



# OJJDP

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September 2000

## JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN

# Preventing Adolescent Gang Involvement



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*The proliferation of youth gangs since 1980 has fueled the public's fear and magnified possible misconceptions about youth gangs. To address the mounting concern about youth gangs, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP's) Youth Gang Series delves into many of the key issues related to youth gangs. The series considers issues such as gang migration, gang growth, female involvement with gangs, homicide, drugs and violence, and the needs of communities and youth who live in the presence of youth gangs.*

The expansion of the American youth gang problem during the past decade has been widely documented. National survey findings that have noted the spread of gangs throughout the United States indicate that law enforcement agencies across the country are acknowledging the presence of youth gangs in their communities.<sup>1</sup> In particular, recent survey results have documented the presence of youth gangs in rural areas. Most of these rural gangs appear to be primarily homegrown problems and not the result of the social migration of urban gang youth.

The emergence of youth gangs in rural areas and in cities previously without gangs coincided with the juvenile violent crime wave of the 1980's and early 1990's. The issue of whether youth gangs were responsible for the juvenile violent crime wave in the United States is beyond the scope of this Bulletin. However, given the relationship between gang membership and violent offending,<sup>2</sup> it makes sense to examine the youth gang problem within the larger context of youth violence.

American society demonstrated a heightened concern about juvenile violence during the past 30 years. Demographic consequences of the baby boom were, in large part, responsible for this concern. During the 1960's, the number of individuals ages 13-17 rose to 10 percent of the total population, leading to a corresponding increase in the number of crimes occurring within this cohort. By the mid-1980's, youth in this age range had fallen to 7 percent of the total population. However, the number of juvenile crimes did not see a similar decrease, resulting in an increase in the juvenile crime rate (Zimring, 1998). Public concern continued to focus on juvenile violence, drug use, and delinquent

## From the Administrator

The growth of youth gangs over the past few decades is a major cause for concern, particularly with the emergence of youth gangs in rural areas and cities without previous gang problems. While there are no simple solutions to ending the youth gang problem, this Bulletin provides the reader with information to better understand its complexity, while dispelling common gang stereotypes.

After describing the key characteristics of youth gangs, the Bulletin examines risk factors for gang membership, including individual and family demographics, personal attributes, and peer group, school, and community factors.

Gang prevention strategies are presented and illustrated with examples of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention programs. Primary prevention targets the entire at-risk population, while secondary prevention focuses on those identified as being at greatest risk for delinquency. Finally, tertiary prevention efforts involve juvenile offenders and youth gang members.

In sum, this Bulletin offers a solid foundation on which to build a comprehensive strategy to prevent youth gang involvement, examining the youth gang problem within the larger context of juvenile violence.

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<sup>1</sup> These include recent surveys by the National Youth Gang Center (1997, 1999a, 1999b, and in press; Moore and Terrett, 1999; Moore and Cook, 1999) and several earlier surveys (Miller, 1982; Spergel, 1990; Klein, 1995; Curry, Ball, and Fox, 1994; Curry, Ball, and Decker, 1996). For a review of these earlier surveys, see Howell, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Decker and van Winkle, 1996; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen and Winfree, 1998; Thornberry et al., 1993.

behavior. Following an apparent hiatus of youth gangs during the 1970's (Bookin-Weiner and Horowitz, 1983), American society witnessed a reemergence of youth gang activity and media interest in this phenomenon in the 1980's and 1990's. "Colors," "Boyz in the Hood," other Hollywood productions, and MTV brought Los Angeles gang life to suburban and rural America. Recent research also suggests that youth gangs now exist in Europe and other foreign localities (Covey, Menard, and Franzese, 1997; Klein, 1995).

Concurrent with the reemergence of gangs, the juvenile homicide rate doubled (Covey, Menard, and Franzese, 1997) and crack cocaine became an affordable drug of choice for urban youth. In spite of the decline in juvenile violence during the 1990's, concern about this issue continued as a dominant topic in public discourse. Fox (1996) and Dilulio (1995) were among the more widely cited authors who warned of an impending blood bath as a new cohort of superpredators (young, ruthless, violent offenders with casual attitudes about violence) would cause an increase in homicides in the 21st century. The media quickly spread this gloomy scenario. Zimring (1998), however, disputed these doomsday predictions by highlighting the erroneous assumptions underlying them. For example, the predictions were based on the belief that 6 percent of the population would become serious delinquents. Dilulio (1995) argued that by 2010, the population of boys under age 18 in the United States would grow from 32 million to 36.5 million, and that this increase would result in an additional 270,000 serious delinquents. However, this estimate suggested that 1.9 million superpredators already

existed in the United States (6 percent of 32 million). Zimring (1998:62) noted, "That happens to be more young people than were accused of *any* form of delinquency last year in the United States" (emphasis added).

