

CHANGING COURSE

Preventing Gang Membership



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Acknowledgments

Like most good partnerships, the one that resulted in this book was sparked by two thought leaders who wanted to push some envelopes. In 2008, Phelan Wyrick, Ph.D. (now a senior advisor to the Assistant Attorney General for DOJ's Office of Justice Programs) was an NIJ program manager when he picked up the phone and called Dr. Rodney Hammond, then the Director of the Division of Violence Prevention at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Wyrick pitched his idea: 'We know that youth gangs contribute disproportionately to crime and violence ... so let's put some good public health and criminal justice minds to work on determining ways to stop kids from joining gangs in the first place.' Always a champion of prevention, Hammond immediately saw the advantages of this collaboration. The editors of this book — who turned that vision into print, Web, and ebook — thank them for their inspiration. Our thanks also go to Louis Tuthill, Ph.D. (a social scientist formerly with NIJ) and Winifred L. Reed (Director of NIJ's Crime, Victimization and Violence Research Division), who were instrumental in envisioning the structure of the book, recruiting the authors and reviewing early drafts of the chapters. Finally, our thanks go to Linda Dahlberg, Ph.D., Associate Director for Science at CDC's Division of Violence Prevention, for her support from the beginning.

— The Editors

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Introduction

Youth gang membership is a serious and persistent problem in the United States. One in three local law enforcement agencies report youth gang problems in their jurisdictions.¹ One in four high school freshmen report gangs in their schools.² Limited resources at the national, state, tribal and local levels make it more important than ever that we make full use of the best available evidence and clearly demonstrate the benefit of strategies to prevent gang-joining.

In acknowledgment of these realities, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) formed a partnership to publish this book. It is critical that those who make decisions about resources — as well as those who work directly with youth, like teachers and police officers, community services providers and emergency department physicians — understand what the research evidence shows about how to prevent kids from joining gangs.

The NIJ-CDC partnership drew on each agency's distinctive strengths: NIJ's commitment to enhancing justice and increasing public safety is matched by CDC's dedication to health promotion and prevention of violence, injury and disability. By combining perspectives, lessons and evidence from public safety *and* public health, NIJ and CDC provide new insights into the complex problems of gangs and gang membership.

Public health and public safety workers who respond to gang problems know that after-the-fact efforts are not enough. An emergency department doctor who treats gang-related gunshot wounds or a police officer who must tell a mother that her son has been killed in a drive-by shooting are likely to stress the need for prevention — and the complementary roles that public health and law enforcement must play — in stopping violence before it starts.

Given our shared commitment to informing policy and practice with the best available evidence of what works, CDC and NIJ brought together some of the nation's top public health and criminal justice researchers to present core principles for gang-membership prevention.

Why Are Principles So Important?

It would seem to go without saying that we should try to prevent kids from joining gangs. But why publish an entire book on principles rather than just a straightforward recipe for preventing gang-joining?

There are at least four reasons to focus on principles of prevention:

1. Much of what we know about preventing gang membership is drawn from research in other prevention fields, such as juvenile delinquency and violence prevention.
2. Joining a gang is a complex process that involves both individual volition and social influences; therefore, it is difficult to imagine that a single "recipe" for preventing gang membership would be effective for all at-risk youth across the array of social contexts.
3. Our focus on prevention principles better equips us to confront the specific public health and public safety issues linked to gang membership: interpersonal violence, truancy and school dropout, alcohol and substance abuse, and a host of related crime and health challenges.
4. By emphasizing principles, we seek to move the public discourse beyond an overly simplistic notion of gangs and gang problems — in an effort to cultivate an understanding of the complex array of social patterns and individual behaviors that are encountered under the rubric of "gangs."

The consequences of gangs — and the burden they place on the law enforcement and health systems in our communities — are significant. The simple truth, however, is that gang intervention and suppression activities and strategies for providing medical services to gang members and victims of gang violence, although critical, are not enough. We must implement early prevention strategies to keep youth from joining gangs in the first place. Indeed, we believe that, faced with current economic realities, prevention is the smartest, most economical approach to solving the gang problem and its cascading impact on individuals, families, neighborhoods and society at large.

Consider the impact of violence. In the U.S., homicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescents and young adults: it results in an average of 13 deaths every day among those ages 10-24.³ However, the number of violent deaths tells only part of the story: More than 700,000 young people are treated in U.S. emergency departments for assault-related injuries each year.³ Violence also erodes communities by reducing productivity, decreasing property values and disrupting social services.

