

# Arizona Gang Threat Assessment

Arizona Criminal Justice Commission

STATISTICS  
2022

# ARIZONA CRIMINAL JUSTICE COMMISSION



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2022, the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission's (ACJC) Statistical Analysis Center (SAC) surveyed Arizona law enforcement agencies regarding their perceptions and experiences with gangs, gang members, and gang activity. This survey is modeled after the *National Gang Threat Assessment* and the *National Youth Gang Survey*. It is designed to gather information on law enforcement agencies' perceptions and experiences with gangs, gang members, and gang activity. The purpose of this survey is to better understand the threat that gangs pose to Arizona's communities and public safety. This report provides statewide results from the 2022 *Arizona Gang Threat Assessment* and compares it to similar data collected from 2008 to 2018. Key findings from this report are described below:

- Gang activity was reported in nearly 70% of jurisdictions that responded to the survey. Nonetheless, the number of law enforcement agencies reporting active gang members and gang activity in their jurisdictions has declined since 2013 (see Figure 2).
- Hybrid gangs (non-traditional gangs with multiple affiliations) are an area of concern for law enforcement as over 30% of agencies reported the presence of hybrid gangs in their respective jurisdictions.
- Agencies most frequently reported gang involvement in: drug crimes (sales/distribution and trafficking), weapons possession/firearms use, and assault (see Figure 4).
- The most frequently reported drugs with gang involvement were methamphetamine (77.1%), fentanyl (77.1%), and heroin/opioids (50.0%; see Table 1).
- Drug-related factors are the most common reported cause of gang violence, followed by retaliation, disrespect/ego, intergang conflict, and relationships with drug cartels and other larger criminal networks (see Table 2).
- Over 60% of agencies reported the use of social media by gangs to recruit new members. Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram were reported as the most frequently used (90.3%, 74.2%, and 71.0%, respectively; see Figure 6)).
- Thirty-eight percent of respondents reported having a designated gang enforcement unit. Most agencies who reported having a designated gang unit also reported that having a specific gang unit reduced gang problems in their jurisdiction (63%).

## INTRODUCTION

Arizona Revised Statute (ARS) §41-2416 requires the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission (ACJC) to conduct an annual survey that measures “the prevalence of street gang activity... [and] the nature and extent of drug related gang activity in the state” when monies are specifically appropriated for that purpose. No funds were specifically appropriated for this assessment. However, effectively addressing gangs and gang activity remains a priority to Arizona’s law enforcement agencies and the criminal justice system. Therefore, the ACJC continues to collect, analyze, and share information on gangs and gang activity across the state using alternative resources. In 2022, the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission’s (ACJC) Statistical Analysis Center (SAC) surveyed Arizona law enforcement agencies regarding their perceptions and experiences with gangs, gang members, and gang activity in their respective jurisdictions. This report examines and summarizes the results of that survey.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Since 1990, the ACJC has administered a gang survey to law enforcement agencies in Arizona. The Arizona Gang Survey was replaced with the Arizona Gang Threat Assessment in 2007, in response to feedback from the Arizona law enforcement community requesting a more in-depth analysis of current threats posed by gangs.<sup>1</sup> The Arizona Gang Threat Assessment is modeled after the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) National Gang Threat Assessment and the U.S. Department of Justice’s (DOJ) National Youth Gang Survey. The National Gang Threat Assessment is a collaborative project facilitated by the National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations, which includes partnerships with the FBI, the National Drug Intelligence Center, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearm and Explosives. The National Youth Gang Survey is administered by the National Gang Center on the topics of gang prevention, juvenile justice, and violence prevention and victimization.

