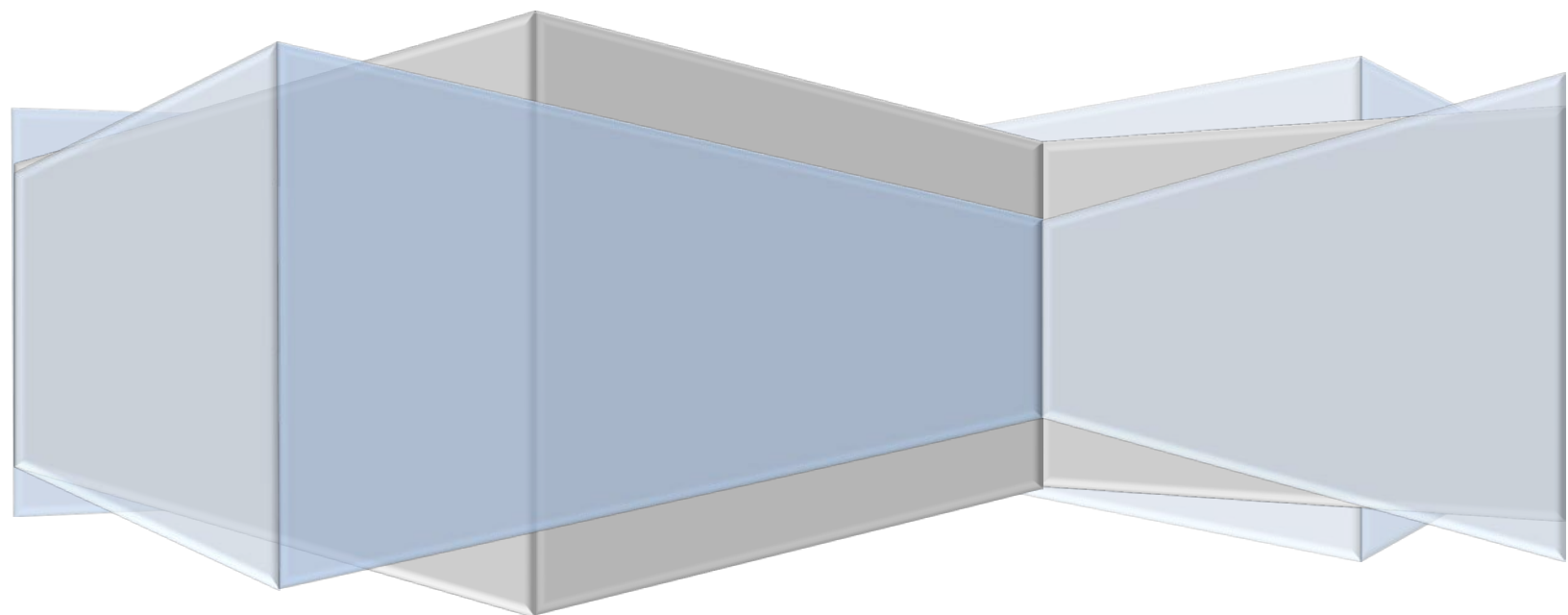


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2011-2012 Omaha Gang Assessment

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Executive Summary

Blocking the road to making progress in dealing with gangs is an institutional and organizational lack of commitment to robust assessment. Positive change for an individual depends on brutally honest self-examination. Similarly, reductions in gang-involved gun violence hinge on programs and agencies documenting what they are doing. Without documentation, there can be no evaluation. If there is no evaluation, nobody knows what works and what doesn't work. Without knowing if programmatic efforts are achieving desired results, we wind up shooting in the dark. In the corporate world, this function is called establishing a "learning system." In the criminology of gangs, we refer to this function as gang assessment. The process is the same in both the corporate and criminological venues: Information on programs and initiatives is collected, analyzed, and fed back into a loop to increase the chances that smart decisions and wise policy choices will be made.

Embracing assessment may seem awkward to police officers and gang interventionists accustomed to common sense they learn from the "school of hard knocks." What everyone involved in the business of dealing with Omaha's gang problem—from the Mayor down to the street cop--needs to realize, however, is that they can't avoid assessment but they can profit from it.

The *Omaha Gang Assessment of 2012* is a no-holds-barred analysis of Omaha's gang problem and the community's response to that problem. It was prepared with the intent of adding to the current dialogue regarding Omaha gangs and it is delivered in the spirit of working together to make our youth and our community safer.

Collapsing over a year's worth of digging into Omaha's gang problem into a few pages might seem daunting to some, but to the assessment team it really wasn't that difficult. Many of

the key issues were repeated so many times they became painfully obvious. Many of our findings will come as little surprise to informed citizens:

JOBS!, JOBS!, JOBS!

IMPROVE POLICE-COMMUNITY RELATIONS!

FAMILIES NEED HELP!

When it comes to Omaha gangs, we found the problem of gangs to be intertwined with a variety of social problems including the multigenerational nature of gang membership, childhood poverty, chronic unemployment, families in crisis, unmet mental health needs, racism, mass incarceration, and distrust between the community and law enforcement.

When it comes to Omaha's response to gangs, we found common fallacies and practices that departed significantly from best practices for attacking the gang problem. These fallacies or ill-conceived practices undermine and subvert the planning and execution of well-intentioned gang prevention, intervention, and suppression programs in Omaha. Omaha's response to gangs will be better off if we get it right the first time. To avoid making unnecessary mistakes and even blunders, we offer a modest proposal: Omaha's policymakers and decision makers should use the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention best practices for gangs as a standard for making decisions instead of relying on common sense.

We hope that the recommendations in this report are taken seriously. Readers should think of our recommendations as practical guidelines for overcoming the common fallacies and problematic practices that we disclose in the report. Moreover, the recommendations should be viewed as the first step in the direction of Omaha taking a more strategic, intelligence-driven approach to its gang problem. Our recommendations are as follows:

➤ Attack Root Causes

- Restore Trust
- Collaborate for the Common Good
- Adopt Problem Oriented Policing
- Implement Case Management as a Means of Reintegrating Violent Gang Members into the Community
- Ask the Right Questions About Gun Violence
- Reinstate the Public Safety Auditor
- Develop a Strategic Plan

“...the problem of gangs is real in communities; communities feel threatened by them. The problem is real but the approaches we take to solving the problem is like the cure is worse than the disease and actually winds up contributing to the very problem that we want to address”

----Michelle Alexander, Ohio State University law professor,

Omaha, Nebraska, March 10, 2012

A. Purpose

The City of Omaha is waging an unofficial, undeclared War on Gangs. Is the city winning? Are there losers? How effective and efficient are the city's efforts? In 2011 the City of Omaha requested assistance from the University of Nebraska at Omaha to conduct a gang assessment. Following the *OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model: A Guide to Assessing Your Community's Youth Gang Problem*, a research team evaluated Omaha's gang problem and the community's response to the problem.

The assessment consists of five parts. The first section provides a discussion of the methodology employed by the evaluation team. The second section provides a detailed profile of Omaha's demographic characteristics. Special attention is given to community risk factors that are likely to provide the fertile conditions necessary for large-scale and sustained gang activity. The Omaha profile focuses on two sections of the City (Northeast and South Omaha) where the highest scores of community risk factors are found and the largest concentrations of gang activity have been documented. The third section directly addresses various dimensions of the gang problem by examining the nature and extent of Omaha gangs. The fourth section discusses existing prevention and intervention efforts currently in place in Omaha and the extent to which these programs appear effective. The last section presents recommendations.

The assessment focuses primarily on Northeast Omaha for several reasons. First, census data indicates that community-level risk factors are more severe in Northeast Omaha than other segments of the city. Second, there is significantly more gang-involved violence in Northeast

Omaha than other segments of the city. Third, the assessment team lacked the resources necessary to complete an in-depth assessment across the entire city.

An Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) assessment should be a starting point for the effort to understand the nature and extent of Omaha's gang problem. This type of assessment provides a snapshot of the landscape and context of Omaha's current gang problem. Omaha's gang problem, like gang problems elsewhere, will change and evolve and thus assessment should be ongoing and dynamic. In addition, efforts to prevent and intervene in Omaha's gang problem should also be dynamic and ongoing. Evaluation of these efforts is necessary in order to determine which gang prevention and intervention programs are working and which ones need modification or elimination.

Findings reflect information collected over more than the past 15 months. As with most assessments, the findings reflect "good news" and "bad news." Assessments that gloss over the bad news are neither helpful nor honest. This assessment is not meant to demean or insult any individuals who are working with gangs in Omaha. Rather, we hope this report will add to the current dialogue regarding Omaha gangs, because it is delivered in the spirit of working together to make our youth and our community safer. As such, we fully believe that an assessment that is not sugar-coated but is honest and raw is the first step to opening up this dialogue. We hope that any readers who are offended by one or more of these findings remember that sometimes the most helpful medicine is tough to swallow.

B. Methodology

To conduct gang assessments, scholars rely upon the "gold standard" for evaluating a community's gang problem—OJJDP's Comprehensive Gang Model. University of Chicago sociologist Irving Spergel and his associates originally developed this model in the early 1990s

based on their analysis of the practices of agencies involved in combating gangs. With some revisions, the Spergel Model has evolved into the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model.

Basically, this model is the accepted manual for communities doing gang assessment. This approach to gang assessment consists of specific instructions, guidelines, and tools for doing an assessment including surveys, interview protocols, and recommendations for different types of secondary analyses.

The first step to conducting an OJJDP gang assessment is the formation of a steering committee composed of key stakeholders. The assessment team is merely one component of the steering committee. The steering committee as a whole is then expected to meet on a regular basis to discuss progress, preliminary findings, and additional data necessary to complete the assessment. In Omaha the process of conducting the gang assessment functioned quite differently. Omaha skipped the first stage. A steering committee was never created. The assessment team was provided some contacts to various agencies but more or less expected to compile everything on their own and complete the assessment *without* the oversight of a steering committee. The problem with this approach is that it isolates assessment and evaluation as something “off to the side” - - something we do only to improve our chances at obtaining federal funding. This type of mentality prevents the discovery of new insight. In contrast, the OJJDP model places assessment front and center in terms of helping entities within a community determine “what is working” and “what is not working.”

The omission of a steering committee to complete the Omaha gang assessment foreshadows one of the most important items our team found during the past fifteen months. While Omaha may not be short on effort in terms of gang prevention and intervention, Omaha is very short on coordinated, cooperative, and targeted action. Part of the reason for this deficiency

in targeted action is that Omaha suffers from two fundamental problems. First, there is a general lack of documentation that prevents agencies from determining the effectiveness of their interventions. Second, there is a “know it all” tendency in Omaha to assume that the city is already utilizing best practices. We heard various people state that “we’re already doing x, y, z” when in fact “x, y, z” wasn’t being done. Although this tendency is not unique to Omaha, the tendency is still a major obstacle to improving policy and programming.

Logic would suggest that the most difficult aspect of completing a gang assessment is accessing current and former gang members. Ironically, we did not find that to be the case. Certainly gang members are a difficult population to access but we also found difficulties accessing gang interventionists, law enforcement, and school officials. Some agencies and individuals were highly accessible while others were not. The Omaha Public School (OPS) District, for example, is akin to “Fort Knox.” We do we say this? Because the OPS is one of the few school districts in the State of Nebraska that does not participate in the state-wide risk assessment nor is the district conducting any other publicly available risk assessment. In addition, we spoke independently with five current OPS employees who agree with the assessment of OPS’ inaccessibility and secrecy. We also spoke to staff members at various agencies who work closely with OPS who reported similar issues in terms of inaccessibility and secrecy. While the people we spoke to do not represent a random sample of OPS employees or Omaha citizens for that matter, the issue of OPS’ accessibility was not the focus of our assessment. We specifically refer to this issue because one of the most important dimensions of an OJJDP gang assessment involves surveying a school-based sample of students regarding various risky behaviors including gang affiliation.

This lack of transparency hinders our community's ability to understand the nature and extent of the Omaha gang problem. Without a school-based or a random youth population sample, it is nearly impossible for a community to accurately estimate the prevalence of gang membership (as well as other social problems). Individuals confuse the OPD's gang database with this type of estimate; however, the gang database simply reflects the individuals the police department has labeled as gang members. For example, there may be a larger number of White gang members in West Omaha than the city realizes. For a variety of reasons, White gang members may evade the official radar screen in terms of the OPD's gang database. An anonymous school-based risk assessment would help answer this question by providing baseline prevalence for various social problems in Omaha.

One possible reason for the unwillingness of OPS and other agencies to be transparent is the fear of revealing "skeletons in the closet." One source told us, for example, that second graders in a predominantly African American OPS school have no textbooks and no workbooks. Although we have no direct evidence confirming this allegation, we hope future assessment will further investigate the issue of educational inequities.

OPS was not alone in failing to cooperate. The OPD's Homicide Unit is responsible for the investigation of homicides and other violent and suspicious deaths. Many data points can be gleaned from homicide investigations that may be relevant for assessing a community's gang problem. Part of any comprehensive gang assessment involves determining the types of approaches that various agencies including law enforcement use as part of ongoing analysis of gang violence. Unfortunately, OPD failed to make the Homicide Unit available during the assessment period and OPD did not provide access to the Unit's records.

The assessment team also faced significant obstacles in terms of social service agencies providing data in a timely manner. In some cases, agencies agreed to provide data but never followed through. This unprofessional behavior not only betrays a lack of commitment and understanding of the OJJDP's comprehensive assessment model, it also suggests that the City of Omaha possesses deficiencies in terms of coordinating efforts to complete a comprehensive gang assessment.

Despite various obstacles and limited resources, the assessment team used the following strategy to collect and analyze different types of data. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of 33 self-identified current gang members from the City of Omaha. A total of 17 individuals were incarcerated at the time of the interview while 16 were not. The youngest gang member interviewed was 17 while the oldest was 41 years old. The median age of the entire sample was 19 years old. All members of the sample were male with the exception of two females. Sixty-five percent of the individuals in our sample were African American, thirteen percent were Hispanic or Latino, thirteen percent were biracial, six percent were Caucasian, and one individual described his race or ethnicity as Mexican. The interviews focused on a wide range of questions; however, due to space limitations this report analyzes the responses to essential questions only.

In addition to current gang members, we interviewed a variety of other individuals with different types of knowledge and experience about local gang issues. This included interviews with 36 former gang members who were primarily active in Omaha gangs during the 1980s and 1990s (although several were active within the past couple years), interviews with gang interventionists, and law enforcement. We do not provide specific details about the gang interventionists or the law enforcement officers we interviewed in order to fully protect the

identity of these sources. Given the relatively small number of gang interventionists and law enforcement who work in the areas of the assessment's focus, providing more specific details would be tantamount to revealing the identity of interview subjects. Hypothetically, if we indicated that 10 of 20 gang interventionists working in Northeast Omaha were interviewed then readers could make inferences and begin a process of elimination in order to determine the identity of sources.

In addition, we conducted an anonymous survey of community leaders (n=293) which asked about local gang issues (See Appendix 24). The assessment team also utilized an ethnographic approach by observing a weekly meeting of at-risk youth and current gang members. Ethnography allows the researcher to get close to the people being studied and "to discover the details of their behavior and the innards of their experience" (Atkinson & Hammersly 1998:119; Finch 1986; Stacey 1988). Ethnographic research requires a balance between insider knowledge and an outsider's curiosity (Rock 2001). Attending these meetings allowed the assessment team to gain a deep understanding of their daily lives including challenges and aspirations.

We also conducted "ride-alongs" and observed police officers working in several different units. We conducted original analyses of police data such as the gang database and shooting timeline along with census data including various types of geo-spatial analyses. Finally, we gathered a variety of other secondary data such as school information and dissimilarity/segregation indices.

Names were omitted from this report to ensure confidentiality. Confidentiality is an essential aspect of any assessment especially assessments addressing sensitive issues such as street gangs.

