



# Executive Roundtable of St. Lucie County

## Gang Prevention & Abatement Initiative

<p>PROBLEM ASSESSMENT &amp; ANALYSIS OUTCOMES</p>
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Children's Home Society  
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Delinquency Prevention Network  
Department of Juvenile Justice  
Executive Roundtable of St. Lucie County  
Florida Gang Investigators Association  
Fort Pierce Police Department  
Frontline For Kids  
Gang Awareness and Information Network  
Garden Terrace Head Start  
Guardian Angels of the Treasure Coast  
Juvenile Assessment Center  
Lincoln Park Head Start  
MADDADS  
PACE Center for Girls  
Port St. Lucie Department  
Project Rock North & South  
St. Lucie County Commissioners  
St. Lucie County Health Department  
St. Lucie County Juvenile Detention Center  
St. Lucie County School District  
St. Lucie County School District Security  
St. Lucie County School District Transportation  
St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office  
St. Lucie County Weed & Seed  
St. Lucie County Weed and Seed  
The Body Network

A special thanks to Michael Jackson and Lisa Barber for their exemplary data collection techniques

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gangs have been cited to be in existence since the days of the late 1920s as per the social science research of Frederic Thrasher.<sup>i</sup> During the last 20 years, gangs have been reported to be increasingly violent and destructive. On a path of power, individuals joining today's gangs have a significant lack of conscience and values creating damage and destruction of major proportions.

While much of the research shows gang life to be more prevalent in urban settings, there is an increase of gang activity in rural and suburban areas. It is no longer just a problem associated with the inner city, but affects a variety of communities. South Florida is distinct in that some of the most violent gangs in the country are migrating up the coast from larger cities like Miami and Fort Lauderdale to areas like Fort Pierce and Port St. Lucie. The 13<sup>th</sup> Annual America's Safest and Most Dangerous Cities Report by Morgan Quitno Press, cites Port St. Lucie to be the 25<sup>th</sup> safest city in the United States however its neighbors West Palm Beach, and Miami are ranked 344 and 327 respectively putting them in the most dangerous category<sup>ii</sup>. This is problematic for St. Lucie County as the influx of individuals moving from these towns has been steadily increasing over the past few years.

The purpose of this document is to solely report the findings associated with St. Lucie County Gang Prevention and Abatement Project, Phase I, *Problem Assessment & Analysis*. The intention of this report is to provide conclusive data to the Executive Roundtable of St. Lucie County as the precursor to developing effective gang prevention and abatement strategies suitable for the citizens of St. Lucie County.

A total of 621 anonymous surveys were collected with 56% representing youth either in gangs or youth involved with activities that put them in high risk situations and 44% representing community concerns about the affects of gang activity. Forty-one percent (41%) of the target group were Fort Pierce residents and 48% were from Port St. Lucie (13% did not report city of residence). Additionally, approximately 250 individuals from both cities were involved through the interview and discussion group process.

Gangs exist throughout St. Lucie County. In Fort Pierce they are visible street gangs blended with an influence of national gangs with members from places like Miami, New York, Chicago and California. In Port St. Lucie without having a "downtown" area gang activity is not always visible to the public. According to statements by individuals, many of the leaders of gangs have been recognized to live in Port St. Lucie. The most frequently mentioned gangs as reported by participants were: Bloods, Crips, V-side and 13<sup>th</sup> Street (Fort Pierce), Bloods, Crips, Latin Kings (Port St. Lucie).

### **Key Highlights from the Survey**

#### *Youth*

- ❖ Nearly 60% percent of the youth surveyed report the gang problem in St. Lucie County to be either "extremely dangerous" or "pretty bad" or "bad but livable".

- ❖ Of the total surveyed, 50 youth report currently being active in a gang (66% FP, 34% PSL).
- ❖ The most commonly stated reasons for joining gang life were (in order of most frequently reported): a) to get respect, b) for fun, and c) for money. Other reasons that were significant to many of the respondents were: for protection and because a friend was in the gang.
- ❖ Fear of physical punishment by fellow gang members and retaliation from rival gangs were the main motives that stopped individuals from leaving gang life.
- ❖ Sixty-two percent (62%) of the gang respondents stated that they have family members that either are or have been in a gang.
- ❖ Overall, the youth in gangs (that participated in private interviews) expressed that the reasons why some join gangs is because of the lack of family support, no one to talk to, single-parent homes, lack of supervision, family members are involved in gangs, no positive role models, and finally, there is nothing to do. “A gang is like a second family, especially if you have a family that isn’t there for you.”
- ❖ If a young person lives in a neighborhood where gangs are present, they report having to stay in their houses to thwart interactions with gangs or do activities out of the neighborhood (which presents transportation obstacle).
- ❖ Eighty-two (82%) percent of the youth in the total survey do have an adult in their life that they can talk to about important issues and the primary trusted person in their life is most frequently reported as grandmother, or friend. Mother was identified the least number of times of all adult categories. Trusting in one’s father was accounted for four times more than the mother.
- ❖ When asked what do kids need to help avoid joining gangs, and overwhelming response was for safe, interesting, positive activities to be involved with. The second most commonly reported answer was to have a trusting individual to provide love, concern and guidance.
- ❖ After school activities and an after school job were the top two items reported by the youth as what was needed to be available to young people so that they could have a more successful life.
- ❖ Sixty percent (60%) of the youth believe that programs should start working with kids to prevent gang involvement between kindergarten and 4<sup>th</sup> grade.
- ❖ Nearly 60% of the youth in the survey that reported having children were between 10 and 15 years of age.

### *Adults*

- ❖ Over half (56%) of the FP adult residents and 58% of the PSL adult residents in the survey do not believe that their children are at risk of gang membership.
- ❖ The top three strategies (in most popular order) to reduce the gang problem reported by county adults were: a) more parental involvement, b) increased recreational programs, c) school programs to combat gangs and, d) increased police presence.

- ❖ The influence of family and parenting on the life of a child (55%) was recognized as the most significant responsibility for taking action in reducing the gang problem.
- ❖ Without prompt, nearly half of the county adult respondents report that the entire community is responsible for reducing the gang problem. Ironically, when probed further as to what specifically respondents could do to help deal with the gang problem in the community, responses were relatively low with an average of 19% of respondents stating participation of any kind.

Youth in gangs attend school in St. Lucie County. Key findings from a variety of interviews and discussion group with school personnel throughout the county are as follows:

- ❖ Gang members are getting younger and thus this is becoming a middle school problem.
- ❖ Opposing gang members attend the same schools and this will continue to grow as the redistricting process is completed.
- ❖ Typically kids are relieved to come to school. They see school as a respite of sorts, away from the streets and in safety.
- ❖ Gang fighting and problems come from the community into the school. When law enforcement is aware of this prior to the school day, they alert the SRO as well as school security to prevent problems. Coordination is high and comprehensive.
- ❖ Violence occurs at the bus stops and on buses in which stronger kids prey on the weak.
- ❖ Transporting gang members is risky and dangerous. The Department of Transportation attempts to eliminate problems by sending multiple buses to an area, in addition to separating various streets in FP onto different buses. However, it is common for a single bus to have 2-3 gang members on a bus at one time.

#### *Faith Based Leaders*

- ❖ There were a total of 25 Pastors surveyed at the Miracle Prayer Pastors Luncheon in St. Lucie County. Eighteen believe there is a gang problem in the county and 16 out of 25 believe the problem to be fairly serious.
- ❖ Seventeen (17) out of 25 stated “rarely” or “never” when asked how often the congregation discussed the gang problem in the community.

During the problem assessment phase, individuals were eager to express potential solutions towards the prevention and abatement of gangs in St. Lucie County. While Phase II of the St. Lucie Gang Prevention and Abatement Project is explicitly designated for action plan development, listed are the key highlights that translated across interviews, discussion groups and surveys.

- ❖ Begin a campaign culture against gangs in the County. Develop a plan that involves the entire community in helping youth and making sure that gang membership is suppressed.
- ❖ Prevention is key. Work with younger kids, to give them hope, goals and values that will deter them from getting involved with gang life. Introduce them to life outside of the

streets. Provide training, travel opportunities, and role models that they can relate to. Do this at a young age. Keep them hopeful and focused on the benefits of a good education.

