Gangs

Street gangs were once thought to be an essentially urban phenomenon. The drug trafficking, random shootings, and fear generated by such gangs were assumed to be confined within the boundaries of the big city. No longer true.

The existence of gangs—especially youth gangs—has spread throughout all kinds of jurisdictions—suburban areas and small towns as well as urban cities.

Teens are targets for gang recruitment. Gangs offer a way to escape problems at home provide excitement and a supportive peer group. Youth often cannot see that gang membership creates serious and sometimes life-threatening problems. Teens use gangs as a surrogate family, friend, and protector despite the fact that gang members live violent, criminal lives.

In order to address gang problems in the community, it is important to understand how they affect the community. Because every community is different, each experience with gangs will be different as well. For example, some communities see gang activity in increased vandalism and graffiti, while others have to deal with gun violence and property theft.

Although gangs are working their way into many communities, there are effective responses to address gang problems. Because neighborhoods differ, the best prevention strategies will vary from one neighborhood to the next. Community problem-solvers must study an area's social and physical conditions before developing and implementing strategies. Once they understand what social and physical conditions exist, some communities have found that anti-gang efforts are most successful with a blend of three strategies:

- primary prevention—educating young people and parents about reasons not to join gangs and providing substitutes for gang membership
- intervention—persuading members out of gangs by providing attractive alternative activities and programs designed to help them give up their gang lifestyles
- suppression—responding with strong police action in communities where gangs are prevalent, ensuring swift and severe penalties for gang-related crimes, and providing safe means for gang members to exit from gangs.

These strategies require cooperation, collaboration, and communication among law enforcement agencies, parents, schools, community leaders, youth service organizations, and teens themselves. Each community must decide precisely who needs to be involved and what mixture of the three strategies works best, based on the nature and extent of local gang problems.

In Escondito, California, a coalition of parents, youth, schools, law enforcement officials, former gang members, social workers, faith community leaders, city officials, and community groups devised and implemented a strategic action plan to address the escalating gang problem. The Escondido Gang Project began in 1993 with a series of town meetings conducted in English and Spanish that asked the question, "What can we do to create a unified and safe community?"

What Is a Youth Gang?

There is no widely accepted standard definition for a youth gang, but the following criteria have been widely used:

- formal organization and structure
- identifiable leadership
- identifiable or a claimed territory
- regular meeting patterns
- organized, continuous course of criminality

It is also important to understand what a youth gang is not:

- Youth gangs are not static. They change and evolve.
- Except for a very few instances, youth gangs are distinct from adult criminal organizations that operate drug networks and other criminal enterprises.
- Hate groups, skin heads, motorcycle gangs, white supremacist organizations, and the like are unlikely to have the characteristics of youth street gangs, although youth may make up a large portion of these hate group populations.

Where Do Hate Groups Fall Into the Scheme of Things?

As opposed to youth gangs, which are usually formed around geographic, demographic, or ethnic characteristics, hate gangs are based on ethnic, racial, or religious superiority or bias. Because the foundation of a hate group is fundamentally different than that of a youth gang, the strategies to deal with these groups are different. Intervention may not work with these groups. A good starting point for dealing with hate groups is to check specific state anti-bias laws to see what legal steps you can take against hate crime acts.

Who's At Risk of Joining a Gang?

Anyone—male or female, wealthy or low-income, from any ethnic or racial background, from a functional or dysfunctional family—may decide to join a gang. Gang involvement can begin as early as elementary school. Experts have identified high-risk characteristics that can contribute to a youth being vulnerable to gang membership. Gang members more often

- are male (although female gangs are becoming more prevalent)
- have other family members or friends involved with gangs
- have seen excessive use of alcohol or other drugs in the home
- live with a single parent or with grandparents
- have poor academic performance
- see poor to non-existent job prospects
- are known for fighting and general aggressiveness in early adolescence, or have chronic delinquency problems
- experience poor living conditions or poverty
- have experienced social deprivation or isolation
- have needs that have been neglected or are unmet.

The presence of one or more of these conditions does not guarantee that a young person will join a gang. Identifying risk factors helps a community understand which youth may be more vulnerable to gang recruitment and enables the community to be more effective in implementing anti-gang programs.

Why Do Youth Join Gangs?

Youth who turn to gang membership may be motivated by some or all of these needs:

- Surrogate family. Young people join gangs to receive the attention, affirmation, and protection they may feel they are lacking at home.
- Identity or recognition. Some youth join gangs for the status they may feel they are lacking if they are unemployed or performing poorly in school. If young people don't see themselves as the smart ones, the leaders, or the star athletes, they join groups where they feel they can excel.
- Excitement. Teens may join a gang for what they perceive as a lack of anything better to do. They also may see gangs and gang activity given a positive portrayal through music, videos, and movies.
- Family history. Gang members may join to carry on a family tradition established by their siblings, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, whom they see as role models.
- Protection. Some youths join gangs to protect themselves. They feel threatened, do not feel they can rely on the police and other authorities, and count on fellow gang members to help protect them from attacks.
- Intimidation. Some young people feel pressure from friends to join a gang. Some actually feel threatened by other gang members to join.
- Lack of alternatives. A deficiency of job opportunities, positive recreational choices, or lack of effective responses to peer pressure can create a climate favoring gang membership as a lifestyle choice.
- Money. The monetary allure of gang membership is difficult to counteract. Gang members can share profits from drug trafficking and other illegal activities. To a teen, money often translates into social status and power.

