

Fresno Gang Prevention Research Workgroup
Community Perspectives Findings - 2009

Methodology

The Gang Prevention Research Workgroup conducted community-specific interactive focus groups throughout the County to examine community perspectives on perceived gang activity and prevention measures throughout the County. The Central Valley Health Policy Institute at Fresno State University designed focus group research protocol and discussion questions. CVHPI also analyzed the qualitative discussion data from the adult community members who participated in the Gang Prevention Focus Groups. Participants were recruited at various community events and flyer invitations were posted throughout the communities. Eleven community focus groups were held in English, Spanish, Hmong, and Laotian were held between May-June 2009. A total of 134 Fresno County residents were included in the focus groups. Nine of the focus groups were focused on residential communities; two were geared toward County parolee service groups; and one aimed to capture the Southeast Asian faith-based community.

Group demographics

Participants ranged from (18-73) years of age and represented the diversity of the County.

Focus Group	Sample size	Ave age	Male	Female	Hispanic	White	Black	Native Am	Asian	Other
CVJPO (Parolee)	12	22.2	11	1	6	3	1	1	0	1
West/Central										
Fresno	9	32.3	4	5	5	3	1	0	0	0
Sanger	3	40.8	1	4	4	1	0	0	0	0
Clovis	5	31.2	3	1	1	1	0	0	2	0
North Fresno	5	24.5	1	4	2	1	0	0	2	0
Huron	16	44.2	4	12	15	0	0	0	1	0
PACT (Parolee)	12	40.4	7	5	3	2	2	5	0	0
Mendota	30	30.2	10	20	30	0	0	0	0	0
Orange Cove	7	40.3	1	5	6	0	0	0	0	0
Selma	13	37.2	5	8	9	1	3	0	0	0
Riverdale/Caruthers	9	39	3	6	9	0	0	0	0	0
FIRM (SE Asian Faith)	13	*	10	3	0	0	0	0	13	0
TOTAL	134	34.8	60	74	90	12	7	6	18	1

Focus Group facilitation and discussion guide

The focus group participants were asked to engage in facilitated conversation led by Fresno State researcher and Fresno County Gang Task Force Coordinator. The participants were asked to respond to questions posed about the perceived gang activity in their areas as well as potential causes of gang membership. Participants were also asked to think about and discuss potential solutions to the gang problem for their communities.

Key Findings

In-depth qualitative analyses are on-going, but the following most frequent community perspective themes have been identified:

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I. NIMBY (“Not In My Backyard”)

North County residents consistently claimed that gang activity was more prevalent in “other areas ‘South of Shaw’” and not so much in the more wealthy areas of the County. On the other hand, other residents scoffed at this notion claiming that gangs were prevalent in all areas throughout the County and no location was safe from gang activity despite the perceived wealth and claimed “safety” in a given area.

~Gangs happen...even in Clovis (group laughed)

~ Yes, there is a problem with gangs; even in “nice” neighborhoods

~Clovis strives for “happy” image

II. “Wannabe” gang members

The distinction between “wannabe” gang members compared with “hard core” members was also consistently expressed. Residents felt that the County consisted of more “wannabe” gang members causing crime and neighborhood distress compared to the “hard core” members from larger metropolitan cities like Los Angeles and Oakland. Residents recommended different strategies to address both types of gang affiliations that are most prevalent in their communities.

~No, there is NOT a gang problem here; there are only “pretenders” in this area. This is nothing like LA so you can’t compare the “real” gang problem in LA with these pretending small-time gangs in the Valley

III. Poor parenting is the problem

The common perception that poor parenting was at the root of all gang membership and activity was striking. Each of the eleven focus groups discussed the role parents play in shaping the lives of their children. They believed that strong parenting skills were required to prevent children from joining gangs. However, some younger participants argued that in spite of parents’ best efforts, gang membership is often “inevitable” in some areas.

~It doesn’t matter how tough pressure is, you do what you want (join or not join)

~Boils down to parents – 1st line of defense because teen youth look up to their peers but parents still #1

~It’s hard for parents to help youth with education and homework when parents’ education is not as advanced as kids’

IV. Lack of meaningful activities and future prospects in communities

The dearth of meaningful activities and recreational investment in poorer areas was discussed very often. Residents felt the County was less invested in rural and poorer areas of the region and gang activity had the most opportunity to flourish where kids

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had too much idle time. Successful programs were said to be “the first to be cut in difficult economic times” and the County was not responsive to community needs.

~Programs can't “half-step”; we need service today, not tomorrow. Promising today for something tomorrow is wrong

V. Lack of police visibility and “community connection”

Interestingly, participants across the board expressed mixed feelings about local law enforcement and the effect suppression and patrol activities had on the safety of their communities. While most residents expressed feeling safer when police patrols and visibility in their neighborhoods was heightened, others felt too much patrolling and stopping for “petty reasons” and/or “profiling” was counterproductive to their safety. Increasing cultural awareness around race, ethnicity, and nationality, income, and education levels was also discussed as a means of improving relationships with desired local law enforcement.

~Courtesy and respect should be involved in every contact, gang-related or not

~Knowing law enforcement as “real people” and neighbors could help with supporting community and vice versa

~Criminals know when the officers have a shift change. Our law enforcement is not connected locally. They have no relationship with the community

VI. Parental denial

Parent denial was discussed as a way gang membership escalates in their families and communities. Parents do not want to believe that the “poor behavior” kids are demonstrating in school and at home could possibly be a precursor or symptom of gang affiliation. Participants want parents to be stronger role models and know that gangs can recruit their children no matter what they believe.

~Parents are ignorant to what's going on

~There needs to be more opportunities for parents to learn how to talk to youth about the dangers of gangs. These training must be FORMAL (not like a “platica”) education style for parents

~Kids that have bad behavior get bad influence from friends and overpower the influence of the family and parents and families should be strong and consistent. Parents should ALWAYS know where the kids are, who their friends are, etc.