How is this discussion relevant to a Bulletin on gang prevention programs? Just as the superpredator notion took on a life of its own in the media, so too has the image of the drug-crazed, drug-dealing, gang-banging gang member. In fact, the tendency is to consider gang members and superpredators as one and the same. This depiction of youth gang members as marauding, drug-dealing murderers has underlying errors similar to those inherent in the superpredator concept. For the majority of the time, gang youth engage in the same activities as other youth—sleeping, attending school, hanging out, working odd jobs. Only a fraction of their time is dedicated to gang activity. Klein (1995:11) summarized gang life as being "a very dull life. For the most part, gang members do very little—sleep, get up late, hang around, brag a lot, eat again, drink, hang around some more. It's a boring life." In his book about Kansas City, MO, gang members, Fleisher (1998) provided numerous descriptive accounts of this lifestyle. Although gang life may not be as exciting or as violent as media portrayals might suggest, one consistent finding across all research methodologies is that gang youth are in fact more criminally involved than other youth. Illegal behavior attributed to youth gangs is a serious problem for which hype and sensationalism are neither required nor warranted. Regardless of study design or research

methodology, considerable consensus exists regarding the high rate of criminal offending among gang members. With the increase in gang membership and in the violent juvenile crime rate during the past decade (Cook and Laub, 1998) and with the availability of increasingly lethal weapons, criminal activity by gang members has taken on new importance for law enforcement and prevention efforts.

## What Is Known About American Youth Gangs?

Although this Bulletin focuses on gang prevention programs, it is essential to first review what is known about American youth gangs. Aside from the high rate of criminal activity among gang members, what is known about this adolescent phenomenon? What risk factors are associated with the emergence of gangs, and who joins these gangs once they have formed? Are gang members stable or transient? Are they delinquent prior to their gang associations? Are there identifiably different social processes (reasons for joining the gang or expected benefits from gang life) involved for girls and boys who join gangs? These are some of the questions that should help to shape gang prevention efforts.

In spite of years of research and years of suppression, intervention, and prevention efforts, considerable disagreement exists regarding the nature and extent of youth gangs. Debate still centers on how to define gangs. For instance, how many youth constitute a gang? Must the gang members commit crimes as a gang to be considered a gang? Must gangs have an organizational structure? Should skinhead groups, white supremacist groups, and motorcycle gangs be considered part of the youth gang problem? These definitional questions reveal both a lack of consensus about the magnitude of the gang problem and confusion about what policies might best address it (Covey, Menard, and Franzese, 1997; Klein, 1995; Spengel, 1995).

Generally, for a group to be classified a youth gang, the following elements should exist:

- ◆ The group must have more than two members. Given what is known about youth offending patterns (most offenses are committed in groups of two or more) and what has been learned



from studying gangs, a gang seldom consists of only two members.

- ◆ Group members must fall within a limited age range, generally acknowledged as ages 12 to 24.
- ◆ Members must share some sense of identity. This is generally accomplished by naming the gang (often referring to a specific geographic location in the name) and/or using symbols or colors to claim gang affiliation. Hand signs, graffiti, specific clothing styles, bandannas, and hats are among the common symbols of gang loyalty.
- ◆ Youth gangs require some permanence. Gangs are different from transient youth groups in that they show stability over time, generally lasting a year or more. Historically, youth gangs have also been associated with a particular geographical area or turf.
- ◆ Involvement in criminal activity is a central element of youth gangs. While some disagreement surrounds this criterion, it is important to differentiate gangs from noncriminal youth groups such as school and church clubs, which also meet all of the preceding criteria.

For further discussion of the issues associated with defining youth gangs, consult Covey, Menard, and Franzese (1997); Curry and Decker (1998); or Klein (1995).

## What Are the Risk Factors?

To prevent gangs from forming and to keep juveniles from joining existing gangs, it is necessary to understand the causes of gang formation and the underlying attraction of gangs. A considerable number of theoretical statements address these issues. Hagedorn (1988), Jackson (1991), and Klein (1995) are among the authors who argue that gang formation is a product of postindustrial development. Klein (1995:234) states, "Street gangs are an amalgam of racism, of urban underclass poverty, of minority and youth culture, of fatalism in the face of rampant deprivation, of political insensitivity, and the gross ignorance of inner-city (and inner-town) America on the part of most of us who don't have to survive there." The early work of Thrasher (1927) and other Chicago-based gang researchers emphasized the importance of structural and community factors. They believed that delinquency in general and youth gangs in particular were products of the social

environment and that these societal factors may also contribute to juveniles' joining gangs. However, because most youth who reside in areas where gangs exist choose not to join these gangs, additional factors are required to explain why youth join gangs. The following sections provide an overview of the research examining risk factors associated with gang membership. They focus on the following five domains: individual and family demographics, personal attributes, peer group, school, and community.

### Individual and Family Demographics

Traditionally, the typical gang member is male, lives in the inner city, and is a member of a racial or ethnic minority. Although these characteristics may be prevalent among gang members, it should not be assumed that all, or even the overwhelming majority of, gang members share these demographic qualities. In addition to changes in the geographical distribution of gangs (that is, the proliferation into nonurban areas) documented by Klein (1995); Curry, Ball, and Fox (1994); Curry, Ball, and Decker (1996); and the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC) surveys, research in the past 20 years has highlighted the presence of girls in gangs (Bjerregard and Smith, 1993; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Curry, 1998; and Esbensen and Winfree, 1998). Evidence also shows that gang membership is not restricted to youth from racial and ethnic minorities.

