

Youth Gangs: Going Beyond the Myths to Address a Critical Problem

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Day 4

Developing an Implementation Plan for Your School and Community

“Public schools, especially middle schools, are potentially the best community resource for the prevention of and early intervention into youth gang problems. The peak recruitment period for gang members is probably between fifth and eighth grade, when youth are doing poorly in class and are in danger of dropping out. Most schools, overwhelmed by other concerns, tend to ignore or deny the problem.”

Gang Suppression and Intervention:
Problem and Response (Spergel I., Curry D., Chance R.,
Kane C., Ross R., Alexander A, Simmons E, & Oh, S.
Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and
Delinquency Prevention, 1994)



Making the Case for a Response to Gangs

In the 1990s, gang activity in Pittsburgh, Pa., was at an all-time high, as it was for many other large cities. Law enforcement mounted a major undercover investigation, which led to the arrest of more than 30 gang leaders who went to prison under tough federal sentencing guidelines. In recent years, after an apparent lull, Pittsburgh is seeing an increase in gangs again. But Erika Fearby Jones, the Gang-Free Schools director in Pittsburgh, believes that the gangs never really went away.

“I believe they weren't gone,” she said. “They had to reorganize. They understood what got those guys arrested [under federal laws] and they didn't want to do it again. [But] we are seeing a rise in gang crime.”

Youth who are involved in gangs today are more savvy about federal laws, such as added penalties for being an identified gang member, so they are less likely to display obvious signs of gang membership, such as wearing a color. But they may employ subtler signs, such as wearing similar designer clothing.



As part of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Gang-Free Schools program, Fearby Jones and her colleagues spent 18 months carrying out an in-depth assessment of the gang problem in Pittsburgh. The resulting report provided evidence not only of gang activity, but specifics about where the activity was taking place, at what times, as well as an assessment of the existing resources in the community that might be used to respond to youth at risk for becoming involved in gangs or already in gangs.

The document also helped make the case to school and city officials that a gang problem existed. For some officials, it is difficult to acknowledge serious gang activities, perhaps out of fears of negative publicity. But when a report spells out the problem with specifics, it is much harder for officials to deny that gangs are active in their area.

Using the resources from this event, including your needs assessment, evaluation findings, and the toll of gang membership on youth, you should have enough information to persuade local officials that they need to address a gang problem found in your community. If you find less evidence of a specific gang problem, the literature on the consequences of gang activity should provide support for strengthening or simply continuing your prevention programs, including your safe and drug-free programs.

Making the Case for School Involvement in Anti-Gang Efforts

Gary and Denise Gottfredson make the argument for why schools should act as a locus for intervention to prevent or reduce gang involvement in their report *Gang Problems and Gang Programs in a National Sample of Schools*:

“First, the school is the main secular institution aside from the family involved with the socialization of the young. Not only do young people spend a great deal of time in school, but until the ages at which chronic truancy and dropout become problems nearly all young people are actively enrolled in school. The school therefore is in a better position than any institution other than the family to influence the behavior of young people. To the extent to which schools provide successful instruction in social competencies and develop attitudes and beliefs that are not conducive to problem behavior or involvement with gangs, gang involvement may be reduced.

“Second, school performance and attitudes are robust predictors of gang involvement, delinquent behavior, and other forms of problem behavior. Young people who do not like school, whose school performance is poor, and who are not committed to education are more likely to engage in a variety of problem behavior -- and they are more likely than other youth to become involved with gangs. Preventive interventions in school that keep youth attached to school, committed to education, achieving, and attending school may thereby reduce the likelihood of gang participation.

“Third, explanations of the development of youth gangs often involved the disorganization or ineffectiveness of social institutions including the school. Schools that are ineffective in providing environments in which everyone feels safe or that fail to generate consensus about socialized normative behavior may create the conditions in which gangs can develop.”

Taking the First Steps with Implementation

With the needs assessment, Coordinators will have a picture of the gang problem and the needs in the community. The next step is crafting responses to the problem, many of which may already exist in the community but may need tweaking or coordination, such as after-school programs with a special outreach to kids who have started to get involved with gangs.

Look for ways for existing programs to start serving gang members or potential gangs if they have not in the past. For example, a drug treatment program that has refused to serve gang members out of fear for staff safety might agree to do so if the members don't wear gang colors, which could incite a rival gang.