A premise of the OJJDP Model is that different viewpoints on a problem yield different perspectives. In line with this premise, our assessment, like all assessments, includes various perceptions. As evaluators, we do not assume the perceptions and accounts we report are accurate. Regardless of their accuracy, perceptions have real consequences. In contrast to a legal assessment or criminal investigation, we do not employ standards of “hearsay” or only consider a statement as relevant if multiple sources corroborate the accuracy of the statement. In an educational assessment, we rely on a more general standard of evidence evaluation where independent statements that broadly relate to a similar theme are used to establish consistency. The problem with this approach is that a theme identified in the research may reflect “folklore” or “urban legends.” Instances of folklore typically include multiple independent parties expressing similar statements but in cases of folklore the congruence reflects the extent to which a misperception is widely held as opposed to the accuracy of the statement. At the same time, we also caution readers to refrain from immediately dismissing “unpopular” findings as mere folklore and therefore without merit.

So why assess gangs?

One of the most serious and persistent social problems facing America is the street gang. The nation’s youth gang problem is tracked by the National Youth Gang Surveys (NYGS) which shows that street gangs are active in communities of all sizes and varieties. Since the early 2000s all cities over 100,000 people, a majority of the suburban counties, and a sizeable number of smaller cities and rural communities have experienced gang problems (Egley and Howell 2011). Gangs are present in more than 3,500 jurisdictions in 2009 reflecting an increase of twenty percent since 2002 (Egley and Howell 2011). Moreover, the number of reported gangs and gang

members reached an estimated nationwide total of more than 28,100 gangs with 730,000 members in 2009 (Egley and Howell 2011).

The association between an individual's involvement in antisocial behavior and gang membership is one of the strongest and most consistent findings in the criminological literature (Elliott et al. 1985; Elliott and Menard 1996; Thornberry et al. 1994). Empirical studies repeatedly have shown that adolescents who are members of a gang are markedly more involved in antisocial behavior than their non-member peers (for an overview, see Spergel 1990). The membership effect has been demonstrated across a great variety of behaviors such as theft, burglary, vandalism, truancy, drug sales and drug use, and is especially strong for more serious and violent offences (Thornberry et al. 1993). Studies of large urban adolescent samples across the nation reported since 1995 show that gang members are responsible for committing a large proportion of violent offenses. Until 1998, delinquency studies reported that the worst influences on non-delinquents were delinquent friends; research since 1998, however, revealed that gang members were far worse influences (Battin-Pearson et al. 1998; Thornberry 1998). The policy implication of this criminological fact has been stated succinctly by youth gang researchers: "Because gangs have such a major effect on delinquent behavior, prevention efforts aimed at reducing delinquency and substance use should seek to prevent and reduce gang involvement" (Battin-Pearson et al. 1998: 10).

The Definitional Debate

What is a gang? How should we define a gang? Are such questions merely academic? Absolutely not. In fact, one of the biggest challenges in dealing with a problem like street gangs is the tendency among key stakeholders to hold divergent definitions of a street gang. Various "real world" implications arise when trying to define a gang.

One issue involves what some interview subjects describe as “racial profiling.” These respondents equate efforts among law enforcement and schools to identify and document gang members as tinged by racial stereotypes (e.g., a young black male with saggy pants is assumed to affiliate with gangs). In our effort to assess the gang problem in Omaha, we found that issues of race and social class are directly tied to perceptions of how to define a gang and how to respond to gangs. Another issue involves a divergence we found between what officials refer to as “gangs” and what segments of the public refer to as “neighborhood groups.” Why is this important? If a person grows up in a neighborhood where a gang is already active then it is likely that a person will associate with these individuals. Does that mean he/she is a gang member? According to standard law enforcement procedures used across the country for defining gang membership and association, the answer is “yes.” That is, the person may not actually be involved in “gangbanging” or other criminal activity but based on the person’s contact with known gang members, law enforcement agencies such as OPD may label this person as an “associate” and consign him or her to the gang database.

The state of Nebraska defines a gang as “a group of three or more people with a common identifying name, sign, or symbol whose group identity or purposes include engaging in illegal activities” (Nebraska Revised Statute 43-245). In addition, the Omaha Police Department notes that “a gang is a group of individuals who associate on a continual basis. Not all gangs are bad. However, many gang members are involved in illegal activity. They identify with gang names, colors, gang language or hand signs and a common philosophy” (cityofomaha.org).

Beyond Nebraska’s legal statute which defines a gang, the Omaha Police Department utilizes more specific gang identification criteria. These indicators include: self-admission, tattoos, involvement reported by reliable informant, involvement in gang retaliation or other

gang violence, and involvement in gang crime. The OPD uses several criteria to document gang members. OPD employs a classification system comprised of three levels of gang membership: associate, member, and hard core. An individual is documented as a “member” if he/she meets three of twelve criteria and an “associate” if he/she meets only two. An individual is documented as “hardcore” if he/she has been involved in violent gang-related crimes, narcotics distribution, or can be shown to have a leadership role in the gang. A person is kept in the gang database beyond five years (members/hardcore) or three years (associates) and his or her clock is restarted if that individual has *any* gang-related contacts or incidents during the initial 3 or 5 year time period. Once a police contact is documented for someone on the gang list, then that person’s clock starts over. Hypothetically, this means that a person on the gang list could have his or her clock restarted for something as trivial as a traffic stop in which this person is riding in a car with a childhood friend who happens to be a gang member.

Documenting gang members and maintaining this information in a computerized database is governed by Federal Statute 28 CFR Part 23. Although these criteria are fairly standard and utilized across the country, there are inherent problems with these indicators. First, OPD policy is based on the “guilt by association” fallacy. Guilt by association in this instance involves the OPD claiming that an individual should be labeled a gang member because of the group he or she associates with. This policy is unfair to suspected gang members. It is unfair because OPD’s guilt by association policy, in effect, changes the focus to an individual’s circumstances and/or associates rather than the individual’s actual participation in gang-involved criminal behavior. Moreover, this policy fails to differentiate between individuals who are associating with gang members but not actively “gang banging” and individuals who are, in fact, still actively “gang banging.” Second, OPD’s restarting the clock policy represents the deck

stacking fallacy. According to the OPD, a suspected gang member's clock can be rewound or started over without the police having produced a scintilla of evidence that a person is engaging in criminal behavior. This policy makes it difficult for a person to get off the gang list.

Given the reality of OPD's proactive approach to policing gangs, it is easy to imagine a young person who is trying to get out of a gang being stopped by police for no reason other than he/she used to be a gang member or being stopped because he/she is riding around with persons who belong to a gang. Officers observed during this assessment frequently stopped suspected gang members for some of the following specific offenses: making too wide of a turn; failure to walk on the sidewalk; and stopping a driver on a claim that his/her car headlights are out when, in fact, the lights are working.

So what? Those whose names are included in a gang database will likely experience increased attention and harassment from local law enforcement (Leyton 2003). For those who are mistakenly included in Omaha's gang database, there is no easy way to have their names purged. Then, too, gang databases tend to over-include racial minorities. To make matters worse, it is not a crime in Nebraska to belong to a gang. Therefore, police actions that deprive individuals of their freedom solely on the basis of suspected gang membership would seem to violate the right to freedom of association.

C. City Profile

Omaha is the largest and most heterogeneous city in Nebraska with a 2010 population of 408,958 as compared to 390,007 in 2000 reflecting a population increase of 4.9 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). The racial and ethnic composition of Omaha is roughly comparable to the nation (73.1 percent White, 13.7 percent Black, and 13 percent Latino). Hispanic or Latino refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish

culture or origin regardless of race. Omaha is becoming more diverse, most recently because of Latino population growth. While the size of the nonwhite population has been fairly stable since the 1950s ranging between 15 and 20 percent, the proportion of the population that is Latino has been increasing.

In Omaha those responsible for policing in particular and responding to gangs in general should not ignore the cultural diversity of the city or the speed with which demographics are changing. It is important, for example, that OPD officers recognize cultural differences and barriers if OPD is to serve all of the citizens of Omaha effectively. The more professional a police officer is, the more sophisticated he or she should be in responding to people of all backgrounds and the better he or she should be at cross-cultural communication.

Omaha's overall city profile suggests relative prosperity thanks, in part, to a strong, diversified economic base. In 2009, the median household income in Omaha was \$47,184 and 14.1 percent of people and 10.5 percent of families in Omaha were living below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

Although Omaha continues to rank as one of the most livable cities in the U.S. (Wojno 2008), it is not immune from serious social problems typically associated with large urban areas. Two areas, Northeast and South Omaha, in particular, face significant challenges related to childhood poverty, academic failure such as chronic truancy and elevated rates of high school dropout, and a street gang problem.

Northeast Omaha

Northeast Omaha is bordered by Dodge Street to the south, Interstate 680 to the north, 72nd Street to the west and the Missouri River to the east. Compared to 2000, the total population in Northeast Omaha declined by almost four thousand residents reflecting a

demographic trend that emerged several decades earlier (Larsen and Cottrell 1997). The overall racial composition of Northeast Omaha is 55 percent White, 32 percent Black, 10 percent Hispanic and 3 percent other (US Census 2010). In some census tracts, however, the percentage of Black residents rises to well over 50% suggesting certain areas of the city are homogeneous and highly segregated. For example, census tracts 11 and 12 are 74% Black respectively, census tract 8 is 77% Black, and census tract 7 is 79% Black (U.S. Census 2010). Residential segregation when coupled with high levels of economic deprivation suggests social and physical isolation.

As measured by the dissimilarity index, Omaha's residential segregation score is 61.3 (with 100 being completely segregated) and is the 38th most segregated city in the United States (compared to other cities with a population of 500,000 or more) (Census Scope 2012).

Residential segregation in Omaha can also be observed when considering certain anecdotal but telling examples. For instance, in 2003 when one of the members of the assessment team first moved to Omaha, he/she requested their real estate agent show him/her a house on Fontenelle Boulevard but was told by the agent that his/her "car doesn't drive to North Omaha." It is also not uncommon to hear residents of Omaha make comments about not driving east of 72nd or 50th Avenue. The dynamics of segregation and wealth disparities in Omaha led C. David Kotok of *the Omaha World Herald* in 1997 to note that "Omaha may be becoming, in effect, two cities – one east of 72nd Street and one west" (quoted in Larsen and Cottrell 1997: 313).

Social and physical isolation are significant factors in both street gangs and violence. Isolation is related to "social disorganization," which can generally be defined as a set of neighborhood-level characteristics such as high levels of poverty, physical deterioration, and declining population to name a few. Social disorganization is correlated with the emergence and

persistence of gangs. According to data from the National Neighborhood Crime Study (NNCS), these same social conditions also indicate something a lot more serious--a higher likelihood of criminal violence. Criminologists Ruth D. Peterson and Lauren J. Krivo, writing about neighborhood crime and what they call the racial-spatial divide in *Divergent Social Worlds*, report that their analysis of NNCS data reveals that residential segregation is an important contributor to violence in local areas. Neighborhoods in cities like Omaha where black-white segregation is greater have notably high levels of violent crime. Specifically, Peterson and Krivo discovered that a one-standard deviation-higher level of segregation is associated with a nearly 30 percent higher rate of neighborhood-level violence. These figures suggest that racial residential segregation in Omaha is harmful to the creation of safe neighborhoods (Peterson and Krivo 2010: 73).

Economic and Family Conditions

Unemployment varies widely across different geographic areas in Omaha and among different racial groups in Omaha. While the overall unemployment rate in Omaha is 6.3 percent, the unemployment rate among Blacks in Omaha is 17 percent (Omaha World Herald, U.S. Census Bureau 2008). More alarming, in certain census tracts with large concentrations of Black residents (e.g., 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 52, 53, 59.02, 60), rates of unemployment range between 20 and 30 percent (U.S. Census 2010).

Median household income is one of the most common indicators of economic standing. As noted above, Omaha's overall median household income is \$47,184 while the overall median household income in Northeast Omaha is \$35,415 (US Census 2010). Clearly, Northeast Omaha's median household income is depressed; however, an even more dramatic story is told when specific census tracts are examined. For instance, census tracts 6, 7, 11, and 53 all have

median household incomes below \$20,000 (U.S. Census 2010). In addition, census tracts 3, 4, 8, 49, 50, 52, 59.01, 59.02, 60 all have median household incomes below \$30,000 (U.S. Census 2010).

America's great accumulation of wealth has always been characterized by a sharp divide between "haves" and "have nots" (Massey 2008). Since the 1970s, however, that divide has grown exponentially larger shrinking America's middle class which is often referred to as our nation's "backbone" (Harvey 1991). Omaha native and one of the world's leading investment experts, Warren Buffet, characterizes the divide between rich and poor and the disappearance of the middle class in the following manner: "There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war and we're winning" (New York Times 11/26/2006). Although Buffet's comments were directed at the national level, the same trends can be clearly observed in Buffet's hometown Omaha. According to a recent study, Black children in Omaha have one of the highest rates of poverty in the country (Omaha World Herald 4/15/2009).

The Omaha World Herald and the University of Nebraska at Omaha's examination of census data revealed that in 2005 nearly 60 percent of Blacks under the age of 18 were living at or below poverty and in 2006 the data revealed 40 percent of Blacks under 18 were living at or below poverty. To reduce potential sampling biases, the researchers combined figures from the two years and the results suggest Omaha has the second highest Black poverty rate among children under 18 in the country (Omaha World Herald 4/15/2009). Only one other U.S. city, Minneapolis, MN, has a wider economic disparity between Black and White residents (Omaha World Herald 4/15/09).

Even more recent figures suggest that a large percentage of Black residents and children, in particular, are living at or below federal poverty standards. Figures from the 2010 Census

reveal that in some largely Black residential areas (e.g., census tracts 3, 4, 6, 7, 11, 16, 50, 51, 52, 59.01, 59.02, 60) 30 or more percent of individuals are living at or below federal poverty standards (US Census 2010). Some of those census tracts are characterized by especially high levels of poverty exceeding 50 percent in three tracts (US Census 2010). In terms of the most recent childhood poverty figures, census tracts 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 48, 49 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 58, 59.01, 59.02, 60, 61.02, 63.02 have rates exceeding 30 percent. Of even greater concern, nine of these census tracts have childhood poverty rates exceeding 50 percent with two tracts exceeding 80 percent (US Census 2010).

Poverty puts children at a much greater risk for gang involvement. For almost a century, gang researchers have found that poverty and other indicators of social disorganization help produce street gangs (e.g., Thrasher 1927; Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Short and Strodtbeck 1965; Moore 1978; Hagedorn 1988; Spergel 1995; Curry and Decker 2003). Reducing childhood poverty in Omaha needs to be the leading priority in the city's effort to develop a comprehensive response to street gangs.

Like poverty, poor parenting in families heightens the probability that a young person will join a gang. Family units are the first and most immediate institution that connects a child to his/her larger environmental surroundings such as their neighborhood and school. Across time and culture, family units have varied in size, structure, and function but despite these differences, the centrality of the family unit is universal. Humans are social animals and, as such, require a social network of either biological or fictive kinship to help meet basic survival needs and adapt to complex environmental conditions. Unlike other species, humans are largely dependent on others to meet these essential physical, psychological, and social needs especially during early childhood.

Interdependence, however, does not magically disappear once a person reaches adolescence or some other milestone of maturity. Despite certain mythologies of self-reliance that espouse the virtues of “self-made men [sic],” during adolescence and beyond, humans depend on others to survive. This most basic reality may antagonize the wisdom of pulling oneself up by your bootstraps, but as many observers have commented it is quite difficult to do this without any boots. All of us depend on others for acquiring our boots. One of the chief responsibilities for a community is ensuring that the youngest and arguably most vulnerable members have the resources necessary to develop in a healthy manner.

Overall the percent of single-parent households in Northeast Omaha is 47.4 (U.S. Census 2010). In census tracts 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 49, 51, 52, 53, 54, 57, 58, 59.01, 59.02, 60, 61.01, 61.02, 63.02, 63.03, 70.01, however, the percent of single-parent households range between 40 and 75 (U.S. Census 2010). While there is nothing morally deficient with single-parent households, substantial evidence suggests that a number of negative outcomes are strongly correlated with single-parent families (Simmons, Simmons, and Wallace 2004). Although there is evidence the negative outcomes associated with single-parent households can be buffeted with alternate supports such as live-in grandparents, children growing up in areas with a large number of single-parent households are more likely to experience significant risk factors including childhood poverty and decreased parental supervision (Simmons et al. 2004).

So are gangs simply a function of poor parenting and, in particular, single-parent households? We want to reiterate that we are not blaming single-parents or suggesting that the problem of gangs can be understood as simply a problem of single-parent households. Many if not most single-parents work hard at providing high quality environments for their children. It is

undeniable, however, that the current and former gang members we interviewed consistently cited family problems as one of the central reasons for joining a gang.