The Arizona Gang Threat Assessment survey has not been administered since 2019 due to limited resources. The 2022 survey instrument has been revised to better understand law enforcement agencies’ experiences with and response to street gangs across the state. In order to ensure a broad response from law enforcement agencies across the state, the ACJC has

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<sup>1</sup> 1 ARS §13-105(8) and ARS §13-105(9) establish a criteria for objectively identifying criminal street gangs and gang members: (8) “Criminal street gang” means an ongoing formal or informal association of persons in which members or associates individually or collectively engage in the commission, attempted commission, facilitation or solicitation of any felony act and that has at least one individual who is a criminal street gang member. (9) “Criminal street gang member” means an individual to whom at least two of the following seven criteria that indicate criminal street gang membership apply: a) self-proclamation, b) witness testimony or official statement, c) written or electronic correspondence, d) paraphernalia or photographs, e) tattoos, f) clothing or colors, g) any other indicia of street gang membership.

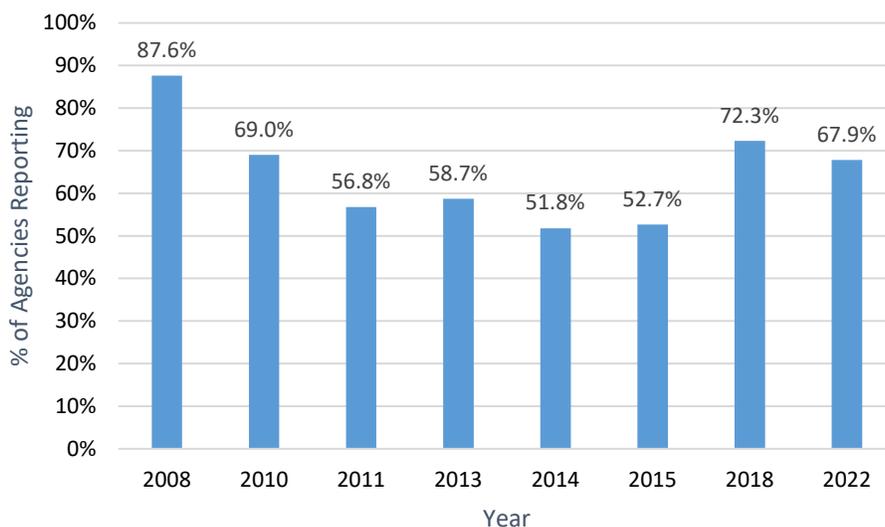
worked to increase the participation of surveyed agencies by shortening the length of the survey. The electronic format also allows for the inclusion of skip logic (or branch logic) within the electronic survey design. With this feature, respondents are only presented with questions that are relevant to their agency based on their response to previous questions. All respondents were initially asked:

*Are there any active gangs or gang members in your jurisdiction?*

Through the use of skip logic, all agencies that did not report any active gangs or gang members in their respective jurisdictions were able to skip all subsequent questions on gangs and gang activity. The analysis for all subsequent sections reports information only from agencies reporting the presence of gang activity.

The ACJC contacted 112 law enforcement agencies including all county sheriff’s, city, and tribal police departments. The agency heads (e.g., Chiefs, Sheriffs, etc.) were encouraged to have a member of their agency with knowledge of gangs, gang activity, and/or gang members in their jurisdiction. Seventy-six law enforcement agencies (67.9%) completed the survey (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Arizona Gang Threat Assessment Response Rate, 2008 – 2022**

