

Street Gangs: Which Community Are You In?

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Abstract

Education in itself requires one to have the desire to gain knowledge of a certain subject, regardless of what that subject is. Community safety as it relates to gang activity awareness should be something that all individuals are concerned enough about to gain whatever knowledge they possibly can. Unfortunately, it appears that a normal citizen crashes into the proverbial brick wall when it comes to truly being aware of their safety and whether or not they indeed have gang activity within their community. Campaigns driven by law enforcement may not be as effective as it would be anticipated, and may show room for improvement. A survey has been administered to help understand what level of awareness the median citizen has of gang activity and presence. Everyone needs to come together as a community to preserve the sanctities and values to maintain a safe lifestyle.

Introduction

Over nearly a century, street gangs have existed within our communities. During this period of time, the number of participants within these groups has grown exponentially. As law enforcement aggressively addresses the issue, one question continues to surface; how aware is the public of gang related activity within their individual community?

Many factors exist when trying to determine what causes our youth to subscribe to such an unsavory way of life. However, the factor that is consistent and never waivers is that children, especially in the early stages of teen hood, desire the sense of belonging to a group regardless of the dangers that may exist. This stems from their childhood, family life and social status.

The writer's interest in this inevitable problem branches from being in law enforcement for over fifteen (15) years, as well as an innate concern for our youth. How effective are the awareness programs currently administered by law enforcement agencies? Are our citizens fully aware of the impact that street gangs can and will have on our communities? What can we, as law enforcement, do to better serve our communities and increase the awareness of gang activity and prevention?

Literature Review

As previously stated, street gangs are a growing community, not only within the United States, but worldwide. Participation in gang related activity causes great challenges to not only law enforcement, but to every law abiding citizen in our country. This research project will delve into the origins, characteristics, and the future

challenges that law enforcement will face due to the growing number of people affiliated with street gangs. In addition, the number of individuals that are affiliated with gangs which are joining the Armed Forces is on the incline, opinions of why this occurs vary between which journal you are reading. (Shane III, L. 2007).

For approximately sixteen years, the Department of Corrections has been working with the community in gang identification, and educating parents of the importance of community awareness to successfully complete the mission to protect their children from gangs. Corrections has developed instruments to help parents understand the indicators of gang members, in hopes that when confronted with possible gang activity the parents can identify a problem within their community. Awareness is the first step in keeping our communities safe. The steps progress into staying aware and alert to identifiers of gang presence and building a community that resists the growth of gangs. As with any other criminal component, it is up to the community to avoid ignorance of gang presence and identification. (Gang and security threat group awareness, n.d.).

A key role in improving your gang awareness levels is to learn where the desire for our youth originates to belong to such an institution. The most exposure comes from glorified "rap artists" which works its way into the lives of young people that do not have strong role models that participate in their lives. Children who want to be perceived as "cool" fall victim to a lifestyle that turns out to be the furthest thing from safe or socially acceptable. This lifestyle changes quickly into one of illicit behavior and distinct criminal activity. (Bove, 2005).

A good start into prevention of children becoming involved in such activity is being involved in your children's lives. This is a delicate balance that should be traversed with rough courage. Remember, these are your children, not your friends. Allowing them to do something, at any time, that you may feel uncomfortable with, to earn "points" with them, is not an option. Guidelines and limits should be placed on your children to let them know what you will tolerate in their behavior. Within those guidelines, children should know what the consequences are for their actions, and the consequences should not waiver. Involvement in school activity, knowing your child's friends, and participation in extracurricular activity are all a start in community awareness. (Bove, 2005).

Gang reputations are established by the severity of the crimes they commit. The term "juice," which means respect, takes center stage. This means the more "juice" you have, the more respect you will receive. Some of the more serious crimes that may be committed range from vandalism all the way to murder. Identifying signs of this within your community will help you secure the future of your children. Signs include, but are not limited to, graffiti, thefts, violent crimes, complaints from children of being intimidated or bullied, groups of youths traveling the streets, and increased levels of drug trafficking and use. (Alonso, 1999).

The recruitment of gang members varies from peer pressure through to intimidation. Children are manipulated into believing that their involvement in gang activity will rocket them into a status that demands respect and will possibly be quite lucrative. It all revolves around the power they will perceive themselves to have. Not only is it sold to them as a status achievement, but also the affiliation will provide to them safety. Unfortunately, the reality is that it brings nothing but corruption to the lives

of the members, which will ultimately quash any dreams and aspirations they may have had for themselves. (Bove, 2005).

Two key elements in preventing our youth from entering into a life of gang violence are to ensure they maintain a sense of self-worth and education. Vincent J. Bove, among many prestigious certifications, is a Board Certified Protection Professional. He maintains a direct interest in Homeland Security which also incorporates protection of United States citizens from gang violence. He indicates that it is "pure foolishness" to maintain the thought that gangs are not a problem within most communities regarding children. Research has proven that juveniles constitute a large number of gang members, and most of these juveniles were searching for a stronger family environment that provided acceptance. Education provided to youths about gang membership should be paramount within our society. This education should not be forced to avoid resistance and defiance from our children. Gang acceptance by children is most likely a direct result of the weakening of the family unit. (Bove, 2005). Overall, Mr. Bove's research allows average citizens to understand the different strategies of protecting our youths from the quagmire of gang involvement.