Gangs have been widely reported as “surrogate families” and we found significant support for this explanation in Omaha (see also Vigil 1988; Jankowski 1991; Fleisher 1998). Although the idea of gangs providing a surrogate family is neither new nor unique to Omaha, we believe that this view is especially important as an alternative view of gang members – that is, as children and adults who are seeking support in alternative family structures. This view varies widely with the idea of gang members as calculating “enemy combatants” which is popularized with the notion of declaring a “war” on gangs. Identifying gangs as surrogate family structures provides a much more human and helpful view of gang members that must be understood by law enforcement, public officials and mainstream society. Many interview subjects discussed feeling “demonized” and pointed to examples of stricter laws with stiffer penalties and terms that are used to dehumanize gang members. For example, “scourge,” “menace,” and “scumbag” are all terms some public officials use to describe gangs and gang members. These comments reveal a tendency within mainstream society to demean the perspective of gang members.

Academic Performance

Another significant component of a community profile is the public education system. Truancy and dropout rates in Northeast Omaha continue to be higher than the rest of the city. The primary high schools serving youth in the Northeast quadrant are North High School, Benson High School, and Central High School. These schools have an average attendance rate of 90 percent as compared to the entire Omaha Public School (OPS) District that has an average attendance rate of 94 percent. Northeast Omaha’s lower rates of attendance than the rest of the city indicate significant truancy issues. OPS’ overall student population is 47,060 with 69.3

percent of the students receiving reduced or free lunch. During the 2009-2010 school year the Omaha Public School District issued 1,000 truancy referrals (this figure represents 1000 distinct students). The average dropout rate for the same three high schools is six percent as compared to a district wide average dropout rate of 3.5 percent. In Northeast Omaha, the average percent of 18 to 24 year olds without a high school degree is 38.2 percent (U.S. Census 2010). As of the 2010-2011 school year, the graduation rate at OPS was 72 percent as compared to Westside which was 90 percent and Millard which was 97 percent.

South Omaha

The City of Omaha annexed South Omaha in 1915 and the area is currently a district within the Omaha metropolitan area. The borders of South Omaha include Vinton Street to the north, Harrison Street to the south, the Missouri River to the east, and 42nd Street to the west.

Economic and Family Conditions

In South Omaha the overall median household income is \$37,606 although census tracts 19, 39, and 40 have median household incomes below \$25,000. Relative to Northeast Omaha, the rate of unemployment in South Omaha is substantially lower at 8.9% percent (U.S. Census 2010). There is some variation of unemployment within South Omaha; however, as census tracts 20, 29, 39, 40 have rates of 14.2, 14.4, 18.8, and 15.9 percent respectively (U.S. Census 2010). In regards to childhood poverty, 17.2 percent of South Omaha children are living at or below poverty (U.S. Census 2010). The range of childhood poverty in South Omaha is substantial as census tracts 20, 24, 27, 28, 29, 38, 39, 40, 42, 43 and 44 have rates in excess of 30 percent and census tracts 18 and 19 have rates in excess of 60 percent (U.S. Census 2010). The overall rate of single-parent households in South Omaha is 37.8 percent (U.S. Census 2010).

Academic Performance

The primary high schools serving youth in South Omaha are South High School and Bryan High School. In South Omaha 36.2 percent of 18 to 24 year olds do not have a high school degree (U.S. Census 2010). Both South and Northeast Omaha have several census tracts where more than 10 percent of 15 to 17 year olds are not enrolled in school (U.S. Census 2010).

Overall Community Risk Factors

Taken together South and especially Northeast Omaha face significant challenges. The community risk index provides an important overall picture of the census information. In particular, children growing up in these areas are going to face the allure of joining gangs at a time when these same children may perceive an increased need for protection, insufficient supervision and role modeling at home, and, perhaps most importantly, little hope for the future.

D. Community Perceptions

Recent survey data suggests there is both generalized and acute concern regarding the gang problem in Omaha (Smith 2009). During the 2009 mayoral campaign a poll of registered voters revealed that nearly 70 percent of respondents ranked crime and gangs as their top concern even ahead of taxes and unemployment (Omaha World Herald 5/7/2009). In Northeast Omaha, gangs are consistently rated as a “high concern” by a majority of residents (Smith 2009). In addition to individual survey questionnaires, town hall-style meetings have also been used to assess the general public’s level of concern regarding the gang problem in Omaha. In both 2008 and 2009, more than 300 attendees of the African American Empowerment Network (AAEN) meetings rated violence prevention and intervention as the third most important priority just below education and jobs. More recently, in 2010, attendees rated violence prevention and intervention as the second most important priority below jobs.

As part of the gang assessment, we also surveyed local community leaders regarding their perceptions about street gangs (n=293). The survey focused on their views about whether gang activity is increasing or decreasing in Omaha, the primary reasons why kids join gangs, and the most effective responses. Survey results suggest a high degree of agreement in terms of the causes of street gangs in Omaha. Slightly more than eighty percent of the respondents indicated that “family problems” are the leading cause of gang activity. The second leading cause was split almost evenly between “poverty,” “lack of recreation,” and “emotional problems” with approximately forty percent of respondents selecting each of these causes.

Interestingly, in terms of what the community should do to respond to gangs, respondents were more evenly divided. At sixty percent, the response that received the highest level of support was the need for greater opportunities in terms of education and recreation. Interestingly, only 10 percent of the respondents selected police involvement as a recommended response to gangs.

As noted above, although the word “gang” conjures image of highly organized “armed thugs” preying on innocent children and other unsuspecting members of the community (Miethel and McCorkle 2001), real gangs contradict this image. In reality, gangs are quite simply a proxy for a set of underlying neighborhood conditions characterized by informal associations where individuals develop an identity intertwined with guns and drugs, gaining respect, and engendering fear among their adversaries (Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2002; Horowitz 1983; Katz 1988; Sanders 1994). For members of the general public, however, it is more difficult to perceive of gang members as “our” children who are simply lacking in one or more basic necessities and who use gang membership to meet otherwise unmet needs.

One of the most concise yet accurate descriptions of youth gangs is that they serve as a mechanism for solving problems individuals encounter in their lives that are beyond their control (childhood poverty, family issues, joblessness, neighborhood deterioration etc.). The immediacy and scope of these problems may seem insurmountable especially through the eyes of a child. Thus, a collective response such as joining a gang may seem “normal” when faced with these conditions. In fact, joining a gang may reflect a child or adolescent’s desire to exercise some control over his/her life. Why is this so important? Typically individuals who join gangs are “written off” as unsalvageable, in part, because society ignores the root causes and fails to appreciate the culture of gangs from an “insider’s perspective.” We are not suggesting a “romanticized” view of the gang - - quite the contrary - - gangs represent harsh realities that a community must address if efforts to prevent or intervene in gang membership are going to be effective.

Based on our interviews and observations, some members of the law enforcement community succumb to the fallacy that “once a gang member, always a gang member.” To be fair, the view that gang membership is a permanent status is also commonly held by various segments of society including, but not limited to teachers, politicians, and probation officers (Klein 1995; Leyton 2003). This type of perspective is fatalistic, short-sighted, and ultimately counterproductive. Unfortunately, the view that gang membership is a permanent status may also create a self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968; Merton 1968) which refers to the tendency for a false definition or prediction to become true due to a series of misjudgments. In other words, some individuals may become long-term gang members because of the way society responds to them.

Another common fallacy held by some community members is to view gangs as someone else's problem. This perspective tends to both dehumanize individuals who are in gangs and dismisses the idea that solutions can be sought through social-structural changes, such as through education and employment, and instead focuses on gang problems as solely a matter of individual choices, with little to be done except imprison offenders. These comments ignore the human and economic consequences of relying so heavily on suppression efforts.

Law Enforcement Perceptions

Items from the Gang Threat Assessment Survey completed by the Omaha Police Department (OPD) in the summer of 2010 (with follow up conducted in the spring of 2011) provide a snapshot of law enforcement's view of the gang problem in Omaha. For example, on a scale from "high" to "low," the OPD identified the following as "high impact" crime problems in Omaha: drug trafficking, robbery, murder, drive-by shootings, firearms trafficking, weapons, and vandalism/graffiti/tagging. At the same time, the OPD also rated the level of gang involvement as "high" in each of these crime types. OPD indicated that gang activity in Omaha has "increased significantly" within the past five years and reported that: "gangs have a significant impact on the quality of life by increasing the fear of violence and gun crimes in the community. Additionally, graffiti destroys the quality of life in gang-plagued neighborhoods." Clearly, the chief law enforcement agency tasked to respond to local gangs identifies them as a serious problem. Keep in mind however, these are perceptions. Perceptions can be flawed and thus it is critical for law enforcement, social service, and educational agencies to maintain "objective" indicators regarding gang activity that are helpful in determining trends over time.

While this discussion focuses on the Gang Threat Assessment Survey, additional information regarding law enforcement perception of gang members was obtained through direct

observation and through interviews with both gang members and law enforcement that are discussed later in this assessment.

At-Risk Adolescent Perceptions

Adolescents' perspectives on problems such as gangs are essential for a gang assessment. In 2008 the AAEN conducted two surveys using a nonrandom sample of 230 respondents attending a teen summit meeting and a jobs program meeting. The respondents included at-risk youth and findings directly relevant to the assessment are reported in the bullet points below:

- “biggest problems you are facing” - - 35% (“peer pressure”); 32% (“finances”)
- “causes of school drop out” - - 23% (“lack of family support”); 22% (“teen pregnancy”)
- “importance of a high school education” - - 83% (“very important”)
- “importance of having job while in school” - - 90% (“very important”)
- “how safe do you feel at school” - - 28% (“neutral”); 27% (“don’t feel safe at all”)
- “safe in the neighborhood” - - 25% (“very safe”); 27.5% (“don’t feel safe at all”)

Results suggest an interesting mix of realism and idealism. Adolescent respondents clearly articulate the challenges they face such as peer pressure and a lack of safety but they also remain cognizant of the importance of obtaining a high school education. This suggests at-risk youth recognize the importance of education, but likely need a greater level of support to achieve their goals.

Omaha needs a clearer portrait of at-risk and gang involved youth in order to understand the true nature and extent of the gang problem. Additional data will put a face to the problem and reduce the average citizens' tendency to “demonize” gang kids and perceive of them as unsalvageable.

E. Characteristics of Omaha Gangs

This section includes a descriptive analysis of various characteristics related to Omaha gangs. The findings in this section are drawn from the interviews conducted with current gang members (see Methods Section pg. 2-11). The second part of this section reports findings from law enforcement sources such as OPD's gang database.

Gang Enculturation

Gang members are made not born. Even a child born into a "gang family" does not automatically become a gang member. Each person who becomes a gang member experiences a process of enculturation that in form resembles how people become any number of things such as a band member, baseball player, or police officer. Enculturation can be defined as the process by which a person learns the requirements of a specific culture (Grusec and Hastings 2007). The process of enculturation that leads to gang membership varies depending on the individual circumstances, community, and specific gang in question (Vigil 2003). Typically, however, this process will last several years or more. During this time the child is introduced to various influences that help "normalize" the gang lifestyle.

Based on our interviews, we found gang enculturation in Omaha was typically a gradual process beginning during childhood and building over time. Some of our interviewees were able to recount specific experiences that helped solidify gang enculturation such as picking up a gun the first time and how powerful they felt while doing this. A child surrounded by gang influences from an early age may experience both direct and indirect influences to adopt a gang mentality and lifestyle. In terms of direct influences, older family members may dress the child in gang attire, teach the child gang-related hand signs, and provide the child with values and rules for living conducive to gang membership (e.g., a parent who implores his/her child to utilize violence in response to perceived "slights" that suggest disrespect). As compared to direct

influence, indirect influence involves the activities a child does not engage in but frequently observes. For example, a child who grows up around gang activity will observe many aspects of gang culture and those observations will help familiarize that culture to the child. Observing social life is an important element of how learning occurs during the enculturation process (Bandura 1986; Blumer 1969; Mead 1934). Before enculturation is complete, the introduction of competing influences is critical from a gang prevention and intervention standpoint. Competing influences may help “push” or “pull” the child in a different direction while simultaneously minimizing the attraction of gang membership.

More than 80% our sample reported that a member of their family was once in a gang. Gang membership in Omaha is related to family structure. In addition, approximately 65% of our sample reported having multiple family members who were once a member of a gang. Most of the individuals in our sample joined the gang while they were children themselves, as the average age at which membership began was 13 years old.

Gang Values

Generally speaking, the gang members we interviewed viewed current members as a valuable part of their lives. Specifically, gang members were asked whether the gang made them feel important, provided a lot of support and loyalty for one another, made them feel respected, made them feel like a useful person to have around, provided a sense of belonging, was like a family to them, was a good way to make money, made them feel powerful, and finally if they enjoyed being a gang member. Responses to these questions ranged from zero to four. These responses were then used to create an additive scale with a minimum possible value of zero and a maximum possible value of 36. Lower scores reflect a lesser degree of satisfaction with the gang, while higher scores reflect a greater degree of satisfaction with the gang. Individual results

on this scale ranged from a low of 11 to a high of 35. The median and mean scores on this scale were both 21 which may suggest that the gang is generally perceived as “somewhat valuable” to the subjects in our sample. Mean, minimum, and maximum scores for individual components of this scale are provided in table 1. The table reveals that the gang seems to provide a strong sense of loyalty, family, and enjoyment for many gang involved individuals in Omaha. This is not surprising since 61% of our sample came from single parent homes where the mother was most often mentioned as the primary caregiver.

Table 1 Individual Components of the Gang Value Additive Scale

Variable	Mean Value	Min. Value	Max. Value
<i>Belong</i>	2.18	0	4
<i>Enjoyment</i>	2.67	1	4
<i>Family</i>	2.79	0	4
<i>Gang Imp</i>	2.03	0	4
<i>Loyalty</i>	2.90	1	4
<i>Money</i>	2.33	0	4
<i>Power</i>	2.00	0	4
<i>Respect</i>	2.36	1	4
<i>Useful</i>	2.14	0	4

When gang members were asked why they decided to join a gang, the most frequently cited reason was some form environmental influence. For example, numerous individuals mentioned things like having “negative influences” in their life, “not having anyone to tell them what to do,” and “growing up around gangs.” The next most frequently cited reason provided was need for acceptance. For example, some of these individuals mentioned the need to have “supportive friends,” “someone to be there,” “someone to care,” and the desire for “brotherhood.” The third most frequently cited reason was evenly split between having family in a gang and the need for money. The degree to which family members may influence gang

membership was mentioned above; however given the extent to which Omaha is plagued with conditions of poverty it is not surprising that many individuals would turn to the gang for a steady source of income.

What matters most to gang members? As part of the interviews, current gang members listed the things that were important to them. Individual subjects were asked to categorize and rank-order their responses with the first area indicating the highest degree of importance and the fifth area indicating the lowest degree of importance. This exercise proved intriguing because it seemed as though many individuals had never contemplated or been asked this question. Many paused and reflected before answering.

The most frequently cited response was the importance of family members, including individuals such as one's grandparents, mother, father, brothers, sisters, uncles, etc. This finding suggests that although gang members may have significant deficiencies in terms of family life, many still indicate significant attachment to the family unit. Respectively, the second and third most frequently cited responses were money and "nothing" which is troubling because it was clear when these responses were given that the individuals felt there were few things in life of any importance to mention. The next most frequently cited responses were friends, children, and significant others.

Community Conditions

With regard to conditions in the community, 84% of our sample mentioned that it would be "very easy" for them to obtain a handgun if they wanted one. Awareness of crime in the community was a common theme expressed by many of the gang involved individuals. Almost three-fourths of our sample mentioned that there were "hot spots" where there was a lot of drug dealing, shootings, and other gang activity. Also, 77% of our sample indicated that there was a

“gang problem” in Omaha, most of whom mentioned a problem with shootings and people getting hurt or killed. For example, 16% of our sample reported witnessing fights between members of different gangs in the community between 51 and 200 times in the past year and 45% of our sample, reported witnessing this behavior between 11 and 50 times in the past year. Similarly, 10% of our sample mentioned seeing a drive-by shooting more than 50 times in their community in the past year, whereas 26% of our sample reported seeing this behavior between 11 and 50 times. Finally, 35% of our sample reported seeing this behavior between one and ten times in the past year. Also, 61% of our sample mentioned that it would be very easy for them to get drugs such as cocaine, LSD, amphetamines, crack, etc. This is not surprising since 32% of our sample reported witnessing gang members selling drugs in their community more than 200 times in the past year. Another 23% of our sample reported witnessing this behavior between 51 and 200 times in the past year. Close to 61% of our sample indicated being expelled from school at one point in their lives. This finding is especially important to highlight since public education is an important opportunity for disadvantaged children to improve their lives.