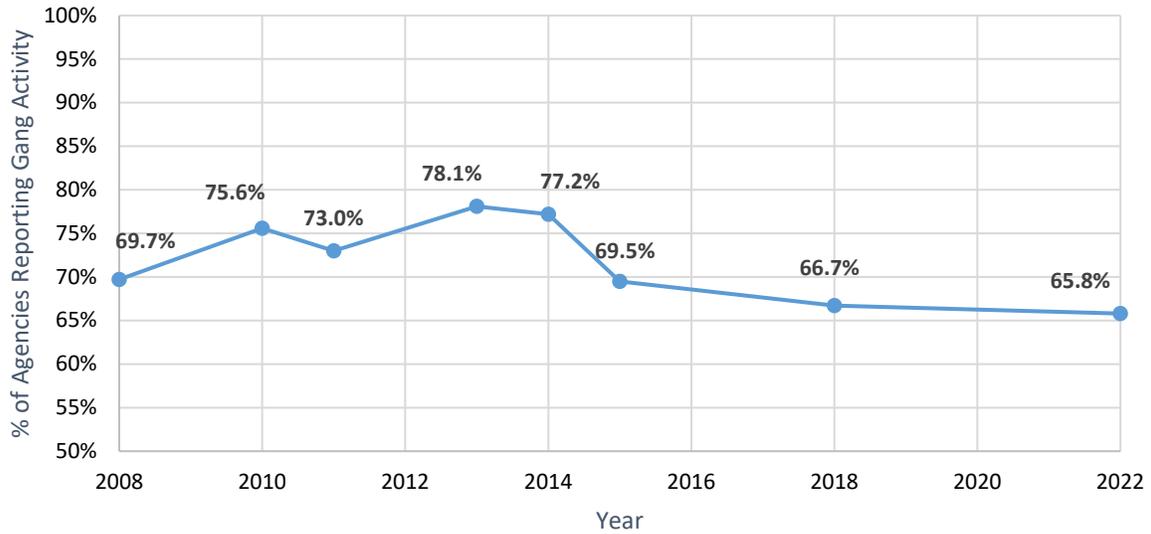


## GANGS AND GANG ACTIVITY IN ARIZONA

Of the 76 law enforcement agencies that responded to the survey, 65.8% reported active gangs or gang members in their jurisdiction. The number of law enforcement agencies reporting active gang members and gang activity in their jurisdictions has declined since 2013. Figure 2 illustrates the differences in reported gang activity by year. The transient nature of gangs and

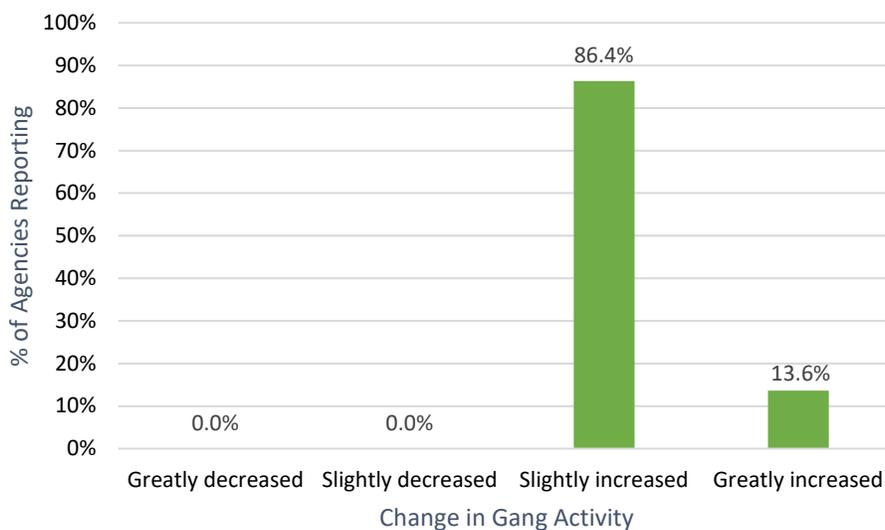
their extensive network structures make it difficult to quantify the exact number of gangs and gang members in a jurisdiction.

**Figure 2:** Agencies Reporting Active Gangs/Gang Members, 2008 – 2022



Agencies were asked to report any change in gang activity over the past 12 months. Similar to previous years, the majority of respondents reported no change to gang activity in the previous year. Forty-four percent of agencies reported they had observed changes in gang activity within the past 12 months. The changes reported were either a slight increase or a great increase.