Early intervention is crucial in prevention of youth involvement in gang activity. Again, educating youth about the consequences of being involved in gangs would potentially de-glorify, and remove any desire for the youth to pursue a life as a gang member. Some circumstances cannot be avoided such as broken homes; this does not negate the importance of both parents remaining involved. Children without both strong, positive male and female influences in their lives are in jeopardy of falling victim and becoming involved in gang activity. (Bove, 2005).

Further, the disrespect of an individual gang member can cause all out war between rival gangs. If one person is attacked, the entire group will seek retribution against the other gang members, which will only lead to a lack of security within the respective community. Even if an individual chooses to leave behind their gang membership, the potential for violence to follow that individual may prove to be inevitable. (Alonso, 1999).

Another misconception that revolves around gang membership is that the only people that participate in gangs are male. Recently, there has been a rise in the number of females that are involved in gangs. The role they participate in is considered to be more of a "support role." This leads to the females being subjected to less desirable activities that are dictated by their male counterparts. (Alonso, 1999).

In the fight against gang violence, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has identified 170 Safe Streets Task Forces throughout the country, five (5) are located in the State of Florida. These task forces work closely with local law enforcement to focus on tracking, apprehending, indicting, and convicting individuals involved in gang activity/violence. Along with this is the goal to prevent an increase in gang participation. Between the years 2001-2006, over 57% of complaints received by these task forces resulted in conviction, 45% of the arrests resulted in convictions. In order to develop trends revolving around gang activity, the FBI also created the National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC). This will assist law enforcement in their future endeavors and help focus their mission in the prevention of gang activity. (Uniform Crime Report, 2007).

Method

The purpose of this research is to determine awareness of gang activity within our public communities as a whole. With the utilization of surveys the determination will be made regarding whether or not normal, prudent citizens are able to identify signs of gang presence within their respective communities. In order to ensure that this research is sterile, individuals with a law enforcement or military background will not be interviewed or surveyed.

Surveys will be conducted via the Survey Monkey program. The surveys will be administered via email to various professional organizations throughout the State of Florida. These organizations included, Orlando Regional Medical Center, Liberty Mutual, Florida Public School Administration (Orange, Volusia, Dade and Lake Counties) and the Central Florida Railroad Exchange Administration.

Additionally, current statistical data will be retrieved from the Uniform Crime Report to determine the actual raw data on crime as it relates to gang violence. A deficiency of gang activity within specific communities may skew the survey results due the lack of exposure the individual citizen has with gang related activities.

Upon conclusion of the survey a summation will be made as to the level of awareness our private citizens actually have of active or potential gang activity within their community.

Results

The survey was sent out to 75 individuals via survey engine Survey Monkey, 44 responded which is a return ratio of 58.6%.

In trying to determine a basic sense of the understanding the public has about the levels of gang activity within their community, the general questions were asked regarding if they felt there was a notable amount of gang activity within their respective area. Almost half, 43.2%, of the respondents advised that they were unsure. Approximately one-third, 31.8%, disagreed that there was a notable amount of gang activity within their community, only 25% believed that there was. Some felt they had heard rumor of gangs being present within their community, but had no firsthand knowledge of this being a reality. A good point made by one that was surveyed was that there may be some gangs, but the individual did not feel the activity was very organized.

The majority of the individuals surveyed, 51.2%, felt that they were not sure if they would be able to readily identify a gang member if they saw one. Over one-third, 34.9%, felt they absolutely would not, where only a staggering 14% thought that they would be able to identify a gang member. Comments made by those surveyed expressed that they may be able to identify gang members by what they have viewed on television. Others felt that they had a minimal amount of knowledge when it came to making a positive identification.

When asked about gang activity within our school system, the majority, 14%, disagreed that there was gang activity within the schools. Many, 44.2%, felt there was, and 41.9% felt unsure.

Awareness campaigns for children to recognize the dangers of gang involvement are present within many schools, and these campaigns mainly take place in elementary schools. (Gang and security threat group awareness, n.d.). The belief of one individual surveyed was that the problem existed mainly in Middle and High Schools. 56.8% of individuals surveyed felt unsure if these campaigns were effective. 27.3 % did not think they were effective, and 18.2% believed these campaigns were helpful to students.

Measures taken by law enforcement to prevent gang activity within our communities show negative results from the opinions of the individuals surveyed. Comments made by those surveyed confirm this concern. No one person identified an effective measure of prevention driven by law enforcement within their community. 54.5% were unsure of the impact, 22.7% disagreed that the efforts by law enforcement were effective, and 22.7% felt the measures were working.

The inquiry about education of citizens by law enforcement to aid in awareness showed that the majority, 40.9%, felt that there was little to no effort made to educate the public, and 36.4% were unsure. Only 22.7% of individuals felt that these public awareness programs were successful. There was little indication that the general public felt comfortable about what was being done to aid in education of gangs outside of the school system.

When surveyed about the presence of females within gangs, and if the individual believed that females participated in gang activity, 65.9% were not sure. 31.8% agreed that there was a distinct female presence within gangs. Only 2.3% felt that females did not get involved in gang activity. This particular question reflects negatively on awareness campaigns as the number of females contributing to gang activity has risen greatly over the past decade. Again, the education in this matter seems to be coming from television as opposed to coming from our local law enforcement agencies.

