

**Youth Safety Task Force Report on Gang Activity  
in the Oxford-Lafayette Community**

Objective: Chairman Andrew Robinson, Mayor Richard Howorth, and Dr. Jerry Webb of the Youth Safety Task Force asked the group to assess the level of organized gang activity in the Oxford-Lafayette-University communities.

The following organizations, agencies and professionals representing a wide array of law enforcement, educators, and community leaders were questioned. The people interviewed were in a position to make a reasonable judgment as to gang activity in our community. Because of the sensitive data obtained many people making statements wished to remain anonymous and their request will be honored.

Agencies interviewed were:

Oxford Police Department	Drug Enforcement Administration
University Police Department	U.S. Attorney's Office
Lafayette County Sherriff's Office	Clerk of the U.S. District Courts
Metro Narcotics	U.S. Marshals Service
Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics	
Administrators, Employees and Coaches of Oxford and Lafayette County School District	

Additionally, a number of individuals or informants unaffiliated with any particular agency but who were known to be closely related to primary sources of information, including known criminals, were contacted and interviewed.

While each and every agency and person interviewed remained concerned about organized gang activity, there is a general consensus that virtually no organized street gang activity exists in our community. The statements in support of this conclusion follow.

The following is a statement from agents at the Oxford Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation: "Our agency is not currently seeing any organized gang activity in the Oxford community. Such activity remains a priority with us and in the event such activity develops, appropriate action will be taken."

A report from a school administrator, who works closely with students, outlined two types of observed gangs: School Yard Gangs and Scavenger Gangs. Typically the School Yard Gang students dress alike, identify themselves with a group, and are disrespectful to adults. These youth could be categorized as 'wannabes.' The Scavenger Gangs possess qualities similar to school yard gangs and though, they are not highly organized, they can and may turn to low level crime like burglary and fighting. The report concluded with a concern for the increase in disrespectful behavior and a discerned need for community and parental involvement. Neither of the groups listed is considered a formal organized gang.

A member of the County Sheriff's department outlined his experience with youth in the county. He noted an increase in phone calls from parents overall and that summer is a particularly bad time since there are fewer activities for students. Also, an increase of participation in the Gateway program is believed to be related to the increase in calls and possible truancy. Many students who are observed outside of school during normal school hours claim to be homeschooled or part of the Gateway program.

It was reported that if the main organizer of any reported crimes is detained, typically, most activity dies down due to a fear of being jailed. However, juveniles cannot be held in Oxford. Transportation is expensive and available holding space is scarce. As a result they are released to their parents.

Chief Mike Martin stated that the Oxford Police Department is proactive in their assessment of gang activity. While they do occasionally see local gang-type activity, it tends to be a transient "coming and going among local teenagers." He further stated that his department was always concerned with "gang wannabes" or young teenagers who tend to assume the role of gang members, without the organization and violence with which it is typically associated. The Oxford Police Department has officers specifically trained in gang recognition and organization.

Mike Foster, Superintendent of the Lafayette Schools stated, "We just don't see any active organized gang activity in the system." He noted that "in the middle school there has always been some curiosity among certain students, but in my opinion that is present in every district in the state. In fact, I believe we are seeing less activity now that we did six or eight years ago." Other school officials agreed with this point of view.

John Murphy, Resident Agent in Charge of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's Oxford Office, stated that "the DEA has targeted a number of significant drug dealers who were known gang members in Northern Mississippi. Known gang members have supplied multi-ounce quantities of crack cocaine to Oxford-based drug dealers. Although DEA has not observed street gang activity in Oxford as in some other parts of Northern Mississippi, it would be wise for any parent or teacher to be alert to the indicators of gang or drug activity. Today, our kids are facing phenomenal peer pressure. In my experience, a teen is far less likely to get involved with a gang or use drugs if the parents are involved in their lives."

### Conclusion

Every person, agency and organization in our community is concerned about gang activity, not only in our youth but in our community as a whole. Each and every person interviewed recognized the activity of local groups and gang "wannabes." No one takes this lightly and vigilance is required to ensure our status as one of America's great communities. The school systems seem to have programs in place to recognize and educate against gang activity. The local law enforcement agencies are trained to do much

of the same thing. Oxford is fortunate to have many law enforcement agencies headquartered here. They cover a much larger area than Lafayette County, even so their presence is a great resource. While not unanimous in their opinions it is safe to say that there is agreement that gang violence and activity in Oxford and Lafayette is limited at most.

The committee suggests several approaches to ensure youth safety:

- community should want to acknowledge positive action in youth
- promote relationships, programs, involvement
- communicate message of zero tolerance
- work to enhance programs and opportunities for positive youth activity
- emphasize parental responsibility and involvement

The task force is in agreement that there is not a current problem with active or organized gangs or organized gang activity. There are minors who are at risk for developing an interest in gang activity, who could be called 'wannabes'. There is a general opinion that the community does have a responsibility to help with the prevention of gang development.

Larger societal problems exist beyond the scope of this report. Unrelated to gang culture or activity, there are many children in our community who are growing up in households with a decreasing amount of adult supervision and role-modeling, leading to behavior problems that are serious and quickly may become more serious (as in criminal behavior), and at the same time, creating individuals who are susceptible to real gang activity should it appear in our community.

These are all weakened areas for gang entrance. In short, we have been lucky. And one could also say many in our community do a good job of minimizing criminal and potential gang behavior. We must continue to work and spend resources to minimize and prevent potential gang activity.