- ❖ Conduct interesting, captivating and meaningful gang trainings for teachers, bus drivers and other school personnel by trainers that have first hand knowledge of working with gangs.
- ❖ Develop a county-wide protocol for gang related offenses on campus, at school bus stops and on the school bus with consistent enforcement.

There are youth of all ages and all ethnicities in St. Lucie County that make the choice to get involved with gang life. Their reasons for joining are personal, however they all share a common theme of relying on the gang for support whether it be protective, social, financial, or emotional support. Phases II and III of the St. Lucie Gang Prevention and Abatement Project are focused on building on this assessment and eventually executing a realistic implementation plan that prevents, intervenes and suppresses gang activity so that the young people of today and tomorrow have a chance of a future that involves reaching adulthood.

# INTRODUCTION

The concept of people joining together to fulfill a need or engage a purpose is commonplace. According to Thomas Scheff (1990), social bonds satisfy the powerful human need to belong.<sup>iii</sup> With adolescents, peer pressure can be a byproduct of the desire on behalf of a young person to fit in and share their experiences with like minded individuals.

Belonging to something occurs on a variety of levels ranging from those banding together to play sports, taking part in an orchestra, joining a religious congregation, participating in after school clubs, involving one's self in support groups, gathering in a quilting bee and simply having a group of friends with similar mindset. Gangs too are social groups yet with a drastic criminal influence.

“We all want to belong, but what is there for kids  
on the fringe to belong to? We must offer alternatives for the  
youth that address the things that they want:  
power, immediacy, control, and prestige”  
(St. Lucie County Public School Principal, October 2006)

Combine the confounding negative risk factors of lack of family involvement, family management problems, extreme economic deprivation, academic failure, negative cultural icons, and there becomes a viable connection and need for acceptance within a gang. The 2006 report from the American's Promise Alliance, reports that more than two-thirds of our children and youth --- 34 million Americans between ages 6 and 17 --- are not receiving sufficient developmental resources that put them on a path to success in adulthood.<sup>iv</sup>

Gang life has the illusion of rewards: money in the pocket, power, respect, authority, the hopes of being liked, and connection and protection. As best summarized by a participant in this project, one 12 year old female gang member from Fort Pierce stated that the most important thing a person needs to avoid joining gang life is a, “family that is going to support you”.

## *Connection and Protection*

From the time a baby is born, the infant is looking for two things: connection and protection. They come into the world looking for someone to attach to and help them meet their needs. Attachment occurs within the first moments that they baby recognizes hunger.<sup>v</sup> The need to be protected becomes engrained in our subconscious during the attachment cycle. We continue growing older while in silent search of continual ways to connect to others and be safeguarded from peril. Researchers, Michael Resnick, Peter Bearman (et al) found in a national study on adolescent health that there is consistent evidence that perceived caring and connectedness to others is important in understanding the health (related to substance use, violence, emotional health and sexuality) and of young people today.<sup>vi</sup>

With a proper degree of protective factors in one's life, it is relatively easy to receive enough connection and protection so that one is able to move through the youth experience with a limited dose of harm. According to over seventeen years of research and data collected from over

two million youth, the Search Institute has recognized that young people require specific developmental assets in their lives in order to be successful. The fewer the numbers of assets present in a young person's life, the greater the possibility the youth will engage in risky behaviors, such as: drug use, unsafe sex and violence.<sup>vii</sup>

*Table 1: Search Institute List of Developmental Asset Categories.*

<p><b><u>External Assets</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Support</b>-Young people need to experience support, care, and love from their families, neighbors, and many others. They need organizations and institutions that provide positive, supportive environments.</li> <li>• <b>Empowerment</b>-Young people need to be valued by their community and have opportunities to contribute to others. For this to occur, they must be safe and feel secure.</li> <li>• <b>Boundaries and expectations</b>-Young people need to know what is expected of them and whether activities and behaviors are "in bounds" and "out of bounds."</li> <li>• <b>Constructive use of time</b>-Young people need constructive, enriching opportunities for growth through creative activities, youth programs</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Internal Assets</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Commitment to learning</b>-Young people need to develop a lifelong commitment to education and learning.</li> <li>• <b>Positive values</b>-Young people need to develop strong values that guide their choices.</li> <li>• <b>Social competencies</b>-Young people need skills and competencies that equip them to make positive choices, to build relationships, and to succeed in life.</li> <li>• <b>Positive identity</b>-Young people need a strong sense of their own power, purpose, worth, and promise.</li> </ul> <p><b>Source:</b> Search Institute®, Minneapolis, MN; <a href="http://www.search-institute.org">www.search-institute.org</a>.</p>
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Children who come to believe that they cannot obtain desired outcomes or prevent negative consequences will tend to react in a maladaptive order, particularly in stressful situations.<sup>viii</sup> According to researchers, Resnick et al. (1997), the home environment also plays a role in shaping negative health outcomes. If homes provide a venue in which adolescents have easy access to guns, alcohol, tobacco, and illicit substances, adolescents are more likely to have an increased risk of suicidality, involvement in interpersonal violence, and substance use.<sup>ix</sup> As it relates to St. Lucie County, sixty-three percent of the youth in the survey sample that self reported to be gang members, answered yes to having a family member that is also in a gang.

*The Gang Problem in St. Lucie County*

Gangs have been cited to be in existence since the days of the late 1920s as per the social science research of Frederic Thrasher. Thrasher and his colleagues at the University of Chicago

identified that clusters of gangs formed in socially disorganized slums<sup>x</sup>. They have been defined as groups of people coming together over a common cause. During the last 20 years, gangs have been reported to be increasingly violent and destructive. On a path of power, individuals joining today's gangs have a significant lack of conscience and values creating damage and destruction of major proportions. Essentially over time the definition of gangs has become more widespread, with the byproducts of gang involvement becoming almost ordinary in urban settings where poverty exists. According to a 2003 community report developed by the California Attorney General's Office, belonging to a gang severely harms a young person's future. Further, gang members often socialize only with other gang members, reinforcing their limited view of life. They frequently establish a lifelong pattern of involvement with the criminal justice system. They may commit serious and violent crimes that lead to lengthy incarcerations. They may be injured for life, or killed. Their gang membership may place an entire family household at risk<sup>xi</sup>.

While much of the research shows gang life to be more prevalent in urban settings, there is an increase of gang activity in rural and suburban areas. It is no longer just a problem associated with the inner city, but affects a variety of communities. South Florida is distinct in that some of the most violent gangs in the country are migrating up the coast from larger cities like Miami and Fort Lauderdale to areas like Fort Pierce and Port St. Lucie. The 2005 National Gang Threat Assessment reports that gang migration issues are significant for the southern region of the United States as upwards of ten national gangs have been identified to have moved into this area.<sup>xii</sup> Specific to St. Lucie County and as reported by the youth respondents in this survey and local law enforcement, those national gangs identified in the 2005 Assessment include: MS 13, Bloods, Crips, Latin Kings, and Surenos (Sur 13). With this relocation of gang members, towns that before were not associated with the harmful effects of gang violence are now part of that experience. The 13<sup>th</sup> Annual America's Safest and Most Dangerous Cities Report by Morgan Quitno Press, cites Port St. Lucie to be the 25<sup>th</sup> safest city in the United States however its neighbors West Palm Beach, and Miami are ranked 344 and 327 respectively putting them in the most dangerous category<sup>xiii</sup>. This is problematic for St. Lucie County as the influx of individuals moving from these towns has been steadily increasing over the past few years.

According to the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, *Juvenile Justice Information System*, a total of 1,461 (420 females, 1041 males) youth in St. Lucie County were referred for delinquency in the 2004-2005 fiscal year.<sup>xiv</sup> In 2005, the St. Lucie County Sheriff's Department, reports that there were a total of 1909 juvenile arrests and 889 violent crime juvenile arrests in the county.