When members of our sample were asked what they thought should be done about the gang problem in Omaha, 35% of our sample mentioned that “nothing” should or could be done about the gang problem. This response may reflect the cynicism and/or hopelessness that many gang members feel towards addressing the gang issue in Omaha. Gang members were also asked if there was anything the community was doing to make the gang problem worse and 26% of our sample stated “problems with the police.” Some of the problems listed included “police stereotyping,” “adding more drama to situations,” “acting mean,” “killing gang members,” “being crooked,” “not enforcing the laws,” and “messing” with them. 42% of our sample reported having between one and ten arrests or contacts with law enforcement in the past year,

while 18% of our respondents reported having between 10 and 40 arrests or contacts, and finally, 12% of our respondents mentioned having 40 or more arrests or contacts with the police in the past year. Asked about their experiences with and treatment by the police, 66% of our sample reported “not being treated fairly by the police.” Conversely, six percent mentioned “being treated fairly by the police.”

Locations of Omaha Gangs

Although gangs exist in every section of Omaha, the majority of the gang problem is concentrated in Northeast and South Omaha (see Appendices 1 and 2). Most gangs in Northeast Omaha are comprised of young African-American males while South Omaha gangs are predominantly young Latino males. Females can be found among gangs in both Northeast and South Omaha although the police department’s gang database suggests females are more likely to be documented as “gang associates.” Approximately seven percent of the gang members documented by the OPD are female. Some of the Latino gangs include White members, however, predominantly White gangs can be found in various pockets across Omaha. That said, according to official law enforcement data, non-Hispanic White gang members constitute a small portion of the overall gang membership in Omaha (approximately 18%) and more telling, White gang members seem to contribute relatively little in terms of gang violence.

Within the past several years Sudanese and Somalian gangs (e.g., the South Sudan Soldiers (Trip Set), African Pride (AP), and Muda Juouk) have been documented in both Northeast, South Omaha, and West Omaha including outlying suburban areas such as La Vista, NE. These gangs range in size with smaller subgroups or cliques and are primarily comprised of second generation African immigrants whose populations have grown rapidly in Omaha over the past several years.

One point of concern regarding the response to Sudanese and Somalian gangs that should be noted is that the assessment team received a MS Power Point file containing names of alleged Sudanese and Somalian gang members and photos of these individuals. The person who sent the assessment team this file is a civilian who received the file via email from another civilian who allegedly was given the file by an active law enforcement officer. The concluding page of the file indicates the information is “law enforcement sensitive” and thus should not have been shared with any civilians. The concluding page also specifically states the following: “The information contained within could compromise future investigations and information sources should it be given to others outside of law enforcement.” Although not explicitly stated, the release of the names and photos of specific individuals may also pose a threat to public safety and jeopardize these individuals’ well-being.

Size of Omaha Gangs

As of the second quarter of 2011, the Omaha Police Department identified 3,335 suspected gang members who are currently active in approximately 80 gang cliques across the city. This figure represents a nine percent increase in membership from the same period of time in 2010. The number of gang members has ranged between 2,500 and 3,500 for the past five years. The most significant change in the suspected number of gang members occurred in 2008 when the Omaha Police Department purged the gang database as per federal guidelines. Most of the gangs that police designated as currently active in Omaha emerged more than five years ago and, in some cases, have been active since the mid-1980s. Yet the total number of gang members remains shrouded in divergent estimations as we encountered many claims that OPD’s numbers are either “gross exaggerations” or “too low.”

As studies of other cities' gangs have found (Klein 2006; McGloin 2005; Short and Hughes 2006), Omaha's gangs tend toward loosely structured, horizontal organizations. The type of gang organization, however, varies across Northeast and South Omaha. Gangs in Northeast Omaha have especially diffuse leadership while South Omaha gangs are more structured. This does not mean that Northeast Omaha gangs are completely disorganized; rather, it implies that leadership is more flexible and almost situational. As such, traditional suppression efforts designed to eradicate gang leaders are not likely to significantly curtail the organization of decentralized gang structures.

Characteristics of At-Risk Youth

One of the most important questions a gang assessment should address involves the social characteristics of youth at-risk for gang membership. The AAEN's survey discussed above (in the Community Perceptions Section) provides some clues as to who at-risk adolescents are in terms of social characteristics. Survey responses directly relevant to this section are presented below:

- Current Age - - 42% report "15-16"; 31% report "17-18"
- Gender - - 57% report male
- Race/Ethnicity - - 70.5% report "Black/African-American"
- 52% report living "with single parent"
- 68% report qualifying for free or reduced lunch
- 13.5% report moving six or more times
- 69% report not having a mentor
- 60.5% report wanting a mentor
- 48% report wanting a tutor to help with school

- 41% report wanting help dealing with life issues
- 10% report wanting help with health issues and 7% report wanting help with dental issues
- 75% report not having started to prepare for college

Northeast Omaha Gangs

According to OPD's gang database, gangs in Northeast Omaha vary in size between 30 and 200 members and typically identify, often somewhat loosely, as either Blood or Crip.

According to the interview subjects, Crip and Blood identifications have become less important over time. In fact, a few gangs are known to be composed of both Bloods and Crips (known more widely as "hybrid gangs").

Rivalries still exist between Crip and Blood cliques in Omaha, and substantial fighting goes on within Crip and Blood cliques (especially Crip cliques). For example, 40th Ave Crips has a rivalry with 37th Street Crips as evidenced by a 2008 rash of 40th Ave Crips shootings targeting 37th Street Crips. The shootings resulted in six homicide victims who were affiliated with the 37th Street Crips. Until recently, the Projects and 40th Ave Crips had an antagonistic relationship. In the spring of 2010, members of both gangs were shot and killed by the same rival gang. Following these shootings, the two gangs "cliqued up" or "got cool" (these terms roughly translate to developing a generally amicable relationship). Even when gangs are cliqued up, however, that does not mean that every member in each gang gets along. At the same time when two gangs are not cliqued up, that does not preclude individual members of different gangs from having friendships with each other. Within larger gang cliques small subsets or sub-cliques exist. These subgroups range between 3-5 individuals and generally consist of an individual and their closest friends within the gang.

Northeast Omaha gang cliques are mobile and interaction across the different cliques is common. While some of these cliques identify with certain areas such as the 40th Ave and 29th Street, members do not live exclusively in their identified neighborhoods. According to OPD data, thirteen of Northeast Omaha's 29 gang cliques have documented and relatively established territories. The 29th Street clique has one of the largest territories which extend north to Pershing, south to Sorenson Parkway, west to 30th Avenue, and east to Florence Blvd. The 40th Ave Crips also have a relatively large territory. More gang cliques in Northeast Omaha have documented territories than gang cliques in South Omaha. In addition, gang territories in Northeast Omaha are much closer together than South Omaha potentially reflecting the more densely populated area in Northeast Omaha.

In terms of gang territories the OPD maintains a gang territory map; however, we were told by upper-level administrators that the accuracy of the map is questionable due to the frequent shifts in gang boundaries. Our interview data with current and former gang members indicate that gang territories are more stable than these comments suggest. Each of the gang involved individuals interviewed were asked whether there are specific street boundaries that are claimed by their gang. Many individuals mentioned a specific street, park, housing development, or other geographical land feature that served as a boundary to the east, west, north, or south. Some individuals mentioned that turf was important because, "they mark the area where no one from a rival gang should go." While these borders are most often geographical, they also serve a function that is highly social in nature. In fact, local gang territories seemed well known to many of our subjects and a few mentioned that gang members simply understood that they shouldn't cross the border of a rival gang without also expecting consequences. If these borders were crossed, numerous individuals mentioned that a fight or

shooting would be the most likely response. We are not sure why the discrepancy between perceived boundaries between gang members and OPD exists, but the disparate information suggests a possible breakdown of gang intelligence on the part of the police.

Another notable characteristic of Northeast Omaha gangs is the substantial intergenerational transmission of gang membership within family structures. Although the assessment team was unable to determine the full extent of intergenerational ties among Omaha gangs, preliminary analysis suggests gang membership in Northeast Omaha clusters along familial lines. This same clustering is less clear among South Omaha gangs. The extent of intergenerational gang ties among Northeast Omaha gangs may result at least, in part, from the dire economic conditions that afflict parts of the area creating an “underclass” characterized by “pervasive and persistent poverty” (Wilson 1987). In some of these families, gang membership extends across the life course and begins at an extremely early age.

South Omaha Gangs

Like Northeast Omaha gangs, South Omaha gangs also identify with the Southern California gang culture. Surenos 13, which is Spanish for southerner, is a California gang distinction used to refer to Latino gangs that reside south of Bakersfield, CA. The “13” signifies the thirteenth letter of the alphabet (“M”) in deference to the Mexican Mafia prison gang. Surenos 13, like the Crips and Bloods, are no longer confined to Southern California and have emerged in cities across the country. Surenos 13 is the largest gang organization in Omaha with approximately 589 members spread across more than five different Surenos 13 cliques with 12 or more members. Various other smaller Surenos 13 cliques also exist in Omaha. In fact, the largest numbers of Surenos 13 members are not documented with a specific clique.

In Omaha, Surenos 13 appears to be an “umbrella gang identity” with several Surenos-affiliated cliques that are more akin to actual organizational entities. Other active gangs in South Omaha include: Lomas 13, which reportedly has 279 members, MS-13, which reportedly has 181 members, 18th Street, which reportedly has 159 members, and Must Be Criminal (MBC), which reportedly has 118 members. The South Family Bloods have one of the largest territories in South Omaha and 252 documented members. Unlike the vast majority of gangs in South Omaha, the South Family Bloods are predominantly African American.

The gangs in South Omaha are generally larger than Northeast Omaha gangs and have a more established organizational hierarchy and leadership. South Omaha gangs are more closely tied to drug distribution as reflected by hot spot analysis of drug offenses which cluster in South Omaha neighborhoods (see Appendix 3). Similar to gangs in Northeast Omaha, South Omaha gangs are also intergenerational. In South Omaha, however, immigration makes the situation more fluid and more difficult to assess. Some of our interviewees claimed that it was easier in the 1990s to figure out which families played prominent roles in South Omaha gangs. One law enforcement source claimed that gangs in South Omaha have changed in certain fundamental ways: “South Omaha gangs used to be about hood—barrio. Now being a gang member in south Omaha is about making money, selling drugs, and pulling robberies.” This statement suggests a transition among South Omaha gangs from territorial to more focused criminal groups.

A Cultural Perspective of Omaha Gangs

How do gang members see themselves? How do they see schools? How do gang members see law enforcement? In other words, what defines a gang members’ worldview? Answering each of these questions requires an appreciation of culture. The term culture refers to a group of people’s whole way of life. Culture provides individuals with a cognitive roadmap or

way of thinking about the world. We see ourselves and others through the cultural lens that we learn beginning at an early age. The best way to study cultural issues is by utilizing ethnographic methods which can be described as a strategy of studying people in their natural environment. The most important aspect of a cultural analysis is that this type of perspective humanizes people whom outsiders may be inclined to conclude are somehow morally deficient. While gang members certainly engage in morally reprehensible behavior (in much the same way as people who are not gang members do), it is easy to overlook the morality of gang members' behavior. For example, in some cases gang members may commit theft or other criminal activity as a means to help a parent pay the utilities, purchase groceries, or pay the rent. Of course these reasons do not excuse illegal behavior but they should complicate how we think about illegal behavior. Typical assessments of gang members' moral character may ignore these aspects of their behavior and instead emphasize conventional understandings that view gang members as "trash." In fact, during our interviews with current gang members their responses to our questions about the most significant things in their lives demonstrated a high level of conventional moral qualities such as valuing family, friends, and religion.

A cultural understanding of gangs helps outsiders appreciate some of the complexities and dilemmas gang members may experience. For example, research shows that carrying a handgun increases a person's likelihood of victimization (Spano, Freilich, and Bolland 2008). Many of the gang members we interviewed, however, perceived this issue from a different vantage point. Our interviewees reported that leaving home without a gun (i.e., slip'n) is a dangerous proposition. Not carrying a gun results in situations where a person is unable to defend him/herself and thus becomes a prime target for "enemies." On the streets a person who

no longer carries a gun is still “fair game.” This point is easily overlooked when examined from the perspective of an outsider.

Gun possession is further complicated because law enforcement seems to realize that gang members may need to carry a gun for their safety. Consider the following statement offered by a police officer to a gang member during a patrol stop: “I understand you have to carry a gun for your safety but don’t let us catch you with a gun.” Think about the double-bind that gang members who are trying to walk away face. On the one hand their rivals are “gunning” for them and even law enforcement seems empathetic of the risk they face without a weapon for protection. On the other hand, law enforcement is also “gunning” for gang members. That is the police are hoping to catch gang members in possession of firearms so the legal system will incarcerate the gang members for a long period of time. From the perspective of gang members this is a classic “catch twenty-two.” Gang members are damned if they carry guns and damned (or killed) if they don’t.

Another critical component of gang culture that distinguishes it from various other cultures is the violence, fear, and trauma. We were frequently told by current and former gang members that a life on the streets produced symptoms suggesting post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). During one of our interviews with a current gang member, he/she compared the stress of living on the streets as “like Iraq.” This same person also reported that in the past two years, twelve of his/her friends and/or relatives had been killed as a result of gang violence. From an outsider’s perspective, gang members are ruthless predators who enjoy the disorder that pervades the streets. This perception assumes that gang members are content or even promote violent conflict resolution. This is an accurate description of some gang members but for many other gang members the violence reflects the extent to which individuals become caught in an

unyielding feedback loop - - a closed circuit system where individuals feel trapped. In this system violence may seem like the only way to survive.

F. Omaha Gangs and Violence

For the past several years Omaha has been plagued with poverty, violence, and gangs. Differing viewpoints about what is going on exist in Omaha. One interpretation is that gang-involved gun violence is a city-wide problem, and that therefore citizens living in Omaha's affluent suburbs have a social responsibility to address this problem. Whereas the AAEN frames the problem this way, others in the community stress that framing the problem in this manner takes the focus away from North Omaha—the place where a multitude of social problems, including gang violence, continue to fester. Although we completely agree with the AAEN's opinion or perspective that gang violence is a city wide responsibility, the location of gang violence in Omaha is an empirical question that must be answered with facts.

This section zeros in on the connection between gang and violence and also examines the places where the violence occurs. To assess different dimensions of gang-involved gun violence, we conducted geographic analyses of data from OPD's shooting timeline between 2002 and 2010. Before we present our findings, however, we must define some key terms.

Gang-Involved Crimes, Gang-Related Crimes, and Hot Spots

When law enforcement agencies classify a crime or incident as “gang-involved,” it implies that a gang member was associated with the event. Alternatively, “gang-related” applies only to those incidents in which gang-related motivation is evident. As a result of this distinction, statistics reported for “gang-involved” events run much higher than those reported for “gang-related” crimes. It is relatively straightforward to identify that parties to a criminal transaction are gang members; it is considerably more difficult to confirm that the event

manifests an attempt to achieve some sort of gang-driven objective. In regards to assessing the extent to which gangs contribute to a city's overall violence, "gang involved" is a more appropriate classification. Gang membership may contribute to violence even when the motive of an incident is not specifically gang-related. The fact that gang membership increases the likelihood of carrying a firearm and getting in fights suggests that gang membership, in general, increases high risk behavior apart from committing crimes on behalf of the gang (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith and Tobin 2003).