Another tool in identifying a gang presence within individual communities is to be able to differentiate the many types of graffiti. An unfortunate result of 79.5% showed that individuals did not know how to decipher what graffiti meant, 15.9% felt they would be able to interpret graffiti, where 4.5% were unsure.

When asked if individuals thought that an intact family unit would prevent youth from wanting to join a gang, the majority 93.2% agreed that it would. Only 6.3% did not feel like this had an effect on whether or not one would desire to be affiliated with a gang. The definition of "intact family unit" comes into question. There is no opinion of this researcher on what constitutes an intact family unit, it was meant in general terms. It was the majority opinion that children without structure may fall into the desire to get involved in illicit gang activity to fill the void of acceptance within their own life, as well as a curiosity of what it would be like to experience the life of a gang member.

50% of individuals surveyed were unsure if our military had a gang presence within it, 34.1% believed that there were gang members within our military, and only 15.9% completely disagreed. Most individuals surveyed cringed at the idea that this statement may be true. Though one-third agreed this is a fact, the comments made by those surveyed showed that the possibility of gang members being in our military was frightening, and they would like to learn more about the likelihood of this happening.

Discussion

Upon review of the data collected, it appears that a normal prudent citizen is not prepared to identify the presence of gang activity within their community. Very few responses that were given confirmed any type of confidence to that affect. Programs implemented by law enforcement for gang awareness are minimal. They are mainly directed at very young children, and the buck stops there. An obvious culprit of what is causing this lack of education is budget restraints. These restraints cause less manpower to go out and speak to the public, less funding for awareness campaigns, which includes campaigns getting cut, and higher crime rates that take up the time of law enforcement.

Another issue that may affect lack of participation on the citizen's part is fear or lack of interest of getting involved. Unfortunately, individuals view programs on television, which may or may not accurately depict true gang activity, and have a misconception of how gangs truly function.

Continuing education throughout the juvenile years may be more effective in instilling the truths about gang involvement within the children. As previously stated, most programs end on the elementary level. Continuance of this education throughout the more influential years may aid in prevention.

During the course of this research, it is my opinion that we, as a law enforcement community, are falling short in keeping the public aware and educated in the realm of gang activity awareness. Overall, people tend to be unaware of what is transpiring around them. Not only should the general public be looking out for ourselves but we should be looking out for each other. The term "community" has been used frequently during this project, and there is a reason for that repetition. Community is defined as a social group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, share government, and often have a common cultural and historic heritage (Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, 2006). With that said, the onus of gang awareness cannot be placed solely on law enforcement, but the general public has to assume responsibility for being alert to their surroundings. Certainly, this is not the only definition; however, it encompasses the true meaning of how our society should work. We all have a common goal of safety for our families, safety of our homes and the desire of confidence to live our lives the way we want to, with freedom from violence.

Captain Melinda Van Doren has been in law enforcement since 1993. She has been with the Florida Department of Transportation's Motor Carrier Compliance for her entire career. Melinda is the Captain of the Orlando DeLand region. She is attending Lake Sumter Community College working towards admittance into the University of Florida's Pharmacy Program.

References

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Appendix A – Survey Results

1. **There is a notable amount of gang activity within your community?

	Response %	Response #
Agree	25.0	11
Disagree	31.8	14
Not Sure	43.2	19

2. You would be able to readily identify a gang member?

	Response %	Response #
Agree	14.0	6
Disagree	34.9	15
Not Sure	51.2	22

3. There is a notable presence of gang activity within our schools?

	Response %	Response #
Agree	44.2	19
Disagree	14.0	6
Not Sure	41.9	18

4. Awareness campaigns, within schools, driven by law enforcement, are meeting the needs of your community as far as public education about gangs? **

	Response %	Response #
Agree	18.2	8
Disagree	27.3	12
Not Sure	56.8	25

5. Measures taken by law enforcement to prevent gang activity within your community are affective?

	Response %	Response #
Agree	22.7	10
Disagree	22.7	10
Not Sure	56.8	24

6. Law enforcement awareness campaigns educate citizens, outside of schools, on how to be aware of gang activity within your community?