Recent headlines related to gang activity from local newspaper periodicals portray some of the issues that the county is facing:

<b>"Alleged Gang Members Arrested"</b>	September 6, 2006 <i>Port St. Lucie News</i>
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<b>"St. Lucie Crime up 8.6 Percent."</b>	October 18, 2006 <i>Port St. Lucie News</i>
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**"Graffiti Surge Spells Increase in Gang Activity, Fort Pierce Residents Fear."**

October 26, 2006  
*Fort Pierce Tribune*

**"Fort Pierce Teen Walking Home Shot As Suspected Gang Members Feuded Nearby."**

November 2, 2006  
*Fort Pierce Tribune*

**"Man Gets 25 Years For Killing As Part Of Gang Initiation."**

November 3, 2006  
*Fort Pierce Tribune*

The current generation of youth growing up in St. Lucie County are similar to those growing up in other counties that commingle with urban centers. There are youth that grow up in middle-class families participating in organized activities whether it be religious education, recreational sports, music and art lessons, babysitting, mowing lawns and have a solid family life with a relatively decent income to purchase youth centered necessities. The youth often report having a multitude of protective factors paving the way for their success and safety. These are the young people that have relatively easy access to the developmental assets that have been proven by the Search Institute to shape productive, positive, healthy young adults<sup>xv</sup>. Opportunity is commonplace in their lives.

There are youth that come from lower income families where the parents are working multiple jobs in order to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. These youth tend to participate in before and after school care, and often times rely on themselves and/or older siblings for daily guidance and lessons. Parents are doing the best that they can, and are often occupied with the chore of providing basic sustenance. Compared with 1960, children in the United States have lost, on average, 10 to 12 hours per week of parental time.<sup>xvi</sup> Participating in fun, recreational activities and/or daily youth-type jobs is less common as the time for this is not as abundant and youth report not having access to rides to and from activities. Opportunity is something that needs to be worked hard for, to have.

There are youth that come from families that live on or below the national poverty level in which they experience a plethora of risk factors that create a difficult/stressful life for the child. They quickly learn the values and skills affecting and life becomes a daily battlefield for opportunity. Participating in anything that requires extra money (local sports, movies, music and art lessons, shopping at the mall) is often times not possible. Wide spread opportunity is something that is not as frequently available and the individual requires significant strength to succeed.

In addition to the basis skills, values and tools that youth have are the influences placed upon them by external forces. In today's world violence, sexual promiscuity and risk taking are almost second nature to youth. Results from various studies show that the fewer the number of

developmental assets present, the greater the possibility youth will engage in risky behaviors such as drug use, unsafe sex, and violence.<sup>xvii</sup>

The impact of gangsta rap, video games, television shows and movies in which sex and violence are visibly depicted can be viewed as the persuading factors for kids and their own personal value system. In 1995, Reed Larson suggested that media usage changes- often becoming more individualistic- as adolescents begin to develop their sense of self.<sup>xviii</sup> Additionally, before an American teen turn 18, they've witnessed an estimated 200,000 acts of violence on TV. Evidence suggests exposure to violence in the media can trigger short-term aggressive behavior--behavior intended to harm others, including shoving and starting fights.<sup>xix</sup> While this is not the only time in the world where these industries have represented the youth culture, it is a time in which violent youth crime is at an all time high. The Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report cites that one of every four violent crime victims known to law enforcement is a juvenile, and most of these victims are female.<sup>xx</sup>

Despite the ratings on video games (T:Teen., E:Everyone), kids have access to games abound that precisely depict aggressive acts, rage-filled circumstances, and intensely violent situations. While, it has not been proven that these games have a direct correlation to an increase in long term violent behavior among youth, one can only assume that repeated access to these images tends to decrease their significance as horrifying images in the human brain. Violent video games are significantly associated with: increased aggressive behavior, thoughts, and affect; increased physiological arousal; and decreased pro-social (helping) behavior.<sup>xxi</sup> Many kids of all class levels are drawn to and interested by these modern influences. Kids talk and act like “gangstas”, listening to abusive lyrics and wearing clothes that represent. They are drawn to these icon-type figures in a misrepresentation of increasing their personal self esteem.

As a member of the Fort Pierce community and director of the volunteer group, MADDADS, Mr. Robert Johnson said it best: “ *it is easier for bad kids to teach good kids---bad things, but it is more difficult for good kids to teach bad kids---good things*”.

The following eighteen pages describe the outcome of a five month process to understand the problem of gangs in St. Lucie County. Gangs do exist in Fort Pierce and Port St. Lucie. Law enforcement agencies deal with them on a daily basis. There are youth of all ages and all ethnicities that make the choice to get involved with gang life. Their reasons for joining are personal, however they all share a common theme of relying on the gang for support whether it be protective, social, financial, or emotional support. Gang membership tends to be a secondary problem and that kids that get involved with gangs are experiencing a multitude of other negative risk factors that cause them to commit to gang life.

## HOW TO USE THIS REPORT

The St. Lucie County Gang Prevention and Abatement Project encompasses three phases each with specific goals.

The purpose of this document is to solely report the findings associated with Phase I, *Problem Assessment & Analysis*. The intention of this report is to provide conclusive data to the Executive Roundtable of St. Lucie County as the precursor to developing effective gang prevention and abatement strategies suitable for the citizens of St. Lucie County. Information gathered during the five months of problem dissection period is representative of community concerns, opinions and ideas. Once this phase is complete, the second phase and then third phases (Table 2) will begin respectively to address the issues illuminated during the problem assessment period and to devise productive, effective, realistic strategies for gang prevention and intervention.

Table 2: Phases of the St. Lucie County Gang Prevention and Abatement Project

<i>Phase I</i>	<u>Problem Assessment &amp; Analysis</u>	July 2006 – December 2006
	To uncover, examine, and analyze the details related to gang activity in Fort Pierce & Port St. Lucie.	
<i>Phase II</i>	<u>Comprehensive Strategic Plan</u>	December 2006 – March 2006
	To identify effective prevention and intervention strategies aimed at preventing and abating gang activity in Fort Pierce & Port St. Lucie.	
<i>Phase III</i>	<u>Implementation Plan</u>	March 2006 – May 2006
	To identify costs, collaborative partners and timeline associated with the implementation of the Comprehensive plan.	

## METHODOLOGY

The process to conduct a systematic problem assessment includes discovery of all relevant data related to the situation. This particular problem assessment document was based on the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Comprehensive Gang Model.<sup>xxii</sup> The model suggests that communities must explore and clearly understand the nature and scope of their gang problem based on multiple sources of information, or they cannot begin to respond effectively or efficiently.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In SLC, the problem assessment phase included three forms of data collection methods:

- Interviews with key stakeholders as the initial point to understand the shape of the problem;
- Enhanced discussion groups with the primary target group and those directly affected by and working in the problem area;
- Anonymous surveys with the primary target group, parents and community members affected by the problem.

The results and interpretations of the problem assessment are indeed significant as the information has been gathered from nearly 900 community residents. Over six hundred individuals participated in the survey and approximately 250 were involved through the interview and discussion group process. The complete target population included a) youth in gangs, youth at risk of gang membership and, youth involved in alternative programs; b) parents, business owners, and community members affected by gang activity; c) school administration, school resource officers, school district security and school transportation personnel; d) youth service providers, juvenile justice staff, community leaders, and law enforcement.

### Survey Collection Framework

Two survey instruments were designed based on the OJJDCP Comprehensive Gang Assessment questionnaires. The first survey targeted the youth population while the second survey was aimed at collecting community/parent input. Surveys were distributed to community key stakeholders for question item review, relevancy and feedback. Once the survey was finalized, a team of three trained interviewers gathered data from individuals at purposefully selected access points. These collection areas were comprised of the following venues:

Weekly Probation Check in  
Project Rock South  
SLC Health Department  
Sportsmans Park  
Teen Court  
Firehouse Teen Center  
Detention Center  
Lincoln Park Head Start  
SLC Weed & Seed Program

PACE Center for Girls  
Project Rock North  
Children's Home Society Locations  
Street Outreach:  
Orange Avenue – Avenue M  
between 10<sup>th</sup> street and 33<sup>rd</sup> Street.  
Miracle Prayer Temple; Ministers Luncheon  
Garden Terrace Head Start  
Fort Pierce Linc Festival

A total of 621 anonymous surveys were collected with 56% representing youth either in gangs or youth involved with activities that put them in high risk situations and 44% representing community concerns about the affects of gang activity. The project has provided for the protection of confidentiality of project participants by keeping all survey data strictly anonymous; therefore, information in this report cannot be used to cause harm to the respondents.

