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**Review of *The Youth Gang Problem: A Community Approach*.**

**Irving A. Spergel. Reviewed by James Callicutt, University of Texas, Arlington.**

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## Book Reviews

Irving A. Spergel, *The Youth Gang Problem: A Community Approach*.  
New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. \$24.00 papercover.

Violent crimes including drive-by shootings, drug related offenses, and other criminal activities frequently attributed to youth gangs have contributed to an explosive and continuing increase in the number of youths incarcerated in the United States. This critical response of the criminal justice system, reflecting important elements of both de jure and de facto social policy, distinguishes corrections as a major growth industry. This in the face of cutbacks in federal and state funding for major social programs.

While Spergel does not explicitly deal with the issue of cost-benefit program comparisons, he cogently makes the case that the youth gang problem is complex, pervasive, and of such a magnitude that it cannot be ignored. Drawing extensively on his "four decades of observation of gang youths and gang problems in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and elsewhere in this country and abroad," he provides an in-depth examination of the problem of the youth gang in the United States and proposes a comprehensive community approach to combat the problem.

Organized in two parts, the first, "Description and Analysis," consists of nine chapters with titles including "Introduction: Comparative and Historical Perspectives," "Research Limitations," "Gangs, Drugs, and Violence," "The Structure of the Gang," and "The Ecological Context." The second part, "Policy and Program" (chapters 10-17), includes chapters on "Theoretical Perspectives," "Criminal Justice System: the Police," "Prosecution, Defense, and the Judiciary," "Social Opportunities: Education and Jobs," and a concluding chapter, "Local Community Mobilization and Evolving National Policy." A welcome part at the end of each chapter is a section on "Conclusion" which, in essence, summarizes the chapter.

In addition to the two main parts, the author provides three useful appendices and a glossary and discussion of many important terms appearing in the text. The appendices may be viewed as tools and guides for planning community responses in terms of matching selected strategic activities/structures with particular

settings/organizations. For example, varying activities involving the categories of suppression, social intervention, opportunities provision, organizational change and development and community mobilization are each listed differentially relative to the setting/agencies including the home, police, schools, prosecutors, and judges.

Much of what the author presents is by way of critically reviewing and drawing together a mass of material, in a clear and well-documented manner. Throughout the book there are the recurring themes of (a) There is no single theoretical explanation for the youth gang phenomenon, (b) There has been insufficient outcome research relative to program effectiveness, (c) There is both a lack of, and need for, a comprehensive multifaceted programmatic response to the youth gang problem, and (d) Youth gangs should be carefully viewed within broad and differing ecological contexts.

Chapters on "The Gang Member Experience," "Theoretical Perspectives," and "Prosecution, Defense and the Judiciary," provide excellent discussions that contribute substantially to the value of the book as a comprehensive text on youth gangs. Female gangs and the involvement of females in gangs receives scant attention in the book although there is evidence of increasing levels of female gang activity. In a section on leaving the gang, Spergel observes, "Again, perhaps because gang researchers usually do not sustain their observations for long periods, they tend to underestimate the socialization of most gang youths to conventional careers as they reach their adult years." Important social policy implications resonate about this conventional career socialization in terms of "targeting gang youths who can be assisted to either leave the gang or change their pattern of gang member behavior as they get older."

To explain youth gang crime, the author presents an integrated theoretical framework. In this context he discusses poverty-related theories (including strain theories, lower class theory, and currently influential underclass theory), social disorganization, racism, and personal disorganization.

Two connecting, organizing conceptual components presented by Spergel as a "promising approach for both reducing

and preventing the youth or street-gang problem" are (1) the provision of social opportunities, and (2) community mobilization, "that is, the concerting of organizational and citizen energies, including perceptions, definitions, communications, and actions in reference to particular gang problems." Spergel approaches social opportunities, focusing on education and jobs, from both macro-level and micro-level perspectives in which he considers large-scale federal and state plans (macro-level) and local community (micro-level) policy and program plans for job development and school improvement. He points out the need "to avoid socially isolating gang youths from mainstream educational, social, and career development opportunities."

In the chapter, "Planning for Youth Gang Control," Spergel asserts that successful models do not exist for dealing with youth gang problems. In this chapter, and throughout the book, the author stays true to a major thesis that empirical outcome evaluations and sustained research of program efforts have been lacking-and we pay the price for this shortcoming-and must, indeed, be a component of subsequent program efforts. "New institutional cross-agency and cross-jurisdictional arrangements must evolve, and new policies and programs must be developed and then rigorously and widely tested, so that we will know what truly works and what does not."

Doubtless, this book, replete with jewels of well-supported assertions and conclusions, has high value as a text and reference source providing critical reviews, historical information, broad theoretical and analytical presentations and discussions-all infused with a professional practice/application perspective. It is just this combination that richly enhances what would otherwise still be a valuable contribution to the literature on youth gangs in the United States. Consequently, it should be required reading in criminology and criminal justice as well as social welfare and social work programs. Nursing, law, and other professions will likewise find benefit in the knowledge presented and wisdom shared in this sterling volume.

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