	Response %	Response #
Agree	22.7	10
Disagree	40.9	18
Not Sure	36.4	16

7. There is a distinct presence of females involved in gang activity?

	Response %	Response #
Agree	31.8	14
Disagree	2.3	1
Not Sure	65.9	29

8. You feel educated in identifying different types of graffiti within your community?

	Response %	Response #
Agree	15.9	7
Disagree	79.5	35
Not Sure	4.5	2

9. An intact family unit may reduce youth's interest in joining a gang?

	Response %	Response #
Agree	93.2	41
Disagree	6.9	3
Not Sure	0	0

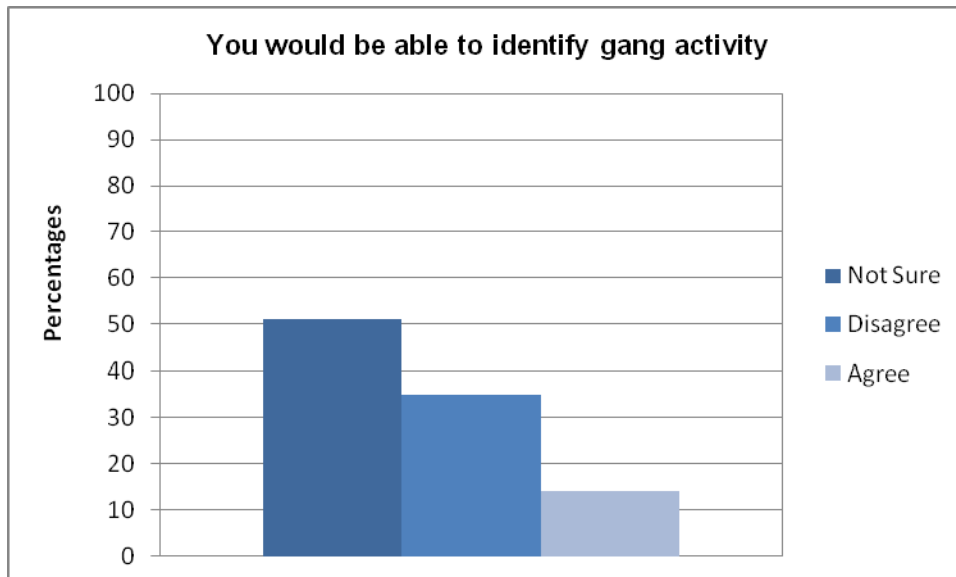
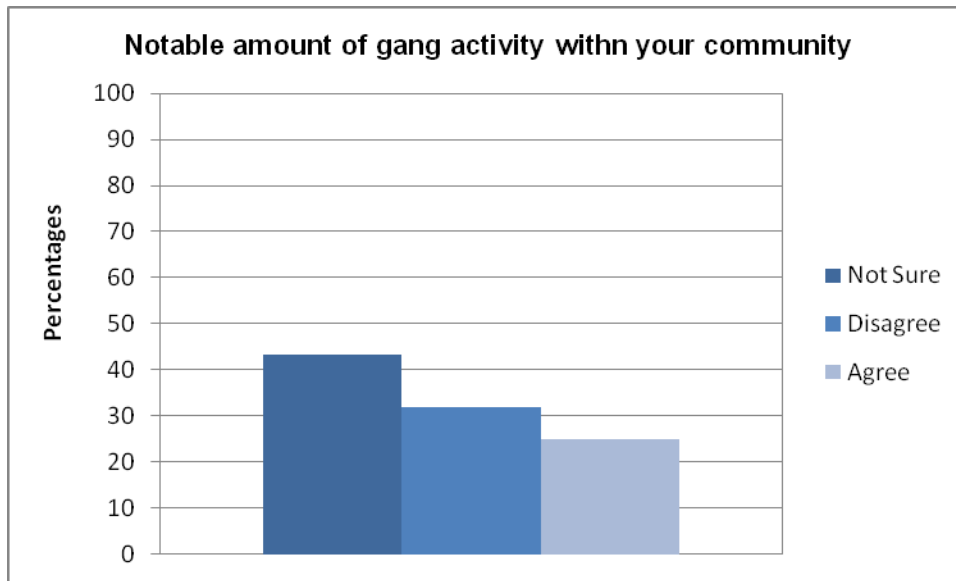
10. Do you believe gang activity exists within the United States military?

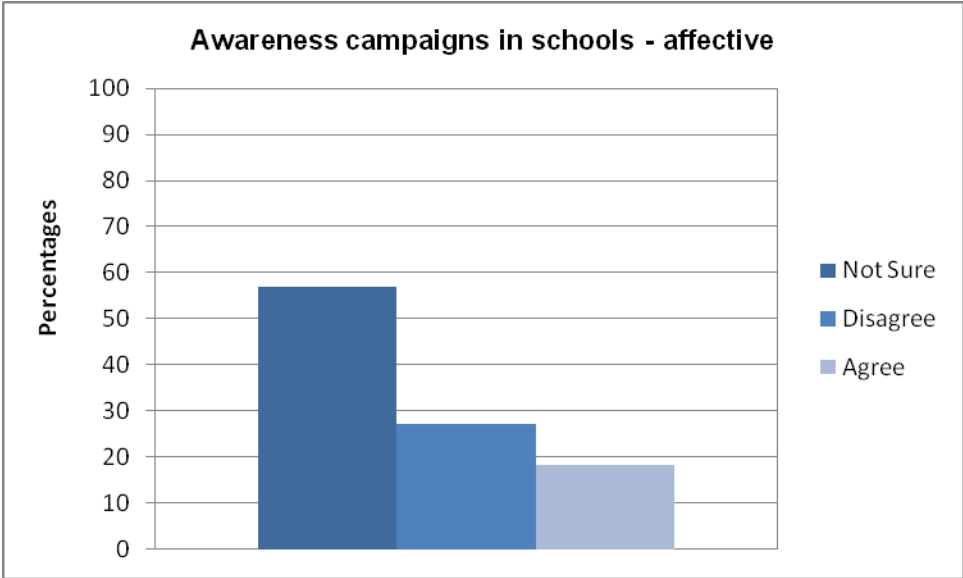
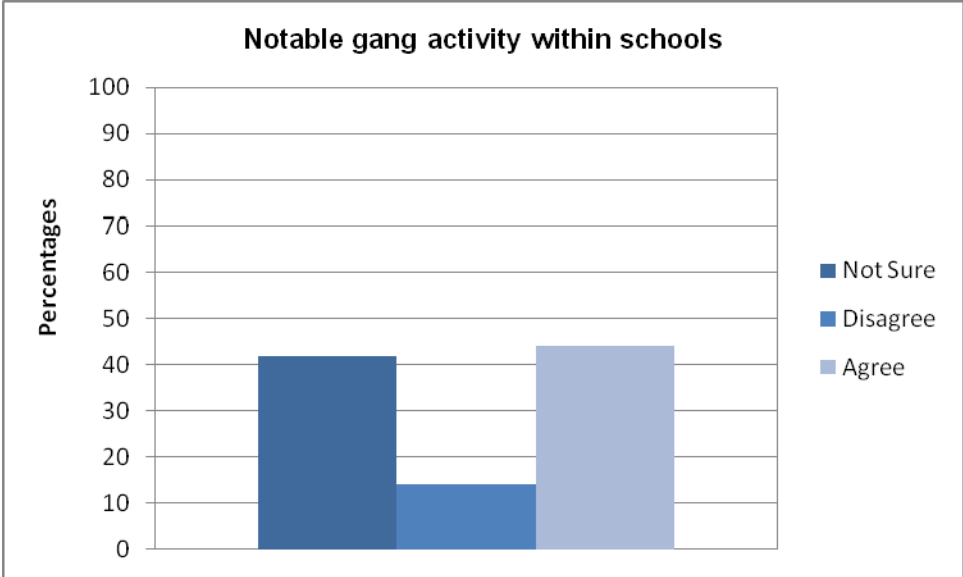
	Response %	Response #
Agree	31.4	15
Disagree	15.9	7
Not Sure	50.0	22