Now, consider the impact of gangs on violence and other crime. Youth involved in gangs are far more likely than youth not involved in gangs to be both victims and perpetrators of violence.^{4,5} In many U.S. communities, gang members (including youth and adult members of street, outlaw motorcycle and prison gangs) are responsible for more than half of the violent crimes and, in some jurisdictions, gang members are responsible for 90 percent of violent crimes.⁶

The consequences of youth gang membership extend beyond the risk for crime and violence. Gang-involved youth are more likely to engage in substance abuse and high-risk sexual behavior and to experience a wide range of potentially long-term health and social consequences, including school dropout, teen parenthood, family problems and unstable employment.⁷

Why Prevention?

The goal of this book is to provide practitioners and policymakers with knowledge about why kids become involved in gangs and to offer effective and promising strategies that *prevent* them from doing so. A significant proportion of local, state and federal budgets — in health, criminal justice, law enforcement and community services — is dedicated to dealing with gang-joining and its sequelae *after* it has occurred. We also know that a large majority of youth who join gangs do so very young — between ages 11 and 15 — and the peak ages for gang-joining are between 13 and 15 years old.⁸

Fortunately, we know that many early prevention programs provide taxpayers with significantly more benefits than costs. Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman, for example, has written about the economic benefits of targeting high-risk children before they start kindergarten.⁹ Researchers at the Washington State Institute for Public Policy have done cost-benefit analyses of programs that show significant effects on a range of outcomes, including crime, educational attainment, substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, teen pregnancy and public assistance. One example is the Nurse-Family Partnership, which provides support during pregnancy to low-income women and helps them develop parenting skills during the child's first two years of life. Evaluations of the long-term effects of this program show significant reductions in child neglect and abuse, and sustained effects on the child through age 15, including less likelihood of running away, reduced alcohol consumption, and 56 percent fewer arrests. The Nurse-Family Partnership is estimated to provide \$2.37 return on every dollar invested, resulting in approximately \$13,181 in savings per child.¹⁰

Although such cost-benefit data provide decision-makers with the fiscal rationale for implementing early prevention programs, it is also important to consider the ethical responsibility that communities have to help children avoid gang membership. That said, no one who reads this book will be surprised to learn that there is no quick fix. Reducing gang activity and violence requires a combination of strategies, including prevention, enforcement and reentry services for those returning from confinement. Preventing gang membership in the first place holds promise for long-term success in reducing both violence and crime *and* the “downstream” societal problems that stem from gang activities.

What You Will Learn

Little scientific evidence specifically addresses gang-membership prevention; however, the body of research on youth delinquency and youth violence offers substantial insights. Where research specific to gang-joining exists, the experts who worked on this book discuss it, but we also asked them to consider research on youth violence, delinquency, developmental ecology and substance use to explore promising principles for gang-membership prevention.

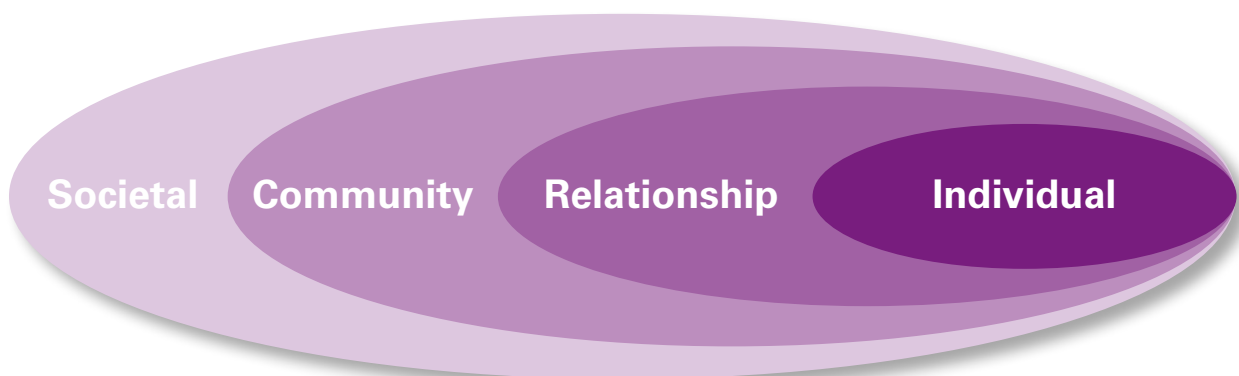
We begin with a chapter by a pioneer in the field of youth gangs, James (“Buddy”) Howell. Examining why preventing gang-joining is so important, Dr. Howell discusses the latest information about the magnitude and seriousness of the gang problem in the U.S. In chapter 2, Dr. Carl Taylor and Ms. Pamela Smith discuss aspects of gang life that are attractive to some youth. This chapter considers the perceptions that an adolescent may have about the personal, economic and social motives for joining a gang.

