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Monmouth University Polling Institute*

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## **MANY NEW JERSEYANS UNAWARE OF GANGS**

*Problem seen as serious in cities, not so much in suburbs*

Youth and gang violence is seen as serious and growing problem by many New Jerseyans. A majority of state residents say that gangs are either active in their town now or likely to become active in the next 5 years, although a sizable number have a blind spot about gang activity, especially in the suburbs. The latest *Monmouth University Poll* also found that most Garden State residents feel news coverage of youth violence does more to exacerbate rather than help the problem.

The poll was conducted by the Monmouth University Polling Institute with 801 New Jersey adults by telephone from February 8 to 12, 2007. This sample has a margin of error of  $\pm 3.5$  percent. The poll was conducted in conjunction with the *Caucus New Jersey* series on "A Culture of Violence" which airs on local PBS stations in July.

### *Key Findings*

- 74% of state residents say that youth violence in New Jersey's cities is a "very serious problem." Just 31% say the same about youth violence in the suburbs.
- 32% of New Jersey adults say gangs are active in their town and 23% say gangs are likely to become active in the next 5 years. Another 41% believe there is no likelihood that gangs will take hold in their own town in the near future.
- Using State Police reports as a benchmark, many New Jerseyans are unaware of gang activity in their own town. Among residents of towns where authorities say gangs have been active for at least 6 years, just over half (55%) are aware of the gang activity in their own backyard. Among

those living in towns where gangs have become active more recently, only 29% report knowing of such activity. Suburban residents tend to be less aware of gang activity in their own town.

- 61% of New Jerseyans believe gangs take hold in communities where “local residents turn a blind eye to them.”
- Nearly 2-in-3 urban residents are worried about being the victim of gang violence compared to only 4-in-10 suburban residents.
- While the situation is serious, only 1-in-3 New Jerseyans feels that the gang problem is unsolvable.
- Substance use (87%), the breakdown of families (86%), the availability of weapons (82%), and the presence of gangs (81%) lead the list of causes of youth violence. Socio-economic issues such as poverty (74%), lack of recreational or mentoring opportunities (62%) and lack of jobs (58%) are also important factors. The amount of violence in the popular media is considered a major factor by 51% of state residents.
- The public feels the news media does little to help the problem:
  - 54% say the news media tend to sensationalize its reporting of youth violence;
  - 41% feel the media make the problem appear bigger than it actually is, while 26% feel that the problem is under-reported by the media;
  - 57% say that media coverage of violent acts encourages others to do the same; and
  - 70% say the media do not devote enough coverage to stories about the causes of youth violence.

### *Full Results*

Acts of youth violence can happen anywhere, but the issue tends to be seen more as an urban problem. Overall, 3-in-4 state residents (74%) say that youth violence in New Jersey’s cities is a very serious problem – 20% say it is somewhat serious and only 3% not serious. It is seen as less of a problem in the state’s suburban communities. Only 31% of residents say youth violence is a very serious problem in New Jersey’s suburbs, compared to 51% who say it is somewhat serious and 14% not serious.

### *Gangs in New Jersey*

About 1-in-3 residents say that gangs are currently active in their hometown. This includes 14% who see a lot of gang activity and 18% who are aware of a little gang activity. Another 53% say no gangs are active in their town and 16% are unsure. Among those who report gang activity in their hometown, 69% say it has grown worse over the past 5 years.

Overall, 32% of New Jersey adults say gangs are active in their town. This itself may be a significant number, but it is an under-estimate according to information from the New Jersey

State Police. The state’s most recent gang activity report, which was issued two years ago, indicates that gangs are active in at least 150 municipalities in New Jersey. This equates to gangs being active in areas with at least half of the state’s population.

In towns where the state reports that gangs have been active since at least 2001, just over half of these residents (55%) are aware of the gang activity in their own backyard. Among those living in towns where gangs have become active more recently, this number drops to only 29% who know that gangs are active in their own town. This number is little different than the 21% in towns who had no reported gang activity as of three years ago, but say that gangs are active there today.

<b>Are Gangs in Your Town?</b>				
<b>Poll responses:</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>NJ State Police Gang Report</b>		
		<b>Active in these towns since 2001</b>	<b>Active in these towns since 2004</b>	<b>No activity reported</b>
Gangs are active now	32%	55	29	21
Likely in next 5 years	23%	23	23	21
Not likely to become active	41%	17	45	54
Unsure	4%	5	3	4

These findings indicate a blind spot among New Jerseyans about the extent of gang activity throughout the state, particularly along an urban-suburban divide. While 70% statewide disagree with the statement that “gang violence is mainly an urban problem that rarely happens in the suburbs,” it appears that suburban residents are less likely to be aware of gang activity happening in their own backyard.