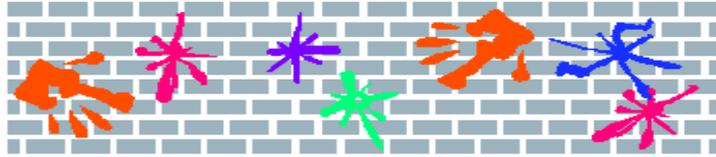
“Some places will say we need to have a job development program,” said Fearby Jones. “We look to resources we already have. If a person is ready to be employed, we have a career center or work force investment dollars. It's really about finding resources in the community.”

If your assessment has revealed gaps in services, such as prevention, you can start with prevention programs that have a solid research base.

“A good gang prevention program is a good prevention program that is applied to kids at risk for joining a gang,” said Phelan Wyrick, Ph.D., Gang Program Coordinator at the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. “You don't need a whole lot of tweaking.”

The assessment may reveal gaps that are not filled in the community, however. For example, the assessment may show that there are few programs that target girls at risk of gang involvement. In that case, you will need to look for approaches or programs to implement. *Click [here](#) for a link to a strategic planning tool that lists effective gang and delinquency programs.*

Former Gang Members Find Jobs



Father Gregory Boyle ministered in the Pico Gardens and Aliso Village neighborhoods of Los Angeles, one of the most violent gang areas anywhere, with eight gangs clashing over the same turf. It was 1988 and Los Angeles was in the midst of "Operation Hammer," a sweeping suppression effort designed to round up and jail large numbers of gang members. But Father Boyle saw a need. Most programs aimed at gang-focused on prevention or police suppression. There were few intervention programs aimed at providing gang members an alternative for their lives where they could find jobs, get counseling, and learn skills.

As part of his efforts, Father Boyle and other community members founded Jobs for a Future, which matched gang-involved youth with willing employers. While the program placed hundreds of clients in jobs, other gang youth struggled to find jobs, in part because of felony records, visible gang tattoos, and little, if any, job experience. To meet their needs, in 1992 Father Boyle created Homeboy Industries to help those individuals. Among their ventures was Homeboy Bakeries, which trained members from different gangs, many of them enemies with each other, to become bakers. Other industries include Homeboy Silkscreen, which prints logos on apparel and provides embroidery services; Homeboy Landscaping, which provides landscape services; Homeboy Graffiti Removal Services, which removes graffiti, much of which is put up by gang members; and Homeboy/Homegirl Merchandise. Once the program manager feels that clients are ready, they are referred to jobs outside of Homeboy Industries.

Gang members, at-risk youth, and those recently released from detention can receive assistance with job placement, tattoo removal (gang tattoos can inhibit employers from hiring someone), counseling, community service, and case management.

The transition from active gang member to gainfully employed citizen can come with some danger. In June 2004, a graffiti removal worker from Homeboy Industries was shot to death by a gunman who police believed was angry because the victim was covering the gunman's gang tags. The victim was a former gang member who had been released from state prison recently after serving 10 years, according to an article in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Just six weeks later, another graffiti worker from Homeboy Industries was fatally shot while driving away from the organization's headquarters. Detectives, however, said they doubted that the victim's job or connection to Homeboy Industries was a factor in his killing. While mourning his death, Father Boyle also spoke of the transformative power of bringing youth from rival gangs together to work side by side.

"Every person on his [work] crew was his enemy at one point," Father Boyle

told the *Los Angeles Times*. "Through working together, they became a family."

Setting Goals and Objectives

According to the National Youth Gang Center's *Planning for Implementation*, when creating a plan to address gang issues, it is important to take the following steps after the priority issues have been established and the target population identified:

- ❖ Develop goals (three to five).
- ❖ Develop objectives for each goal.
- ❖ Develop activities for each objective.
- ❖ Identify target groups (youth, family members, community residents, etc.) for activities.
- ❖ Identify the agency responsible for the activities.
- ❖ Identify potential barriers and a plan to overcome the barriers.
- ❖ Identify the contact person responsible.
- ❖ Determine start and completion dates.

Click [here](#) for more information on setting goals and objectives.

You will look to different programs for youth at elementary, middle, and high school. As mentioned earlier, the younger the children, the more efforts will focus on primary and secondary prevention. As youth get older, especially in high school, efforts will need to focus on intervention and working with police in suppression.

Click [here](#) for specific ideas about prevention and intervention efforts that are needed at the school level.

Developing Community Partnerships



One of your most important jobs as a Coordinator is to foster relationships with community agencies and members who will provide many of the services to potential and active gang members. Your work already with your advisory committee and in developing responses to other issues, such as bullying, crisis response, and others should have laid the groundwork for many of these relationships. The needs assessment may well reveal other organizations that you will want to work with.