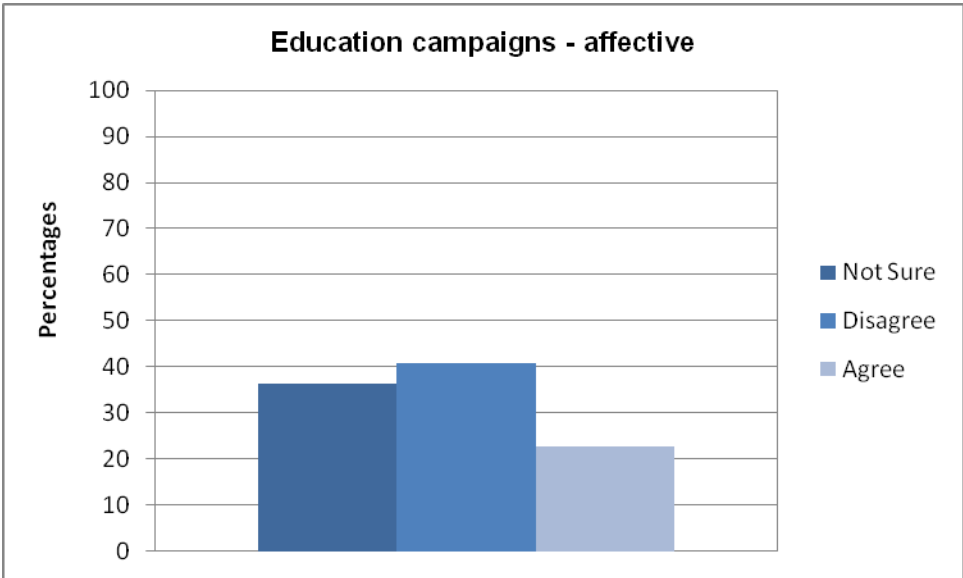
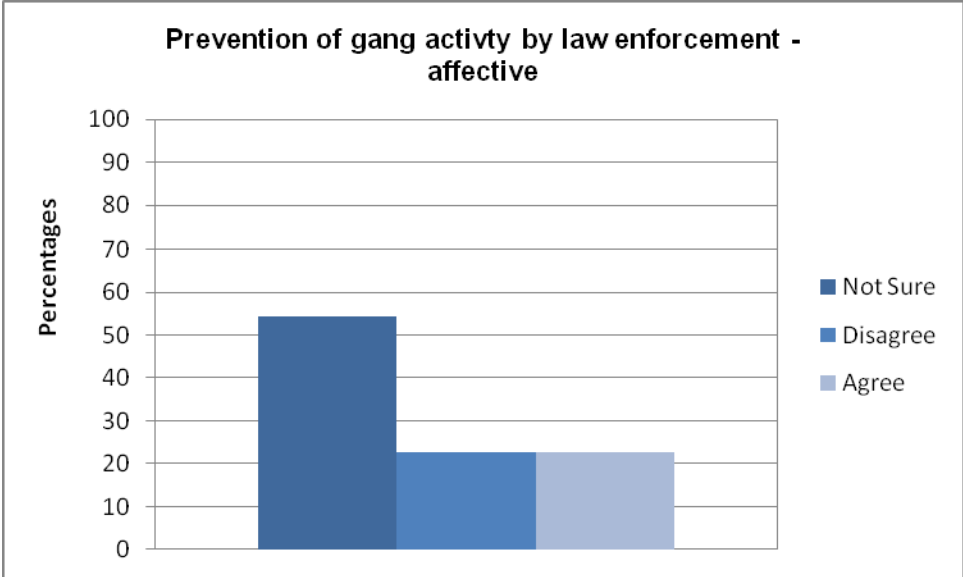
Forty four (44) people responded to this survey, seventy five (75) surveys were distributed. This concludes a 58.6% response rate.