Among residents of towns where the State Police has recorded gang activity, urban residents are more likely than suburban residents to report knowing of such activity. Specifically, 70% of those in the state’s biggest cities say that gangs are active in their towns and 50% of those in smaller urban centers say the same. Among residents of older towns and suburbs where gangs have been reported, only 39% say that they know of gang activity. And in the state’s newer, rapidly developing suburbs where gangs are active, only 26% say they know of such activity.

Although state reports show that gangs are active in every type of community, 4-in-10 New Jerseyans (41%) believe there is no likelihood that gangs will take hold in their own town

in the next 5 years. Wealthier residents earning over \$100,000 are among those most likely to feel that their town is impervious to gangs (53%).

An interesting poll finding in light of different awareness levels is that a majority of New Jerseyans (61%) believe gangs take hold in communities where “local residents turn a blind eye to them.” This opinion ranges from 67% among residents in towns where gangs are currently active to 55% among those in towns without gang activity.

“Gangs are not just an urban problem. Amid numerous reports that gangs are making inroads into suburban areas of the state, a large number of New Jersey residents still say it can’t happen in my town,” remarked Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute, “At the same time, they say that ignoring the problem is a key reason gangs are able to take hold in local communities.”

Regardless of whether gangs are active where they live, just under half of New Jersey residents say they are very (16%) or somewhat (30%) worried that they or a member of their family will be the victim of gang violence. The remaining 54% are not worried. Nearly 2-in-3 urban residents are worried about gang violence impacting their families compared to only 4-in-10 suburban residents. Half of the state’s parents say they have spoken with their children about gangs.

The poll results also found some significant racial/ethnic differences in concerns about gangs in New Jersey. Specifically, 60% of Black and Hispanic residents say gangs are active in their towns compared to only 22% of white residents. Also, more Black and Hispanic New Jerseyans (58%) are concerned about being the victims of gang violence than are white residents (41%).

### *The Role of the News Media*

The news media plays an important role in informing the public about youth violence. However, Garden State residents give newspapers, radio and TV news generally negative reviews in how they handle this function. A majority of 54% believe that the media tends to sensationalize its reporting of youth violence episodes, compared to only 37% who feel they report these events objectively.

Furthermore, residents are split on whether the media’s overall coverage of the youth violence issue accurately portrays the extent of the problem. A plurality of 41% feel that the

media make it appear that youth violence and gang activity is a bigger problem than it actually is, compared to 26% who feel that the problem is under-reported by the media. Only 21% feel the news media accurately portrays the extent of the problem.

New Jerseyans also feel that current news reporting on youth violence tends to do more harm than good. Specifically, 57% feel that media coverage of violent acts encourages others to do the same as a way to gain notoriety among their peers. Only 40% disagree with this view.

Residents would like to see the media spend more time covering stories that counter typical images of youth violence. Specifically, overwhelming majorities say the media does not devote enough coverage to stories about urban youth who do positive things in their communities (84%), stories about people and programs that help prevent violence and gangs (83%), and stories about the causes of youth violence (70%).

### *The Causes of Youth Violence*

Survey respondents were presented with a list of 11 possible factors that can contribute to youth violence and asked to rate the importance of each. According to the survey, the top causes of youth violence are substance use (87%), the breakdown of families and parental control (86%), the availability of weapons (82%), and the presence of gangs (81%). More than 8-in-10 New Jerseyans feel these are major factors behind youth violence today.

A large majority feel that economic factors also play an important role in youth violence. Specifically, 3-in-4 name poverty (74%) as a major factor and about 6-in-10 feel that lack of recreational or mentoring opportunities (62%) and lack of jobs (58%) are major factors. Also, 64% feel that lenient sentencing for violent offenders is a major contributor to youth violence.

About half of New Jersey residents (51%) peg violence in the popular media as a major factor and 4-in-10 say they same about immigration (41%) or having too few police patrolling the streets (39%).

“While economic factors are considered important, New Jerseyans feel the main causes of youth violence can be pegged to the accessibility of a violent lifestyle, such as drugs, guns, and gangs, coupled with a lack of parental authority or involvement in the child’s life,” Murray commented.