### **Interview/Discussion Group Data Collection Framework**

Interviews were conducted with various key stakeholders from agencies that interact directly with gang members and gang issues in St. Lucie County. Approximately 50 individuals participated in this 30-60 minute interview from the following organizations: Port St. Lucie Police Department; Fort Pierce Police Department; St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office; St. Lucie County School District; St. Lucie County School District Security; Juvenile Assessment Center; St. Lucie County Detention Center; St Lucie County Commissioners; Department of Juvenile Justice, Probation Office; Men Against Destruction Defending Against Drugs and Social Disorder (MADDADS); St. Lucie County Weed and Seed; adult community residents and gang members.

The discussion groups, comprised of approximately 200 youth and adults were from the following organizations: Frontline For Kids; Gang Awareness and Information Network; Circuit 19 Supervisory Staff; PACE Center for Girls; St. Lucie County Bus Utility Drivers; Guardian Angles of the Treasure Coast; Boys and Girls Club Pruitt Center; Boys and Girls Teen Center; St. Lucie Sheriff's School Resource Officers; Children's Home Society Avenue L Group Home; Lincoln Park Community Center.

# PROBLEM ASSESSMENT OUTCOMES

The Outcomes of the problem assessment phase is an amalgamation of the three data collection methods (surveys, interviews and discussion groups) and is divided into two categories: a) Youth, and b) Adult. Within each of these, there are subsets that incorporate data related to either the City of Fort Pierce or the City of Port St. Lucie. Additionally, the youth category includes a section on the impact of gangs on school life.

## I. Youth

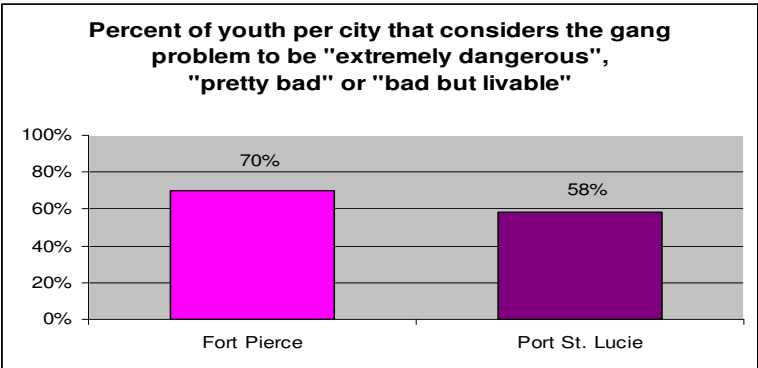
### *Demographics*

A total of 344 youth completed surveys of which 38% were from Port St. Lucie and 33% were from Fort Pierce. Many of the youth did not report the city or the zip code in which they live. Fifty-five percent of the youth were male and 44% of the youth were female with 46% reporting being either African or Haitian American, 37% Caucasian, 11% Hispanic and 3% Native American. English was reported as the primary language used most often at home with 4% stating Spanish and 2% stating Creole. Most of the youth in the survey were between the ages of 12-17 years of age (87%). Of those youth who reported having a child, 58% of them were between the ages of 13-16 years old.

### *Gang Presence*

Gangs exist throughout St. Lucie County. In Fort Pierce they are visible street gangs blended with an influence of national gangs with members from places like Miami, New York, Chicago and California. In Port St. Lucie without having a “downtown” area gang activity is not always visible to the public. Although that is reported to be changing with parents in the assessment process noting problems occurring at Whispering Pines park on a fairly regular basis along with Sportsman’s Park. According to statements by individuals, many of the leaders of the gangs have been recognized to live in Port St. Lucie. Moreover as depicted by Tables 4-5, the gangs that are assembled in Port St. Lucie are related to larger, more organized groups. Port St. Lucie has also felt an influx of residents with national gang affiliation from cities such as West Palm Beach, Miami, Chicago, New York and California. In both cities, there are mentions of many smaller cliques, groups and/or gangs that do not have too much information associated with them.

Table 3



Nearly 60% percent of the youth surveyed report the gang problem in St. Lucie County to be either “extremely dangerous” or “pretty bad” or “bad but livable”. However, when looked at further, 70% of the FP youth believe the gang problem to be extremely dangerous” or “pretty bad” or “bad but livable as compared with 58% of PSL youth (Table 3). While this is a considerable number of individuals, the majority of youth in the county (Fort Pierce 75%, PSL 77%) are not afraid to walk alone in their neighborhoods. However of the one quarter (FP 25%, PSL 23%) that are afraid, it is related to gangs, gang violence and the fear of getting jumped.

“I was held down by gang members in PSL and tattooed against my will.”  
 (17 year old White female, PSL)

Unsafe areas in the County are reported by the youth to be:

- The North side of Fort Pierce – Avenue D, 13<sup>th</sup> Street, Plaza, 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, 29<sup>th</sup> Street
- Sportsman’s Park
- Superplay, Rave, Friendly’s
- Whispering Pines Park
- Treasure Coast High School Area
- Walton Road (Tiffany Plaza behind St. Lucie Medical Center)
- North of Prima Vista between Bayshore and Airoso

“My neighborhood”  
 (13 year old White female, Port St. Lucie 34953)

“If I wear a certain color in my neighborhood, gangs will bang on me”  
 (16 year old African American male, Fort Pierce)

Table 4: Most Commonly Reported Gangs Per City

Fort Pierce		Port St. Lucie	
Gang Name	No. of Responses	Gang Name	No. of Responses
Bloods	144	Blood	99
Crips	126	Crips	96
V Side	88	Latin Kings	39
13 <sup>th</sup> Street	86	Folk Nation	14
Latin Kings	51		
23 <sup>rd</sup> Street	46		
Vatos Locos	36		
Island Boys	34		
10 <sup>th</sup> Street	25		

Table 5: Less Commonly Reported Gangs Per City

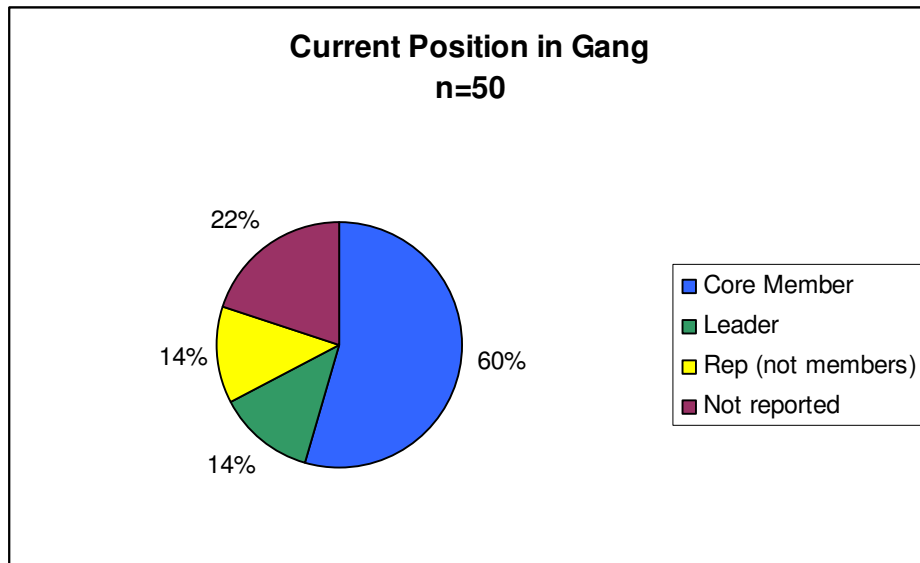
Gang Name (FP)	No. of Responses	Gang Name (PSL)	No. of Responses
Sur 13	19	MS 13	4
Zone 1	11	MOB	4
21 <sup>st</sup> Street	11	Sur 13	3
27 <sup>th</sup> Street	9	Cash Money	3
Nine Tre Gangstas	3	Midnight Crips	3
J Block	4	Vatos Locos	2
Southside Mafia	4	Zoe Pound	2
		Pink Ladies	2
		Southside Mafia	2
		DSPs	2

\* Fort Pierce - two or less mentions: Saca Tecas, A -TownLWP, Diieser, Dirty Boyz,, NGC, L-Stars, LSB, TGI, MNC, DSP, Latin Soul, Ghost Town Gangstas, Sucios, Pirate Blood, TOL, Brown Pride, Norenos, Mexican Mafia, La Raza, Sombra 13, MNL 12, Junior Mafia, Locs, D-Block Bounty Hunters, Gutter Boys, Chinese Mafia, Southside La Familia.