Gang behavior has been described almost exclusively as a male phenomenon. Law enforcement estimates generally indicate that more than 90 percent of gang members are male (Curry, Ball, and Fox, 1994). Early references to female gang members were usually restricted to their involvement in sexual activities or as tomboys; they were rarely included in any serious discussions about gangs. The little that was said about gang girls suggested that they were socially inept, maladjusted, and sexually promiscuous and that they suffered from low self-esteem.

Recent survey research, however, suggests that females may account for more than one-third of youth gang members (Esbensen and Winfree, 1998). In addition, a number of contemporary researchers have moved beyond the stereotypical notion that female gang members are merely auxiliary members of male gangs and have proposed gender-specific explanations of gang affiliation (Campbell, 1991;

Chesney-Lind and Shelden, 1992; Fishman, 1995; Miller, 1998). Some researchers have explored the possibility that girls join gangs in search of a sense of belonging to a peer "familial" group (Giordano, 1978; Harris, 1988; Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995). For example, in an ethnographic study of Latina gang members in male-dominated Hispanic gangs in the San Fernando Valley of California, Harris (1988) concluded that Latina gang members were lost between two worlds—Anglo and Mexican American society and culture. The complex social and cultural roles of Latinas, according to Harris, are displayed in Latina gang membership and behavior in which females found peers with whom they could relate. The females would "fight instead of flee, assault instead of articulate, and kill rather than control their aggression" (Harris, 1988:174).

Another myth about the demographics of gang youth is that they are almost exclusively members of ethnic or racial minorities. Some law enforcement estimates and studies based on law enforcement samples indicate that 85 to 90 percent of gang members are African American or Hispanic (Covey, Menard, and Franzese, 1997). However, more recent law enforcement estimates from the 1998 National Youth Gang Survey (National Youth Gang Center, in press) indicate that earlier estimates may overstate the minority representation of gang members. The survey revealed that the race or ethnicity of gang members is closely tied to the size of the community. While Caucasians constituted only 11 percent of gang members in large cities (where most gang research has taken place), they accounted for approximately 30 percent of gang members in small cities and rural counties. Lending credence to law enforcement estimates are ethnographers' depictions of gang youth, usually based on research conducted in socially disorganized communities (that is, characterized by high rates of poverty, mobility, welfare dependency, and single-parent households) in Los Angeles, New York, or other urban areas with high concentrations of minority residents. More general surveys that examine youth gangs also tend to be restricted to specific locations that do not include diverse population samples. For example, longitudinal studies in Denver and Rochester (Bjerregard and Smith, 1993; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry et al., 1993), part of the OJJDP-funded Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency, were concentrated in



high-risk neighborhoods that (by definition) included disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic minorities.

It is worthwhile to note that the early gang studies provided a rich source of information about white urban gangs. These early gangs were usually described according to nationality and/or ethnicity, not race. Researchers began to identify gang members by race in the 1950's (Spergel, 1995). This change in gang composition is closely tied to the social disorganization of urban areas and the research focus on urban youth. Covey, Menard, and Franzese (1997:240) suggested that the scarcity of non-Hispanic, white, ethnic gangs may be attributable to the smaller proportion of non-Hispanic European Americans residing in neighborhoods characterized by social disorganization.

As research expands to more representative samples of the general population, a redefinition of the racial and ethnic composition of gang members is likely. Esbensen and Lynskey (in press) report that community-level demographics are reflected in the composition of youth gangs; that is, gang members are white in primarily white communities and are African American in predominantly African American communities.

Family characteristics of gang members, such as family structure and parental education and income, also have been revised, because the traditional stereotype of gang members as urban, minority males from single-parent families is too restrictive. In fact, gang youth are found in intact two-parent, single-parent, and recombined families. In addition, gang youth are not limited to homes in which parents have low educational achievement or low incomes. Klein (1995:75–76) summarizes gang characteristics as follows (emphasis added):

[I]t is not sufficient to say that gang members come from lower-income areas, from minority populations, or from homes more often characterized by absent parents or reconstituted families. It is not sufficient because most youths from such areas, such groups, and such families do *not* join gangs.

Although it would be erroneous to conclude that demographic characteristics alone can explain gang affiliation, individual factors are nevertheless clearly associated with gang membership; that

is, minority youth residing in single-parent households are at greater risk for joining gangs than are white youth from two-parent households.

### Personal Attributes

Some researchers (for example, Yablonsky, 1962) have found that, compared with nongang youth, gang members are more socially inept, have lower self-esteem, and, in general, have sociopathic characteristics. Moffitt (1993) stated that youth gang members are likely to be "life-course persistent offenders." To what extent are such depictions accurate? Are gang youth substantially different from nongang youth? Recent surveys in which gang and nongang youth's attitudes were compared found few consistent differences.<sup>3</sup> This lack of consistent findings, however, may reflect differences in survey methods and question content. Comparisons between gang and nongang youth have been reported from Rochester (Bjerregard and Smith, 1993), Seattle (Hill et al., 1999), and San Diego (Maxson, Whitlock, and Klein, 1998). These authors used different questions and different sampling methods and reported slightly different findings. In the Seattle study, Hill and colleagues (1999) found that gang youth held more antisocial beliefs, while Maxson, Whitlock, and Klein (1998), among others, found that gang members had more delinquent self-concepts (based on statements such as the following: "I'm the kind of person who gets into fights a lot, is a bad kid, gets into trouble, and does things against the law."), had greater tendencies to resolve conflicts by threats, and had experienced more critical stressful events. On a more generic level, both the Seattle and San Diego studies found significant differences between gang and nongang youth within multiple contexts; that is, individual, school, peer, family, and community characteristics.