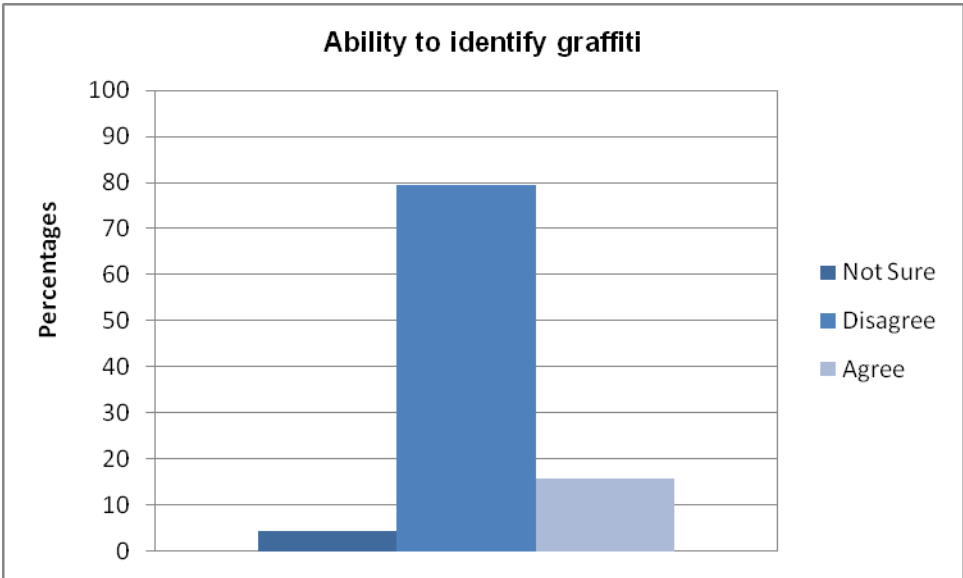
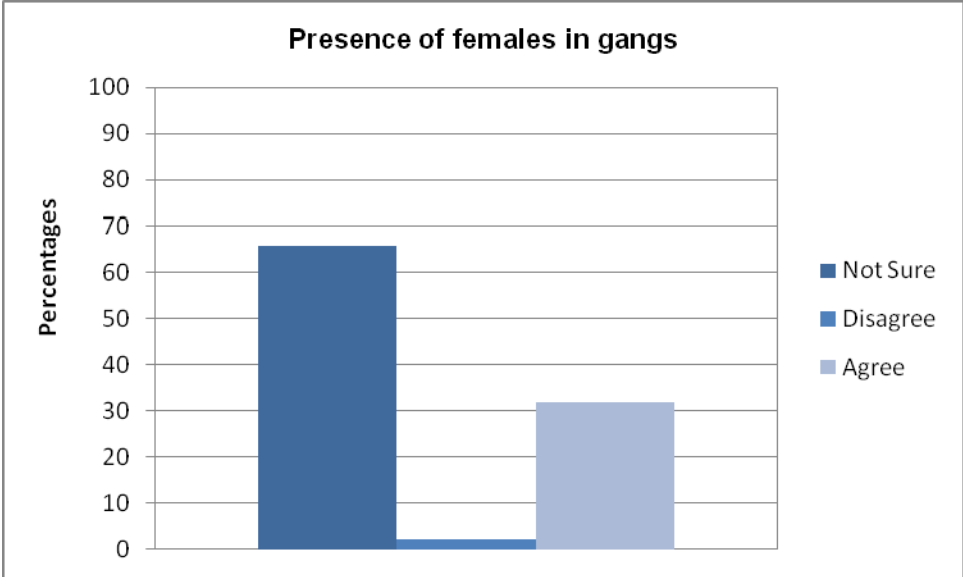
** This question generated 45 responses. It is undetermined how this occurred since the maximum number of responses for other questions revealed 44 responses.