Law enforcement also uses special terminology—"hot spots"--to refer to the places or areas in a community where most of the violence is concentrated. A hot spot is a representation of a high concentration of incidents within a particular geographical space. They are created through mapping the specific incidents and then using a program to identify where the concentrations are the highest, given the overall distribution of the incidents. ArcGIS, the software that is used to create "hot spot" maps, determines where the highest concentration is, then the second highest, etc. and displays these on a map in different colors or shades. It can show up to a dozen different variations in the concentrations of incidents, but to keep things simple in this report we chose only to show the top two levels of concentration – often referred to as "hot spots" and "warm spots." The "cutoff" concentration of where the warm spots and hot spots begin and end is based on standard deviations of the overall distribution of the locations. This means that the individual maps show a different "scale" for what makes a warm or hot spot, because each year or area had distinct distributions of shootings.

The Myth of Gang-Involved Gun Violence as a City Wide Problem

Our analysis of OPD data reveals that approximately 58 percent of Omaha's gun violence is gang-involved. These figures reflect a rough estimate due to limitations of OPD's data. Data

show that the majority of Omaha's gang violence occurs in the Northeast and involves Blood and Crip affiliated cliques. Most importantly, in terms of gang-involved gun violence, the data over nearly a decade reveals extremely high levels of clustering in a relatively small geographic area in Northeast Omaha.

A counter-argument is that there has been a shift in the location of gun violence (including gang-involved incidents) over time and that the trend is in the direction of a city-wide dispersion of this type of violence. To explore this counter-argument, we examined homicide data compiled by the Abide Network during the years 1991-2011 and OPD's gang-involved gun violence data during the years 2002-2010.

In the past ten years, the City of Omaha's homicide rate per 100,000 residents averages between 4.9 and 10.7. These rates, however, are misleading and reflect artificially low numbers. In terms of homicides, lethal violence in Omaha is clearly clustered in a relatively small geographic area. When you actually compile the locations of Omaha homicides you find a heavy concentration in only a few highly segregated and highly disadvantaged neighborhoods. For example, when you restrict analyses to census tracts where more than four homicides occurred between 1991 and 2011, you find that 85 percent of the homicides occurred in an area of the city where approximately 12 percent of the city's population resides. When these spatial dynamics are taken into consideration, the recalculated homicide rate in these parts of the city with high concentrations of violence is actually 57.4 per 100,000 residents.

In order to examine OPD's gang-involved gun violence, we conducted "hot spot" spatial analyses. While the Northeast shootings of 2007 look like they have fewer "hot spots" than the Northeast shootings of 2006, one has to only look at the distribution of the shootings in 2006 and 2007 to realize that, while there are fewer "hot" spots in 2007, the spots themselves are "hotter"

– that is, the concentration of shootings in the red areas go from 7.25-10.87 shootings per square mile. The highest concentration for 2006 was between 5.81 and 8.71 – most of which would only show up in the “warm” areas for 2007. There were more overall shootings in 2007, with a mean of .271 shootings per square mile, and a standard deviation of .84. By contrast the distribution for 2006 shootings showed a mean of .214 and a standard deviation of .76. This consideration is quite important when comparing hot spots in the Northeast and Southeast precincts – as demonstrated by the “overall” map – there are no areas in the Southeast Precinct that would register as hot (although there are a few warm areas) when measured along the same scale as the Northeast – however, when sectioned by itself, one can see where areas of concentration in the Southeast exist relative to the rest of the precinct (see Appendices 4-12).

Although, as noted above, one can only discuss the results of the hotspots with regard to the change *in concentration* of crime (rather than the severity) some interesting patterns emerge. Below are some insights into the changes in hotspots both from year to year and with regard to locale.

Hot Spots Over Time: Northeast

The scale for hotspots in the Northeast appeared fairly stable between 2002 and 2010 with a few outlier years. 2003, in which only 46 shootings were reported, had significantly lower thresholds for hot and warm spots. 2006 also saw concentrations that were “cooler” by comparison, though the total number of shootings in the Northeast that year (232) was similar to other years. By contrast, 2008 saw areas that were much “hotter” in terms of concentration, with the hottest spot reaching over 14.5 shootings per square mile. The other 5 years had hot spots that were around 7.0-12.0 shootings per square mile, and warm spots that were around 3.0-7.0 shootings (2009 was also somewhat warmer). Interestingly, the locations of some of the hot

spots seem to have shifted over time. In particular, the hot spot between district 44 and 47 (along 30th street between Hamilton and Lake Streets) seems to be stable, and even growing as a high concentration between 2002 and 2006. By 2007, however, this location seems to have cooled to a warm spot, and there does not seem to be a return of concentrations in this area from 2008-2010. Likewise, the largest northern hot spot in the district seemed to move from the upper half of District 35 (between 24th and 30th and between Fort and Redick) south and west to District 34 (between 30th and 42nd, around Sorenson Parkway). These hotspot movements may be the results of natural movement of gang activity, or could be a response to particular crackdowns, which would be the result of displacement. Regardless, it is clear that the hot spots in the Northeast have moved from the first part of the 2000's to the latter part.

The movements of these hotspots to different areas past 2006 are notable. The African American Empowerment Network was launched in September of 2006, which as a portion of Omaha 360, targeted the very areas noted as hot spots from 2000-2005, particularly the location identified above (although other areas were also targeted). As gang involved shootings did not decrease overall, and given the consistency with this particular hot spot, it seems likely that these community efforts had a hand in dispersing this area of violence. In addition, since the efforts of 360 and in particular the AAEN have been active in the community, we see that hot spots in the northeast quadrant seem to have become less stable than in previous years. While this did not result in fewer overall areas of hotspot shootings, or even cooler hot spots across the board, the *stability* of these areas seems to have diminished. The result of this is that from 2007-2010, the northeast quadrant, at least in terms of tenacity of hotspot locale, looks more similar to the southeast quadrant than the area from 2000-2006. A more specific analysis of individual interventions targeted towards these areas would be helpful, to examine more closely the effects

that *particular* efforts of Omaha 360 and its partners, along with law enforcement efforts, may have had on displacing what for the first half of the decade appeared to be a persistent concentration of gang violence.

Hot Spots Over Time: Southeast

Unlike the Northeast precinct, the hot spots identified in the Southeast do not seem to stay stable for a few years and then move. Indeed the Southeast seems to have hot spots that change locations (sometimes by a long way) nearly every year, indicating either that these types of shootings in the Southeast do not seem to have patterns that are as stable (or as influenced) as those in the Northeast. This may also be the result that, overall, there were fewer shootings, and also that shootings in the Southeast Precinct do not seem to be as concentrated in hotspots generally (See Appendices 13-21).

Hot Spots Relative to Urban Structures

Additional maps indicate Northeast and Southeast hot spots (again, these are measured using different scales, as indicated by the blue and red shades). Of the structures of schools, alcohol outlets and parks, schools seem to have the highest correlation with hotspots overall, although there seems to be some parks that are relatively close to hot spots as well. This is perhaps not surprising, as one might assume that these shootings involve youth who would also have dealings with parks and schools, but are not yet of age to consume alcohol.

The hot spot analysis of gang violence in relation to schools revealed approximately eight Northeast Omaha schools are in either the core or periphery of shooting hot spots while about four schools in South Omaha are located in or near these shooting hot spots (see Appendix 22). One of the most significant risk factors is exposure to violence which would include residing in neighborhoods and attending school in areas with heightened levels of gun violence (Sheidow,

Gorman-Smith, Tolan, and Henry 2001). Gun violence is not evenly distributed across geographic areas within the city and thus certain schools are likely to have a disproportionate number of students who are exposed to this type of violence. These findings are an important data source for helping schools identify youth who are more likely to experience exposure to gun violence. Schools at the core or near the periphery of these hot spots should be especially concerned about proactively identifying these youth. In turn, school district administrators need to strongly consider allocating additional resources for schools located in or near these hot spots to help provide the social services recommended for children exposed to violence.

Offenders and Victims as Strange Bedfellows?

A careful assessment of a city's gang problem should include the extent to which gang members are victimized as this experience is closely linked to offending. Previous research suggests a strong correlation between offenders and victims. Offenders and victims often share important characteristics such as high risk behaviors, associations, and frequenting high risk locations.

Since 2007 the percentage of homicide victims who were gang involved has increased substantially. In 2007 21 percent of Omaha's homicide victims were gang involved. In 2008 and 2009 gang involved homicide victims accounted for almost half of the homicide victims in Omaha. Most recently, in the first quarter of 2010, a full 50 percent of Omaha's homicide victims have been gang involved. Of course, these figures only include victims who are gang involved and thus, when information about the offenders' gang involvement is also included the number of homicides that are gang involved is even larger (e.g., when both offenders and victims are considered, the percent of gang involved homicides in the first quarter of 2010 increases to 59 percent). In 2011 the percent of homicides that were gang-involved declined, however it was

unclear how this determination was made. Future assessments of Omaha gang violence should examine these issues further and access to homicide unit detectives and case files should be made available.

What Motivates Gang-Involved Violence?

A pet theory in some law enforcement circles is that there is a close connection between gangs and drugs and that gang-involved violence is an offshoot of gangs competing with other gangs to control the illegal distribution of drugs (Klein 1995). The policy implication of this theory is that investigating drug offenses vigorously and arresting gang members who use and deal drugs will make a city less violent. In other words, aggressive strategies to enforce drug laws will reduce gang-involved violence. Police departments across the country have bought into this idea and have used it as one of many justification for devoting substantial police resources to drug enforcement. We wondered whether or not OPD data support this theory for Omaha.

As noted above, we found there is virtually no spatial correspondence between drug offenses and gang-involved violence as the majority of this violence clusters in Northeast Omaha while drug offenses cluster in South Omaha (see Appendix 3). If the drug trade is not motivating gang violence in Northeast Omaha then what is? According to most of our interview subjects, violence in Northeast Omaha, to a large extent, is spurred by interpersonal disputes or “beefs” (see also Kennedy 2011; Anderson 1999). Conflicts involving romantic partners (for example, “I heard so and so was talking to my girl at a party last night...”) are another common motive that spurs gang involved violence in Northeast Omaha. One of our interviewees described the tendency for romantic relationships to spur violence as the “problem with pillow talk.” This

person discussed how rivalries may be inflamed when a romantic partner passes along negative information between two antagonists.

Although this type of inter-personal violence involving romantic relationships may involve gang members, these incidents certainly do not comport with typical conceptions of gang violence. While the violence is not committed on behalf of the gang, the gang identity does contribute to individual perceptions that violence is a necessary strategy for restoring respect when a person has been challenged and/or “dissed.” Targeted prevention and intervention offers an opportunity to keep adolescents from adopting this “gang persona” or teaching gang involved adolescents alternate scripts for gaining and sustaining respect.

Why do the gangs in Northeast Omaha commit more violence than South Omaha gangs? Several contributing factors seem to play a role in the different levels of violence among Northeast and South Omaha gangs. First, the greater degree of organizational structure found among South Omaha gangs and their higher level of involvement in the drug trade may create internal mechanisms that constrain spontaneous violent outbursts. Ironically, participating in the drug trade may encourage South Omaha gang members to be extra careful to avoid the unnecessary attention that spontaneous gun violence generates. Second, there is a smaller amount of population transition in Northeast Omaha as compared to South Omaha. The relatively stable population in Northeast Omaha results in longer “shelf lives” for the type of interpersonal disputes that seem to motivate most of the gang involved violence in Northeast Omaha. Third (and probably most important), the type of interpersonal dispute-driven violence that predominates in Northeast Omaha may reflect the area’s greater underlying social disorganization that corresponds with the higher level of community risk factors present in Northeast Omaha as compared to South Omaha.

We also believe that the idea of “legal cynicism” offers particular promise for understanding the different levels of gang violence in Northeast Omaha and South Omaha (Kirk and Papachristos 2011). Based on our own observations and conversations with gang members in Northeast Omaha, we sensed cynicism about the police and a lack of trust in the criminal justice system. Because we were unable to collect the same level of ethnographic data among South Omaha gangs, it is unclear if a similar level of legal cynicism exists among these individuals. Previous research (Sampson and Bean 2006), however, finds that high-violence neighborhoods, such as some of the hot spot areas in Northeast Omaha, are characterized by legal cynicism or the feeling among residents that legitimate channels of police protection are not viable options. This can occur when minorities and residents of racially stigmatized neighborhoods feel alienated from the police, who citizens perceive are inclined to treat citizens like suspects rather than individuals in need of assistance. Under these circumstances, a common reaction for minority residents is to feel that they must resolve their conflicts themselves, obtaining the support of family and friends to do so (Sampson and Bean 2006).

Legal cynicism is seen by some criminologists as leading to a practice referred to as “cultural retaliatory homicide” (e.g., see, Sampson and Bean 2006). This type of homicide differs from other forms of violence in its disproportionate emphasis on retaliation for “disrespect” or slights to individual or female family members. Cultural retaliatory homicide also includes situations involving the use of vigilante executions to resolve disputes that could be taken to the police. In sum, research has found that neighborhoods with high rates of poverty, unemployment, transience, and a perceived lack of access to the law enforcement combine to produce legal cynicism and an emphasis on retaliation in order to resolve interpersonal disputes. Given our anecdotal findings regarding legal cynicism among some Northeast Omaha gang

members and our data on the concentrated disadvantages that exists in some Northeast Omaha neighborhoods, the combination of legal cynicism and cultural retaliatory homicide seems like a plausible explanation of the different levels of gang violence in Northeast Omaha and South Omaha.

G. Existing Community Resources

Who should be at the center of Omaha's response to the gang problem? After interviewing many people who are involved in various capacities in dealing with gangs, we found a divide between what respondents referred to as the "suits" and the "streets." Suits is a term used to refer to individuals perceived as middle and upper class professionals ("bouisie" is another term used) who lack direct experience living on the streets and thus are perceived as less capable of effectively responding to the problem of gang membership. People who are "street" are characterized by a greater degree of life experiences that provide them with a level of insight regarding gangs that few, if any, non-street individuals possess. One criticism we often heard directed toward Omaha's approach to gang intervention is that more "OGs" (original gangsters) need to play a role in the community's gang outreach efforts including mentoring younger gang members. This issue is a classic reflection of a much larger debate involving "insiders" and "outsiders." Ironically, law enforcement also uses their position as insiders to argue that they know best. In the end, while we appreciate the distinction between certain types of insight based on specific experiences, this debate is largely counterproductive.

According to OJJDP best practices, a steering committee consisting of the main stakeholders should be at the center of a city's response to gangs. Moreover, the goal should be to include on this committee a wide pool of perspectives on about how to best respond to gangs instead of a smaller restricted pool based on certain experiences whether it be as a former gang

member or a law enforcement officer. The reality of the situation in Omaha is that law enforcement stands at the center of the city's response to gangs and various community agencies, programs, and initiative operate on the periphery. During the assessment period, we observed firsthand and interviewed a number of people in the community who are deeply committed to reducing gang violence. These individuals work tirelessly toward helping children and adults in need of assistance. We now turn to examine their efforts.

Empowerment Network

The AAEN is a collection of residents, community organizations, faith community, educational institutions, neighborhood organizations, law enforcement and elected officials. AAEN emphasizes a holistic and multifaceted approach that includes: economic redevelopment, job training/placement, and improvement of local housing conditions among other things. Omaha 360 is part of the AAEN's collaborative effort that includes over 100 other organizations. With respect to the City's gang and gun violence problem, AAEN has several functions including collaboration, mobilization, coordination, and innovation. AAEN accomplishes these functions, in part, through weekly meetings that bring representatives from human service agencies, law enforcement, education and the faith community among others. A sign of the network's success is the presence of top leadership from community organizations at these meetings. Their presence indicates "buy in" from agencies. The AAEN'S effectiveness in terms of collaboration was recently recognized by the Department of Justice's 2011 Director's Leadership Community Award.

One of the AAEN's strategies is to approach gang and gun violence on a neighborhood by neighborhood basis. For example, several years ago the AAEN focused on a hot spot for violence in the vicinity of 30th and Parker. Using a combination of block parties, prayer walks,

and other strategies to enhance the neighborhood, the network claims to have reduced violence in the area. As a result of data limitations, we can neither confirm nor deny the network's claims regarding violence reduction, however our hot spot analysis suggest the AAEN's efforts may have been successful (see Hot Spot Section, pp. 43-44). Any interpretation of data relating to reduced levels of violence in this neighborhood should also consider the possibility of crime movement to another location in the city and encompass a long enough period of time to determine actual changes in patterns of violence.