Extending this comparative approach, Esbensen, Huizinga, and Weiher (1993) examined gang youth, serious youthful offenders who were not gang members, and nondelinquent youth. Their findings indicated that the nondelinquent youth were different from the delinquent and gang youth—nondelinquent youth reported lower levels of commitment to delinquent peers, lower levels of social isolation, lower tolerance for

deviance, and higher levels of commitment to positive peers. In a partial replication of the study by Esbensen, Huizinga, and Weiher (1993), Deschenes and Esbensen (1997) found a continuum extending from nondelinquent to minor delinquent to serious delinquent to gang member. Based on delinquency scores, they categorized eighth grade students into one of these four classifications. On every measure tested, gang members were significantly different from each of the other groups but were clearly the most distinct from nondelinquents (generally, at least one standard deviation above the mean). Gang members were more impulsive, engaged in more risk-seeking behavior, were less committed to school, and reported less communication with, and lower levels of attachment to, their parents. Nongang youth were more committed to prosocial peers and less committed to delinquent peers.

Using a somewhat different approach, Esbensen et al. (in press) examined differences among gang members. They classified gang members on a continuum, beginning with a broad definition of gang members and gradually restricting the definition to include only those youth who claimed to be core members of a delinquent gang that had a certain level of organizational structure. They found significant attitudinal and behavioral differences between core gang members and those more broadly classified as gang members. They did not find any differences in regard to demographic factors.

In another report from the Seattle study, Battin-Pearson and colleagues (1997) compared nongang youth, transient gang youth (members for 1 year or less), and stable gang youth (members for 2 or more years). Both the transient and stable gang members differed significantly from the nongang youth on a variety of attitudinal and behavioral measures. However, few distinctions between the transient and stable gang members were found. The measures on which differences occurred tended to represent individual- and peer-level measures (for example, personal attitudes and delinquency of friends).

Research shows that the notion of youth joining gangs for life is a myth. While some members make the gang a lifelong endeavor, findings from three longitudinal studies indicate that one-half to two-thirds are members for 1 year or less (Battin-Pearson et al., 1997; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Bjerregard and Smith, 1993; Esbensen, Huizinga, and Weiher, 1993; Esbensen and Deschenes, 1998; Hill et al., 1999; Maxson, Whitlock, and Klein, 1998.

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## Peer Group, School, and Community Factors

One consistent finding from research on gangs, as is the case for research on delinquency in general, is the overarching influence of peers on adolescent behavior (Battin-Pearson et al., 1997; Menard and Elliott, 1994; Warr and Stafford, 1991). In their comparison of stable and transient gang youth, Battin-Pearson and colleagues reported that the strongest predictors of sustained gang affiliation were a high level of interaction with antisocial peers and a low level of interaction with prosocial peers. Researchers have examined the influence of peers through a variety of measures, including exposure to delinquent peers, attachment to delinquent peers, and commitment to delinquent peers. Regardless of how this peer affiliation is measured, the results are the same: Association with delinquent peers is one of the strongest predictors (that is, risk factors) of gang membership.

Gang researchers examine school factors less frequently than other factors. However, they have found that these issues are consistently associated with the risk of joining gangs. Research indicates that gang youth are less committed to school than nongang youth (Bjerregard and Smith, 1993; Esbensen and Deschenes, 1998; Hill et al., 1999; Maxson, Whitlock, and Klein, 1998). Some gender differences have been reported in regard to this issue. In OJJDP's Rochester study, expecta-

tions for educational attainment were predictive of gang membership for girls but not for boys. In a similar vein, Esbensen and Deschenes (1998) found that commitment to school was lower among gang girls than nongang girls. No such differences were found for boys. Studies that examine juveniles' cultures and ethnic backgrounds also attest to the role of school factors in explaining gang membership (Campbell, 1991; Fleisher, 1998).

The community is the domain examined most frequently in regard to both the emergence of gangs and the factors associated with joining gangs. Numerous studies indicate that poverty, unemployment, the absence of meaningful jobs, and social disorganization contribute to the presence of gangs (Curry and Thomas, 1992; Fagan, 1990; Hagedorn, 1988, 1991; Huff, 1990; Vigil, 1988). There is little debate that gangs are more prominent in urban areas and that they are more likely to emerge in economically distressed neighborhoods. However, as previously stated, surveys conducted by NYGC during the 1990's identified the proliferation of youth gangs in rural and suburban communities. Except for law enforcement identification of this phenomenon, few systematic studies have explored these rural and suburban youth gangs. Winfree, Vigil-Backstrom, and Mays (1994) studied youth gang members in Las Cruces, NM, and Esbensen and Lynskey (in press) looked at gang youth in rural areas and small cities that were included in an 11-site study. Although neither of these reports addressed environmental characteristics, they did indicate a substantial level of violence by these gang members.