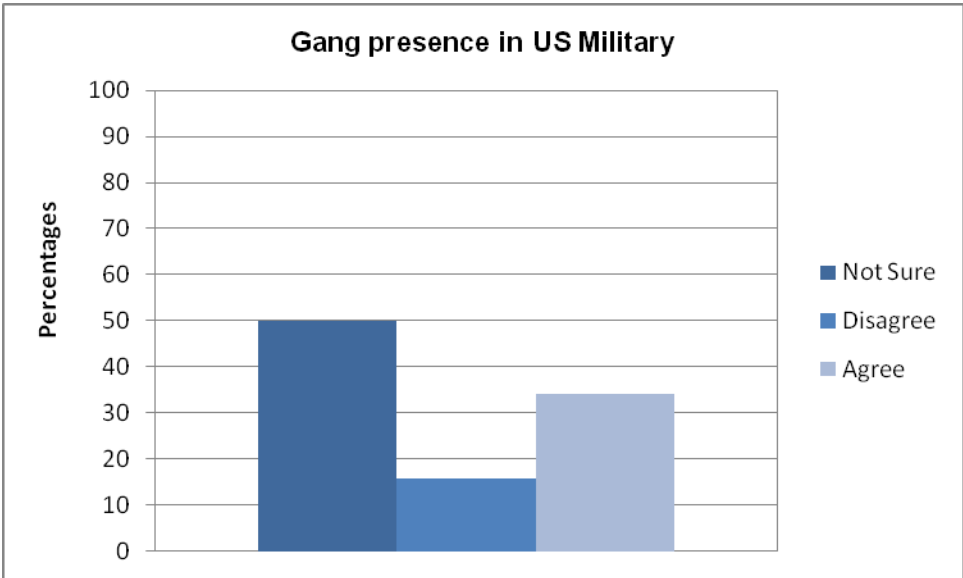
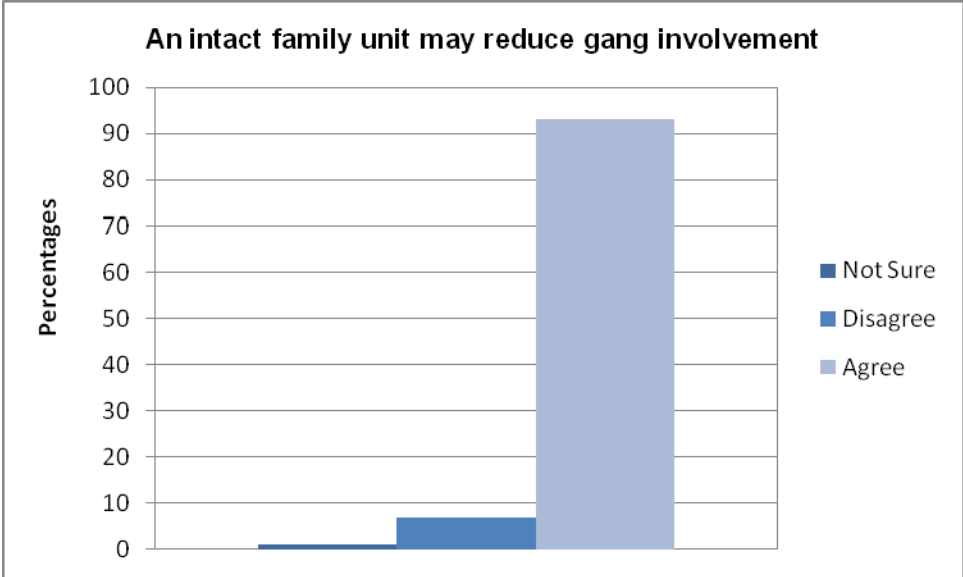
Appendix B - Graphs











Appendix C - Comments

Question:

There is a notable amount of gang activity within your community?

Error! Hyperli nk referenc e not valid.	1. I have heard there is but have not experienced it in my area.	Thu, 1/22/09 9:57 AM
Error! Hyperli nk referenc e not valid.	2. i am sure there are some gangs, but i do not believe that they are very organized.	Wed, 1/21/09 1:48 PM
Error! Hyperli nk referenc e not valid.	3. I haven't seen or heard of any gang activities within my developement.	Tue, 1/20/09 3:39 PM
Error! Hyperli nk referenc e not valid.	4. I haven't seen what I believe to be gang activity	Tue, 1/20/09 2:56 PM

Question:

You would be able to readily identify a gang member?

	Comment Text	Response Date
Error! Hyperlin k referenc e not valid.	1. Only because I watched several specials on the History Channel.	Thu, 1/22/09 9:57 AM
Error! Hyperlin k referenc e not valid.	2. I would be able to identify some gangs, but probably not all.	Wed, 1/21/09 4:31 PM
Error! Hyperlin k referenc e not valid.	3. Certain gang signs I know, but many not	Tue, 1/20/09 3:48 PM
Error! Hyperlin k referenc e not valid.	4. From watching television programs I may be able to	Tue, 1/20/09 2:56 PM

Question:

There is a notable presence of gang activity within our schools?

	Comment Text	Response Date
Error! Hyperlin k referenc	1. Not in my elementary school, but that is not a good point of reference.	Thu, 1/22/09 9:57 AM

e not		
valid.		
Error!	2. more so in the middle school and/or high school level students, however the elementary age students try to copy what they see by clothing etc.	Wed, 1/21/09 1:48 PM
Hyperlin		
k		
referenc		
e not		
valid.		
Error!	3. I don't have any kids so I don't know this.	Tue, 1/20/09 3:46 PM
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k		
referenc		
e not		
valid.		

Question:

Awareness campaigns, within schools, driven by law enforcement, are meeting the needs of your community as far as public education about gangs?

	Comment Text	Response Date
Error!	1. See above	Thu, 1/22/09 9:57 AM
Hyperlin		
k		
referenc		
e not		
valid.		
Error!	2. I don't know of any	Tue, 1/20/09 3:46 PM
Hyperlin		
k		
referenc		

e not		
valid.		
Error!	3. There were not any awareness campaigns when I was in school...not sure about now.	Tue, 1/20/09 2:56 PM
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k		
referenc		
e not		
valid.		

Question:

Measures taken by law enforcement to prevent gang activity within your community are affective?