In chapter 3, Dr. Tamara Haegerich, Dr. James Mercy and Ms. Billie Weiss explore the public health impact of gang membership, and they encourage readers to consider the complementary roles of public health and law enforcement in helping to prevent kids from joining a gang. In chapter 4, Dr. Scott Decker describes the role that law enforcement can play in preventing youth from joining a gang and recommends an emphasis on prevention rather than suppression-only tactics. Together, these two chapters highlight the importance of collaboration and coordination across sectors, including health, law enforcement, education and business.

The next four chapters are structured according to the social ecological model for designing prevention strategies.

The social ecological model posits multiple levels at which risk factors can be reduced and protective factors can be enhanced — moving from within individuals and relationships to an entire community or society at large (see graphic, “Levels of Social Influence on Youth Violence: The Social Ecological Model”). First, in chapter 5, Dr. Nancy Guerra and colleagues describe the individual and family factors in early childhood (ages 0-5) and the elementary school years (ages 6-12) that increase the risk for gang-joining. They also explore opportunities for prevention when at-risk youth are identified and provided with age-appropriate prevention strategies that help them avoid a cascade of problems, including gang-joining, delinquency and violence. In chapter 6, Dr. Deborah Gorman-Smith and colleagues focus on how early prevention strategies increase the protective role of families by enhancing consistent and appropriate

Levels of Social Influence on Youth Violence: The Social Ecological Model



SOURCE: Dahlberg LL, Krug EG. Violence — A global public health problem. In: Krug EG, Dahlberg LL, Mercy JA, Zwi AB, Lozano R, eds., *World Report on Violence and Health*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization, 2002.

discipline, monitoring, communication and warmth. In chapter 7, Dr. Gary Gottfredson describes the need for strategies to enhance the willingness — and ability — of schools to assess gang problems accurately, implement prevention strategies, and address the fear in schools that contributes to the risk for gang-joining. In chapter 8, Dr. Jorja Leap emphasizes the opportunity to build on existing strengths within communities. She describes the need for community-based, multifaceted prevention efforts that work across the life span and are grounded in collaboration among the various stakeholders.

As the editors of this book, we felt strongly that — in addition to describing principles for gang-membership prevention at the individual, family, school and community levels — it was incumbent on us to consider head-on the need to reduce gang-joining among girls and the issues of race and ethnicity. In chapter 9, Dr. Meda Chesney-Lind explores how we can prevent girls from joining gangs. Her discussion includes the risks of child sexual abuse, poor family functioning, neighborhood safety, substance abuse and dating violence. In chapter 10, Drs. Adrienne Freng and T.J. Taylor look at the complex role that race and ethnicity can play in gang membership. Although there is no doubt that more research is needed in this area, they argue that, at this point, common underlying risk factors — such as poverty, challenges for immigrants, discrimination and social isolation — should be our focus.

In chapter 11, Drs. Finn Esbensen and Kristy Matsuda examine a subject that is critical to those responsible for making decisions about how limited resources for gang-membership prevention are allocated. Everyone — from federal and state policymakers to local school board members, and from health departments to police departments — is eager to answer the question: “How do we *know* if we are preventing gang membership?” Anecdotal success stories do not justify creating a new program or continuing the investment in an ongoing one. Decisions should be made on the best available evidence. We believe that it is crucial for decision-makers to understand the key principles of process, outcome and cost-effectiveness evaluations offered in this chapter.

Finally, in our Conclusion, we extend an invitation to policymakers and practitioners to engage in a new way of thinking about the intersection of public health and public safety strategies and leveraging public health and public safety resources. As a collaboration of international experts recently noted, “It may not be an easy invitation to accept.”¹¹ We are accustomed to attacking problems such as gang-joining through “silos.” These silos can exist in all levels of government and can be fairly entrenched. So, in addition to facing our nation’s economic challenges, we must start breaking down silos — silos of thinking, silos of action. With this goal in mind, the Conclusion offers suggestions for strategic actions that can help prevent kids from joining a gang.