From the AAEN's perspective, its efforts have stimulated a dialogue between the community and police. Acting as a bridge, the AAEN has reportedly been responsible for improved police-community relations. Indications of this improvement include: claims alleging more reporting of crime, more witnesses and victims cooperating during investigations and prosecutions, and greater community understanding of the police role. Evidence relating to improved police-community relations, though, is primarily anecdotal and the extent to which community-police relations have actually improved is hard to determine. There is ample evidence that law enforcement participation at the AAEN weekly meetings has steadily grown.

The South Omaha Violence Intervention and Prevention (SOVIP) team operates as an Empowerment Network in South Omaha. This organization partners with the AAEN, but it is a distinct and independent group that focuses on crime and social issues that challenge South Omaha. SOVIP is organized around a leadership team that includes a chair, vice-chair, secretary, and a member of the Office of Violence Prevention. SOVIP is noted as focusing on "striving to bring community agencies, residents, and government officials together to address the needs and activities revolving around violence and gang activities in South Omaha" (<http://jjpf.co.douglas.ne.us/committee/youth-violence>). SOVIP meets once a month and is

currently involved in a “listening project” in which members of the community organization walk and talk with South Omaha residents and ask them about problems they experience.

SOVIP works closely with members of the local community and law enforcement from the Southeast Precinct.

Existing Gang Member Services

Impact One Community Connection (IOCC) pulls the big oar in the community when it comes to direct engagement with current gang members. In particular, IOCC provides gang prevention and intervention programs across Omaha neighborhoods and within local middle and high schools. IOCC uses a case management model for providing services and documents program effectiveness by utilizing a database modeled after the OJJDP’s client tracking system. IOCC employs outreach specialists or “interrupters,” many of whom are either former gang members themselves or grew up around gangs active in the area. The interrupters conduct street outreach aimed at high risk and gang-involved youth and seek to connect these youth to prevention and intervention programs; the interrupters also intervene in dicey situations where violence between gangs seems imminent in hopes of settling beefs and persuading gangs not to escalate violence through retaliation.

The Urban League of Nebraska is another impact player in the community part of Omaha’s response to gangs. The Urban League’s focus on economic self-reliance, parity, power, civil rights, and equal opportunities (www.urbanleagueneb.org) puts in sync with the perspectives of both the empowerment networks and Impact One. It works with at-risk youth and young adults in the community. Some of these individuals might be gang members, former gang members, or gang influenced. Individuals become involved with the initiatives of the Urban League through referrals from the juvenile justice system, school districts, and word of

mouth. Those who are between the ages of 15 to 21 are eligible for inclusion in many of the programs offered. In total, the program efforts of the Urban League claim to serve approximately 600 people.

The Urban League spearheads a variety of local efforts that either directly or indirectly have an impact on Omaha's gang problem. These include job training, summer employment, life skills management, and the facilitation of post-secondary educational opportunities. Beginning in 2008, the Urban League began the Urban Youth Empowerment Series (U-YES) which incorporates multiple program initiatives such as the Youthful Offender Reentry Program, the Truancy Reduction Program, and the Urban League University. Whereas the Youthful Offender Reentry and Truancy Reduction efforts are diversion programs for juvenile probation, the Urban League University is a supplemental education program that works with OPS and other educational institutions to help students with credit recovery. This program collects baseline and follow-up data for measurable program goals that is evaluated by an independent source. Urban League administrators claim the results are positive; although information that would confirm this was not made available to members of the assessment team.

Prayer Walks

Prayer walks started in 2007 when the OPD reached out to local church officials in an effort to team up against violence. Since the inception of prayer walks, numerous local churches have participated in different types of prayer walks. The First Responder Prayer Walks (FRPW) involves individuals who respond to the location of homicides with the intent of sending a message that the City of Omaha is united in its efforts to combat violence. Prayer walks focus primarily on gang involved homicides; however they also happen at nearly all other locations of homicides as well. In fact, a leading member of the prayer walk initiative stated that the only types of homicide incidents that they do not respond to are those that involve incidents of

domestic violence. Another type of prayer walk involves groups of individuals who pray at certain parts of the city with relatively high levels of violence. During these prayer walks members of the group encourage local members and business owners to cooperate with local law enforcement.

At the time of the assessment, leaders of the prayer walks were in the process of coordinating their efforts with those of local crisis care responders to help with the cost of funeral arrangements, follow up care, and connecting people in need to local churches and service agencies. Prayer walks represent a collaborative community response to violence. The goal of prayer walks is to involve the church in helping reduce violence in the city through the use of spiritual and social networking components. Among other indicators, many of their efforts are measured by asking individuals in the neighborhood if they feel comfortable allowing their children to play outside, whether residents feel safe in their community, and whether new groups of people are coming together for a positive cause in those communities. The prayer walk initiatives also rely on secondary sources of police data and whether there is an observable reduction in the level of crime in the neighborhoods where prayer walks are conducted. Based on these indicators, a representative of FRPW feels their efforts have produced positive results. No systematic evaluation has been completed.

Group Counseling for Gang Members and At-Risk Youth

South Omaha Boys & Girls Club sponsors the Noble Youth Group which meets weekly to discuss coping and lifestyle skills, trauma management, sex education, and substance abuse among other things. The facilitator is a well known gang counselor with substantial “street cred” in South Omaha. The clientele include at-risk youth and current gang members referred through a variety of sources.

Family First: A Call to Action, which started in 2010 includes a multi-racial clientele from multiple gangs. Directed by a minister who has a charismatic leadership style, this agency has approximately 10 staff and 50 to 60 volunteers. TRUCE, a subset of this agency, is a gang prevention and intervention program. Children and young adults are commonly referred to this program through an array of sources including concerned parents, the county attorney's office, probation, the juvenile justice system, recruitment on behalf of the agency, and self-referrals. One of the major goals of this program is that members will make a commitment to not be "active shooters" in the community. Upon entry, new members of the program are also asked to complete an initial assessment that asks questions about many aspects of their lives including their education, social, behavioral, and family situations. While there are many basic tenants of the group-level program, individuals are also assessed in terms of individual risk factors and needs. These individual level needs are then addressed during one-on-one meetings and a life plan is developed to help participants identify and track their progress towards positive life goals. Life plans are individualized and based on one's unique passions, talents, and interests.

The group meetings of TRUCE concentrate on teaching behavior modification skills through a formalized curriculum. Specifically, these meetings address the development of life, social, and employability skills, and other issues such as anger management and proper decision making. After completing the TRUCE program, a post assessment is conducted to determine progress and areas that need further development. Successful completion of the TRUCE program may result in expungement of one's criminal record. Some participants in the TRUCE program may also be recommended for involvement in an apprenticeship program that focuses on skills such as vehicle care, lawn care, and snow removal. Despite the assessment team's request, data to gauge the effectiveness of this program was not provided.

Another program providing group counseling to gang members operates through the Hope Center for Kids in North Omaha. Group meetings at the Hope Center are voluntary and include both gang members and at-risk youth. Besides playing a surrogate father role, the minister who facilitates this group provides individual counseling and directs weekly meetings. Hope Center clientele is primarily limited to one African American gang. The Hope Center combines recreation with an agenda emphasizing education, jobs, and the Christian faith.

Recreation Programs and Gang Members

Although many recreational programs are currently working with youth and young adults in the community, three organizations are known for working with at-risk and gang involved youth: the Hope Center for Kids in Northeast Omaha, South Omaha Boys & Girls Club, and Victory Boxing Club in South Omaha. The Hope Center for Kids hosts the Village Basketball Alliance which is comprised of multiple basketball teams from the local community. Some of the teams included in the alliance are from Impact One, ENCAP, Hope Center, Omaha Street School, and the Salvation Army. This event is said to provide a “haven” in which rival gang members who otherwise would not normally associate can come together and play basketball. Although this initiative has not been officially evaluated, members of the community have reported that some of the young participants in the basketball league have had an increase in confidence and a change in attitude as a result of their participation (Omaha World Herald 2/11/2012).

The Victory Boxing Club, which began during the summer of 2005, serves anyone in the community who wants to learn how to box but it has a reputation in the community for doing one thing especially well: working closely with gang members or individuals in the community with family members that are currently or were involved with gangs in the past. Victory Boxing is

both a gang prevention and intervention effort because it provides young individuals with an opportunity to become committed to something positive. Victory focuses on building strong relationships with youth and on promoting a strong system of values for its members. The club expects its members to remain humble and to refrain from cussing and fighting outside of the ring. Victory also encourages gang members who become involved in the program to participate in Bible study classes.

Omaha's Mythical Interagency Outreach Team

OJJDP best practices stipulate that an “interagency street outreach team” is one of the most important components of a community’s response to gang membership and gang violence. The interagency street team is a formal outreach team of direct service personnel which includes police, probation, outreach youth workers, school officials, and community organizers. Ideally, the individuals occupying these roles should function as a team—that is they should interact with each other on a regular basis in regards to planning, programming, and contacting gang-involved youth, high-risk youth, and families as well as gangs that influence targeted youth. The outreach or street team is the key direct service and contact component of the program—it is responsible for communication and coordination within the interagency team as well as with local groups and neighborhood residents (OJJDP 2010: 123).

We found only a semblance of this interagency team in Omaha. We could not find any single representative or committee officially and formally responsible for this type of communication and coordination. When a community lacks this type of small interagency initiative, efforts to target gang youth will be diffused. Contrary to our observations, some individuals who work in the area of gang prevention and intervention insisted that Omaha does indeed have an interagency team. Their responses indicate a possible discrepancy between

perceptions and reality. One respondent adamantly denied that Omaha has an interagency team. This respondent added that it would be a mistake for Omaha to have such a team because it would consist of competitors (like law enforcement and gang intervention specialists) who could never get along.

Undoubtedly, it is true that tension between agencies holding competing goals can sometimes become magnified in certain situations. Consider a “hard core” gang member known to local law enforcement as an “active shooter” who decides to leave his/her gang lifestyle and is working with gang interventionists to change his/her life. Should law enforcement and gang intervention specialists work at cross purposes or should they collaborate? Or consider another hard core gang member who is receiving intervention services such as help finding housing and employment. Meanwhile, the police refuse to accept that this person who was a gang member once upon a time is trying to leave the streets. Based on the assumption “once a gang member—always a gang member,” the police violate this individual’s civil rights. The police visit this person’s landlord and employer, warning them that this person is a dangerous gang member and that he or she should be fired and evicted. We wish we could state that these are hypothetical situations in Omaha, but instead they are real allegations.

Flying Solo: Gang Interventionists at OPS and OPD

In 2007, the Omaha Public School (OPS) District hired its own gang interventionist. While the OPS should be commended for assuming responsibility in terms of gang intervention and acknowledging the importance of such efforts, there are a number of issues that limit the effectiveness of this position. For reasons that are unclear, OPS schools are not systematically tracking gang activity among their students. The current gang interventionist is not allowed to maintain statistics or other records that would be necessary to determine whether the

interventions are actually effective. In addition, the OPS employs one interventionist despite a student body that numbers 47,060 – a ratio that is unlikely to result in much benefit.

In 2010 the Omaha Police Department received grant funds from the Nebraska Crime Commission to hire a civilian “gang intervention specialist.” Like OPS, the OPD should also be commended for taking a proactive step in trying to address the gang problem in Omaha. After conducting interviews with the intervention specialist, supervising officers at OPD, and reviewing the position description and monthly reports, the assessment team came to several conclusions: (1) the gang intervention specialist spends a significant portion of his/her time at various local area schools mentoring students; (2) the gang intervention position combines multiple roles including school counselor, gang intelligence analyst, public safety monitor, and youth mentor; (3) the specialist prepares monthly reports that include names of school-age children who provide information (some of which may be incriminating) to the gang intervention specialist; (4) OPD does not appear to have established guidelines to govern situations in which the specialist experiences role conflict that raises serious ethical issues with possible legal ramifications; (5) OPD does not seem to have considered the implied confidentiality that students may reasonably assume when discussing problems with a person who appears to be serving as a school counselor; (6) any counselor or interventionist playing dual or multiple roles runs the risk of being viewed in the community as a “double-agent” or essentially a “narc”; and (7) the monthly reports that OPD currently maintains do not provide the level of detail or follow up information necessary for ascertaining whether the interventions are effective.

Both OPS and OPD gang intervention positions are structured as a “catch all” or “jack-of-all-trades.” Doing this is dangerous. A lack of focus dilutes effectiveness. Intervention positions need a clear focus for optimal impact (Spergel 1995). A clear focus can be ensured, in

part, by the person maintaining detailed records of every intervention, especially those in which the intervention specialist provides mentoring or individual counseling.

OPD and OPS gang interventionist positions are uncoordinated. It is a mystery why and how this could happen, especially considering that both of the positions largely involve working with students across the Omaha Public School District. The lack of coordination compromises the effectiveness of each position.

H. Existing Law Enforcement Strategies: The War on Gangs

When our team began the assessment process, we had no idea that we would wind up looking at police-community relations. We were conducting a gang assessment and what did that have to do with law enforcement? Sometimes gang assessments will exclude a discussion of police-community relations. We now know why this is a big mistake. Assessing gangs without considering the relationship between police and citizens misses one of the most important dimensions that helps generate and sustain street gangs - - namely social and political marginalization. Poor community-police relations are, arguably, one of the most striking measures of political and social marginalization (Kennedy 2011).

Even a casual observer is aware that the history of policing in America belies an ugly past of racial violence and oppression (Walker and Katz 2007). Although some members of the general public would like to ignore that history and pretend America is a “color blind” society where race plays little role in matters involving criminal justice or other aspects of society, there is substantial evidence demonstrating that race “still matters” (West 1994; Pager 2007; Alexander 2012; Kennedy 2011; Walker, Spohn, and Delone 2012).

During the question and answer portion of Michelle Alexander’s recent talk in Omaha, Alexander declared that the “War on Gangs” fuels the mass incarceration problem in much the same way that the “War on Drugs” does. To quote Alexander:

“...it [the War on Gangs] all boils down to viewing a whole population [gang members] as disposable and viewing them as bad, then as a result you can treat them any kind of way. You can stop them, you can frisk them, you can brand them, you can ship them off, you know for decades at a time and shrug your shoulders and I think it’s the same mentality that we brought to the drug war that we’re bringing to, you know, the problem of gangs” (Alexander 3/10/2012).

Almost anticipating Alexander’s position on the social injustice of the War on gangs and mass incarceration, a local prosecutor told us that “an Indian reservation analogy” is useful for understanding the gang problem in Omaha: “In Omaha—especially North Omaha—we segregate people, deny them equal opportunity for education and work and then we expect them to blend into society and conform. If we would assimilate all citizens and provide opportunities, then we wouldn’t have such a big gang problem in the city.”

In terms of suppression strategies, Omaha has a number of initiatives in place designed to attack the link between gangs and violent crime. Since 2003, the US Attorney’s Project Safe Neighborhoods has established a structure within which federal, state and local agencies orchestrate a concerted response to gun, drug and gang-related offenses. While Omaha law enforcement agencies are clearly committed to suppression strategies, this commitment obscures the possibility that certain types of suppression strategies or an overreliance on suppression strategies may be ineffective or even worse increase the severity of the problem.

Based on our observations, Omaha is over-relying on suppression strategies. For example, the Mayor’s recent crime plan references the need to seize 700 guns from the streets without any logical basis for how or why this figure was selected. Moving forward with an effort to seize hundreds of guns will promote one thing: indiscriminate patrol stops and searches. These tactics are ineffective and worse reinforce the perception that policing is biased and relies heavily on racial profiling. Although this perception already exists, the Mayor’s plan is likely to further reinforce these perceptions.

Patrol stops aimed at gun seizures must rely on “reasonable suspicion” and officers need to have a list of indicators of possible characteristics of “why you would suspect a person is carrying a firearm.” “Fishing expeditions” should be avoided where “guesswork” becomes the method of choice. Simply stating that because certain geographic areas have higher levels of gun violence, we can reasonably assume that any individual walking or driving around in those areas are more likely to carry a firearm than individuals living in areas with lower levels of gun violence is problematic. Based on our observations, though, we sense that some officers assume that “fishing expeditions” are expected by upper command and are part of the organizational culture.