The traditional image of American youth gangs is characterized by urban social disorganization and economic marginalization; the housing projects or barrios of Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York are viewed as the stereotypical homes of youth gang members. The publication of Wilson's (1987) account of the underclass—those members of society who are truly disadvantaged and affected by changes in social and economic conditions—has renewed interest in the social disorganization perspective advanced by Thrasher (1927) and Shaw and McKay (1942). Los Angeles barrio gangs, according to Vigil (1988) and Moore (1991), are a product of economic restructuring and street socialization. Vigil (1988:9) refers to the multiple marginality (that is, the combined disadvantages of low socioeconomic status, street socialization, and

segregation) of both male and female gang members who live in these socially disorganized areas. In addition to the pressures of marginal economics, these gang members experience the added burden of having marginal ethnic and personal identities. They look for identity and stability in the gang and adopt the cholo subculture—customs that are associated with an attachment to and identification with gangs—that includes alcohol and drug use, conflict, and violence. According to Moore (1991:137–138):

Gangs as youth groups develop among the socially marginal adolescents for whom school and family do not work. Agencies of street socialization take on increased importance under changing economic circumstances, and have an increased impact on younger kids.

Social structural conditions, which have resulted in a lack of education and employment and in lives of poverty without opportunities (Short, 1996), are compounded for females, who experience the additional burden of sexual discrimination and traditional role expectations (Fishman, 1995; Swart, 1995). Social structural conditions alone, however, cannot account for the presence of gangs. Fagan (1990:207) comments that "inner-city youths in this study live in areas where social controls have weakened and opportunities for success in legitimate activities are limited. Nevertheless, participation in gangs is selective, and most youths avoid gang life." Therefore, addressing structural factors is not the only plausible strategy for gang prevention or intervention.

## Prevention Strategies

Given the risk factors associated with violent offending and gang affiliation, are specialized prevention and intervention programs necessary for gang members? This is a critical question that has been asked all too infrequently in research on gang behavior. The trend has been to study gangs as a phenomenon distinct from delinquency in general. Despite the recent emphasis on gangs as a separate topic in research literature, there is reason to believe that gangs and gang programs should also be studied within the overall context of juvenile delinquency. For example, the works of Esbensen and Huizinga (1993), Thornberry et al. (1993), and Battin et al. (1998) suggest that, while the gang environment facilitates delinquency, gang members are already



delinquent prior to joining the gang. However, rates of delinquent activity increase dramatically during the period of gang membership. From a prevention and intervention perspective, three thoughts emerge. First, the finding that delinquency generally precedes gang membership suggests that gang programs should not be limited to gang intervention or suppression. General prevention efforts that target the entire adolescent population may also prove beneficial in reducing youth gang involvement. Second, certain risk factors associated with gang membership have been identified. As such, prevention and intervention strategies that specifically target at-risk youth are warranted. Third, given the level of delinquent activity that occurs within the gang environment, specific programs that seek to intervene in the lives of gang-affiliated youth should also be encouraged.

This section addresses the following types of prevention efforts (Johnson, 1987):

- ◆ Primary prevention focuses on the entire population at risk and the identification of those conditions (personal, social, environmental) that promote criminal behavior.
- ◆ Secondary prevention targets those individuals who have been identified as being at greater risk of becoming delinquent.
- ◆ Tertiary prevention targets those individuals who are already involved in criminal activity or who are gang members.

The preceding discussion of risk factors emphasizes the necessity for all three strategies. In addition, law enforcement has tried a variety of suppression strategies designed to disrupt gang activity.

The past 60 years have seen a variety of gang prevention and intervention strategies. These strategies include efforts that focus on environmental factors and the provision of improved opportunities—for example, the Chicago Area Project developed by Shaw and McKay (1942), the Boston Midcity Project evaluated by Miller (1962), and the Mobilization for Youth program in New York (Bibb, 1967); programs with a distinct social work orientation [most notably the detached worker approach reported by Klein (1971) and Spergel (1966)]; and the strategy of gang suppression by law enforcement [for example, Chicago's Flying Squad (Dart, 1992)]. Most of these programs experienced short



lifespans because changes did not take place immediately or because of a change in administrative priorities. For a review of past programmatic approaches to the gang problem, consult Howell (1995, 1998, and 2000), Klein (1995), or Spergel (1995). It is important to note that, in the overall history of America's response to youth gangs:

Gang prevention programs have been rare. They require accurate knowledge of the predictors of gang membership, that is, identifying likely gang members, and they require knowledge of the causes of gangs and gang membership. Finally, they require knowledge of the likely impact of prevention efforts. (Klein, 1995:137)

As indicated previously, there is a general lack of consensus about why gangs emerge and why juveniles join gangs. Therefore, it is more difficult to develop gang prevention programs and assess their impact.