Making Research Useful to Practitioners and Policymakers

The chapters in this book have these common features to help readers determine what information may be most important to them, see the most critical information up front, and begin to connect research with real-world applications:

- The titles are framed as questions.
- Key principles are presented in bulleted form.
- An “In Brief” summary pulls together key findings and ideas.
- A Q&A interview with a practitioner offers a personalized illustration of the principles discussed.
- Implementation and policy challenges are explored.

The need to move beyond silos is one of the reasons we brought together diverse perspectives: public health and law enforcement, researchers and practitioners. Criminal justice and public health can collaborate at multiple levels to raise awareness about the importance of early prevention in helping to keep youth from joining gangs and to ensure that the best available evidence of what works is identified and fully used.

This book provides a foundation for that collaboration by describing the principles and promising practices for preventing gang-joining that practitioners and policymakers can use to guide decisions and long-term planning for reducing gang activity. NIJ and CDC are dedicated to this mission, and we hope that this collaboration will serve as an example of the way forward.

Vocabulary: Some Basic Definitions

Vocabulary can be a stumbling block for collaboration across sectors. To help avoid confusion and to facilitate consistency across chapters, we established a few basic operational definitions. In the same way that this book attempts to help break down silos between criminal justice and public health, we tried to remove some of the jargon that might get in the way of policymakers and practitioners understanding and embracing the principles in this book. Here, then, is some general guidance about what we mean when we use these terms:

Youth gang: Although there is no standard definition of what constitutes a gang, one of our authors, James C. (“Buddy”) Howell, has offered a practical definition, which incorporates several widely accepted criteria for classifying a group as a youth gang:¹²

- Five or more members.
- Members share an identity, often linked to a name and other symbols.
- Members view themselves as a gang and are recognized by others as a gang.
- The group has some permanence and a degree of organization.
- The group is involved in an elevated level of delinquent or criminal activity.

Gang-joining: We use an operational perspective to define this as when a youth self-identifies as a member of a gang.

Gang-membership/Gang-joining prevention: This is the implementation of a strategy, program or policy that has the direct or indirect effect of reducing youth’s risk of joining a gang. We use the term *primary prevention* to refer to preventing youth from joining a gang in the first place. We include strategies that either reduce known risk factors or enhance protective factors that reduce the likelihood of gang-joining.

Evidence: Principles or assertions made by the authors of the chapters in this book are based on systematic research. We have endeavored to ensure that an evaluation exists to support statements of effectiveness and that the rigor of an evaluation qualifies the strength of statements about a program’s or principle’s effectiveness. We have tried to ensure that the authors avoided (1) statements of opinion or observation that are not based on systematic research, (2) assessments or discussions of a strategy’s effectiveness that are not based on an evaluation, and (3) overstatement of confidence in the results of evaluation.

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Why Is Gang-Membership Prevention Important?

James C. Howell

- **Gangs are a serious, persistent problem in the United States; according to the National Youth Gang Survey, from 2002 to 2010 the estimated number of youth gangs increased by nearly 35 percent — from 21,800 to 29,400 nationwide.**
- **Because high-rate gang offenders impose enormous costs on society, successful prevention and early intervention programs potentially can produce large monetary cost savings to communities.**
- **Programs and strategies are most urgently needed with high-risk youth, families, schools and communities.**
- **The most successful comprehensive gang initiatives are communitywide in scope; have broad community involvement in planning and delivery; and employ integrated prevention, outreach, support and services.**

In Brief

Youth gangs are not a new social problem in the United States. They have been a serious problem since the early 19th century — and they remain a persistent problem. Overall, one-third (34 percent) of cities, towns and rural counties in this country reported gang problems in 2010.¹ Recent data indicate that nearly half of high school students report that there are students at their school who consider themselves to be part of a gang, and 1 in 5 students in grades 6-12 report that gangs are present in their school.^{2,3} Other data have found that nearly 1 in 12 youth said they belonged to a gang at some point during their teenage years.⁴

The consequences of joining a gang are potentially very serious, both for the youth and for their communities. The frequency with which someone commits serious and violent acts typically increases while they are gang members, compared with periods before and after gang involvement. Adolescents who are in a gang commit many more serious and violent offenses than nongang adolescents.^{5,6} In samples from several U.S. cities, gang members account for approximately three-fourths of the violent offenses committed by delinquents in those samples.⁶ Gang involvement also elevates drug use and gun carrying, leading to arrest, conviction, incarceration and a greater likelihood of violent victimization. These experiences bring disorder to the life course through a cascading series of difficulties, including school dropout, teen parenthood and unstable employment.⁷

The total volume of crime costs Americans an estimated \$655 billion each year.⁸ Over his or her lifetime, each high-rate criminal offender can impose between \$4.2 and \$7.2 million in costs on society and their victims.^{9,10} Early prevention activities that target high-risk youth can have enormous payoffs *if* they are effective. Early prevention strategies are likely to produce other social and behavioral benefits in addition to reducing the risk for gang membership.

