

March 2014

# Comprehensive Gang Assessment

A report from the Assessment Work Group to the GRACE Task Force

Albemarle – Charlottesville  
Commonwealth of Virginia

prepared by  
**Partnerships for Strategic Impact**  
*Leveraging collective expertise for impact.*

**Maryfrances Porter, Ph.D.**  
*President & Founder*

## Acknowledgements

The GRACE Task Force's Assessment Work Group (AWG) thanks the Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) for funding this comprehensive assessment and the part-time GRACE coordinator. Partnerships for Strategic Impact, a local private evaluation firm, was contracted to conduct the assessment under the leadership of AWG.

AWG is grateful for the time and energy of the 40 community service providers and criminal justice system staff, as well as the 31 police officers who contributed their time and experiences to this project. A complete list of service provider and criminal justice system interviewees can be found in Appendix A.

AWG is especially grateful to the 101 adult and youth residents who participated in interviews and focus groups, contributing their time, personal experiences, and perspectives. The following individuals and groups are additionally thanked for their assistance in coordinating focus groups: the Achievers and Believers, anonymous persons connected with the Hispanic community, the Boys & Girls Club of Central Virginia, Charlottesville Abundant Life Ministries, the City of Charlottesville Youth Council, the City of Promise, Parks Edge Apartments Management, Piedmont Family YMCA, and Wes Bellamy.

The following individuals made especially significant contributions to data collection: Mary Donald, Gretchen Ellis Cabell Hintz, Jim Horn, Nicole Ocheltree, Cathy Roessler, and Nick Rudman.

Lastly, AWG is grateful to Col. Steven Sellers for his leadership, Lt. Timothy Aylor for overseeing the assessment process, Jonathon Earl for his guidance, and Jenna Easton for her enormous contribution of administrative and research support.

### *GRACE Assessment Work Group*

Tim Aylor  
Shawn Bayles  
Gary Clore  
Jonathan Earl  
Jenna Easton  
Gretchen Ellis  
June Jenkins  
Ron Lantz  
Gary McCool  
Nicole Ocheltree  
Maryfrances Porter  
Ronnie Roberts  
Steve Sellers  
Clinton White

### *GRACE Research Partner – Partnerships for Strategic Impact*

Maryfrances Porter, Ph.D., President and Founder

Casey Cox, Senior Data Manager

Research Staff: Margarita Caldenty, Fiona Charles, Siada Hussain, Ola Onawole, Selena Cozart O'Shaughnessy, Shrina Patel, Juliana Risso-Weaver, Marla Sihalath, Sreen Thahir, Martha Trujillo, Tammi Walker, Todd Warner, Lee Williams, Nikki Yung

# Comprehensive Gang Assessment

A report from the Assessment Work Group to the GRACE Task Force  
Albemarle – Charlottesville, Commonwealth of Virginia

---

## Executive Summary

**Background** In January 2012, Albemarle Police Chief Colonel Steve Sellers, along with his counterpart in the City of Charlottesville, Chief Tim Longo, convened a multidisciplinary task force to address the growing evidence of and concerns about gangs in the area with a collaborative, preventative approach. Part of the initiative led by the Chiefs is to implement the Comprehensive Gang Model endorsed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). In June 2012, the task force adopted by-laws and the name Gang Reduction through Active Community Engagement (GRACE).

GRACE has adopted the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model, which is considered a “best practice” for social intervention. It contains critical elements that distinguish it from typical program approaches to gangs. The Model’s key distinguishing feature is a thorough strategic planning process that empowers communities to assess their own gang problems and create a complement of anti-gang strategies and program activities. The first step of this approach is to conduct a comprehensive assessment of gang activity.

The assessment process outlined by OJJDP consists of three general steps:

1. lay the groundwork by assembling those individuals who will oversee the entire process and provide direction for the data collection efforts,
2. collect and interpret the data on a range of indicators in multiple domains, and
3. prepare findings and final reporting.

This overall assessment process aims to build a fact-based understanding that supports informed strategic and action planning.

**What is Known about Gangs Nationally** Research compiled by the National Gang Center shows that risk factors known to increase the likelihood of gang membership include the following (the presence of more risk factors further increases the likelihood of gang membership):

- > prior and/or early involvement in delinquency, especially violence and alcohol/drug use;
- > poor family management and problematic parent-child relations;

- > low school attachment and achievement and negative labeling by teachers;
- > association with aggressive peers and peers who engage in delinquency; and/or
- > living in neighborhoods in which large numbers of youth are in trouble and in which drugs and firearms are readily available.