**Figure 3:** Reported Change in Gang Activity over the Past 12 months, 2022



Respondents were asked which gangs they have identified in their jurisdiction within the past 12 months. The most frequently reported gangs were (in order):

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***BLOODS (ALL SETS)***

***CRIPS (ALL SETS)***

***MEXICAN MAFIA***

***VAGOS MOTORCYCLE CLUB***

***MONGOLS MOTORCYCLE CLUB***

***PECKERWOODS***

***ARYAN BROTHERHOOD***

***DINÉ PRIDE***

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Law enforcement also reported the presence of hybrid gangs in their jurisdictions. Specifically, over 30% of agencies reported the presence of hybrid gangs. The definition of a hybrid gang varies across jurisdictions. Generally, hybrid gangs defy traditional typologies by being more diverse in their attributes and behaviors, particularly with respect to age and racial composition.<sup>2</sup> Law enforcement agencies frequently reported that hybrid gangs are younger in age, loosely organized, and do not adhere to traditional identifiers. Additionally, they cited the use of social media for hybrid gang recruitment.

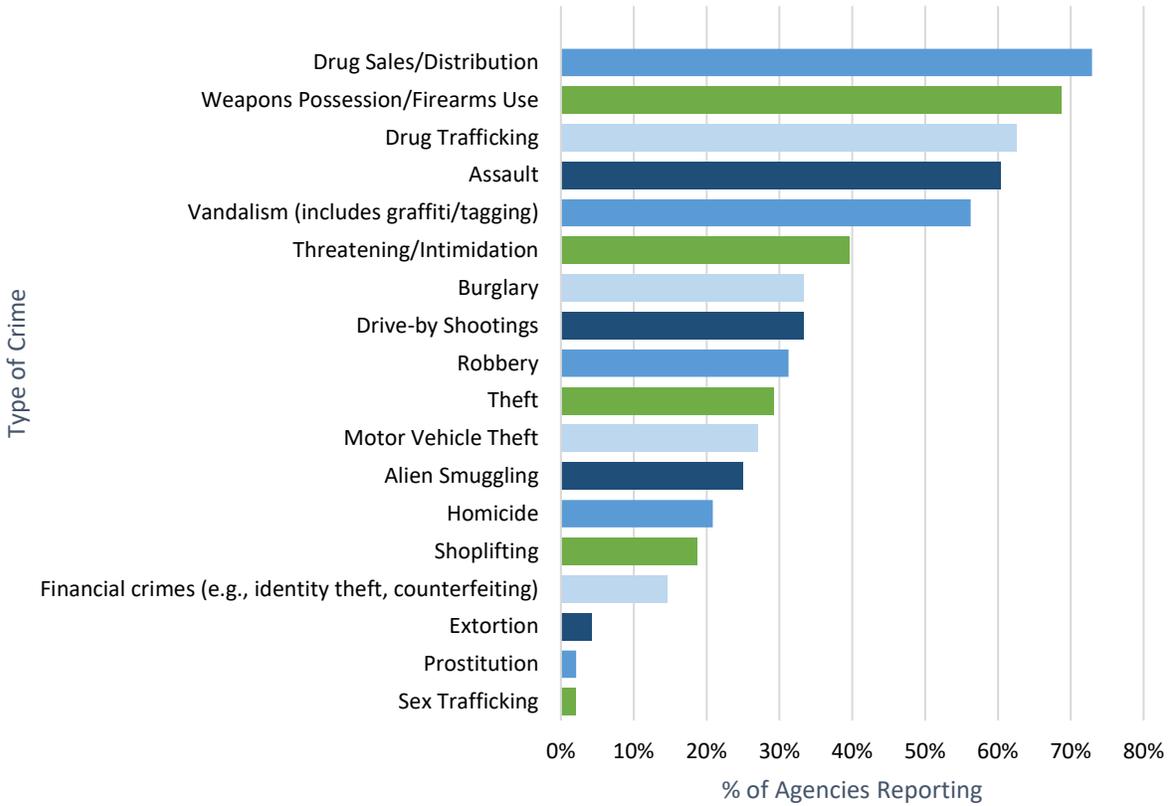
#### *Gang Involvement in Criminal Activity*

Street gangs play a role in criminal activity through Arizona's communities. Respondents were asked which crimes are committed the most by gang members in their jurisdictions. As seen in Figure 4, agencies most frequently reported gang involvement in drug sales/distribution (72.9%) and weapons possession/firearms use (68.8%). More than half of reporting agencies also reported gang involvement in drug trafficking (62.5%), and assault (60%).