\*\* Port St. Lucie – one mention: Zone 1, Southside Crips, A-Town, TFQ, TFK, D-Block Bounty Hunters, Toy\$, La Raza, Brown Pride, G&G, Junkie Jits, Ghost-town Gangstas, NGC, South 13

*Youth Currently In Gangs*

Of the total surveyed, 50 youth report currently being active in a gang (66% FP, 34% PSL).



The most commonly stated reasons for joining gang life were (in order of most frequently reported): a) to get respect, b) for fun, and c) for money. Other reasons that were significant to many of the respondents were: for protection and because a friend was in the gang. Hand signs and wearing colors were the two primary ways that the gang members in the survey rep their gang. Tagging was the third most commonly reported by less than half of the individuals.

When asked if they will ever leave the gang, an equal number of participants stated yes and no. After probing further, the most commonly stated reasons (in order of most popular responses) to help them leave gang life were: obtaining a job, becoming a parent, getting into a school/educational program, getting married, being involved with a sports program and because of a steady girl/boyfriend. Fear of physical punishment by fellow gang members and retaliation from rival gangs were the main motives that stopped individuals from leaving gang life. Gang members had the opportunity to specify what they would need to help them get out of gang life and while it was stated that fear of retribution was a major concern, many of them reported that nothing would help them because if they wanted to get out---they would just leave.

“I don’t want to get out of a gang, I wouldn’t leave it for nobody.”  
 (14 year old African American female, FP)

However, there were quite a few that stated needing the following precise assistance:

“A father”  
 (14 year old African American male, Detention)

“I’m already out! What I needed to help me get out was somebody to love me and get respect from others and God in my life”  
 (15 year old white female mother, PSL)

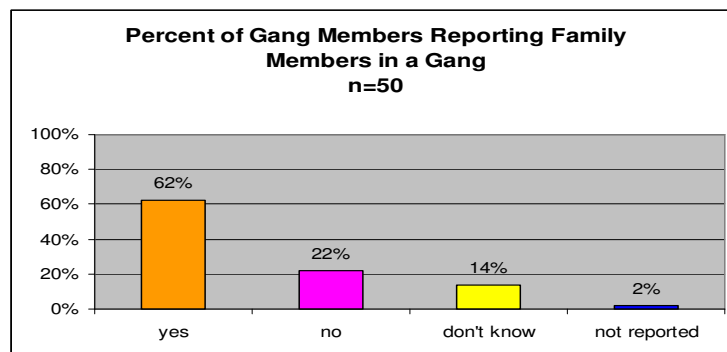
“Being cared about, being understood for who I am so I won’t have to live that life”  
 (15 year old Haitian American female, Fort Pierce)

“Leave the neighborhood”  
 (13 year old African American male, Fort Pierce)

“I just needed someone to help me, like a mentor.”  
 (19 year old white female ex-gang member, PSL)

Nearly two-thirds of the gang members in the survey, report that their parents are aware that they are in a gang. Similarly, 70% report having an adult in their life that they can talk to and Grandmother, Friend or Auntie were declared most frequently as the primary trusted person in their life. Table six portrays the percent of gang members that report having family members also in a gang.

Table 6



### *Private Interviews with Gang Members*

In addition to the youth survey, fifteen Fort Pierce suspected gang members participated in private discussions with the interview team to further probe and validate some of the data.

Overall, the youth expressed that the reasons why some join gangs is because of the lack of family support, no one to talk to, single-parent homes, lack of supervision, family members are involved in gangs, no positive role models, and finally, there is nothing to do. “A gang is like a second family, especially if you have a family that isn’t there for you.”

Gang life is strictly about “goin everywhere and messin up stuff”. Younger kids are imitating gang members as young as 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Some felt as though it wasn’t safe to be in a gang anymore. “There is no telling when they’ll shoot at you. You could be at a family event and they’ll still try to get you”.

Continual problems were cited at the Pop Warner Football games with rival gangs fighting before, after and during games. There are no basketball, tennis or soccer leagues available to kids.

These youth had definite aspirations for their lives ranging from becoming a doctor to being a famous sports player. Most of them spoke of becoming a famous sports star and very few had no back-up plan. They exist in the here and now and much of that is filled with anger, sadness and a general feeling of being lost. Some mentioned having older siblings or relatives playing college sports and this has renewed their interest in school so that they can have a way out of the hood.

If they live in neighborhoods where gangs are present, kids have to stay in their houses to thwart interactions with gangs or do stuff out of the neighborhood (which presents transportation obstacle).

Having no one to listen to you was referred to as a significant problem in the lives of these youth.

Most self reported getting in trouble in order to get money for themselves or for their families. Gang members said that they have nothing to do, they are bored. Some would like to get jobs but they don’t have the education.

Being in a gang means that the kids can not go to certain places without fighting. Once they get put in jail, their friends forget about them. One participant went to St Lucie County Jail (Rock Road) as a youth and was terrified every single day of his 3 year term.

Their formula for success from the lessons they had learned:

- Stay away from drugs---they lead to bad things
- Obey your parents
- Stay in school
- Have more programs to help kids stay out of trouble: basketball, tennis, soccer teams, music programs, poetry,
- Get a job

- Need to be strong minded in order to stay away from gangs.

### *Youth At Risk of Gang Membership – Further Perspectives*

Approximately one-third of the 344 youth surveyed report that the top reasons kids join gangs are: 1) family or friends in gangs, and 2) lack of money---to earn money. The secondary reasons reported were 3) power and 4) protection. Almost one quarter of the youth report that family problems are the major reason that kids join gangs. Eighty-two (82%) percent of the youth do have an adult in their life that they can talk to about important issues and the primary trusted person in their life is most frequently reported as grandmother, or friend. Mother was identified the least number of times of all adult categories. Trusting in one's father was accounted for four times more than the mother.

Less than 20% of the youth in the sample ran away from home in the last year. However, 63% skipped school between one and five times in the past 6 months with nearly half of the truancy rate related to those respondents between ages 15 -16.

“Nobody can help me but myself, and I don't want to.”  
(17 year old African American male, PSL)

Approximately 15% of the sample has been pressured to join a gang with twice the amount reporting feeling that pressure in Port St. Lucie. However, 85% of the youth respondents reported either not being in a gang or not currently being a gang member

“My brother got shot because of what he looks like.  
Now he holds a gun.”  
(15 year old Hispanic female, Port St. Lucie)

Just over half of the youth believe that programs like DARE and GREAT do not help keep kids out of gangs. Additionally, over half of the kids in gangs that responded to the survey also do not believe that DARE and GREAT help to keep kids out of gangs. When asked what do kids need to help avoid joining gangs, and overwhelming response was for safe, interesting, positive activities to be involved with. The second most commonly reported answer was to have a trusting individual to provide love, concern and guidance.