Universal prevention approaches are necessary to reach the entire youth population and reduce the number of youth who join gangs, particularly in high-crime and high-risk communities. More

intensive “*selected*” prevention programs are needed to reach youth who are most at risk of gang involvement.

To succeed, communities must first assess their gang problem and use that assessment to craft a continuum of responses that are communitywide in scope. These responses should involve the community in planning and delivering prevention and intervention programs and employ integrated outreach, support and services. A balanced approach that incorporates each of these components is most likely to have a significant impact.

This chapter draws on multiple data sources to provide a brief summary of the scope of youth gang problems in the United States. The second section considers the consequences of gang membership and calls attention to several issues of concern, particularly the enormous costs associated with gangs and criminal careers. The third section discusses the potential for gang-membership prevention activities. And, finally, the chapter concludes with a call for comprehensive, communitywide initiatives.

The gang problem in the United States persists, even though violent crime and property crime rates have dropped dramatically.^{5,11} An enduring concern for many large jurisdictions is the continued presence of gangs and gang activity, which are often associated with violence and serious crimes.^{1,5} About one-quarter of all homicides in cities with populations of 100,000 or more were gang-related in 2009.^{5,12} Gang activity and its associated violence remain significant components of the U.S. crime problem. It has been reasonably assumed that gang activity would follow the overall dramatic declines in violent crime nationally; however, the analyses provided in this report find overwhelming evidence to the contrary — that is, gang problems have continued at exceptional levels over the past decade despite the remarkable drop in crime overall.

Other data — regarding youth gangs, in particular — are equally compelling. In a 2010 national survey, 45 percent of high school students and 35 percent of middle school students said that there were gangs — or students who considered themselves to be part of a gang — in their school.²

Youth gangs are not a new phenomenon; they have been a serious crime problem in the United States since the early 19th century.^{5,13} However, as described below, key indicators of youth-gang activity clearly show the persistence of this social problem over the past decade. These indicators

include youth self-admission of gang membership and estimates of gang activity by knowledgeable observers of gangs, particularly law enforcement. Youth surveys are also a main source of information for gauging gang activity.

Although most youth never join a gang, 8 percent of youth reported in a national survey that they had belonged to a gang at some point between the ages of 12 and 17.⁴ The proportion of youth that joins a gang during this age span is largest in high-crime areas and among high-risk youth in cities with gang problems. This proportion can vary considerably across cities — for example, 17 percent of youth in Denver, CO, and 32 percent in Rochester, NY, were members of a gang at some point during their teenage years.⁵

Assessments of patterns of gang membership and activity by racial and ethnic subgroups vary widely across data sources (official records vs. self-reports), locations, and how the questions are asked. Adrienne Freng and T.J. Taylor, in chapter 10, describe these patterns and the implications for prevention.

More girls are involved in gangs than most people realize. Nationwide, the male-to-female ratio is approximately 2:1 (11 percent of boys, 6 percent of girls).⁴ However, in a nine-city survey published in 2008, researchers found that nearly identical proportions of girls and boys belonged to a gang — 9 percent of boys and 8 percent of girls.¹⁴

Among early adolescents, girl gang members commit crimes that are similar to those boy gang members commit, including assault, robbery and gang fights, although a smaller proportion of girls is involved.^{15, 16} (For more information on girls and gang membership, see chapter 9.)