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<sup>2</sup> Starbuck, D., Howell, J. C., & Lindquist, D. J. (2001). *Hybrid and other modern gangs*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

**Figure 4: Reported Criminal Activity by Gang Members, 2022**



*Note: The categories are not mutually exclusive; therefore, the percentages will not sum to 100%.*

Respondents were also asked about levels of gang involvement in the sale and distribution of different types of drugs (see Table 1). Consistent with prior reports, the most reported drugs with gang involvement were methamphetamine (77.1%), fentanyl (77.1%), and heroin/opioids (50.0%). Two response options, fentanyl and PCP, were added to this year’s survey instrument given law enforcement recommendations based on their expertise on the subject matter. Trends for these drugs will be included in future reports.

**Table 1:** Reported Gang Involvement in Selling/Distributing Drugs, 2022

Type of Drug	% of Agencies Reporting
Methamphetamine	77.1%
Fentanyl	77.1%
Heroin/Opioids	50.0%
Marijuana	39.6%
Powdered Cocaine	22.9%
Crack Cocaine	6.3%
Ecstasy (MDMA)	6.3%
Pharmaceuticals (Non-Opioid)	6.3%
Synthetics (e.g., Spice)	4.2%
Phencyclidine (PCP)	4.2%
<i>No drugs are being sold/distributed by gang members in my jurisdiction</i>	8.3%

*Note: The categories are not mutually exclusive; therefore, the percentages will not sum to 100%.*

Street gang involvement in violent criminal activity was low relative to other crime types, but still present. Respondents were asked to identify the factors that influence gang violence in their jurisdictions. Results indicate that drug-related factors are the most commonly reported cause of gang violence, followed by retaliation, disrespect/ego, intergang conflict, and relationships with drug cartels/other larger criminal networks (see Table 2).

**Table 2:** Reported Factors Influencing Gang Violence, 2022

Gang Violence Factor	% of Agencies Reporting
Drug-related factors	48.0%
Retaliation	42.0%
Disrespect/Ego	38.0%
Intergang conflict (conflict between gangs)	36.0%
Relationship with drug cartels/other larger criminal networks	32.0%
Return from confinement	22.0%
Gang member migration (from inside U.S.)	18.0%
Emergence of new gangs	12.0%
Intra-gang conflict (conflict within the gang)	12.0%
Gang member migration (from outside U.S.)	8.0%
<i>No gang violence in my jurisdiction</i>	18.0%

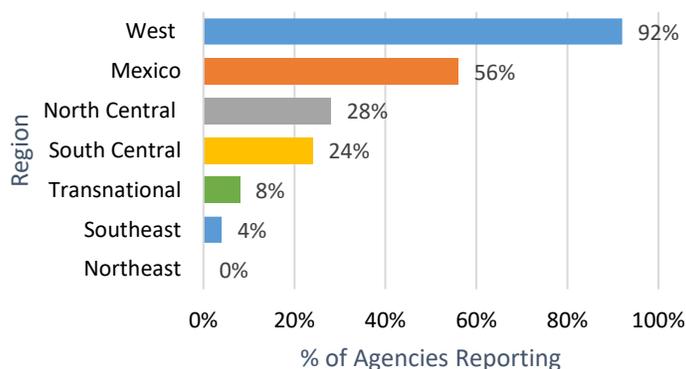
*Note: The categories are not mutually exclusive; therefore, the percentages will not sum to 100%.*

## Gang Migration

Respondents were asked a series of questions about gang migration in their jurisdictions. The National Gang Center (n.d.) defines gang member migration as, “the movement of actively involved gang [members] from other U.S. jurisdictions to the respondents’ jurisdictions.” Since gang migration includes anyone from outside of one’s jurisdiction, it is possible that the survey is capturing migration and/from Arizona’s cities (e.g., gang member moves from Phoenix to Tucson). Eighty percent of respondents indicated that they have had contact with gang members from outside their respective jurisdictions within the last 12 months. This number has risen over 65% from the 2018 report, in which only 48% of respondents reported migration in their jurisdictions.