<b>Major Factors behind Youth Violence</b>	
87%	Drug and alcohol use
86%	Breakdown of the family and parental control
82%	The availability of weapons
81%	The presence of gangs
74%	Poverty
64%	Lack of tough sentences for violent criminals
62%	Lack of recreational or mentoring opportunities
58%	Lack of jobs
51%	The amount of violence on TV, movies and music
41%	Immigration
39%	Not enough police on the streets

The situation is a serious one, but few residents see youth violence as an unsolvable problem, particularly in terms of gangs. Only 35% agree with the statement that “there’s not a lot that can be done to solve the gang problem since certain people will always be drawn to this lifestyle.” Another 63% disagree with this statement.

There are some interesting differences in opinion on both the inevitability and causes of youth violence by income levels. Lower income residents are somewhat more likely than higher income residents to agree with the assertion that not a lot can be done to stop gang recruiting. This may be linked to the fact that residents of areas with gang activity are somewhat more likely than others to see socio-economic variables – such as poverty, jobs, and recreational opportunities – along with the very presence of gangs themselves as major factors behind youth violence today.

### DATA TABLES

*The questions referred to in this release are as follows:*

(\* Some columns may not add to 100% due to rounding.)

I'd like to ask you some questions about violence among young people, including both teens and young adults.

1. How serious a problem is youth violence in New Jersey's CITIES – very, somewhat, or not serious?

	TOTAL	RACE		COMMUNITY TYPE		
		White	Black & Hisp	Urban	Stable town	Expanding suburb
Very serious	<b>74%</b>	75%	79%	77%	71%	74%
Somewhat serious	<b>20%</b>	21%	14%	16%	24%	18%
Not serious	<b>3%</b>	1%	6%	4%	1%	5%
(VOL) Don't know	<b>3%</b>	3%	1%	3%	3%	3%
<i>Unwtd N</i>	<b>801</b>	623	131	140	341	299

2. How serious a problem is youth violence in New Jersey's SUBURBS – very, somewhat, or not serious?

	TOTAL	RACE		COMMUNITY TYPE		
		White	Black & Hisp	Urban	Stable town	Expanding suburb
Very serious	<b>31%</b>	29%	38%	37%	27%	30%
Somewhat serious	<b>51%</b>	53%	44%	44%	56%	49%
Not serious	<b>14%</b>	14%	17%	14%	13%	17%
(VOL) Don't know	<b>4%</b>	4%	1%	5%	4%	3%
Unwtd N	<b>801</b>	623	131	140	341	299

3. I'm going to read you a list of some possible factors that contribute to youth violence. For each, please tell me if you believe it is a major factor, minor factor, or not a factor behind youth violence today? [NOTE: THESE ITEMS WERE ASKED OF HALF THE SAMPLE, margin of error = ± 5%]

TOTAL [**READ ACROSS ROWS**]	Major Factor	Minor Factor	Not a Factor	(VOL) Don't Know
The presence of gangs	81%	15%	2%	2%
Immigration	41%	42%	15%	2%
Lack of jobs	58%	35%	6%	1%
Lack of tough sentences for violent criminals	64%	27%	6%	2%
The availability of weapons	82%	11%	3%	3%
Breakdown of the family and parental control	86%	11%	2%	1%
Not enough police on the streets	39%	45%	13%	3%
The amount of violence on TV, movies and music	51%	34%	13%	1%
Drug and alcohol use	87%	9%	3%	1%
Poverty	74%	18%	5%	2%
Lack of recreational or mentoring opportunities	62%	30%	6%	3%

4. Now, I'd like to ask you some questions specifically about gangs. Currently, are any gangs active in your town? [Is there a lot of gang activity or just a little?]

	TOTAL	RACE			INCOME			COMMUNITY TYPE		
		White	Black & Hisp	< \$50K	\$50 to \$100K	\$100K+	Urban	Stable town	Expanding suburb	
Yes, a lot	<b>14%</b>	5%	35%	17%	18%	6%	34%	7%	9%	
Yes, a little	<b>18%</b>	17%	25%	22%	13%	18%	19%	16%	18%	
No gang activity	<b>53%</b>	60%	30%	48%	53%	60%	32%	61%	56%	
(VOL) Don't know	<b>16%</b>	18%	10%	13%	16%	15%	14%	16%	16%	
Unwtd N	<b>801</b>	623	131	191	245	256	140	341	299	

4A. Over the past 5 years, has gang activity increased, decreased or been about the same? [AMONG THOSE WITH GANG ACTIVITY IN THEIR TOWN]

	TOTAL
Increased	<b>69%</b>
Decreased	<b>5%</b>
About the same	<b>24%</b>
(VOL) Don't know	<b>2%</b>
Unwtd N	<b>225</b>