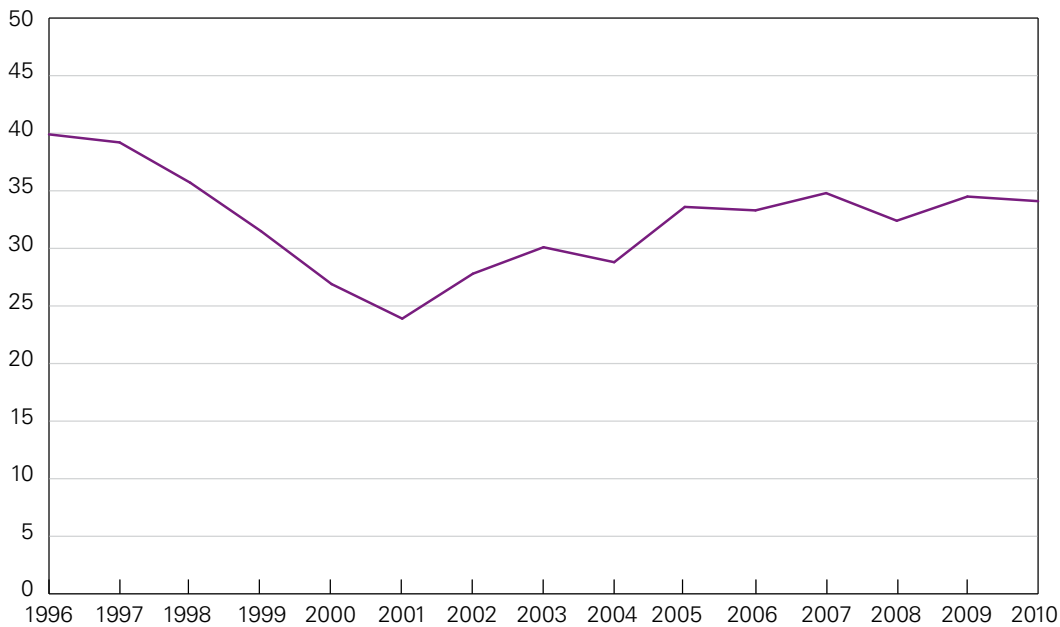
Presence of Gang Problems Over Time

Reported youth gang problems grew significantly in the United States during the 25 years before 1995, reaching the highest peak in our nation’s history in the mid-1990s.¹⁷ In the 1970s, only 19 states reported youth gang problems. Twenty-five years later, all 50 states and the District of Columbia reported youth gang problems. Formerly a problem only in large cities, youth gangs became present in many suburbs, small towns and rural areas during the 1990s. Thereafter, there was a significant decline in the number of jurisdictions reporting youth gang problems, which continued until 2001.¹⁸

As shown in the figure below, the percentage of localities reporting gang problems through the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) jumped almost 10 percentage points (23.9 percent to 33.6 percent) from 2001 to 2005. The estimate has remained elevated since 2005; slightly more than one in three cities, suburban areas, towns and rural counties reported gang problems in 2010.¹ The data from the NYGS also indicate that, during 2002-2010, the estimated number of gangs increased by nearly 35 percent, from 21,800 to 29,400 (special data analyses from the National Gang Center, Tallahassee, FL). Although the number of gang homicides has dropped in suburban areas and smaller cities, recent evidence has shown increases in gang violence in large urban areas. In cities with more than 100,000 people, for example, gang-related homicides increased by more than 10 percent from 2009 to 2010.¹

Student reports of gang activity in the School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey show a similar pattern. In the mid-1990s, 28 percent of a national sample of students reported that gangs were present in their schools.¹⁹ This dropped to 17 percent in

Percentage of Local Law Enforcement Agencies Reporting Youth Gang Problems, 1996-2010



SOURCE: Data from National Gang Center Survey Analysis: Prevalence of Gang Problems in Study Population, 1996-2010. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Assistance and Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Available at <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Survey-Analysis/Prevalence-of-Gang-Problems#prevalenceyouthgang>.

1999, then began to increase to 23 percent in 2007 — nearly the level reported a decade earlier — and dropped slightly in 2009.^{3, 19}

Although there are some discrepancies in these data (largely because they come from different sources and are gathered using different methods), they clearly show that gang activity is widespread and that strategies for gang-membership prevention need to address all segments of the child and adolescent population in the United States.

Gang-Joining

Studies have shown that the gang-joining process is similar to how most of us would go about joining an organization — that is, gradually, as familiarity and acceptance grow. A youth typically begins hanging out with gang members at age 11 or 12 and joins the gang between ages 12 and 15. In other words, the process typically takes from 6 months to 1-2 years from the initial association with a gang.^{20, 21, 22, 23}

Some widely held beliefs on why youth join gangs are misleading.^{5, 24} For example, there is a common misperception that many youth are coerced into joining a gang. Quite to the contrary, most youth who join a gang very much *want* to belong to a gang but for reasons that may vary. The major reason youth give for joining a gang is the need for protection, followed by fun, respect, money, and because a friend was in the gang.^{25, 26} (For more information about why youth join gangs, see chapter 2.)