Respondents who reported contact with members outside of their jurisdiction were asked if the gang members were coming from outside of the state. Over 60% reported that gang members migrating to their jurisdiction were coming from outside of the state. Of that 60% of respondents, over 90% indicated that the gang members were coming from the Western region of the United States, followed by Mexico (56%), and the North Central region (28%; see Figure 5).<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 5: Reported Gang Member Migration Region, 2022**



*Note: The categories are not mutually exclusive; therefore, the percentages will not sum to 100%.*

<sup>3</sup> Regions are defined according to the FBI’s Safe Streets Gang Task Force regions: <https://www.fbi.gov/states-services/publications/2011-national-gang-threat-assessment>

- North Central (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wisconsin)
- Northeast (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, West Virginia)
- South Central (Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas)
- Southeast (Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, Virginia)
- West (Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming)
- Mexico
- Transnational (Any country other than Mexico)

When asked to identify the factors that may influence gang migration, agencies most frequently reported that gang members migrate to avoid law enforcement crackdowns, to move with family, and for drug market opportunities (see Table 3). Additionally, nearly 45% of agencies thought that other illegal ventures were influencing gang member migration. It is possible that there are alternative factors not listed here that may be influencing gang migration into Arizona’s communities.

**Table 3:** Reported Factors Influencing Gang Member Migration, 2022

Gang Migration Factor	% of Agencies Reporting
Avoid law enforcement crackdowns/injunctions	52.5%
Move with family	52.5%
Drug market opportunities	50.0%
Other illegal ventures	42.5%
Get away from gang life	30.0%
Member recruitment	20.0%
Other (please specify)	20.0%
Employment	12.5%
Don't Know	12.5%
Educational opportunities	2.5%

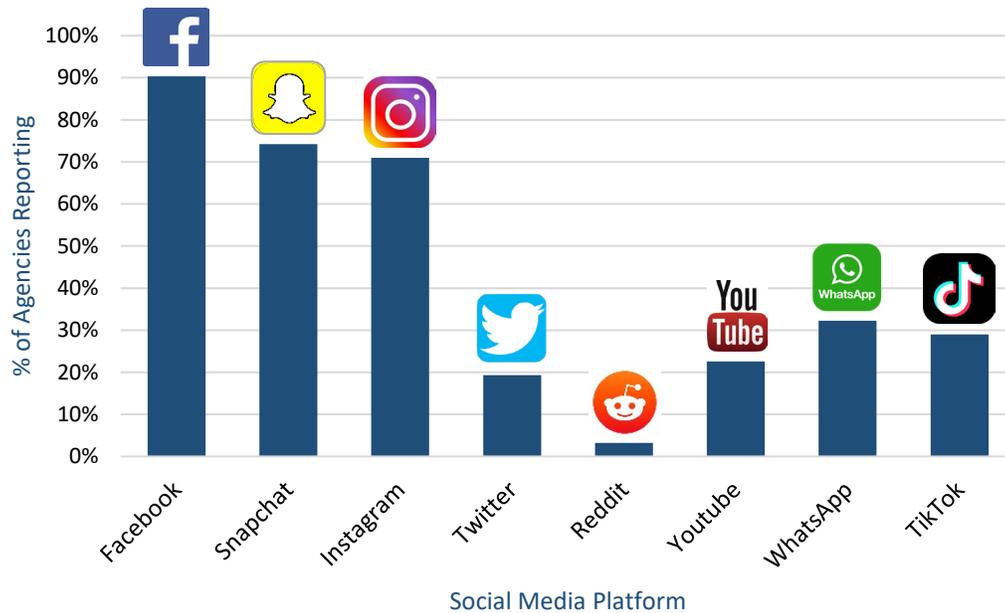
*Note: The categories are not mutually exclusive; therefore, the percentages will not sum to 100%.*

### *Gang Trends and the Use of Social Media*

Consistent with national trends and prior reports, law enforcement agencies reported that Arizona gang members are being recruited through social media platforms.<sup>4</sup> Over 60% of Arizona’s law enforcement agencies reported use of social media by gangs to recruit new members. Those who reported the use of social media by gangs were subsequently asked which social media platforms are used by gangs in their jurisdiction. The social media platforms most frequently reported to be used by Arizona’s street gangs were Facebook (90.3%), Snapchat (74.2%), and Instagram (71.0%; see Figure 6).