4. Do you think it is very likely, somewhat likely, or not likely that gangs will become active in your town in the next 5 years? [COMBINED WITH CURRENT ACTIVITY FROM #4]

	TOTAL	RACE			INCOME			COMMUNITY TYPE		
		White	Black & Hisp	< \$50K	\$50 to \$100K	\$100K+	Urban	Stable town	Expanding suburb	
Active now (from Q4)	<b>32%</b>	22%	60%	39%	31%	24%	53%	23%	27%	
Very likely future	<b>5%</b>	5%	4%	5%	5%	3%	4%	5%	5%	
Somewhat likely future	<b>18%</b>	22%	12%	19%	18%	19%	20%	16%	19%	
Not likely future	<b>41%</b>	47%	21%	31%	43%	53%	17%	52%	45%	
(VOL) Don't know	<b>4%</b>	4%	3%	6%	3%	1%	5%	4%	3%	
Unwtd N	<b>801</b>	623	131	191	245	256	140	341	299	

6. How concerned are you that you or a member of your family will be the victim of gang violence – very, somewhat, or not worried?

	TOTAL	PARENT		RACE		COMMUNITY TYPE			PERCEIVED GANG ACTIVITY PRESENT - FUTURE		
		Yes	No	White	Black & Hisp	Urban	Stable town	Expanding suburb	Active now	Likely future	Not likely future
Very worried	<b>16%</b>	20%	13%	10%	29%	29%	12%	12%	26%	15%	7%
Somewhat worried	<b>30%</b>	35%	26%	31%	29%	36%	29%	27%	38%	39%	18%
Not worried	<b>54%</b>	44%	59%	59%	41%	35%	57%	61%	36%	46%	74%
(VOL) Don't know	<b>1%</b>	0%	1%	1%	1%	0%	2%	0%	0%	1%	1%
Unwtd N	<b>801</b>	272	529	623	131	140	341	299	225	174	367

7. Have you ever talked to your children about gangs, or not? [PARENTS ONLY]

	TOTAL
Yes	<b>49%</b>
No	<b>51%</b>
Unwtd N	<b>272</b>

8. I'm going to read you a few statements about gang activity. For each please tell me whether you agree or disagree.

a. Gang violence is mainly an urban problem. It rarely happens in the suburbs.

	TOTAL	RACE		INCOME			COMMUNITY TYPE		
		White	Black & Hisp	< \$50K	\$50 to \$100K	\$100K+	Urban	Stable town	Expanding suburb
Agree	<b>28%</b>	26%	28%	28%	24%	34%	30%	27%	28%
Disagree	<b>70%</b>	72%	69%	69%	75%	63%	66%	72%	71%
(VOL) Don't know	<b>2%</b>	2%	3%	2%	1%	3%	4%	1%	2%
Unwtd N	<b>801</b>	623	131	191	245	256	140	341	299

b. The reason why gangs can take hold in certain communities is because local residents turn a blind eye to them.

	TOTAL	RACE		INCOME			COMMUNITY TYPE		
		White	Black & Hisp	< \$50K	\$50 to \$100K	\$100K+	Urban	Stable town	Expanding suburb
Agree	<b>61%</b>	58%	74%	64%	62%	55%	72%	54%	63%
Disagree	<b>35%</b>	39%	25%	32%	37%	41%	25%	44%	33%
(VOL) Don't know	<b>4%</b>	4%	2%	4%	1%	4%	3%	3%	4%
Unwtd N	<b>801</b>	623	131	191	245	256	140	341	299



- c. There's not a lot that can be done to solve the gang problem. Certain people will always be drawn to this lifestyle.

	TOTAL	RACE			INCOME		COMMUNITY TYPE		
		White	Black & Hisp	< \$50K	\$50 to \$100K	\$100K+	Urban	Stable town	Expanding suburb
Agree	<b>35%</b>	33%	44%	46%	39%	27%	32%	34%	37%
Disagree	<b>63%</b>	66%	54%	53%	59%	71%	67%	64%	60%
(VOL) Don't know	<b>2%</b>	1%	2%	2%	1%	2%	1%	2%	3%
Unwtd N	<b>801</b>	623	131	191	245	256	140	341	299

9. Now some questions on how the news media – including TV, radio and newspapers – report on youth violence. In general, do you feel that the news media tend to sensationalize episodes of youth violence or do they report such events objectively?