## Prevention Programs

### Primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention: The Chicago Area Project.

The history of gang intervention in the United States shows that early programs emphasized prevention. . . . The Chicago Area Project (CAP) (Sorrentino, 1959; Sorrentino and Whittaker, 1994), created in 1934, was designed to implement social

disorganization theories, which suggested that community organization could be a major tool for reducing crime and gang problems. CAP was designed to involve local community groups, that is, indigenous community organizations, in improving neighborhood conditions that were believed to foster the formation of youth groups. (Howell, 1998:3)

CAP is representative of a community change approach and is perhaps the most widely known delinquency prevention program in American history. CAP was based on the theoretical perspective of Shaw and McKay and is summarized in their 1942 publication. Its intent was to prevent delinquency, including gang activity, through neighborhood and community development. CAP organized community residents through self-help committees based in preexisting community structures such as church groups and labor unions. Consistent with the research findings of Shaw and McKay, it was believed that the cause of maladaptive behavior was the social environment, not the individual. CAP and other similar programs are, at least in part, primary prevention efforts that target all adolescents in the neighborhood.

During the latter part of the 1940's, CAP introduced its detached worker program, which focused on either at-risk youth (secondary prevention) or, in some instances, current gang members (tertiary intervention). It recruited community members to help develop recreational activities and community improvement campaigns (e.g., health care, sanitation, education). These individuals worked with specific neighborhood gangs and served as advocates for gang members. This included advocating for gang members when they were confronted by the justice system and helping them find employment, health care, and educational assistance, among other services. The intent of the detached worker program was to transform the gang from an anti-social youth group to a prosocial group.

CAP's detached worker component was adopted by numerous other programs, including the Boston Midcity Project (Miller, 1962), Los Angeles' Group Guidance Program and Ladino Hills Project (Klein, 1968), and Chicago's Youth Development Project (Caplan et al., 1967). Although based on sound principles, Klein's Ladino Hills Project (which was a carefully designed implementation and evaluation of the



detached worker program) led to the conclusion that the detached workers created an unintended outcome: increased gang cohesiveness, which resulted in increased gang crime. According to Klein (1995:143), "Increased group programming leads to increased cohesiveness (both gang growth and gang 'tightness'), and increased cohesiveness leads to increased gang crime." Klein (1995:147) concluded, "We had affected them but not their community. The lesson is obvious and important. Gangs are by-products of their communities: They cannot long be controlled by attacks on symptoms alone; the community structure and capacity must also be targeted."

Klein's research focused on detached workers targeting gang members (tertiary prevention), but the overall effectiveness of the CAP model remains in question. In regard to the community change approach described previously, subjective assessments by individuals involved with the project proclaimed its success. To date, however, the evaluations of this strategy have not reported a reduction in gangs or in gang activity. One review of delinquency programs stated that the measures collected by the program staff "have never been reported in ways that permit outsiders to assess the extent to which the Chicago Area Project accomplished its announced goal of preventing delinquency" (Lundman, 1993:74). In fact, evaluations of the Boston Midcity Project and other projects based on community organization and detached workers have documented that the programs failed to reduce delinquency and gang activity.

OJJDP promotes Spergel's Comprehensive Gang Model as a comprehensive communitywide response to gangs. This model consists of the following five strategies, which are representative of secondary and tertiary prevention:

- (1) Mobilizing community leaders and residents to plan, strengthen, or create new opportunities or linkages to existing organizations for gang-involved or at-risk youth;
- (2) using outreach workers to engage gang-involved youth;
- (3) providing or facilitating access to academic, economic, and social opportunities;
- (4) conducting gang suppression activities and holding gang-involved youth accountable; and
- (5) facilitating organizational change and development to help community agencies better address gang problems through a team 'problem-solving' approach that is consistent with the phi-

losophy of community oriented policing. (Burch and Kane, 1999)

Evaluations of this program have been initiated, but to date no results have been published. An evaluation of the Little Village Project, a precursor to the Comprehensive Gang Model, has shown promising preliminary results (Spergel and Grossman, 1997; Spergel et al., 1999).

**Primary prevention: School-based prevention programs.** Schools provide one of the common grounds for American youth. Although growing numbers of children are being home schooled, the majority participate in the public education system. In recent years, schools have become a focal point for general delinquency prevention programs. The average middle school provides 14 different violence, drug, and other social problem prevention programs (Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 1999). One gang-specific prevention program that has received considerable attention is the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program. The Phoenix Police Department introduced this school-based program in 1991 to provide "students with real tools to resist the lure and trap of gangs" (Humphrey and Baker, 1994:2). Modeled after the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) program, the 9-week G.R.E.A.T. program introduces students to conflict resolution skills, cultural sensitivity, and the negative aspects of gang life. G.R.E.A.T. has spread throughout the country; to date, it has been incorporated in school curriculums in all 50 States and several other countries.

The objectives of the G.R.E.A.T. program are "to reduce gang activity and to educate a population of young people as to the consequences of gang involvement" (Esbensen and Osgood, 1999:198). The curriculum consists of nine lessons offered once a week to middle school students (primarily seventh graders). Law enforcement officers (who always teach the program) are given detailed lesson plans that clearly state the purposes and objectives of the curriculum. The program consists of the following nine lessons: introduction; crime, victims, and your rights; cultural sensitivity and prejudice; conflict resolution (two lessons: discussion and practical exercises); meeting basic needs; drugs and neighborhoods; responsibility; and goal setting. The curriculum includes a discussion about gangs and their effects on the quality of people's lives and addresses the topic of resisting peer pressure.