Nationally, the two biggest reasons youth give for joining gangs are: (1) the desire to be around friends and family members who are already in the gang, and (2) safety and protection. There are only a few longitudinal studies of youth gang membership, and those were conducted in communities with an emerging gang problem. In these studies, youth report being part of the gang for one year or less; other, emerging research shows long-term involvement of youth in gangs in areas where gangs have become intergenerational.

The National Gang Center reports that compared to gangs 20 to 40 years ago, gangs today use firearms more and that there has been substantial growth of prison gangs. The most frequently identified groups in prisons are the Crips, Bloods, Gangster Disciples, Latin Kings, and Aryan Brotherhood.

Additionally, the 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment study by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) noted a shift of gang activity, beginning in 2009, from urban to suburban and rural areas so that gangs could hide from law enforcement and expand into new territory. The study also notes that gangs are becoming more sophisticated in their structure and crime (including engaging in “white-collar” and cybercrime, infiltrating sensitive information systems, and targeting and monitoring law enforcement), and have changed or stopped using typical gang signs, colors, tattoos or hand signs.

**GRACE Assessment Workgroup** An Assessment Work Group (AWG) was appointed by the GRACE Task Force to manage the gathering, compilation, and analysis of the comprehensive assessment data. A contracted research partner (Partnerships for Strategic Impact) assisted with data collection and analysis, writing of this final report, and presentation of the results.

AWG drew on nine existing data sources and interviewed 141 people in the community between September 2013 and January 2014. Detailed data and data summaries are presented in the body of the report.

**Data Summary** Overall, there was great consistency across the nine data sources and 141 interviewees included in this report. Albemarle and Charlottesville are relatively young, primarily white, relatively educated communities. Nonetheless, across the area, about 1 in 5 families are single-mother households that have experienced poverty in the last 12 months. Unemployment hovers around the state average of 5.9%. There are roughly 17,000 students across both the Albemarle (APS) and Charlottesville (CCS) public schools, with CCS having about one-third the population of APS, twice the proportion of racial/ethnic diversity, and nearly twice the proportion of economically disadvantaged students.

When looking at youth behavior in general, behavioral offenses in public schools have generally gone down over the last three years, with disruption, defiance, obscene language, and altercations being the most frequent offenses receiving discipline/referrals. CCS has a higher proportion of discipline incidents than APS; however, APS experienced twice the raw number of fights and more drug offenses than CCS in the last school year. The case records of 131 youth placed on probation in 2010 and 2011 were reviewed (including 98 Albemarle and 25 Charlottesville youth). Their average age was 15, and they most often had zero to two felony petitions and/or one to three criminal petitions.

There was consistent consensus that the gang problem in Albemarle-Charlottesville pales in comparison to those of larger cities, with many residents unaware that there are even gangs in the area. Nonetheless, when surveyed within the last 18 months, between 40% and 50% of residents in largely lower-income neighborhoods near downtown Charlottesville reported gangs were a problem. Law enforcement and other members of the criminal justice system expressed concern that the general lack of knowledge about gangs—coupled with gang members moving in from other localities and gangs becoming increasingly quiet and less likely to outwardly demonstrate gang affiliation—puts the community at increased risk for gangs to grow larger and stronger without generally being noticed. Both police departments express an urgent need for increased, dedicated resources to keep gang activity at bay and concern that without additional resources, gang activity will rise and become increasingly dangerous.

### **The Extent of Gang Activity in Albemarle-Charlottesville**

- > Between 2006 and 2013, 183 residents of Albemarle-Charlottesville have been validated as being in a gang; an average of 29 people have been validated per year.
- > Gang validations<sup>1</sup> peaked in 2007 as the initial backlog of potential gang members was validated. The precipitous drop in validations in 2013 is due to moving key detectives off gang-related activities due to staffing vacancies; nonetheless, the regional jail had submitted nearly 30 individuals for review for validation.
- > There are 16 gangs in Albemarle-Charlottesville with verified members. As is consistent with state data, Bloods are the most populous gang, followed by the Crips. Other nationally identified gangs with a local presence are 5%ers, Aryan Brotherhood, Gangster Disciples, ICP (or Insane Clown Posse), Latin Kings, MS-13, Sureños, Vice Lords, and White Power. Gangs local to Albemarle-Charlottesville (called “neighborhood sets” which may have members who also affiliate with national gangs) are 6N0, 13th St (Eastside Locos), Eastside, G-Square, Southside, and Westside/PJC or Project Crud. Zoo of Goons (ZOG) is a local-

---

<sup>1</sup> The process of validating gang members is described in detail in the full report. The validation process is outlined in the Code of Virginia § 52-8.6, and is conducted by law enforcement.

gang not associated with a specific neighborhood; ZOG emerged from a local middle school.