	TOTAL	RACE			INCOME		COMMUNITY TYPE		
		White	Black & Hisp	< \$50K	\$50 to \$100K	\$100K+	Urban	Stable town	Expanding suburb
Tend to sensationalize	<b>54%</b>	59%	43%	45%	56%	60%	45%	56%	57%
Report objectively	<b>37%</b>	33%	43%	43%	38%	33%	42%	35%	35%
(VOL) SOME OF BOTH	<b>4%</b>	3%	7%	3%	4%	3%	6%	3%	4%
(VOL) Don't know	<b>5%</b>	5%	7%	8%	2%	3%	6%	6%	4%
Unwtd N	<b>801</b>	623	131	191	245	256	140	341	299

10. Overall, does the news media's coverage of youth violence and gang activity accurately portray the extent of the problem or does it make people think the problem is bigger or smaller than it actually is?

	TOTAL	RACE			INCOME		COMMUNITY TYPE		
		White	Black & Hisp	< \$50K	\$50 to \$100K	\$100K+	Urban	Stable town	Expanding suburb
Accurately portrays	<b>21%</b>	20%	22%	20%	21%	22%	24%	22%	18%
Make people think problem is BIGGER	<b>41%</b>	38%	48%	44%	43%	38%	47%	40%	37%
Make people think problem is SMALLER	<b>26%</b>	29%	22%	23%	29%	28%	22%	24%	32%
(VOL) Don't know	<b>12%</b>	12%	8%	13%	7%	12%	8%	13%	12%
Unwtd N	<b>801</b>	623	131	191	245	256	140	341	299

11. Some people say that media coverage of violence encourages others to perform violent acts as a way to gain notoriety among their peers. Do you agree or disagree with this view?

	TOTAL	RACE			INCOME		COMMUNITY TYPE		
		White	Black & Hisp	< \$50K	\$50 to \$100K	\$100K+	Urban	Stable town	Expanding suburb
Agree	<b>57%</b>	58%	53%	61%	58%	53%	56%	53%	59%
Disagree	<b>40%</b>	39%	46%	36%	41%	44%	40%	44%	38%
(VOL) Don't know	<b>3%</b>	3%	1%	2%	1%	3%	4%	3%	3%
Unwtd N	<b>801</b>	623	131	191	245	256	140	341	299

12. Does the news media devote enough coverage or not enough coverage to the following:

a. Stories about the factors that cause youth violence

	TOTAL	RACE		INCOME			COMMUNITY TYPE		
		White	Black & Hisp	< \$50K	\$50 to \$100K	\$100K+	Urban	Stable town	Expanding suburb
Enough coverage	<b>26%</b>	27%	18%	29%	26%	21%	24%	27%	24%
Not enough coverage	<b>70%</b>	69%	79%	65%	73%	77%	72%	69%	73%
(VOL) Don't know	<b>4%</b>	4%	3%	6%	1%	2%	4%	4%	3%
Unwtd N	<b>801</b>	623	131	191	245	256	140	341	299

b. Stories about urban youth who are doing positive things in their communities

	TOTAL	RACE		INCOME			COMMUNITY TYPE		
		White	Black & Hisp	< \$50K	\$50 to \$100K	\$100K+	Urban	Stable town	Expanding suburb
Enough coverage	<b>14%</b>	13%	13%	24%	9%	11%	14%	12%	14%
Not enough coverage	<b>84%</b>	85%	86%	73%	91%	88%	84%	85%	84%
(VOL) Don't know	<b>3%</b>	2%	1%	3%	0%	1%	2%	3%	1%
Unwtd N	<b>801</b>	623	131	191	245	256	140	341	299

c. Stories about people and programs that help prevent violence and gangs

	TOTAL	RACE		INCOME			COMMUNITY TYPE		
		White	Black & Hisp	< \$50K	\$50 to \$100K	\$100K+	Urban	Stable town	Expanding suburb
Enough coverage	<b>14%</b>	14%	13%	20%	13%	9%	13%	14%	14%
Not enough coverage	<b>83%</b>	84%	84%	79%	86%	87%	82%	83%	84%
(VOL) Don't know	<b>3%</b>	2%	3%	1%	1%	4%	4%	3%	2%
Unwtd N	<b>801</b>	623	131	191	245	256	140	341	299

Results for this *Monmouth University Poll* are based on telephone interviews conducted by the Monmouth University Polling Institute on Feb. 8-12, 2007 with a statewide random sample of 801 adult residents. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling has a maximum margin of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points. Sampling error increases as the sample size decreases, so statements based on various population subgroups, such as separate figures reported by gender or party identification, are subject to more error than are statements based on the total sample. In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

*It is the Monmouth University Polling Institute's policy to conduct surveys of all adult New Jersey residents, including voters and non-voters, on issues which affect the state. Specific voter surveys are conducted when appropriate during election cycles.*

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