To date, two evaluations have reported small but positive effects on students' attitudes and their ability to resist peer pressure (Palumbo and Ferguson, 1995; Esbensen and Osgood, 1999). Using a multisite, pre- and posttest research design, Palumbo and Ferguson reported that students in the G.R.E.A.T. program had a "slightly increased ability" to resist the pressures to join gangs. The authors acknowledged, however, that "the lack of a control group prevents assessments of the internal validity. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that the results . . . were due to G.R.E.A.T. as opposed to other factors" (Palumbo and Ferguson, 1995:600). A second multisite evaluation of G.R.E.A.T. examined the program's effectiveness. This evaluation compared eighth grade students who had completed the program with a comparable group of students who had not participated in G.R.E.A.T. The G.R.E.A.T. students self-reported less delinquency and had lower levels of gang affiliation, higher levels of school commitment, and greater commitment to prosocial peers, among other positive outcomes. However, the statistically significant effects were modest in terms of effect size, with an average between-group difference of about one-tenth of a standard deviation (Esbensen and Osgood, 1999).

As evidenced by the curriculum, the intent of the G.R.E.A.T. program is to provide life skills that empower adolescents with the ability to resist peer pressure to join gangs. The strategy is a cognitive approach that seeks to produce a change in attitude and behavior through instruction, discussion, and role-playing. Another notable feature of the program is its target population. In contrast to suppression and intervention programs, which are directed at youth who already are gang members, G.R.E.A.T. is intended for all youth. This is the classic, broad-based primary prevention strategy found in medical immunization programs: They intervene broadly, with a simple and relatively unintrusive program, well before any problem is detectable and without any attempt to predict who is most likely to be affected by the problem.

**Secondary prevention: Boys & Girls Clubs of America program and the Montreal program.** The Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) has developed a program "to aggressively reach youth at risk of gang involvement and mainstream them into the quality programs the Club already offers" (Boys & Girls Clubs of

America, 1993). This program, Gang Prevention Through Targeted Outreach, is an example of secondary prevention and consists of structured recreational, educational, and life skills programs (in conjunction with training) that are geared to enhance communication skills, problem-solving techniques, and decisionmaking abilities. This strategy targets youth who are at risk of becoming involved in gangs and seeks to alter their attitudes and perceptions and to improve their conflict resolution skills.

The BGCA outreach program also involves at-risk youth in conventional activities. Through its case management system, BGCA maintains detailed records on each youth, including participation in program activities, school attendance, contact with the justice system, and general achievements or problems. This information allows caseworkers to reward prosocial behavior or to take proactive measures in the event the youth engages in behaviors likely to lead to gang involvement (for example, skipping school, breaking curfew, and associating with delinquent friends).

Feyerherm, Pope, and Lovell (1992) conducted a process evaluation of 33 different BGCA gang intervention programs. Their examination focused on the degree to which the clubs implemented the gang intervention model and the extent to which clients received the various treatment components. The researchers concluded that "the youth gang prevention and early intervention initiative by Boys & Girls Clubs of America is both sound and viable in its approach" (Feyerherm, Pope, and Lovell, 1992:5). The researchers also collected descriptive information on risk

factors and found that 48 percent of participants showed improvement in school (more than one-third of the youth improved their grades, and one-third improved their school attendance). However, to date, no evaluation results have been published that address the effectiveness of this strategy in reducing gang involvement. BGCA has also expanded this program in recent years to reach out to youth who have become involved with gangs.

The Montreal Preventive Treatment Program (Tremblay et al., 1996) is another secondary prevention program. It addresses early childhood risk factors for gang involvement by targeting boys from low socioeconomic backgrounds who display disruptive behavior while in kindergarten. It offers parents training sessions on effective discipline techniques, crisis management, and other parenting skills while the boys participate in training sessions that emphasize development of prosocial skills and self-control. An evaluation of the program showed that, compared with the control group, significantly fewer boys in the treatment group were gang members at age 15.

**Tertiary prevention.** Tertiary prevention programs target individuals who are already involved with gangs. Although this approach includes detached worker programs such as those described above, a more common strategy implemented during the past decade has relied on law enforcement suppression tactics. Two such programs serve as examples. During the early 1990's, the Chicago Police Department experimented with the "Flying Squad," a special unit comprising young officers selected from the department's three gang units. According to Dart (1992),

Chicago's chronic gang problem had left residents feeling intimidated and harassed. In response, the Chicago Police Department decided to give the impression of an omnipresent police force by assigning an additional 100 officers (the Flying Squad) to the Gang Crime Section and saturating an area of approximately 5 square blocks every night. It is interesting that while the intent of this tactic was to hold gangs accountable to the fullest measure of the law, the author acknowledges that "to win the war . . . there must be a marriage of intervention, prevention, and suppression strategies aimed at deterring and containing gang activity" (Dart, 1992:104). As with most gang prevention programs, this program was short lived and was disbanded by 1998.

The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), with its long history of dealing with gangs, organized a suppression unit in 1977. It was known as the Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) unit, and its mission was to combat gang crime. This unit was a "high profile gang control operation, carried out by uniformed patrol officers, stressing high visibility, street surveillance, proactive suppression activities, and investigative follow-through arrests" (Klein, 1995). At approximately the same time, LAPD began Operation Hammer, in which hundreds of officers saturated a predesignated area and arrested citizens for every possible legal violation and suspicious activity. Evaluations of these types of suppression efforts are lacking, but the consensus is that they are not likely to be an effective means of combating gang crime<sup>4</sup> (Klein, 1995; Spergel and Curry, 1995).