One of the most significant findings that resulted from the gang assessment is that a pervasive sense of distrust appears to exist between law enforcement and segments of the city. In particular, many of our respondents who reside in Northeast Omaha seem especially likely to cite police misconduct as a serious issue. Surely this can’t be news to anyone with a passing knowledge of Omaha history and politics. The level of distrust between law enforcement and residents is not unique to Omaha but unfortunately exists in many cities across the country (Brunson 2007). But the fact that distrust between law enforcement and residents in Northeast Omaha is neither new nor unique does little to help mitigate the devastating consequences that emanate from this problem. What is clear is that police officers and residents in Northeast Omaha both seem “locked into” a script steeped in cynicism and distrust. Of course, neither all police officers nor all residents adhere to this script but those that do can be characterized in the following manner. Police officers tend to overgeneralize nefarious motivations present among residents (e.g., “everyone in North Omaha is dirty”). Residents, in turn, tend to assume that all police officers consistently abuse their authority and are motivated by racist intentions (e.g., “the

cops hate Black people”). Adherence to this script creates a vicious cycle of interaction where each set of actors are assuming the worst about the others’ intentions (see also Kennedy 2011).

This may sound like we are suggesting that residents and law enforcement are equally responsible for perpetuating the script. That is not our intent. It may be true that residents and law enforcement are equally involved but keep in mind law enforcement have additional burdens that come with the authority society grants them. While civilians certainly perpetuate the problem by acting impolitely or disrespectfully toward law enforcement, ultimately civilians have this prerogative. Law enforcement does not have this luxury. Communities must have exceedingly high standards for the individuals who assume the oath to “serve and protect.” High standards must include officers treating individuals with dignity and respect. Referring to residents (including suspected gang members) as “pieces of shit” cannot be tolerated nor can other hostile styles of interaction such as treating residents as “enemy combatants.” So how can this cycle be broken? Although this may sound cliché, the first step is acknowledging the problem exists. Some people choose to downplay the problem or cite improvement in this area with little or no hard evidence. Other people may claim any problems in this area that exist are simply the result of a “few rotten apples” (Punch 2003). The extent which this problem is pervasive across the department needs further investigation.

Allegations of Police Misconduct

The negative script that exists between residents and police officers is magnified significantly when the residents are suspected gang members. Some of the current and former gang members we interviewed referred to the Omaha Police Department as “the largest gang in Omaha.” In talking with these respondents, we learned this statement and others like it referred to the perception that OPD’s officers allegedly engage in various types of routine misconduct

and treat individuals (especially suspected gang members) in a discriminatory fashion.

Understanding the perspective of gangs requires that we take their views of law enforcement seriously.

Approximately 50 percent of the current gang members we interviewed reported experiencing some type of police misconduct. Of note, this figure does not include any reference to allegations of police misconduct documented during interviews with former gang members. Interviews with former gang members referenced incidents that, in many cases, allegedly occurred more than ten years ago, however, these incidents have long “shelf lives” and impact the collective memory of a community thus affecting the overall tone of police/community relations.

Although a range of alleged misconduct was reported by current gang members, we focus in this section on one specific type of misconduct that can be described as “dropping suspected gang members off in rival territories.” More specifically, this allegation involves claims of officers handcuffing suspected gang members, and placing them in squad cars in order to transport the individuals to “rival” gang territories, and then leaving those individuals in such areas to fend for themselves. Based on our interviews, we found eight individuals who reported directly experiencing this practice. Although this may not sound like a large number, it is critical to keep in mind this number reflects reports drawn from a relatively small interview sample (n=33). The gang members who reported experiencing this practice represent approximately 24% of those interviewed. If this rate held for the overall number of gang members documented by the OPD, there may be more than 400 gang members across the City that have been dealt with in this manner in recent years. Obviously, this projection assumes the veracity of the allegations.

In terms of timeframe, these alleged “drop offs” occurred between 2005 and 2010. Based on the reports obtained during interviews, two of the incidents involved individuals transported from neighborhoods in South Omaha to neighborhoods in Northeast Omaha (one incident involved an individual who was allegedly transported to the area of 40th Street and Ames Avenue and the other incident involved an individual transported from South Omaha to the area of Miami Street and 45th Street). In other cases, individuals reported being transported from neighborhoods in Northeast Omaha east of 30th Street to other neighborhoods in Northeast Omaha west of 40th Street. The distinctions between different neighborhoods is highly salient as gang cliques are active in different neighborhoods and, in many cases, these neighborhoods have on-going conflicts or “beefs” that are often the catalysts for gun violence. In these situations, an individual not living in the area who is observed walking may become a target of violence especially if the person is perceived to be affiliated with a rival gang. In other words, if one or more officers are, in fact, engaging in the practice referenced above, the officer (s) are quite literally engaging in a dangerous and illegal practice that jeopardizes public safety and may result in the serious injury or death of one or more individuals.

If these allegations are accurate, one of the problems with treating suspected gang members as enemy combatants is that this approach legitimizes dehumanization. Once a police officer begins dehumanizing gang members this process becomes a powerful mechanism for rationalizing misconduct including illegal behavior. When the victims of this misconduct are suspected gang members few people seem to care (McCorkle and Miethe 2002). Worse yet, some people may actually believe that because a person is a suspected gang member he/she deserves “whatever they get.” This is a significant problem. From a constitutional perspective,

mistreating suspected gang members is no different than mistreating anyone else and this problem should be defined and approached as a human rights issue.

In addition to the obvious problems associated with police officers dropping gang members off in rival territories, members of the assessment team also heard allegations about OPD officers who, in the respondent's estimation, intentionally made gang members appear as "snitches" (i.e., cooperating with law enforcement). Specifically, we heard claims that some police officers would place gang members in squad cars and drive them around on the gang members' own "turf" or neighborhoods in front of associate gang members to make it appear as though the individual could not be trusted. While increased cooperation with law enforcement is an important goal, the appearance of snitching may be met with consequences such as physical punishment or even lethal violence, thus increasing tension between local residents and the police.

So, if these allegations are accurate, why would officers do these things to suspected gang members? Determining motivation is always complicated but from what we could ascertain, these practices are part of an alleged pattern of what people on the street refer to as "bumping up." The term bumping up includes the various ways police hassle suspected gang members (some of the techniques are legal such as when patrol officers stop a car belonging to a suspected gang member for a minor traffic violation and some of the hassles are illegal such as the drop offs). Whether legal or illegal, some police may perceive bumping up gang members as a "noble cause" and thus the "right thing to do" (Crank and Caldero 2000). The war on gangs necessitates that officers utilize a "by any means necessary" approach. If criminal and civil violations result from the war on gangs, then these are the eggs that must be broken to make the omelet of gang suppression.

In addition to the issue of police bumping up suspected gang members, it does not take long for an observer to notice the dramatic difference in styles of policing that exist in Northeast Omaha compared to South Omaha. In South Omaha officers seem more committed to embodying a community-oriented policing approach that relies on a close working relationship with residents. In South Omaha, officers seem invested in the local area and approach residents as resources who are vital to increasing their effectiveness. What is even more striking is that officers themselves recognize the differences between style of policing in Northeast and South Omaha and speak freely about these differences. We were told by law enforcement officers quite simply that when it comes to dealing with gangs things are done differently in the two areas. And while policing should certainly reflect the nuances of each neighborhood, one would expect that there should also be some degree of standardized practices. For example, consider the following statements collected during another research study specifically examining policing practices in Omaha. These statements clearly indicate why and how policing varies in Northeast compared to Southeast precincts. And while the statements are disturbing in terms of racially-charged accusations, they also suggest that there is an assumption that different tactics are expected for different neighborhoods.

“The difference between NE and SE is the volume and drama. Black people are more verbal, more dramatic...I would rather deal with ten Mexicans than one Black because of the mouth. Hispanics are more courteous to police”

“There are a variety of people and cultures and racial/ethnic groups. They have different kinds of relationships with police and different expectations from police. There are times in NE when you have to tell somebody to shut up. Different expectations; different everything”

“Each precinct has different ethnic groups that live a different lifestyle. You approach people differently, especially depending on where you are at [sic]. There are things you will do in NE that you can't do out west”

“...More violent crime – Black on Black crime. Hispanics are more family-oriented. Blacks want something for nothing and they live off the system. Blacks are more apt to treat their women worse, more subject to violence. Black women fight back. Blacks want to play the race card because that is the hand they have played for centuries and gotten away with it...Blacks have no culture. They can make more money sitting on their ass collecting taxes rather than working a job” (all of the above quoted in Hassell 2004).

The good news is that it seems as though, particularly in South Omaha, law enforcement seems to “buy in” to a community-based approach to address gang-related issues. In addition, there are clearly a number of community members in Northeast Omaha who are able and willing to work with law enforcement to address gang issues in their neighborhoods. We hope these realities can have a positive influence on police/community relations, particularly in Northeast Omaha. The AAEN meetings, where captains and other officers have a place to interact with community members and other professionals working toward the same goal of reduced gang influence and violence, are a good start toward positive change. It is vital, however, that law enforcement, as well as other leaders in Omaha, be willing to take an honest and substantive look at policies and procedures that continue to play into the “script of distrust.” Some of these deal with patrol, as noted above, and others lie not with law enforcement specifically, but with prosecution, such as the Violent Criminal Prosecution Unit (VCPU), discussed below.

Hammer Time: The VCPU

The VCPU symbolizes the heart of Omaha’s War on Gangs: the escalation of punishment through increased incarceration. In February 2011 Douglas County Attorney Don Kleine created the Violent Criminal Prosecution Unit (VCPU) to combat violent crime and habitual offending. To get an insider’s view of the rationale for the VCPU and also to understand how it operates, we interviewed some of the prosecutors who work in this unit. In addition, we talked to critics of the VCPU.

The VCPU focuses on a variety of violent crimes and types of criminals. Types of crime include robbery, assault, burglary, and possession of weapon with intent to commit a felony. Types of criminals include gang members, repeat or habitual offenders, and murderers. According to VCPU prosecutors, desired outcomes from VCPU prosecutions are as follows: 1) less plea bargaining; 2) more convictions; 3) longer sentences; 4) fewer guns on Omaha's streets; 5) a reduction in gun violence; and 6) a lower rate of violent crime.

The architects of the VCPU claim the initiative is modeled after Boston's Operation Cease Fire by delivering a strong message to gang members and other violent offenders: if you carry a gun, you will face grave consequences. When we asked prosecutors to connect the dots for us—that is, explain how the VCPU reduces gang violence in Omaha--VCPU prosecutors told us their purpose is to “take the hard core gangbangers off the streets.” The prosecutors stated that they wanted to remove the bad role models from the streets that draw kids into gangs. As one prosecutor put it, “Kids see a gangbanger rolling down the street in a fancy car, and they want to emulate the gangbanger—we're going to take that gangbanger out of commission.”

The concept behind the VCPU was to pick aggressive prosecutors to work in the VCPU so that they could use powerful weapons, such as mandatory minimum sentences and habitual criminal statutes, to “hammer” gang members and other violent criminals. Specifically, the expectations were that these prosecutors would be given lower caseloads meaning more time to prepare cases for trial; charge offenders with crimes carrying extremely long sentences; refuse to plea bargain; devote more time to preparing for trials which, in turn, would translate into more guilty verdicts in trials; and have a big deterrent impact on violent crime.

VCPU prosecutors maintain that they are targeting gang members who are terrorizing the community. They are going after the few who are scaring, frightening, and intimidating average

residents to the point where citizens are afraid to cooperate with the police, afraid to be witnesses in criminal cases involving gang members, and afraid their names will appear in police reports.

Prior to 2011 the Douglas County Attorney's office did not target hard core gang members because of the community's lack of trust in law enforcement. "Without the community behind you," one prosecutor informed us, "you can't obtain witnesses and informants in gang cases." To build trust, VCPU prosecutors became active in Omaha 360. According to VCPU prosecutors, community leaders saw the same VCPU prosecutors attending Omaha 360 meetings every week, and they saw that these prosecutors were serious about fighting gangs.

While VCPU prosecutors claim they are only targeting "hardcore" violent criminals, they also admit that the VCPU has no selection criteria for accepting a case to prosecute. Instead, case selection seemed to follow a much less formal process, such as a member of the OPD gang unit approaching a VCPU prosecutor and asking if they have "heard of this guy?" It appears that this type of statement is often enough to prompt VCPU prosecutors to start looking at a gang member as a possible target. A VCPU investigator works with victims and witnesses to secure the cooperation and safety before trial.

Among the powerful weapons in the VCPU arsenal are "The Bitch" (the Nebraska Habitual Criminal Act) and an assortment of sentencing enhancement laws recently passed by the Unicameral. An example of an enhancement law that the VCPU uses is the Felon in Possession of a Firearm law which now carries a mandatory three year prison sentence. Before passage of the most recent crime control package in the legislature, this offense was a Class II felony and there was no mandatory minimum. Sentencing enhancements in Nebraska criminal statutes are so strong now that prosecutors report Omaha police officers come to the Douglas County Attorney's office with their "gangster cases" instead of taking them to the U.S. Attorney

because the new enhancements contain higher mandatory minimums. “Thanks to the sentencing enhancements, local law enforcement has come back home,” quipped one of the VCPU prosecutors.

While sentencing enhancements are an integral part of the VCPU’s “hammer time” strategy, something important is missing from the VCPU’s approach---Boston’s “pulling levers” or notification program. This key element of Operation Cease Fire involved the delivery of a direct and explicit “retail deterrence” message to a small target audience of active offenders. This message relays the response that specific violent behaviors would provoke *while simultaneously offering these individuals opportunities to reform themselves*. Instead of delivering a personalized, targeted, and credible deterrence or notification message to specific gangs and gang members in Omaha, VCPU prosecutors give talks to much broader audiences consisting of OPS middle school youth, losing the specific impact of the message to known gang members.

Perhaps the most problematic issue regarding the VCPU is that no outside evaluation will be conducted of the VCPU because the Nebraska Crime Commission did not fund an evaluation. No outside evaluation equals no accountability, but also means that it is impossible to identify what is working, not working, and what might be missing to improve the effectiveness of the VCPU. Prosecutors concede that the lack of outside evaluation is problematic because a typical VCPU criminal trial is expensive. As they point out, the VCPU pushes for longer sentences and tries not to plea bargain. This makes defendants more likely to go to trial. More trials mean more money must be expended in order to put these defendants in prison. To acquire funding for the next fiscal year, the VCPU only needs to file a series of statistical reports showing what the VCPU is doing.

Asked if it is possible that by locking up primarily young black men for a large number of years, the VCPU might be doing irreparable harm to the Omaha's African American community in the same way that the drug war has hurt the black community, the prosecutors disagreed. They dismissed the human costs argument against mass incarceration with these declarations: "Negative behavior earns negative consequences. You break the rules, you pay the price." They added that as prosecutors they have no control over effects of the VCPU on the Black community. "As prosecutors," they said, "we are concerned with deterrence, incapacitation, and retribution. We have no control over rehabilitation." This statement is not only antithetical to a community-based approach to stop violence, it is also contrary to Boston's gun crime approach where all parties, including law enforcement and prosecutors, take an active role in offering and facilitating rehabilitation.

Critics of the VCPU take issue with some of its premises and claims. A retired North Omaha police officer questions the VCPU's assertion that it deters gang crime by severely punishing hard core gang members. He notes that deterrence is based on the idea of setting examples to influence the behavior of others. The premise of deterrence is that those who are to be deterred think rationally. The problem with deterrence in the instance of the VCPU, according to this source, is that gang members do not rationally calculate the costs and benefits before taking action.

A former North Omaha gang counselor agrees with the police officer. He/she noted that heavy handed solutions to street gangs like extreme sentences cause "blowback." Both sources recommend that instead of severely punishing kids for carrying guns, Omaha police and prosecutors need to check out the gang members' reality--discover the reasons why gang

members think it is necessary to carry guns in the first place and then see if they can do something about those reasons.

Other critics doubt the logic that the VCPU rests on. They point out that “We can’t arrest and incarcerate our way out of the gang problem. The VCPU approach will wind up shooting us in the foot. One type of blowback will be the exacerbation of prison overcrowding. Nebraska’s prisons are already overcrowded. Where is the money to build more prisons? It’s not there. Which types of offenders are authorities going to release from prison to make room for young gang members to do hard time?” Critics also questioned the underlying assumption of the VCPU, namely that there is no chance of rehabilitating young gang members. “The basis of the VCPU is the stereotype that Omaha gang members are trash,” he/she said. “Throw them away. No second chances.”