Signs That Gangs Have Moved In

Gangs have unique symbols, signs, and behaviors that declare their presence. You might find the following signs when a gang has invaded the community:

- Specific graffiti: Gangs purposely vandalize and destroy public and private property in order to further their reputations. They leave their trademark graffiti behind, or use it to stake out turf controlled by a particular gang. Gangs challenge each other by defacing or drawing a rival gang's symbols upside down. Such a challenge can lead to violence. Abandoned houses are a favorite target for property damage or graffiti. Also, as of this writing, different ethnic gangs have unique styles of graffiti. For instance, Hispanic gang graffiti is often written in stylized, blocked letters, while African-American and White gang taggers tend to use a cruder style.
- Clothing: Some gangs choose certain articles or clothing or a specific manner of wearing clothes to show their allegiance to a gang.
- "Colors:" Certain colors or combinations may be used to identify gang members.
- Hand signals: Gangs use hand signals and gestures called "throw signs" to communicate among themselves and sometimes with other gangs.
- Language: The meanings of existing words can be changed or new words created as a gang code.
- Tattoos: Many members use gang symbols as designs for tattoos.

What Your Community Can Do To Fight Gangs

Communities are approaching the problem of gang violence in a variety of ways. As discussed earlier in this paper, the key to success relies on the right combination of prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies tailored to the community's issues and resources.

Teens Against Gang Violence (T.A.G.V.), in Dorchester, MA, is a volunteer, community-based, teen peer leadership program. T.A.G.V. is not anti-gang but is against gang violence. Making a distinction between gangs that are nonviolent and those that participate in violence, T.A.G.V. provides violence, gun, and drug prevention education to teens, parents, schools, and community groups through presentations and workshops.

The first steps toward removing gangs from the community is defining what a gang is in your community, identifying what gang-related issues need to be addressed, and then choosing the correct people or agencies to deal with the problems. Consider including the following strategies:

- mobilizing the community (including citizens, youth, community groups, and agencies) to assess the problem and develop solutions
- offering social and economic opportunities for teenagers, including after-school, weekend, and summer activities, alternative schools, and job programs
- starting adult mentoring youth outreach programs
- suppressing gang activity. Community-based agencies and local groups must work together with juvenile and criminal justice agencies in surveillance and sharing of information under conditions that protect the community and the civil liberties of youth.

The Boys & Girls Clubs of America's (BGCA) Gang Prevention Through Targeted Outreach program provides an alternative to gang life by recruiting young people directly through a referral network that links local clubs with courts, police, schools, social services,

and other agencies who have contact with youth. Once in the club, young people partici-pate in structured recreational activities. A case management team monitors their progress and problems through monthly reports. A process evaluation showed that once enrolled in the BGCA, 90 percent of the youth attended once a week or more, with 26 percent attending daily. Substantial improvements in the academic arena were also documented.

It is vital to reach out to all aspects of the community to build an effective anti-gang strategy. Here are some ideas about what these partners can do:

Law Enforcement Can

- train community members about how to spot gang graffiti and how to report it
- coordinate identification and suppression of gang activity
- attend community, school, or religious group meetings—any place where parents get together—to discuss gang activities
- make sure parents know what resources are available to help identify and address gang or near gang behaviors
- organize positive activities for young people through agencies like the Police Athletic Leagues or Boys & Girls Clubs
- develop a community-based presence in gang-involved neighborhoods to increase trust and respect
- get involved with the G.R.E.A.T. program.

Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) is a program designed to reduce youth violence and gang membership through a curriculum taught by law enforcement officers to elementary and mid-dle school students. G.R.E.A.T. students are given the opportunity to discover for themselves the ramifi-cations of gang violence through structured exercises and interactive approaches to learning. Included in the curriculum are many optional and extended activities that reinforce classroom instruction.[1]

Teenagers Can

- survey youth in schools and youth programs about their concerns, fears, and needs and work with authorities and community groups to meet them
- start a citywide Youth Council to provide a forum for discussion and influence of gov-ernment policies affecting young people
- take the lead in designing and promoting programs that educate children and other teens about gangs and provide them with self-esteem life skills and activities that counter the appeals of gang membership
- start a graffiti clean-up in their school or neighborhood. A note of caution on graffiti removal. Check with your community's gang expert before removing graffiti. If it is "in memory of____" graffiti, removal can be seen as disrespect.
- get involved or stay involved in such community organizations as the Boys & Girls Club, the YMCA or YWCA, religious congregations, or community centers.