Law enforcement also has responded to juvenile violence and gangs with new ordinances, including curfew laws, anti-loitering laws, and civil injunctions. These suppression tactics limit the ability of certain groups of people (based on age or group affiliation) to congregate in public places based on the belief that such restrictions will reduce gang activity.



<sup>4</sup> During a weekend of Operation Hammer, for example, 1,453 arrests were made (half of those arrested were nongang members). Of these, 1,350 were released without charges being filed. Only 60 felony arrests were made; 32 of them resulted in charges being filed. This was the end product of 1,000 police officers saturating a small section of south central Los Angeles. In addition, this suppression and saturation approach assumes that gang members commit crimes based on a rational decisionmaking process. In reality, these crimes are more spontaneous and include fights, random assaults, and driveby shootings.



However, constitutional concerns (that is, violations of the 1st, 4th, 5th, 9th, and 14th amendments) have been raised, and a 1999 U.S. Supreme Court decision declared that a Chicago antiloitering law was unconstitutional. This law targeted gang members (that is, persons the police believed to be gang members) by prohibiting the gathering of two or more people in any public place. Other jurisdictions have implemented civil injunctions and statutes that restrict or prohibit gang members from gathering in particular places (for example, parks, specific street corners, playgrounds) or from engaging in specific acts or wearing certain paraphernalia (wearing pagers or bandannas, riding bicycles, flashing gang signs). Evaluations of these city ordinances are mixed, as is legal opinion assessing their constitutionality (American Civil Liberties Union, 1997).

## Conclusion

In light of the risk factors discussed at the outset of this Bulletin, what conclusions can be made about gang prevention strategies? In regard to primary prevention, three facts are particularly salient. First, gang formation is not restricted to urban, underclass areas. Second, gang members come from a variety of backgrounds; they are not exclusively male, urban, poor, minority, or from single-parent households. Third, once juveniles join a gang, they engage in high levels of criminal activity. Therefore, it is appropriate to formulate primary gang prevention efforts that target the entire adolescent population.

In terms of secondary prevention approaches, some youth are at higher risk of joining gangs. Although social structural conditions associated with gang formation and demographic characteristics attributed to gang members are diverse (and despite the facts stated above), youth gangs are still more likely to be found in socially disorganized or marginalized communities. Secondary prevention strategies should, therefore, focus on communities and youth exposed to these greater risk factors. Community-level gang problem assessments may help guide prevention strategies by identifying areas and groups of youth that are most at risk for gang activity.

Tertiary prevention programs, such as CAP and a variety of gang suppression techniques, have shown little promise. Some detached worker programs produced the unintended consequence of increasing gang cohesion (Klein, 1995). Operation Hammer, CRASH, and similar

law enforcement crackdowns have proven to be inefficient suppression approaches to gang activity and are not cost effective.

In conclusion, there is no clear solution to preventing or reducing gang activity, although some promising programs have been identified. As Short (1996:xvii) indicated (italics in original):

*Systematic and sustained research is necessary if we are to understand gangs or any aspect of human behavior. A corollary is equally important. If they are to be successful, efforts to prevent, intervene with, or suppress gangs also must be systematic, sustained, and based on local knowledge and on research that is systematic and up to date.*

Recent findings from the Seattle study (Battin-Pearson et al., 1997), in which early predictors of gang affiliation were identified, highlight the importance of early primary prevention strategies. Additionally, given results from relatively recent studies of girls in gangs and girls who associate with gang members but are not part of the gang (Deschenes and Esbensen, 1999; Esbensen and Deschenes, 1998; Fleisher, 1998; Miller, 1998), prevention programs may need to consider gender as part of their efforts.

Much of this Bulletin has focused on individual factors. However, prevention efforts that concentrate only on individual characteristics will fail to address the underlying problems. As Short (1997:181–194) states:

Effective interventions at the individual level that seek to control violence thus require that macro-level factors . . . be taken into consideration. . . . Absent change in the macro-level forces associated with these conditions, vulnerable individuals will continue to be produced. It follows that . . . to be effective in reducing overall levels of violent crime, interventions directed primarily at the individual level must address the macro-level as well. . . . A substantial body of research demonstrates . . . that single approaches, whether based on prevention, suppression, coordination of agency programs, community change, or law enforcement, are unlikely to prevent gang formation or to be successful in stopping their criminal behavior.

This overview of gang prevention strategies has sought to highlight the complexity of the youth gang issue, dispel some com-

mon stereotypes about youth gangs, and provide a framework within which to develop prevention programs. Clearly, there is no one “magic bullet” program or “best practice” for preventing gang affiliation and gang-associated violence. The youth gang problem is one that will be best addressed through a comprehensive strategy that incorporates primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention approaches. The Comprehensive Gang Model is one example of a multifaceted approach that targets individual youth, peer groups, families, and the community.

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*The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.*

### Acknowledgments

Finn-Aage Esbensen, Ph.D., is Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

The author would like to thank G. David Curry, James C. Howell, Cheryl Maxson, and Terrance J. Taylor for their comments on earlier drafts of this Bulletin.

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