<sup>4</sup> National Gang Report. (2015). Retrieved August 14, 2019, from <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/stats-services-publications-national-gang-report-2015.pdf/view>.

**Figure 6:** Reported Social Media Platforms Used by Street Gangs, 2022



*Note: The categories are not mutually exclusive; therefore, the percentages will not sum to 100%.*

Arizona may be seeing an increase in social media and technology use because social media sites may provide gangs with a platform for recruitment, targeting rivals, and evading law enforcement. The anonymity of these sites allows gang members to communicate with a decreased risk of detection or apprehension.

### *Gang Prevention Programs*

Respondents were asked to report whether or not their agency had implemented any gang prevention programs within the last 12 months. About 20% of respondents indicated that they *had* implemented a gang prevention program. Of those 20%, nearly 40% indicated that the gang prevention program had reduced gang problems in their jurisdiction. Sixty percent were not sure if the gang prevention program had reduced gang problems in their jurisdiction.

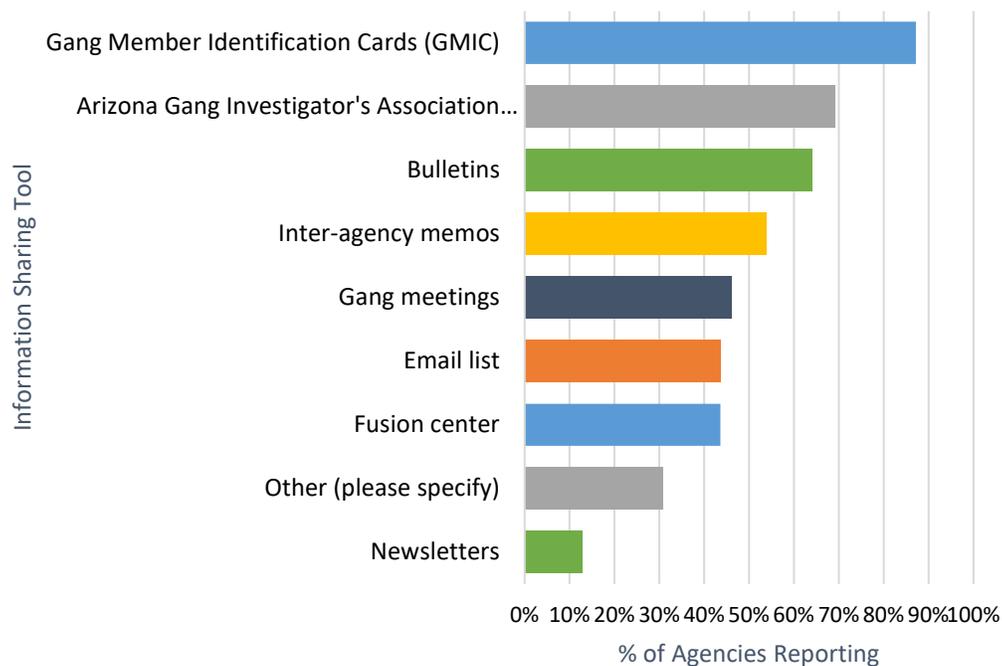
When asked to describe the gang prevention programs that their jurisdictions have implemented, most respondents reported becoming more involved with youth and schools. Specifically, they noted an increase in presentations at schools, providing youth with opportunities to positively interact with law enforcement, as well as participation with youth athletic leagues.