- > Between January 1, 2010, and September 1, 2013, there were 14,959 offenses in Charlottesville and Albemarle, and 480 of these involved validated gang members, including 193 unique victims and 96 unique arrestees. The Bloods, Crips, and MS-13 are responsible for the largest share of arrests in Albemarle, while Charlottesville has substantial activity by both national gangs and neighborhood sets including Bloods, Westside/PCJ, Crips, and ICP.
- > Assault, larceny, burglary, and forgery are the most common gang-related arrests across both localities, followed by weapons offenses and vandalism. The most common offenses for gang involved youth were aggravated assault, assault, and weapons offenses; the most common offenses for all other youth were larceny and non-aggravated assault.
- > Overall, streets in downtown Charlottesville, as well as around Prospect Avenue and South 1st Street, have the most incidents and offenses involving gang members (however, it is not known how many of these incidents and offenses were related to gang-activity, *per say*). In Albemarle, arrests are clustered in the urban ring (primarily on the north side) and extend up Rt. 29 North.
- > Some interviewees reported that the number of gang members is growing and that new gang members may be coming from other localities and states. Correctional facilities are common recruiting grounds.
- > There is strong consensus that people join gangs to fill voids in their lives. Most interviewees spoke primarily of a desire for sense of family and belonging, but also for income, opportunity, power, leadership, and even a sense of the greater good that some feel gangs provide (e.g., community building, anti-bullying, etc.).
- > The full extent of gang activity within the Hispanic community and primarily within Hispanic neighborhoods is still unclear. Due to the close-knit Hispanic community, as well as concern about personal safety, it was difficult to identify people willing to talk about gangs. What was reported was fear and intimidation by gangs in the Hispanic community, as well as assaults, intimidation, drugs, and human trafficking/prostitution. Hispanic residents are also afraid to go to the police to report gang activity, in part due to experiencing discrimination, and in part due to fears of being deported. These challenges further isolate a community already isolated culturally and linguistically.

## Gangs and Youth

- > Gangs actively recruit young children and youth; gangs recruit youth who are disconnected from family and school, youth who are looking for a sense of belonging, youth who lack supervision, and/or youth who are rebellious.
- > Last school year, about 1,100 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> graders reported that there were gangs in their school (a higher percentage of middle school than high school students reported gangs). The gang problem in school was rated as moderate or big by 341 students; 6th, 7th, 9th, and 10th grade students reported more of a gang presence and/or more problems associated with gangs at school.
- > Between 2009 and 2013, 13 Albemarle-Charlottesville youth were verified as gang members in Blue Ridge Juvenile Detention Center. There also were three Albemarle-Charlottesville youth in Juvenile Correctional Centers in October 2013 verified as gang members and two additional youth suspected of gang membership. The gang validation process for youth is much stricter than for adults, resulting in fewer youth being validated than may claim gang membership or engage in gang-related activities.

## Additional Community Comments on Gangs and Needed Interventions

- > Many people see neighborhood sets and gangs as different in important ways. Neighborhood sets are based on where a person lives, do not always require people to formally join, and do not always have the same structural hierarchy as national gangs. Interviewees report that the primary function of the sets are “brotherhoods” to defend neighborhood reputations, and that as many as 50% of the youth in a neighborhood may be associated with sets. Nonetheless, neighborhood sets are considered recruiting grounds for national gangs, and can be involved in gang-type activities.
- > Interviewees expressed substantial concern about discrimination and stereotyping in general and by police, as well as the fact that youth cannot gather together without being called a gang (especially non-Caucasian youth).
- > Most gang-involved interviewees were not actively involved in a gang and wanted productive lives outside of their gang. They spoke of significant barriers to successful re-entry and job attainment when leaving jail and prison. Most gang-members interviewed regretted earlier life decisions including getting involved in gangs, and several spoke of wanting to help youth avoid getting involved in gangs.
- > Some neighborhood communities have banded together and explicitly do not tolerate gang activity. Residents and ex-offenders have asked to be meaningfully included in the process of addressing youth development and for the policy

makers to direct anti-gang funding and resources to community residents, who best know their children and what they need to thrive.

