

**Proceedings of the 2008  
College of Liberal Arts  
Forum on Faculty-Student  
Research**

**March 26, 2008**

**Rochester Institute of Technology**

## **Rochester Safe & Sound: Applying Action Research to a Local Anti-Gang Strategy**

*Prof. Tom Castellano & Prof. Jason Scott  
Criminal Justice*

**T**he problems of gangs, and associated gang violence, continue to represent a challenge for the city of Rochester. The Rochester Police Department (RPD) indicated to the National Youth Gang Center that 1985 was the year of onset for gang activity in the city (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, and Tobin, 2003). This has lead some to conclude that Rochester is an “emergent” gang city compared with more “traditional” gang cities like Chicago or Los Angeles (Thornberry et al., 2003). Despite the more recent onset of gangs (compared with traditional gang cities), gangs contribute significantly to both violent offending and violent victimization in the city of Rochester. Data obtained from an evaluation of a federally funded violence reduction project (Project Safe Neighborhoods) indicate that between 2003 and July of 2005, 26 percent

of young male (age 15-30) homicide victims had a clear affiliation with a local gang. During that same period of time, 35 percent of young male (age 15-30) homicide suspects had a definitive affiliation with a local gang.<sup>1</sup>

The challenge presented by gangs prompted the U.S. Department of Justice to announce in February 2007 that they were dedicating \$30 million in grant funding to support anti-gang initiatives. In April 2007 Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez visited Rochester to announce that Rochester would be one of ten cities to receive \$2.5 million to support local efforts. Rochester joined Oklahoma City, Indianapolis, Raleigh-Durham, Los Angeles, Tampa, Cleveland, Dallas/Ft. Worth, Milwaukee, and Easton, PA as cities to receive this grant funding based on the need for resources, the presence of an established infrastructure to support the effort, and existing partnerships prepared to focus on the gang problem. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the "...strategy to combat gang violence around the nation is two-fold: First, prioritize prevention programs to provide America's youth, as well as offenders returning to the community, with opportunities that help them resist gang involvement. Second, ensure robust enforcement policies when gang-related violence does occur" (Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales Announces..., April 26, 2007).

The Rochester anti-gang initiative has been dubbed, *Rochester Safe & Sound* (RSS). Beginning in September 2007 and over the next three

---

<sup>1</sup> Data obtained from Chris Delaney, Crime Research Specialist, Rochester Police Department, Special Investigations Section.

years, Rochester Safe & Sound will support comprehensive gang prevention with \$1 million, enforcement and prosecution efforts with \$1 million, and gang offender re-entry programs with \$500,000. The gang prevention component is designed to address a range of individual, family, and community risk and protective factors related to early juvenile crime and gang activity. The enforcement component is designed to identify and target the most serious violent gang offenders with enhanced law enforcement and collaborative state and federal prosecution efforts. Finally, the re-entry component supports intensive pre-release case management and community-based housing, education, job placement, and drug rehabilitation services to local gang members returning to Rochester after a period of incarceration.

In addition to the direct provision of services, RSS is interested in monitoring and evaluating the impact of this project. To support endeavor, we serve as a *research partner* to Rochester Safe & Sound. As research partner we are responsible for working with key stakeholders to a) identify the local context of the gang problem in Rochester, b) identify a comprehensive array of “best practices” that have shown success at addressing gangs in other locations, c) develop a coordinated delivery of prevention, enforcement, and re-entry services, d) measure the process of service delivery, and e) evaluate the impact/outcome of the prevention, enforcement, and re-entry components of RSS. Throughout this research we are committed to using an *action research* framework as a guiding principle. Below we highlight a number of the key characteristics of

action research and discuss how our role as research partner to RSS is consistent with these characteristics.

Action research requires a number of key dimensions or characteristics (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). First, action research requires a collaborative approach that brings together researchers and stakeholders like practitioners/professionals, service providers, and community members. This approach requires the joint participation of these members in the development of research goals, the identification of established knowledge, and the interpretation of program outcomes. As research partners we work collaboratively with a number of critical stakeholders. These have included individuals representing the criminal justice community (e.g., Rochester Police Department, Monroe County Probation, Monroe County District Attorney's Office, and the Monroe County Jail), non-criminal justice government organizations, (e.g., Rochester City School District, Rochester Neighborhood Empowerment Teams, and Rochester Mayor's Office), and community-based non-profit organizations (e.g., Community Place of Greater Rochester, Hillside Children's Center, and the Rochester Catholic Family Center).

Second, action research is dynamic. The identification of a problem, the formulation of a plan, the implementation of a solution, and the collection of data assessing the process and outcome are all critical components of action research. Central to this process is the development of feedback mechanisms so that group members can monitor progress and modify strategies where necessary.

Third, action research is committed to resolving problems and instituting change. Rather than simply accumulating knowledge as an academic exercise, action research is tasked with ameliorating social conditions; in this instance, gangs and their negative impact on an urban environment.

Finally, action research frequently provides the opportunity for researchers to serve as agents of capacity building. In this way, the stakeholders should leave the experience with greater capacity to monitor their progress and achieve goals of change in the future. As we facilitate collaboration between criminal justice agencies, government organizations, and community-based non-profits, we are institutionalizing partnerships that have previously not existed and further enhancing the collective capacity of these collaborations.

The research partner role provides a number of specific opportunities to contribute to this action research approach. These opportunities include input into the program selection process, the sharing of best practices research to help guide and shape program activities, and the contribution of data instruments, data reporting benchmarks/timelines, and evaluation plans. To assist us with this research we recruited four undergraduate criminal justice students that began working with us in the Fall quarter 2007. As this project is in the early stages, most of their research has focused on understanding the local context of Rochester gangs and the identification of best practices in gang prevention, enforcement, and offender re-entry. In her paper Michaela Conrad explores the potential that exists within gang prevention. Her

paper begins by outlining several theoretical perspectives used to explain why young people join gangs. The remainder of her paper discusses the school-based prevention approach that RSS has proposed. Matthew Davis and Kristofer Nystrom address the various approaches law enforcement and prosecutors have used to combat gangs. They begin by defining gangs and discussing the unique characteristics of Rochester gangs. Following this introduction, the main focus of their paper is on specific law enforcement (e.g., targeted saturated patrols) and prosecution (e.g., anti-gang legislation) approaches that have been used in other jurisdictions. Finally, Helen Syme addresses characteristics of effective re-entry programs and highlights some of the unique challenges that gang membership poses for the re-entry process.

## **Works Cited**

Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales Announces Expansion of Justice Department's Comprehensive Anti-Gang Initiative. *U.S. Department of Justice*, Press Release #07-292, April 26, 2007.

Greenwood, D. J. & Levin, M. (1998). *Introduction to action research: Social research for social change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Thornberry, T. P., Krohn, M. D., Lizotte, A. J., Smith, C. A., & Tobin, K. (2003). *Gangs and delinquency in developmental perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.