I. Recipes for Failure

As noted earlier, there is little doubt that the will to alleviate gang violence in Omaha is alive and well. There are many avenues of hope that, if pursued, can help move the city towards this goal. However, before this can be achieved, an honest (and difficult) look at some past and current policies that are “recipes for failure” is necessary. Just as positive change for an individual often requires a stark assessment of their shortcomings, a clear identification of problematic strategies in addressing gang issues is a necessary component to a helpful assessment. The following critiques should not be cause for defensiveness, despair, or even much surprise – as an initial formal gang assessment, it is to be expected that many of the current strategies are far from best practices, otherwise there would be little need for an assessment at all.

Focus on Suppression. A “suppression mainly” strategy, such as the one the City of Los Angeles relied on for more than 20 years (i.e., Community Response Against Street Hoodlums, C.R.A.S.H., which was disbanded in 2000 due to widespread police misconduct) does *not* work. This strategy has proven to be ineffective at not only addressing the root conditions that cause and sustain gang violence, but also at reducing gang-related crime. Cities experiencing high levels of gang-related gun violence often lack both target suppression and problem-oriented policing. High gun violence communities often perceive law enforcement as using “heavy-handed” tactics that indiscriminately unfairly target African or Latino males without addressing the true sources of violence.

Follow Policies that Produce Mass Incarceration. The Omaha War on Gangs is for all intents and purposes geared to produce mass incarceration. When the Omaha Police Department’s gang unit and utilities units hit the streets, they are looking for any way to lock up young men suspected of gang membership. Similarly, the Douglas County District Attorney’s Violent Criminal Prosecution Unit seeks to imprison gang members for long periods. A preferred charge is “use of a firearm to commit a crime” because under Nebraska law this offense carries a mandatory five years in prison. The mass incarceration of suspected gang members might be useful in the short term, but over time mass incarceration makes it hard for arrestees to obtain jobs and it weakens families and minority communities. Mass incarceration alienates residents of minority communities from police. Alternatively, a step in the right direction would be for the Mayor’s Task Force on Gun Violence to endorse a pending proposal for gun diversion for juveniles and first offenders. As spelled out in a citizen’s proposal made to the task for in May 2012 (Robinson 2012), a gun diversion program holds promise for reducing violence, saving on the economic and human costs of mass incarceration, and eliminating the

collateral consequences of labeling young people felons. For gang members who have been convicted repeatedly of gun-related violent crimes, focused deterrence should be pursued.

Declare War, Militarize the Police Response. A militaristic style of policing is characterized by the use of fear and the use of force. This approach assumes there is a war against crime, where only superior firepower can win the war. In Northeast Omaha, classic examples of militaristic policing include alleged bumping up and the driving of military assault vehicles on midnight raids. The target of fear in Northeast Omaha is suspected gang members. Basically, the militaristic model assumes an “us” versus “them” mindset that leads to excessive force, police misconduct, and the violation of suspected gang members’ constitutional rights. American law and tradition have tried to draw a line between police and military forces. Soldiers go to war to destroy and kill the enemy. The police are supposed to keep the peace. Some police officers who work Northeast Omaha insist they are not engaging in militaristic policing but merely protecting themselves and the citizens of Northeast Omaha from the threat of gangs. This is the way, they say, to protect citizens and send officers home alive at the end of their shifts. With all due respect to the views of these officers, disclosures made in this report force the public to confront the realities and costs of militaristic policing in Omaha. Admittedly, however, the picture is mixed. While some ugly scenes in Northeast Omaha make the police look like an occupying force, scenes in South Omaha exhibit a partnership between South Omaha and the police. What is certain, it seems, is that a continuation of militaristic policing in Northeast Omaha will lead the community to eventually rebel against this type of policing and file lawsuits against the police (something that has already begun happening). A better model of policing for Northeast Omaha would be a community partnering, problem-solving model.

Forget About Accountability. Initiatives without accountability, like the Douglas County Attorney's Violent Criminal Prosecution Unit, are doomed to fail. Any initiative must have built in accountability measures that will ensure the initiative is regularly evaluated by outside agencies and that it is working. Both the public and private sectors must hold themselves accountable.

Rely on Common Sense as the Basis for Policy. Without data-driven decision making and data-driven assessment, efforts to respond effectively to gangs will fail. OPD's gun give-back program is a prime example of a program that is not data-driven. The theory behind gun give back and gun buy-back programs is that fewer guns on the street will result in a reduction in gun violence. Although these programs generate good publicity for the police and give the appearance that the police are doing something about the problem of gun violence, research has consistently failed to show a link between these programs and a reduction in gun violence. For more information about evaluations of these programs, see: Firearms and Violence: A Critical Review by the National Research Council of the National Academies et al. (2004); Aiming for Evidence-Based Gun Policy (Cook and Ludwig 2006); Under Fire: Gun Buy-Backs, Exchanges and Amnesty Programs published by Police Executive Research Forum (1996) and The Effectiveness of Policies and Programs That Attempt to Reduce Firearm Violence: A Meta-Analysis (Makarios & Pratt 2012).

Filter Community Problems through the Law Enforcement Lens. During weekly meetings of Omaha 360, the police take the floor first to provide law enforcement updates regarding problems in the community. For Omaha 360, collaboration involves inquiring about status updates from local community leaders who are involved in various types of efforts such as crime prevention, intervention, enforcement, and re-entry. On the surface, these efforts may

appear innovative and collaborative. As noted above, participation in these meetings is a step in the right direction; however in-depth conversations regarding community needs and obstacles individuals face when they try to meet their goals rarely occur. Instead, community problems are filtered through the lens of local law enforcement when they provide their weekly updates rather than soliciting information from local residents. One complaint expressed to members of the assessment team is that the AAEN is unwilling to discuss controversial issues involving local law enforcement. One perception held by some community members is that the AAEN is on law enforcement's side. Another critical dimension of an empowerment model is the welcoming of "devils advocates" who provide critical perspective. While there were incidents of individuals who did not shy away from providing critical assessments, these incidents were not the norm. We also discovered that these meetings, designed to enhance collaboration, are sometimes perceived as "closed" to "outsiders." In this regard, we spoke to several individuals who indicated feeling "marginalized" and "unwelcome" during network meetings after offering critical comments. To reiterate, the concept of the weekly meetings – that is, a place where law enforcement can interact with citizens in a safe forum on a regular basis – is overwhelmingly positive, especially considering the historical tensions between the police and residents of Northeast Omaha. However, to truly adopt a community-based model, the discussions of community problems should come from community members, with input from law-enforcement, rather than the other way around, and neither law enforcement nor 360 leaders should shy away from discussing sensitive issues or prevent others from raising concerns.

Assume Everyone is "Dirty" Except the Police. At the beginning of this assessment, a number of police officers took us aside and tried to steer us in the right direction: they identified lawyers, community activists, and supposedly "former" gang members who, according to the

police, were all “dirty.” We assumed that this labeling of people as dirty was intended to help us see that certain people could not be trusted as reliable informants for our assessment. The flip side of this assumption was that the police were clean and that they could be trusted. During the course of this assessment, we tested these assumptions and found them to be of dubious value.

Furthermore, we accidentally stumbled onto a “dirty hands dilemma” that plagues Omaha’s War on Gangs. Public officials “dirty” their hands when they implement laws and policies in a wrong way to promote what they see as a social good, i.e. “getting the scumbags off the streets.”

Translation: what some law enforcement officers are allegedly doing to fight Omaha’s War on Gangs clashes with important moral values and, in some instances, with the U.S. Constitution.

With respect to the alleged dirty hands of the Omaha police, there is the issue taken up earlier in this report as to whether or not it is permissible for the police to do something unethical and perhaps illegal in hopes of making a neighborhood or a community safe. The famous Platonic “noble lie” is one of the many bases of this argument. Professor Sissela Bok addresses this issue in her book *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*. Her position is that even if there are justifiable lies in government—as in a crisis situation or for national security—allowing public officials to engage in lying and other deceitful behavior carries grave risks for public trust in the government, and hence should be avoided. In Omaha, allegations of police lying and other unethical police behavior strain collaboration between the police and gang intervention specialists and threaten to undercut the City of Omaha’s response to gangs. Some people might ask, “Why don’t gang members just file official complaints?” The answer is retaliation. Gang members state that in the past they have reported police misconduct to OPD and then faced “payback.”

Interrupt the Interrupters. Documenting allegations of dirty hands involving police interfering with the work of gang intervention specialists or interrupters would require us to write a book or at least a long chapter in a book. Here are some of the allegations reported:

- Illegal wiretapping of the phones of gang intervention specialists.
- High ranking police officers sabotaging relationships between gang intervention specialists and human service agencies that provide support services to gang members.
- Gang interrupters securing housing and a job for a suspected gang member and then discovering that the police had attempted to undo this street work by informing the landlord that his new tenant was a gang member and by revealing the past criminal record of this gang member to the gang member's employer.
- Police trying to ruin relationships between gang intervention specialists and gang members by falsely telling gang members that the intervention specialists are snitching on them to the police.
- Police attempting to wreck positive relationships between certain police officers and gang members by falsely telling gang members that particular officers who seem friendly toward gang members are actually setting up these gang members.

While it would be easy to brush off these allegations as merely unfounded accusations, such a decision would be unwise. When we presented allegations of police harassment of gang intervention specialists to a federal judge, we received an interesting response. Initially, the judge informed us that the courts give the police a free pass so long as officers state that they acted in "good faith." Then, we told the judge that in one day police allegedly issued traffic tickets to everyone working in a gang interrupters' office. Commenting on whether or not the

good faith justification would fly in this instance, the judge said: “If that’s true, then good faith is hard to swallow.”

Ignore the Elephant in the Room. The possibility that Omaha’s War on Gangs has racist overtones is a problem that the powers that be do not want to discuss. There is a perception in some segments of the African American community and to a lesser extent in the Latino community that the gang problem is a veil or cover for institutional racism. Omaha’s War on Gangs is perceived in some quarters as “open season on young people of color.” This war is seen as a way to label young Black and Latino people as gangbangers and felons so that “the system” can legally discriminate against them and keep them down for the rest of their lives.

Shoot in the Dark. OJJDP best practices call for a comprehensive gang plan, but Omaha has no such plan. A local gang expert from the law enforcement community told us that he/she suggested to Omaha officials they needed to bring in OJJDP consultants to create a plan and lay the ground work for ongoing assessment. Omaha officials declined his/her offer on the grounds that Omaha is already following best practices. Operation Ceasefire best practices stipulate that communities ask and answer specific questions about the “who, what, where, and when” of gang and gun violence. Gang-involved gun violence, which is arguably the most important indication of gang activity, is poorly documented by OPD. OPD maintains a “shooting timeline,” however it is not updated after a thorough investigation. Such a large amount of missing data prevents OPD from identifying patterns that could be used to help direct the allocation of departmental resources. In addition, the inability to conduct detailed analyses of gang-involved gun violence prevents OPD from implementing problem-oriented policing strategies that rely on focused deterrence (Kennedy 2011).

J. Recommendations

Currently, Omaha’s approach is out of whack—that is, it is lop-sided in favor of suppression. Omaha needs to strike a balance between prevention, intervention, and law enforcement strategies. If the City of Omaha is going to develop an integrated approach, each of the following recommendations needs to receive serious considerations.

Attack Root Causes. Stop treating gangs like a military problem and start viewing gangs as a social problem in need of social remedies. Thinking about and planning programs to attack Omaha’s gang problem requires community leaders to think outside of the box and give serious consideration to supporting solutions advocated by Voices for Children in Nebraska. These include improving access to health care for children (including access to prenatal care for all low income pregnant women); increasing resources dedicated to early childhood education; expanding access to enriched preschool programs; alleviating child poverty; and improving work supports for families. Another organization to consider is the Children’s Defense Fund which calls for investing in all children from birth through their successful transition to adulthood, remembering Frederick Douglass’s observation that “it is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”

Restore Trust. Organize a series of “truth and reconciliation” public forums to address police misconduct, racial profiling, and the documentation of suspected gang members. The forums should welcome honest discussion and debate but also provide local citizens with “nuts and bolts” information. Community leaders and law enforcement officials should encourage a critical dialogue including criticism of law enforcement. Equally important, these public forums should involve discussions about how documented gang members are purged from the gang

database. In addition, OPD should use some of these meetings to rebuild relationships with gang intervention specialists.

Collaborate for the Common Good. An interagency gang outreach team—even one consisting of people from agencies that seem to have contradictory goals—can accomplish more in dealing with gangs than OPD or any other single agency can accomplish by itself. This team would combine the knowledge of diverse specialists in order to create a “collaborative community.” A collaborative community encourages people to apply their unique talents to group projects—and become motivated to a collective mission, not just personal glory or the enhancement of a single agency’s reputation. By marrying a sense of shared purpose to a supportive structure, an interagency team could mobilize knowledge about gangs and actionable intelligence in flexible group initiatives. A collaborative community fosters not only innovation and better communication but also sociability and trust.

Adopt Problem-Oriented Policing. OPD should adopt best practices of problem-oriented policing (POP). Doing so would mean reforming suppression strategies such as gun seizure patrols to incorporate greater focus and specificity. Instead OPD gun seizure patrols and other related strategies should rely on focused deterrence techniques such as those employed in High Point, North Carolina and Cincinnati, Ohio. Unfocused gun seizures generate antipathy between citizens and law enforcement and perpetuate an ongoing negative script based on cynicism and distrust. Furthermore, “bumping up” gang members for trivial offenses such as minor traffic infractions wastes police resources and sours police community relations. The City should revamp current notification meetings targeting middle school students and instead hold notification meetings with active, hardcore offenders (i.e., the target population of focused deterrence efforts across the country).

Implement Case Management as a Means of Reintegrating Violent Gang Members into the Community. One of the best approaches for reducing violent and chronic criminality is to rely on individualized assessments, successful connections with treatment and support services, and case-management (Robinson and Murray 2006). The same can also be said for helping intervene in gang members' lives. Current and former gang members need individualized case management services including job training, educational support, and mental health assessment to name a few. Five years ago, this model was proposed to the City of Omaha and discussed during a state legislative hearing but Omaha failed to adopt the model (Robinson and Simi 2007). It is time for the city (and state) to invest in case management for the sake of efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability.

Ask the Right Questions about Gun Violence. The Mayor's newly formed gun violence task force should examine shooting incidents (not just homicides, but all recent shooting incidents over multiple years) and try to answer a series of critical questions (Please see Appendix 23 for the list of questions). These questions were adopted from Operation Ceasefire in Boston, Massachusetts and other cities across the country. Ceasefire has been the basis for gun violence reduction initiatives in cities across the country and it should be an essential component of any community efforts to implement focused deterrence techniques. Omaha must carefully identify the common denominators present in gun incidents by asking the right questions. Formulating policy regarding gang-involved gun violence without first answering the right questions is like playing darts blindfolded.

Reinstate the Public Safety Auditor to Police the Police. The Mayor and the Omaha City Council need to pick their poison: they can either continue to support the status quo and run the risk of incurring lawsuits pertaining to the violations of suspected gang members' civil rights

or appropriate funds for a Public Safety Auditor. If the Mayor and the Omaha City Council are serious about doing something about gangs and gun violence, they must understand that Omaha has a police problem that is, in part, driving the gang problem.

Develop a Strategic Plan. Engage in a comprehensive strategic planning process. A steering committee should serve as the main decision making body for this planning. It should use this assessment as a guide in formulating a strategic plan to mitigate Omaha's gang problem. Close OJJDP strategic planning and implementation oversight is imperative. The steering committee should use OJJDP's Gang Reduction Program (GRP) as a model, but should realize that GRP is not a one-size-fits-all-approach to gang prevention and reduction. GRP is flexible enough so that Omaha community leaders can adapt it to local conditions yet remain true to the GRP design. Omaha's final plan should be acceptable to OJJDP and should reflect an appreciation of different gang problems in different environments in Omaha. A best practice that has proved helpful to the planning process in other cities that have adopted OJJDP's GRP is to introduce GRP in a formal manner with multi-media materials. These include OJJDP's online Strategic Planning Tool (<http://www.iir.com/nygc/tool/>), which helps identify programs and compare existing community resources with existing needs.

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