# Methods and Findings from the National Violent Death Reporting System for Identifying Gang-Like Homicides, 2005–2008

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Abstract: Background: The National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) captures homicides that law enforcement or coroner/medical examiners deem as gang-related but the criteria used may vary across locations. Also, the existing gang-related variable likely underestimates the number of homicides that are associated with gang activity. This study utilizes NVDRS data to identify "gang-like" homicides which are not currently captured as "gang-related."

Methods: A set of criteria recommended by a panel of experts in gang violence, was applied to homicides collected in the NVDRS. These criteria, termed "gang-like" characteristics, were developed in order to better identify homicides consistent with gang activity. The narratives of the identified cases were then reviewed to refine the operational standard. After the reviews were complete, the typology was modified to finalize the operationalization of "gang-like" homicides.

Results: A total of 481 gang-like homicides were identified using the "gang-like" criteria. This represents an increase of almost 69% over the 696 gang-related homicides captured in NVDRS dataset.

Gang-like and gang-related homicides combined represented 6.6% of homicides that occurred from 2005 to 2008. Among the 16 states included in this analysis, Colorado (15.5%) and Oklahoma (14%) had the highest percentage of homicides that were either gang-related or gang-like.

Maryland had the greatest relative increase (227.3%) between gang related and gang-like homicides.

Conclusion: The new "gang-like" variable complements the existing "gang-related" variable by providing an automated, standardized way to identify homicides that have circumstances consistent with gang activity. This new variable might be useful to states and localities seeking an efficient way to monitor homicides potentially resulting from gang activity. Additional efforts are needed to standardize the reporting of homicides associated with gang activity.

Keywords: Homicide■Gang■National Violent Death Reporting System■Circumstances

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## BACKGROUND

There were an estimated 782,500 gang members belonging to 29,900 gangs across the United States in 2011. The number of gang members and gang-related homicides increased slightly in metropolitan areas over the last decade.[1] In 2011, nearly 1 in 3 law enforcement agencies participating in the National Youth Gang Survey reported that gangs were active in their jurisdiction.[1] Involvement in gang activity may predispose an individual to be involved in criminal behavior[2] which may ultimately lead to becoming a perpetrator and/or victim of homicide. Recent data from 2009 shows that almost eight out of ten cities with populations greater than 100,000 regularly report gang homicides.[3] However, this number is widely believed to be an underestimate. The violence that results from gang activity can prevent individuals from living life to their full potential and have significant negative impacts on health.[4] Having the ability to identify homicides associated with gangs is critical for informing gang violence prevention strategies.

There are several impediments to the collection of accurate gang-related data. One is the lack of a national uniform definition of a "gang" used by all federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. Another barrier involves attributing homicides directly to gang activity. Although efforts have been made to accomplish this, there are limitations in existing methodologies. Rogers,[5] Pizarro and McGloin[6] and Bailey[7] have published work attempting to distinguish gang homicides from non-gang homicides. Their approach primarily involves reviewing law enforcement records to identify gang homicide cases. However, the varying definitions and criteria used by different law enforcement agencies to identify gang homicides could result in unreliable state and national estimates of gang related homicides. A homicide labeled as gang related in one jurisdiction might not be labeled gang related in another jurisdiction. In addition, there are significant variations in experience with gang-related crime between jurisdictions which can impact estimates. Law enforcement records may be more reliable for identifying gang homicides in large cities such as Los Angeles and Chicago because of their size and development of gang intelligence units. However, in small cities and localities with limited resources and no specialized gang intelligence unit, gang related homicides may not be easily distinguished by law enforcement.

Nonetheless there are definitions currently used by some law enforcement agencies to identify homicides resulting from gangs. One commonly used definition developed by the National Alliance of Gang Investigators' Associations (NAGIA) is: A gang is a group or association of three or more persons with a common identifying sign, symbol, or name who individually or collectively engage in criminal activity that creates an atmosphere of fear and intimidation.[8] Maxson and Klein refer to the term "Chicago" definition used by Chicago law enforcement agencies to classify a homicide as gang related only if it occurs between two or more gangs.[9] The definition used by law enforcement agencies in Los Angeles is more inclusive and identifies any homicide involving a gang member as being gang related.[9–11] If a law enforcement jurisdiction utilizes the "Chicago" definition for gang related homicides, potential gang related homicides could be missed. An example would be a gang member killing a non-gang member drug dealer for selling on the gang's turf. In this case, the death would not be considered a gang related homicide because the drug dealer was not affiliated with a gang. Thus, the number of homicides related to gang activity may be under reported based on the definition used. Homicides where law enforcement does not know if the suspect is a gang member and the victim is not a known gang member would not be captured using either definition. Many incidents with potential gang involvement are likely missed even though the circumstances indicate there is a high likelihood that it resulted from gang activity. Certain circumstances about a death might indicate a higher likelihood that the homicide was gang related. For example, a drive-by shooting is a circumstance that is a common characteristic of gang related homicides.[10] A homicide could result from a drive-by shooting, but the identity of the perpetrator is not known. Using either the "Chicago" or "Los Angeles" definition, that homicide would most likely not be classified as gang related.

Maxson and colleagues[10] have stated that rather than debate a best definition for use by law enforcement to determine a gang related homicide based on "gang motive" or "gang participation", a definition utilizing homicide circumstances may be worth considering. The definition would include circumstances most commonly associated with a gang homicide that would lead to its classification as a "gang-like" homicide. Decker and Curry[12] outlined eight specific characteristics of gang homicides that serve as a starting point for the development of a "gang-like" definition. These characteristics include: (1) spatial concentration; (2) weapon use; (3) race of victim and perpetrator; (4) location; (5) drug involvement; (6) age; (7) sex; and (8) victim–offender relationship. In this study, the authors apply the work of Decker and Curry combined with the input from two leading experts in the field (Arlen Egley and Kim Dammers) to develop an operational definition that could be applied to the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) data to tabulate homicides that appear to be associated with gang activity.

## The National Violent Death Reporting System

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) began collecting violent death data through the NVDRS in 2003. NVDRS is a state-based surveillance system that provides detailed information about the circumstances of violent deaths at the national, state, and local levels that is more detailed and timely than is currently available.[13] Eighteen states are currently funded to collect NVDRS data and include Alaska, Colorado, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Utah, Virginia and Wisconsin. However, Ohio and Michigan did not begin data collection until 2010 and are therefore excluded from this analysis. NVDRS links data from vital records, medical examiners/ coroners, law enforcement and crime laboratories to provide a greater understanding of the incident characteristics and precipitating circumstances surrounding each death. Narratives from law enforcement and coroner/medical examiner (C/ME) records describing the violent death are included in the database. The use of a database such as the NVDRS, which collects data from multiple data sources could potentially provide more reliable information for determining gang like homicides.[14]

NVDRS is in a unique position to increase the level of information public health and law enforcement agencies have to monitor homicides with known gang involvement and to identify those that may suggest gang involvement. Analysis of data captured in NVDRS indicates that the occurrence of homicides related to gang activity may be under reported. NVDRS captures homicides known to be "gang-related." This variable is endorsed in the database only if the C/ME or law enforcement (LE) report states the death was gang-related. The NVDRS coding manual directs abstractors to endorse "gang-related" if one of the data sources reference that the homicide was related to gang activity. The authors theorized that many homicides are not identified by C/ME or LE as being gang related even when many of the circumstances that may point to the homicide being gang related are present. The development of a "gang-like" variable could allow for the estimation of the extent to which homicides associated with gang activity are under reported. This study sought to develop a set of circumstances surrounding a homicide that could suggest a death was related to gang activity.