An anti-gang organization called Barrios Unidos helps ex-gang members become part of the community. Many gang members involved with Barrios Unidos have turned their lives around by doing such things as getting their General Educational Development diplomas, taking college courses, and reaching out to other gang members to curb violence and gang activities.

Parents Can

- learn the signs of gang activity—such as graffiti, hand signs, clothing styles, or colors
- learn why youth join gangs and how to counter those influences
- communicate effectively with children
- get involved in programs that create healthy outlets—sports, hobbies, youth clubs, etc.—for youth
- know their child's friends
- discuss with their child consequences of being in a gang
- contact their local law enforcement agency or juvenile probation department to find out up-to-date information on gangs
- go to religious leaders for advice on programs their child can get involved in
- start a program to report and immediately remove any graffiti in their neighborhood.

Parents, educators, and other concerned adults should watch for signs of gang involvement. Changes in a child's behavior or activities, which may be early warning signs of gang involvement, include

- ▶ change in types of friends
- ▶ changes in dress habits, such as wearing the same color combination all the time (note that style changes quickly and just because a child wears a certain type of clothing does not mean he or she is in a gang)
- ▶ displaying gang symbols on books, clothing, or locker
- ▶ wearing tattoos
- ▶ carrying extra cash from unknown sources
- ▶ carrying a weapon
- ▶ losing interest in school and family
- ▶ getting arrested or detained by police
- ▶ becoming truant
- ▶ using alcohol and other drugs
- ▶ talking in gang-style language
- ▶ using hand signals to communicate with others.

Schools Can

- establish policies that prevent gang involvement
- educate teachers and students about recognizing signs of gang activity
- train teachers in techniques for enhancing children's self-esteem
- start a drop-out prevention program
- prohibit symbols and clothing that suggest gang activity or membership
- contact parents immediately if their child shows signs of gang activity
- develop approaches to stop truancy
- start a community service program to give young people the opportunity to identify problems, design solutions, and develop a positive stake in the community
- establish and enforce Drug-Free/Gun-Free School Zones
- stage regular campus-wide graffiti and vandalism clean-up campaigns
- organize crisis intervention teams to counsel students coping with violence in and near schools
- develop an early intervention program for special education classes

- offer students special outreach and after-school programs as an alternative to gang membership.

Religious Institutions Can

- learn about how gangs affect the community
- open meeting and other spaces to positive youth activities
- support such community activities as clean-up campaigns, anti-crime rallies, block parties, and youth-led service projects
- start a youth ministry
- use education, recreation, and counseling efforts to reach out to young people at high risk of gang involvement
- start parent support groups.

Media Can

- support gang prevention and awareness campaigns
- refuse to glorify or publicize gang connections to crimes
- air programs that show youth engaged in constructive activities
- give airtime and print space to youth anti-gang and anti-drug success stories, as well as projects undertaken by young people to help improve community well-being
- support legislation that provides swift prosecution and appropriate penalties for gang-related crime.

Community Organizations Can

- promote activities that are led by or involve youth
- reach out to parents with information and support
- create after-school centers using school facilities
- play a major, visible part in anti-gang coalitions
- train members of the community in gang prevention strategies
- involve adults in the lives of youth
- offer activities that involve youth and their families.

Social Service Agencies Can

- reach out to troubled families with counseling and home visits
- address drug and alcohol problems in the community
- organize recreation, service, and skill-building programs for youth.

Business Leaders Can

- provide apprenticeships and vocational training
- provide summer and other jobs for teens
- adopt a local school
- provide one-on-one tutors and mentors
- reward community volunteerism by employees.

Resources

Boys & Girls Clubs of America
1230 West Peachtree Street, NW
Atlanta, GA 30309
404-815-5763
Web site: bgca.org

Bureau of Justice Assistance Clearinghouse
PO Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20849-6000
800-688-4252
Web site: ncjrs.org

G.R.E.A.T. Program Branch
Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms
PO Box 50418
Washington, DC 20091-0418
800-726-7070
Web site: atf.treas.gov/great/great.htm

Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse
PO Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20849-6000
800-638-8736
Web site: ncjrs.org

National Youth Gang Information Center
Institute for Intergovernmental Research
PO Box 12729
Tallahassee, FL 32317
800-446-0912
Web site: iir.com/nygc/

National Crime Prevention Council
1700 K Street, NW, Second Floor
Washington, DC 20006-3817
202-466-6272
Web site: ncpc.org

National School Safety Center
141 Duesenberg Drive, Suite 11
Westlake Village, CA 91362
805-373-9977
Web site: nssc1.org

National Congress of Parents and Teachers (PTA)
330 North Wabash Avenue, Suite 2100
Chicago, IL 60611
800-307-4782
Web site: pta.org

Police Executive Research Forum (PERF)
1120 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 930
Washington, DC 20036
202-466-7820
Web site: policeforum.org

National Graffiti Information Network
PO Box 400
Hurricane, UT 84737
435-635-0646
Web site: inforwest.com/business/n/ngin

Reference

1. J.L. Arnette and M.C. Walsleben, *Combating Fear and Restoring Safety in Schools* (Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, 1998), 6.