“Kids need a person that can give them guidance  
and one who is capable of being a mentor.”  
(17 years old, African-American, Female, Fort Pierce)

“More places to spend time doing something good”  
(14 year old gang member, Female, Hispanic, Fort Pierce)

“A good father figure”  
(15 year old African American male Detention)

Many of the respondents reported believing that kids need to actually see the danger associated with gang life as a strategy to prevent membership. Further a smaller percentage believed that

letting younger kids (13 and up) have paying jobs and believing in God will be effective prevention tactics.

“Believe in a religion or higher power.”

(19 year old, African American Male, PSL)

When asked what needs to be available for kids so that they have more chances to be successful in life the top two answers were: after school activities and an after school job. Yet, less than one-third of the participants reported being involved with any activities. The respondents were asked what activities are important to have available in the County and the top three responses were; sports activities, a safe place to go to hang out, and a paying job that teaches a skill.

As far as specific gang prevention programs are concerned, 60% of the youth believe that programs should start working with kids to prevent gang involvement between kindergarten and 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

“I started learning the dangerous things in fifth grade  
and all the other kids already knew it.”

(14 year old White female, Port St. Lucie)

“Just let them know that they still have  
a chance to be something by going to school.”

(19 year old African American female. Fort Pierce)

Finally, it seemed appropriate to ask the youth if they could have one wish for something that would help them to have a happier, better life what would it be and the answers were extremely poignant and astonishing. Many of the youth in the detention center asked for a second chance, to have a family that cares about them and for a chance to have a normal life. Other commonly (in order of most frequently reported) mentioned themes between the youth were: a) desires to have either their father or grandparents back in their lives; b) to have supportive parents that they can talk to; c) to stop all of the community violence (including gangs); d) to live in a better neighborhood; e) have friends, boyfriends, and girlfriends; and f) money.

“I need a normal life.”

(15 year old White male gang member, Fort Pierce)

“A job as a kid to get money in my pocket and help mom pay bills, help the family out.”

(11 year old African American Male, Fort Pierce)

“To have a family that cares about me”

(19 year old White male, Fort Pierce)

“Have my Dad”

(12 year old Hispanic gang member, Port St. Lucie)

“I would want to live peacefully where ever that I live  
and to have my dad in my life and to continue to live for God”

(16 years old African American female, Fort Pierce)

“To move”

(15 year old White female gang member, PSL)

“More money in a legal way for my family and better paying jobs in PSL”

(16 year old African American Male, Port St. Lucie)

“Have my Dad pay attention to me”

(12 year old Hispanic male, Port St. Lucie)

“To end the Black on Black crime and killings)

(18 year old African American Male, Fort Pierce)

“A scholarship to a college for I won’t need to be pressured  
into gangs or drugs. I would have a positive life”

(15 year old African American Male, Fort Pierce)

### *Schools*

Youth in gangs participate in many facets of community life. According to data supplied by the St. Lucie County School district there were 89 out of 533 students suspected of gang related activity related to level four disciplinary actions (see 7) in the 2005-06 school year. This figure is considered to be underreported as the reporting system has been newly implemented and at the time of reporting all schools had not be fully trained on the new collection methods.

*Table 7: Placement Review Committee 2005-06 (provided by St. Lucie Department of Education)*

Total n = 89 out of 533 (17%) students suspected of gang related activity related to infraction.

SCHOOL	No. of Students Suspected of Gang Activity – Last School Year
Fort Pierce Central	35
Fort Pierce Westwood	20
Port St. Lucie High	14
Southern Oaks Middle	5
Northport Middle	4
St Lucie West Centennial	3
Forest Grove Middle	3
Delaware Avenue	2
Southport Middle	1
Indian Hills	1
Dan McCarty Middle	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>89</b>

In effort to provide a complete picture of the impact of gangs in the county, interviews were conducted with 8 of the 13 middle and high schools in St. Lucie County (does not include charter

or magnet schools) . Participating schools include: Dale Cassens Middle School, Dan McCarty Middle School, Delaware Avenue School, Forest Grove Middle School, Fort Pierce Central High School, Fort Pierce Westwood High School, Indian Hills Alternative School and, Northport Middle School. Multiple attempts by phone and email were made to interview the remaining five schools however conflicting schedules and/or other unknown reasons created this minor limitation. Additionally, discussion groups and key interviews were conducted with School Resource Officers, School District Security Officers and Bus Drivers. The information collected during a combination of these interview processes is reflective of all schools in which gang members attend. It is clear that each of the St. Lucie County middle and high schools are affected at some degree by gang activity whether it is on campus, at the bus stop or on the bus. Data captured during the interviews, discussion groups and surveys provides anecdotal evidence of gang members attending each and every middle/high school in the county. Further, there is a great anecdotal input among youth and providers in the community that gang activity is a problem at Treasure Coast High School.

Every school based interview involved a combination of individuals including the Dean, Principal, Guidance Counselor, Behavioral Specialist and/or School Resource Officer. The purpose of the interviews was to understand and document the affects, consequences and impact of having youth gang members in the school community. The following is a summary of the common themes that appeared during the school interviews:

#### Gang Members Attending St. Lucie County Schools

- Gang members are getting younger and therefore this is becoming a middle school problem. This is especially problematic as the younger children involved in gang life are easily influenced by others and have a significant lack of respect for authority of any kind.
- Opposing gang members attend the same schools and this will continue to grow as the redistricting process is completed. Some schools closely monitor the lists of potential gang members in their school and keep them in separate classes.
- Gang members at school have been noted as having bad attitudes and demonstrate anger towards authority.

“We can’t put 100% blame on kids that join gangs:  
they come from incredible hardships”.

School Administrator  
St. Lucie County School District

#### The Affects of Gangs on School Life

- Typically kids are relieved to come to school. They see school as a respite of sorts, away from the streets and in safety. School provides meals and a social component that are recognized as incentives to attend.
- Gang fighting and problems come from the community into the school. If there is a fight, drive-by or violent eruption in the community it usually transfers onto the school bus or school property. When law enforcement is aware of this prior to the school day, they alert the SRO as well as school security to prevent problems. Coordination is high and comprehensive.

- Intimidation and bullying have been recognized as negative factors on the campuses of some middle schools.
- Bullying others has been recognized to be part of gang recruitment on school campuses.
- Violence occurs at the bus stops and on buses in which stronger kids prey on the weak.
- Some schools have been required to significantly reduce the amount of free time a child has during the school day. Additionally, they have been required to set patterns for the changing of classes that would prevent co-mingling although the kids still manage to send signals to each other and throw gang signs.

#### Underlying Problems

- The younger the gang members are the more dangerous and frivolous they are.
- School district security is understaffed and the combination of a large county creates a problem in which they can not always respond to problems in a swift manner.
- There is no set standard or policy about dealing with kids in gangs on school property.
- Female gang members stir up trouble and fight worse than the boys. Girls are often seen as the recruiters on campus.

#### Gangs & School Transportation

- Transporting gang members is risky and dangerous. The Department of Transportation attempts to eliminate problems by sending multiple buses to an area, in addition to separating various streets in FP onto different buses. However, it is common for a single bus to have 2-3 gang members on a bus at one time.
- Bus drivers do not know if weapons are being carried on the bus until it is too late.
- There is a serious lack of communication between bus drivers and school administration.
- Most of the gang fights occur either at the bus stop or on the bus. If a child has been suspended or expelled, the driver needs to know so that they do not get on the bus. Kids that have been suspended or expelled due to violent behavior have been known to show up at the bus stop and getting on the school bus to start more trouble. Problems at school need to be related to the bus driver before a child gets on the school bus.
- Drivers have a tremendous responsibility to keep children safe during the ride to and from school. They have upwards to 70 children to 1 adult on the bus and the bus driver has their back to the kids while in transit. When fights erupt, they have to find a safe place to pull the bus over, call school security and 9-1-1. In the interim, there is only one adult to manage the situation. Due to the large geographic area of the county and the limited number of district security, it can take up to 15-20 minutes for another adult to provide assistance. This is extremely dangerous and has resulted in horrific outcomes.
- There is a sentiment among kids that once the bell rings school is over. However, for the safety of all children, the rules must remain until a child exits the school bus. Kids get onto the bus and pull out their colors, take off their belts and use them as whips.
- K-8 buses are problematic. Having 5-7 year olds mixing with 14 year olds is a major concern.