Gang-joining typically has several steps, particularly in communities where gangs are well-established.²⁷ In elementary school, children may hear about gangs and some are in awe when they see gang members in middle school. Seeing gang members for the first time can validate their importance in a young adolescent's mind. Also, the schoolyard may have separate gang hangouts to which youngsters gravitate. In addition, the most vulnerable children enter middle school with poor academic achievement, and their street exposure renders them prime candidates for gang membership. Researcher Diego Vigil observes that “[a]s they become more and more involved in the oppositional subculture, they become

increasingly disdainful of teachers and school officials — and in the process become budding dropouts.”²⁷ Walking home from school with friends, a child might have a chance to bond with gang members with whom he had been hanging out during the school day. Perhaps he is invited to join them by older gang members who wish to make their group appear bigger and more menacing in the eyes of onlookers, particularly to rival gang members. The child or adolescent who joins the gang may feel compelled to do so. Faced with the prospect of belonging to nothing and feeling alone, youngsters in this situation may feel that they *must* join the gang, “even though,” Vigil notes, “the requisites for membership are quite demanding and life threatening.”²⁷

The Consequences of Gang Membership

At the individual level, youth who join a gang develop an increased propensity for violence and, in turn, are more likely to be victims of violence. In addition, the likelihood of favorable life-course outcomes is significantly reduced. Communities are also negatively affected by gangs, particularly in terms of quality of life, crime, victimization and the economic costs.

Increased Involvement in Violence

Studies of large representative samples in several large U.S. cities show that many gang members are actively involved in violent crimes.^{5, 28} Youth commit many more serious and violent acts while they are gang members than before they join and after they leave the gang. During the time they are actively involved in a gang, youth commit serious and violent offenses at a rate several times higher than youth who are not in a gang. In late adolescence, gang involvement leads to drug trafficking and persistent gun carrying.²⁹

Gang members account for a disproportionate amount of crime in communities where gangs are particularly active.^{5, 28} In several cities, gang members accounted for more than 7 in 10 self-reported violent offenses in the study sample.⁶ The extensive criminal involvement of gang members — particularly in serious and violent crime — has been noted by Terence Thornberry, a highly respected gang researcher, to be “one

of the most robust and consistent observations in criminological research.”⁶

Life-Course Outcomes

Gang involvement encourages more active participation in delinquency, drug use, drug trafficking and violence, and in turn may result in arrest, conviction and incarceration.^{28, 30} These effects of gang involvement also tend to bring disorder to the life course in a cumulative pattern of negative outcomes, including school dropout, cohabitation, teen parenthood and unstable employment.⁷ These and other unfortunate impacts of gang involvement on youngsters’ lives are particularly severe when they remain active in the gang for several years.²⁸

Individual Victimization

The victimization cycle can begin at home, when children are abused or neglected. Youth who experience violent victimization — such as maltreatment at home or assaults outside the home — may experience a range of consequences: becoming more aggressive themselves, being rejected from prosocial peer groups, affiliating with high-risk youth, and consequently being at elevated risk of joining a gang.⁵ According to researcher T.J. Taylor and his colleagues, “Although victimization preceding gang membership often comes from sources outside the gang, other gang members are often the ones inflicting the victimization once youth become involved with gangs.”³¹ It should come as no surprise, therefore, that active gang members are also more likely to be victimized themselves than are youth who do not belong to a gang.^{26, 31}

Frequent association with other gang members encourages and reinforces violent responses to situations and retaliation against others; this, in turn, elevates the risk of violent victimization in gangs.^{32, 33, 34}

For girls, regularly associating with gang members increases the likelihood of very high-risk sexual activity, other problem behaviors and violent victimization.³⁵ (For more information on girls, see chapter 9.)

Community Decline and Costs

More than seven out of 10 very large cities reported a consistently high level or increasing proportion of gang-related homicides over the 14-year period, 1996-2009.¹² Fear of crime and gangs are immediate, daily experiences for many people who live in neighborhoods where gangs are the most prevalent.³⁶ Also, the intimidation of witnesses is serious — it undermines the judicial process, making it difficult for law enforcement to maintain order in gang-impacted areas.³⁷

Other negative impacts of gangs on communities include the loss of property values, neighborhood businesses and tax revenue; weakened informal social-control mechanisms; and the exodus of families from gang-ridden neighborhoods.³⁸

The total monetary burden of crime on Americans is estimated at \$655 billion each year.⁸ Researchers are now able to estimate the costs of crime to victims, to the criminal justice system, and those incurred by the offender.^{9, 10} Mark Cohen, at Vanderbilt University’s Owen Graduate School of Management, and Alex Piquero, at the University of Texas at Dallas, have estimated the staggering cost of crime imposed on society by high-risk youth: A youth with six or more offenses over his or her lifetime imposes \$4.2 to \$7.2 million in costs on society and the victims.^{9, 10} These costs include \$2.7 to \$4.8 million resulting from crimes committed as well as costs due to drug abuse and the lost productivity due to dropping out of high school.