## LAW ENFORCEMENT INTERVENTIONS

In an effort to better understand law enforcement intervention strategies used in jurisdictions across the state, respondents were asked if their agency has a specific unit designated as gang enforcement (e.g., Gang Unit, Gang Task Force, Security Threat Group (STG) Unit, etc.). Thirty-eight percent of respondents reported that they *do* have a designated gang enforcement unit, while 62% reported that they *do not* have a designated gang enforcement unit. Most agencies who reported having a dedicated gang unit also reported a reduction in their gang problem within the last 12 months (63%). The most frequently reported reasons that agencies do not have a designated gang enforcement unit were staffing, lack of resources, not needed due to limited/no gang activity, and the utilization of an assigned AZDPS officer.

It is essential that Arizona law enforcement agencies have access to current, statewide gang data to monitor hybrid gangs and variation in gang-related activity, and to focus on information-gathering. To understand the mechanisms used to share inter-departmental intelligence, respondents were asked to select the information sharing practices used by their agency. Nearly 90% indicated that they utilize Gang Member Identification Cards (GMIC), followed by information from the Arizona Gang Investigator's Association (AZGIA) (69.2%), bulletins (64.1%) and inter-agency memos (53.4%). Newsletters (12.8%) and other gang databases (30.1%) were reportedly used less frequently (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7:** Reported Use of Information Sharing Tools, 2022



*Note: The categories are not mutually exclusive; therefore, the percentages will not sum to 100%.*

Additionally, agencies were asked if they had experienced any gang-related information-sharing challenges within the last 12 months. The most common response was that they *had not* experienced any gang-related information-sharing challenges. Those who reported that they *had* experienced gang-related information-sharing challenges most often cited challenges collecting information within the agency and from other agencies (both in state and out of state), an overall lack of communication, and a general lack of resources.

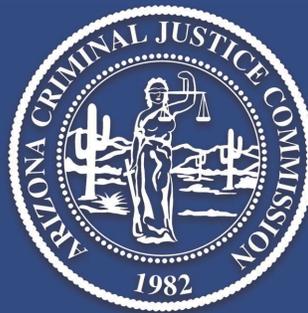
## CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This report examines and summarizes the results of the *2022 Arizona Gang Threat Assessment*, administered by the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission's (ACJC) Statistical Analysis Center (SAC). The *Arizona Gang Threat Assessment* analyzes information regarding law enforcement agencies' perceptions and experiences with gangs, gang members, and gang activity in their jurisdictions. Overall, the ACJC found that the percentage of law enforcement agencies reporting any active gang members and gang activity in their jurisdictions has declined since 2013. However, hybrid gangs and gang involvement in drug-related criminal activity remain an area of concern for law enforcement.

Additionally, Arizona's jurisdictions reported the use of social media as a recruitment strategy; Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram were the most frequently reported social media platforms used by Arizona's street gangs. Furthermore, about 20% of respondents indicated that their agency had implemented a gang prevention program. Of those 20%, nearly 40% reported that the gang prevention program had reduced gang problems in their jurisdiction. Future surveys should continue to focus on gaining knowledge on prevention efforts that are being implemented in Arizona's law enforcement agencies, particularly those involving Arizona's youth.

While responses to the survey were informative and insightful, it is crucial to continue drawing on the vast experience of Arizona's law enforcement agencies, including those who did not respond to this survey. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that findings from this survey reflect individual perceptions of gangs and gang activity. The findings of this assessment may therefore differ from actual rates of gang activity and violence. Future assessments should consider ways to collaborate with different agencies (e.g., public health agencies, schools) in order to share information and data. This will allow the use of multiple sources of information, in turn, improving the nature of the assessment and accurately portraying the magnitude of the gang problem. In order to present the most accurate representation of gang activity in Arizona, the ACJC will continue to collaborate with local experts in the field and in academia to ensure the survey instrument and methodology are consistent with current and emerging gang-related

trends. This publication is a useful resource for law enforcement working to reduce the gang problem in Arizona.



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