“How do we protect ourselves and the children on the bus?  
 What do we do if we have a child being beaten to a pulp?  
 How liable will we be if we jump in to protect that child?”

(School Bus Driver, African American, Female)

### Current Undertakings at the Schools

Following are steps that are currently being implemented in a variety of schools in St. Lucie County. This is just the beginning of efforts to combat gang activity and violence in the school system. The second phase of the Gang Prevention and Abatement Project will be researching best practices and effective prevention and intervention techniques for the County.

- Implementation of Positive Behavior Support System at county schools. One school in particular uses a point system with all students and they earn points as extrinsic reinforcements if they are: acting safely, in their assigned area, respectful and on task. At 7<sup>th</sup> period, they are allowed to use redeem their points for free time and/or prizes at the school store.
- County dress code is helpful and School Resource Officers are cognizant of gang members attempting to wear their colors at school. Things to look for are: bandanas in the pocket, colored shoe laces, colored shoe laces in one shoe, flags, colored shirts under their collared shirt, writings on shoes, gang signs and lingo on backpacks/books. Additionally many other cartoon references can have negative meanings for example: shirts, socks with snowmen on them = cocaine dealer.
- If graffiti or tagging happens on school property it is removed immediately. In some situations (at one particular school) there is a code of conduct in which the students must pay for costs associated with the removal of the desecration.
- School leaders, SROs and other key personnel in a variety of schools make it a point to know every single student and their background. They report being very visible throughout the school day, interfacing with the students at all times.
- SROs stay on top of who is who at each school. They watch body language, mumblings, grumblings, whispering and gossip then respond accordingly.
- Some schools enforce behavior contracts between school administration, guidance counselor, parents and student. This is an individualized plan that has various levels of consequences if the behavior plan is not fulfilled.
- Many of the schools report creating an environment of rules and expectations. When there are flaws in the consistency, problems are more likely to occur.

“School is a place of learning.  
This is permeated through every student at our school.  
We interact with every kid including the thugs.  
We know who they are and have in depth conversations with each one of them.  
We personalize our communications with each child  
so that they know that they are important and cared about.”  
(St Lucie County, Middle School Administrator)

## **II. Adults**

During the survey process, a total of 273 adults in St. Lucie County completed the community questionnaire. Of these individuals, 54% came from Port St. Lucie and 43% came from Fort Pierce. General demographics of the respondents were as follows:

- 73% Female                      26% Male
- 53% Black                      35% White                      10% Hispanic                      2% Asian
- 79% between 25 and 67 years old

Seventy-two percent (72%) of St Lucie County residents believe there is a gang problem in the County. The top three reasons why County residents believe that kids belong to gangs are:

1. Lack of Activities
2. Family Problems
3. To feel loved and have a sense of belonging

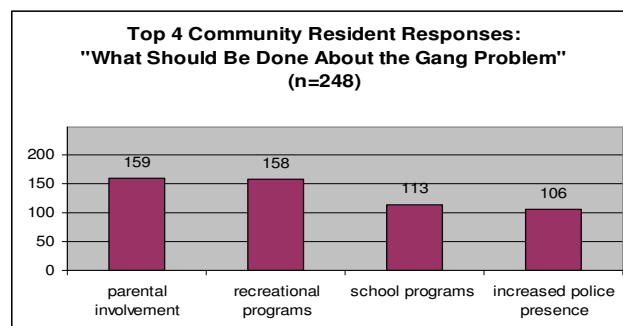
When comparing Cities in the St. Lucie County the following was revealed:

Eighty nine percent (89%) of the Fort Pierce respondents believe that there is a gang problem in FP as compared to 63% of the Port St. Lucie residents that believe there is a gang problem in PSL. The primary problems that gangs present as reported by both cities is an increase crime related to weapons, drugs and violence. Over half of the Fort Pierce respondents believe that the gang problem in their community is to be “extremely dangerous” or “pretty bad” compared to one-third of the Port St. Lucie residents that believe the same. 86 depicts the number of respondents within each zip code that believe the gang problem is bad in their area:

Table 8

Zip Code	# Of Respondents Within Each Zip Code That Believe The Gang Problem is Bad In Their Area
34950 FP	23 out of 26 (88%)
34947 FP	24 out of 28 (85%)
34946 FP	12 out of 17 (71%)
34982 FP	15 out of 25 (60%)
34952 PSL	15 out of 26 (58%)
34986 PSL	9 out of 16 (56%)
34983 PSL	16 out of 31 (52%)
34953 PSL	18 out of 39 (46%)

56% of the FP residents and 58% of the PSL residents in the survey do not believe that their children are at risk of gang membership. Less than one-third of respondents in both cities believe that their (FP 28%, PSL 22%) children are at risk or do not know of their involvement with gangs.



The influence of family and parenting on the life of a child (55%) was recognized as the most significant responsibility for taking action in reducing the gang problem. The second most commonly reported responsibility lies with the community as a whole. Without prompt, nearly half of the county adult respondents report that the entire community is responsible for reducing the gang problem. Ironically, when probed as to what specifically respondents could do to help deal with the gang problem in the community, responses were relatively low with an average of 19% of respondents stating participation of any kind. Fifty individuals report not knowing how to help and the two categories in which only a quarter of the respondents responded affirmatively to were: being a mentor and helping with neighborhood outreach.

Only 12 adults in the entire St. Lucie County sample believed that their child was in a gang. They believe the most common reasons of gang membership were: power, protection and to belong. When asked what gang their child was involved with only 2 out of 12 stated various colors that the child wears. None of the respondents mentioned name affiliation. They state that top three things that the children need to get out of gang life are: a) more involvement by parents, b) community activities and c) jobs.

“They need some strong men to take them out eat, bowl and listen to them.  
Encourage them to try a new life before they have no life.”  
(35 year old African American Mother, Fort Pierce)

“Parents and the county or city authorities need  
to tackle the problems at hand with community members”  
(53 year old, African American Father, Fort Pierce)

“Steering out children to productive sources that will motivate  
their interest in things that are clean and motivating “  
(53 year old African American Father, Fort Pierce)

“To have the kids involved with after school activities, but no funds”  
(23 year old White Mother, Fort Pierce)

The primary issues that worry the respondents about the life of their child are: a) bad influences/peer pressure, b) violence, personal safety and, c) alcohol and drugs.

“I am worried about the influences that are permeating our culture”  
(36 year old African American, Male Fort Pierce)

Children have no role models, parents have sold out  
to keep a job and food on the table so unhappy parents make unhappy children.  
(51 year old African American Female, Port St Lucie)

Only between 14% and 39% of respondents with children stated that their children have activities to do after school. The commonly reported activities were sports (39%), music/art or other fun program (27%), an after school program (24%), and work (14%). 9% of the parents report that their kids just hang out after school and 5% report that they don't know what their kids do after school.

“My husband and I teach them to be leaders.  
And we can only hope that they will make the right choices.”  
(30 year old Hispanic Mother, Port St. Lucie)

### Faith Leaders

There were a total of 25 Pastors surveyed at the Miracle Prayer Pastors Luncheon in St. Lucie County. Eighteen believe there is a gang problem in the county and 16 out of 25 believe the problem to be fairly serious. The top three reasons that the ministers believe that youth join gangs are: a) family problems, b) family or friends in gangs, and c) school problems. More parent involvement and mentoring programs were most overwhelmingly responded to as what could be done to solve the gang problem. When asked the degree to which their congregations were concerned about the gang problem, 17 out of 25 reported not knowing the concerns. Additionally 17 out of 25 stated “rarely” or “never” when asked how often the congregation discussed the gang problem in the community.

Nineteen of the pastors believe that it takes the entire community (in particular parents, friends and family) to solve and reduce the gang problem. Additionally, almost half of the ministers believe that the Church has a role in addressing the gang issue in the community. When asked what specifically can the religious community do the following was reported:

- Provide wholesome, godly programs that are relevant (15)
- Educate the community, create neighborhood outreach centers (5). The most important things that worries the Pastor respondents about the youth in the community and the life they lead is that they do not have the skills to become productive, moral citizens (11). Coming from broken homes, being involved with drugs and having a lack of consciousness about God and morality were additionally reported responses.