For young offenders who become chronic offenders (six or more police contacts through age 26), costs imposed in the early ages (through age 10) are relatively low — about \$3,000 at age 10.⁹ Over a lifetime, these costs aggregate to nearly \$5.7 million. This demonstrates the costs and benefits of early interventions that target high-risk youth, which can have a high payoff *if* they are effective.¹⁰ All too often, the initial intervention with high-risk youth occurs several years after the onset of an offender career — and at enormous cost to taxpayers.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: THE COMPREHENSIVE GANG MODEL

The Comprehensive Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression Model — supported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) — is one model that has demonstrated effectiveness in multiple cities.^{39, 40, 41, 42} Researchers looked at five cities in the initial evaluation of the model; they compared youth and neighborhoods that received Comprehensive Gang Model programming with matched comparison groups of youth and neighborhoods that did not receive the programming.³⁹ They found that the program was implemented with high fidelity in three of six sites (Chicago, IL, Riverside, CA, and Mesa, AZ). In these three sites, there were statistically significant reductions in gang violence, and in two of these sites, there were statistically significant reductions in drug-related offenses when compared with the control groups of youth and neighborhoods.³⁹

In the most recent evaluation of the Comprehensive Gang Model in four cities (Los Angeles, CA, Richmond, VA, Milwaukee, WI, and North Miami Beach, FL), researchers concluded that the model was successfully implemented in all four sites despite substantial variation in the nature of the sites' gang problems, albeit with varying impacts.⁴¹ The researchers also found that although results

varied across outcomes, one or more indicators of crime reduction were seen. In sum, the Comprehensive Gang Model has demonstrated evidence of its effectiveness in reducing gang violence when fully implemented with program fidelity. Although the research to date has been primarily on the intervention and suppression components, the Comprehensive Gang Model holds promise for integrating prevention activities with intervention programs and suppression strategies.

The first step in implementing the Comprehensive Gang Model is for the community to take stock of its particular youth gang problem because the response must be tailored to fit the situation. No two gangs are alike, and no two communities' gang problems are alike. Assessing the nature and scope of a gang problem is the first step. The National Gang Center provides an assessment manual that identifies many of the social contexts in which gangs form and the elevated risk factors that can lead to child delinquency and gang involvement⁴³ (see <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Comprehensive-Gang-Model/Implementation-Manual>).

The second step is taking an inventory of existing programs that address risk factors

for gang-joining and other conditions that give rise to gangs. Gaps in existing prevention activities can then be easily identified in the third step. Only then is a community prepared to consider programs and practices that need to be put into play in response to the local gang problem.

Questions to Guide the Assessment

Because information on what constitutes a gang is often misrepresented in broadcast media, each community should agree on a common definition to guide data collection and strategic planning. This practical definition could be considered as a guide:⁵

- The group has at least five members, generally ages 11-24.
- Members share an identity, typically linked to a name.
- Members view themselves as a gang and are recognized by others as a gang.
- The group has some permanence (at least 6 months).

Prevention Options

Because gang membership typically occurs along a pathway to serious and violent delinquency, delinquency prevention programs can help to prevent gang involvement. Involvement in juvenile delinquency — almost without exception — precedes gang-joining, and *very early involvement* in delinquency has been shown to be a precursor behavior for gang-joining in several independent studies.^{21, 28, 44, 45, 46, 47} In fact, one study suggests that fighting and other delinquent acts by age 10, and perhaps younger, may be a key factor leading to gang involvement.⁴⁵ Another study found that failure as early as in elementary school is a main risk factor for later gang involvement.⁴⁶

Children who are on a trajectory of increasing anti-social behavior are more likely to join gangs during their late childhood or early adolescence.^{45, 48} In fact, we know that early onset of behavioral problems can escalate to gang involvement and, in turn, to serious and violent offending.^{49, 50}

There are multiple strategies for working with pre-delinquent and delinquent youth in early prevention of gang-joining. For example, it is possible to focus at the individual level on at-risk children, particularly disruptive children. Other strategies work at the family, school or community levels to reduce risk and to enhance protective influences. Other chapters in this book discuss the principles for gang-joining prevention that are

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