- > Interviewees generally called for more resources to strengthen families, more activities and opportunities for youth—including opportunities for leadership and paid employment—more non-traditional policing, and greater involvement of residents and reformed offenders in helping to engage youth and reduce the gang presence.

### Ways Forward

Overall, there was a strong call to action from those interviewed, as well as the need for long-term solution. It is clear that there is no single, straightforward program or sole community entity that can address the gang problem locally; a coordinated, multifaceted approach is needed.

Based on interviewees' input, long-term solutions must:

- > be lasting—resources must be committed long-term,
- > examine and address underlying issues facing children and families,
- > focus on addressing the specific community issues that enable gang recruitment and activity, and
- > address the economic and social barriers gang members face when trying to leave the gang.

**The OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model** This report represents the **first step** in strategic planning to reduce gang activity and support positive youth development. As such, the comprehensive assessment aimed to answer the following questions.

#### 1. What are the most serious and prevalent local gang-related problems?

Both arrest records and interviewees reported the following are the most prevalent gang-related problems: assaults, fighting, stealing, intimidation. Drugs were consistently reported as the central gang-related activity in the area; however, there are no gang-related arrests for drugs during the time period studied.

#### 2. In which communities and neighborhoods does gang crime most often occur?

Lower-income City neighborhoods have neighborhood sets. Set involvement ranges from hanging out with neighborhood friends to activities that attract the attention of national gangs. When surveyed in the last 18 months, 40-50% of residents in two lower-income City neighborhoods reported that gangs were a problem.

Overall, streets in downtown Charlottesville, as well as around Prospect Avenue and South 1st Street, have the most incidents and offenses involving gang members. In Albemarle, arrests are clustered in the urban ring (primarily on the north side) and extend up Rt. 29 North.

### **3. What are the potential factors contributing to the local gang problems?**

As described above, the factors contributing to the local gang problem are multifaceted. The community conditions that likely promote growth in gang activities include (in no particular order):

- > Lack of visibility and knowledge of gang activities, as well as lack of knowledge about sets
- > Lack of understanding of the dangerousness of gangs and what is needed to suppress gang growth
- > Gang members moving to Albemarle-Charlottesville from other localities or visiting from other states
- > Discrimination
- > Lack of positive connections/relationships between lower-income neighborhoods
- > Lack of dedicated gang-related police resources
- > Lack of educational and work opportunities for youth and adults (including people leaving detention jail and prison)
- > Lack of fun, supervised places for youth to hang out
- > Truancy and graduation rates
- > Families where parents cannot get adequate employment, as well as those unable to provide adequate structure and supervision for youth for any reason

Youth may be vulnerable to gang-involvement for different combinations of reasons including the following (in no particular order):

- > Youth who need or want to make money
- > Youth who do not feel like they have a family, who are isolated and/or bullied
- > Youth who are bored
- > Youth looking for leadership and respect
- > Youth involved in neighborhood rivalries
- > Youth who are truant and/or at risk for not graduating

**4. What are the organizational or systemic issues that should be addressed toward long-term effects on gang related problems?**

- > Community perceptions about the differences and overlaps between gangs and neighborhood sets, as well as education of service providers and community members about these differences and overlaps.
- > The role of, not only about gang violence and crime, but also intimidation and how it can affect the way people live.
- > Multiple levels of isolation of the Hispanic community, including fear of police and deportation.
- > Gang involvement in jails and correctional facilities.
- > Gang involvement and employment are key issues in adult and youth re-entry from jail, detention and corrections.
- > Law enforcement buy-in and coordination around gang identification and submitting people for verification.
- > Neighborhood identity and between neighborhood and community relationships.
- > Understanding of gangs and gang recruitment in schools.
- > Ensuring families with children have needed resources to support positive youth development.

\*\*\*\*\*

Starting in March/April, GRACE will begin the strategic planning and action planning processes outlined in the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model. The **next step** of this process is to develop recommendations based on the data and conclusions in this report. To this end, GRACE may seek to answer the following questions.

- 1. What are the current and needed efforts needed within Albemarle County and Charlottesville City to reduce gang activity and youth violence?**
- 2. To whom should prevention, intervention, and suppression activities be targeted?**