Churches reaching out to the youth and their families, keeping kids in school and working together as a cooperative community were all cited as strategies to prevent the gang problem from continuing in St. Lucie County.

## SUGGESTIONS FROM THE PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

“We need to get to the root of the problem and make changes there.  
Gangs are only a symptom of illness in society  
and the health of a family.”  
(Community Law Enforcement Officer)

During the problem assessment phase, individuals were eager to express potential solutions towards the prevention and abatement of gangs in St. Lucie County. While Phase II is explicitly designated for action plan development, listed below in three sections are the widespread ideas that were generated from participants in the surveys and interview process.

Community members are conflicted. They feel concerned, discouraged and wary regarding the development of effective, practical prevention strategies and programs. They feel optimistic and trusting that the community can unite in a positive way to combat the problem. It is a cautious, difficult road yet the majority of individuals involved in the assessment want to see less violence, deeper connections, increased responsibility, better chance at productivity and general success for St. Lucie County youth.

“We greet every child that walks through these doors with  
a warm smile at the beginning of each day.  
Kids feel welcomed, wanted and we tell them  
we are glad that you are here.”  
(Alternative School Resource Officer)

### **Community**

- Begin a campaign culture against gangs in the County. Develop a plan that involves the entire community in helping youth and making sure that gang membership is suppressed.
- Join in partnership with the Port St. Lucie News and Fort Pierce Tribune to conduct weekly or monthly educational articles to increase awareness and knowledge in the community. This strategy is to support community involvement and decrease the glorification of gang life.
- Initiate more community watch programs. Support individuals to be crimefighters and use their cell phones to immediately report dangerous activity. Each neighborhood could have a designated team of volunteers that cover up graffiti and tags immediately. Could be a community partnership with Loews and Home Depot.
- Continue the coordination between law enforcement agencies and local businesses. Having a significant presence at the Rave, Superplay and Friendly’s on the weekend has helped to deter gang violence.
- Conduct random one-on-one interactions between parents/families of suspected gang members. Teach parents how identify the signs that their child might be involved with a gang, and then provide assistance with overcoming the problem. When asked, “do your parents know that you are in a gang”, one female gang member (14 years old) stated, “*she see me throwin it up round her.*”

## Youth

- Prevention is key. Work with younger kids, to give them hope, goals and values that will deter them from getting involved with gang life. Introduce them to life outside of the streets. Provide training, travel opportunities, and role models that they can relate to. Do this at a young age. Keep them hopeful and focused on the benefits of a good education.
- Parents are in denial or fear regarding their child's involvement with gang activity. This is an enormous problem reported by nearly 75% of the individuals in the assessment process. Parents need guidance, help in identifying gang activity, and various solutions. For example, the Sheriff's office recently began conducting home outreach where kids were suspected of gang involvement. They showed parents what the signs were in the house (all clothing of one color, gang literature, myspace.com etc.) and many parents were either horrified or still in denial. Once the parent's are aware of the situation, they need to have viable solutions for helping themselves and their child. The big unsolved question: "*And then what?*" What can be done to help the parents, help their child?
- Increase after school activities including those at school (band, music and sports). Re-institute Freshman sports teams at school and require incentives and proper behavior for participation.
- Work with local businesses to initiate hiring paid interns and/or employees at the high school level.

*"We have to try, even if it costs too much or is difficult... We can't think of what could happen."* Circuit 19 Staff Supervisor

## School

- Conduct interesting, captivating and meaningful gang trainings for teachers, bus drivers and other school personnel. School District Security Office conducts a comprehensive, street based gang training specific to the gangs in St. Lucie County. Provide this in-service to all bus drivers include safety precautions for when violence erupts. Have SROs dialogue with bus drivers on a regular basis to update them on gang issues affecting the safety on their specific routes.
- Complete revamping of in school suspension programs (ISS). Individuals sit in the detention room with their problems festering and it gives them a place to act out. Detention should be a consequence in which individuals in ISS are required to do some service to make the school community a better place for all.
- High schools should teach job skills/trades. Give incentive for high school students and college freshman to go into education/teaching as a profession.
- Develop a county-wide protocol for gang related offenses on campus with consistent enforcement. Teachers need to know from a valid, reliable source how to identify gang related activity and paraphernalia. Include parents in this training protocol to build community involvement regarding the gang issue.
- For Buses: wand metal detectors, id scanners, cameras have all been suggested as tools to help protect the safety of the children and bus driver during transportation.
- Bus drivers need a consistent safety policy that includes communication about suspended and expelled students between school administrators and the drivers. A coordinated

series of discussions between administration and the drivers would help to increase communication and coordination and thereby keep the kids safer. Seating charts on buses need to be reviewed by the school dean to prevent seating kids next to rivals.

- Providing uniforms for bus drivers is a way to establish authority on the school bus. This should be a standard just as it is a standard for other district departments.
- Implement a team of bus drivers for an area. One primary driver and one that roves between several buses during the week.
- School sports programs should be incentive based. More money needs to go to the schools to increase learning about job trades, teach responsibility & discipline. *“This is the one place where kids feel safe to come. Use it.”*
- Canine dogs have been involved at one school as a deterrent and a constructive tool. Kids would take the time to interact positively with the dog while preventing them from bringing dangerous items to school.

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<sup>i</sup> Thrasher F., *The Gang*. 1927/1963. Chicago. University of Chicago Press

<sup>ii</sup> The 13<sup>th</sup> Annual America’s Safest and Most Dangerous Cities Report by Morgan Quitno Press available online at: [www.morganquitno.com](http://www.morganquitno.com)

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<sup>iv</sup> American’s Promise Alliance (2006) *Every Child Every Promise: Turning Failure into Action*

<sup>v</sup> Bowlby J., (1969). *Attachment and Loss: Attachment*. New York: Basic Books

<sup>vi</sup> Resnick, MD., Bearman PS., Blum RW. et al. (1997) *Protecting Adolescents from Harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health*. *JAMA*: 278, (10).

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<sup>viii</sup> Soures I., Lemos MS., Almeida C., (2005) *Attachment and Motivational Strategies*. *Adolescence*, Spring, 2005.

<sup>ix</sup> Resnick, MD., Bearman PS., Blum RW. et al. (1997) *Protecting Adolescents from Harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health*. *JAMA*: 278, (10).

<sup>x</sup> Thrasher F., *The Gang*. 1927/1963. Chicago. University of Chicago Press.

<sup>xi</sup> California Attorney General’s Office, Crime and Violence Prevention Center (2003). *Gangs, A Community Response*. Available online at: [http://www.safestate.org/shop/files/Gangs\\_Comm.resp.pdf](http://www.safestate.org/shop/files/Gangs_Comm.resp.pdf)

<sup>xii</sup> National Alliance of Gang Investigators Association (2005). *The 2005 National Gang Threat Assessment*. (Bureau of Justice Assistance)

<sup>xiii</sup> The 13<sup>th</sup> Annual America’s Safest and Most Dangerous Cities Report by Morgan Quitno Press available online at: [www.morganquitno.com](http://www.morganquitno.com)

<sup>xiv</sup> Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, *Juvenile Justice Information System*

<sup>xv</sup> Search Institute®, Minneapolis, MN; [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org). All Rights Reserved.

<sup>xvi</sup> Fuchs V, Reklis D. The status of American children. *Science*. 1992;255:41-46.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid*. pg 41-46.

<sup>xviii</sup> Larson, R. (1995). *Secrets in the bedroom: Adolescents' private use of media*. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 24(5), 535-550.

<sup>xix</sup> Gaskins, P. (2001). *The Science of Violence*. *Science World*, October 15, 2001.

<sup>xx</sup> Snyder, HN., and Sickmund, M. (2006). *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

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<sup>xxii</sup> Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2002) *A Guide to Assessing Your Community’s Gang Problem*. Institute for Intergovernmental Research.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid*, pg 1.