	Comment Text	Response Date
Error!	1.	i wish i knew for sure.
Hyperlin		Wed, 1/21/09 1:48 PM
k		
referenc		
e not		
valid.		
Error!	2.	To the best of my knowledge there is no gang awareness education in elementary schools in Seminole County, also the DARE program was discontinued.
Hyperlin		Tue, 1/20/09 9:16 PM
k		
referenc		
e not		
valid.		
Error!	3.	I have not personally seen any measures taken
Hyperlin		Tue, 1/20/09 2:56 PM
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e not		
valid.		

Question:

Law enforcement awareness campaigns educate citizens, outside of schools, on how to be aware of gang activity within your community?

Comment Text	Response Date
<p>1.</p> <p>Error!</p> <p>Hyperlin</p> <p>k</p> <p>referenc</p> <p>e not</p> <p>valid.</p>	<p>I haven't seen any awareness campaigns within my community.</p> <p>Wed, 1/21/09 4:31 PM</p>
<p>2.</p> <p>Error!</p> <p>Hyperlin</p> <p>k</p> <p>referenc</p> <p>e not</p> <p>valid.</p>	<p>I have personally not witnesses any campaigns of this nature in my community</p> <p>Tue, 1/20/09 2:56 PM</p>
<p>3.</p> <p>Error!</p> <p>Hyperlin</p> <p>k</p> <p>referenc</p> <p>e not</p> <p>valid.</p>	<p>I haven't heard of anything but that doesn't mean they are doing anything</p> <p>Tue, 1/20/09 2:56 PM</p>

Question:

There is a distinct presence of females involved in gang activity?

Comment Text	Response Date
<p>1.</p> <p>Error!</p> <p>Hyperlin</p> <p>k</p> <p>referenc</p> <p>e not</p> <p>valid.</p>	<p>more and more, yes.</p> <p>Wed, 1/21/09 1:48 PM</p>
<p>2.</p> <p>Error!</p>	<p>I have seen TV shows regarding</p> <p>Tue, 1/20/09 3:39 PM</p>

<p>Hyperlin</p> <p>k</p> <p>referenc</p> <p>e not</p> <p>valid.</p>		female in gangs, very interesting.	
<p>Error!</p> <p>3.</p> <p>Hyperlin</p> <p>k</p> <p>referenc</p> <p>e not</p> <p>valid.</p>		From what I have seen on television, yes.	Tue, 1/20/09 2:56 PM

Questions:

You feel educated in identifying different types of graffiti within your community?

Comment Text	Response Date
<p>Error!</p> <p>1.</p> <p>Hyperlin</p> <p>k</p> <p>referenc</p> <p>e not</p> <p>valid.</p>	<p>unless i try to find out about it, via internet, law enforcement etc. i am not able to identify gang logos or messages.</p> <p>Wed, 1/21/09 1:48 PM</p>
<p>Error!</p> <p>2.</p> <p>Hyperlin</p> <p>k</p> <p>referenc</p> <p>e not</p> <p>valid.</p>	<p>I have no clue about graffiti</p> <p>Tue, 1/20/09 9:16 PM</p>

Question:

An intact family unit may reduce a youth's interest in joining a gang?

	Comment Text	Response Date
<p>Error!</p> <p>Hyperlin</p> <p>k</p> <p>referenc</p> <p>e not</p> <p>valid.</p>	<p>1.</p>	<p>for the most part, however...i am sure that some children-teen-young adults are curious and will perhaps try to experiment by checking it out.</p> <p>Wed, 1/21/09 1:48 PM</p>
<p>Error!</p> <p>Hyperlin</p> <p>k</p> <p>referenc</p> <p>e not</p> <p>valid.</p>	<p>2.</p>	<p>An intact, connected parental unit.....</p> <p>Wed, 1/21/09 12:10 AM</p>
<p>Error!</p> <p>Hyperlin</p> <p>k</p> <p>referenc</p> <p>e not</p> <p>valid.</p>	<p>3.</p>	<p>I think that when kids have difficulty finding an acceptable place where they fit in they may fall into gangs.</p> <p>Tue, 1/20/09 9:16 PM</p>
<p>Error!</p> <p>Hyperlin</p> <p>k</p> <p>referenc</p> <p>e not</p> <p>valid.</p>	<p>4.</p>	<p>But I also believe that any type of family structure may reduce this, not necessarily from your "typical" family unit (mother and father).</p> <p>Tue, 1/20/09 2:56 PM</p>

Question:

Do you believe gang activity exists within the United States military?

	Comment Text	Response Date
Error! Hyperlin k referenc e not valid.	1.	God, I hope not! Thu, 1/22/09 9:57 AM
Error! Hyperlin k referenc e not valid.	2.	never thought about it.... Wed, 1/21/09 1:48 PM
Error! Hyperlin k referenc e not valid.	3.	I hate to think there is and hope there is not. Tue, 1/20/09 9:16 PM
Error! Hyperlin k referenc e not valid.	4.	would believe so but don't have any evidence of that. Tue, 1/20/09 3:46 PM
Error! Hyperlin k referenc e not	5.	I've never heard of this...sounds interesting. Would like to hear more about it. Tue, 1/20/09 3:39 PM

valid.

Error!

6.

Hyperlin

k

referenc

e not

valid.

I have never
thought about
that

Tue, 1/20/09 2:56 PM