Depending on the scope of the gang problem in your community, you may want to spearhead the creation of a separate committee that targets gang prevention and intervention. This committee can act as other multi-disciplinary committees do, meeting on a regular basis, carrying a case load of youth at risk for gang membership, and making referrals for each youth depending on his or her needs. Practitioners who work with youth involved with gangs point out that each adolescent needs individual attention. Any group seeking to respond to their issues must find ways to respond to those particular needs, such as mentoring with a consistent adult figure, job training, anger management, providing help getting to school, finding an alternative school, or tutoring to bring the reading level up, just to name a few needs.

If you believe that more concerted efforts are needed to reach some youth, you may want to look into funding to hire outreach workers and Program Coordinators (we will look at funding sources on Day 5). It is important, however, to look for ways to institutionalize any of the efforts in local agencies so that they will continue once funding ends.

How Organizations Can Worsen Gang Problems

The National Youth Gang Center's *Planning for Implementation* lists several ways that organizations can exacerbate gang problems in their communities -- or at least not contribute to comprehensive solutions.

According to the manual, "organizations that give rise to or sustain gang problems are: Organizations . . . that are generally narrowly focused on their own special missions. This is especially true for large bureaucratic organizations. For example, law enforcement may concentrate exclusively on harassment, arrest, and incarceration of gang youth; social service or youth agencies may concentrate only on social development, prevention, or treatment of certain less difficult to handle youth and families, especially those willing to accept services; schools may concentrate on education of non-troublesome youth and increasingly espouse elimination of gang youth (as well as zero tolerance of gang or gang-like behavior); neighborhood organizations may be intolerant of youth, especially those of different minority backgrounds.

"Organizations that do not communicate with each other consistently as to the nature and scope of the gang problem, thus making the problem ill-defined. Organizations that do not usually plan and collaborate with each other in addressing the complex interrelated aspects of the gang problem. Organizations that either tend to deny the existence of the gang problem . . . or accept as irremediable the gang problem in chronic gang contexts or communities, or emphasize highly aggressive law enforcement actions to control it."

Other Options in Addressing Youth Gang Problems

It may turn out that the gang problem in your area is not severe enough to warrant creating a separate committee that focuses on youth at risk of gangs or actively involved in gangs. Or you may not have the resources to create and sustain such a committee. If so, your ongoing work should begin to include anti-gang approaches. As mentioned earlier, you do not necessarily have to create new programs for youth at risk of gang involvement, but it is important to look at the existing programs through a new lens: do these programs reach these youth, and do they meet the multiple needs of these youth -- many of whom might have more severe problems than the typical adolescents whom programs address.

Understanding Gangs from Recent Ethnic Groups

It is important for Coordinators to understand the background of gang members, especially those of recent immigrants (as opposed to more established minority groups or whites). The most recent immigrant groups are least likely to trust institutions, such as schools, police, banks, and others), according to Phelan Wyrick, Ph.D., Gang Program coordinator at the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. They are more likely to keep their money in cash and prey on their own using armed robbery and home invasion robberies. Victims are less likely to report the crime to police because they do not trust them (as part of their experiences from their home country) and because they may fear deportation if they are in the country illegally, Wyrick said.

Parents of gang-involved youth may also be fearful of coming forward to police or schools because their children, who typically speak better English than they do, threaten to report them to the authorities for deportation. Laura Kallus, the director of the North Miami Beach Gang Reduction Program, is working with Haitians, many of whom are recent immigrants. As part of their assessment, Kallus and her colleagues plan to hold focus groups with parents and community members to inform them about their rights and what to do if they are victims of a crime.

"If the community is more aware of their rights, they are more empowered to report crime," Kallus said.

Working Toward Organizational Change

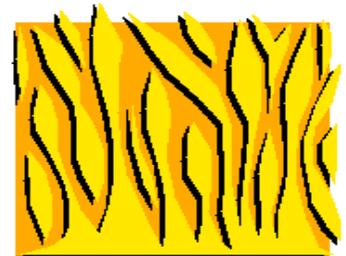


In your work on gangs, you may find out that structural changes are needed in the community in order to more effectively address gangs. For example the Pittsburgh Gang-Free Schools program staff is working with the police department to include a checkbox on arrest reports where officers can indicate whether or not they believe that a crime is gang-related. That change would make it easier to gather data on gangs in the future.

The Pittsburgh police department also began officer training in working with gangs and tracking incidents to assist in directing patrols and activities. At the school level, it may be necessary to make changes that ease the ability of youth with mental health issues to get help, for example. According to *Planning for Implementation*, a manual for developing gang intervention programs, in Tucson, Ariz., the juvenile court judge issued an order allowing various agencies to share information that was previously considered confidential. In San Antonio, Tex., several schools began allowing youth workers to meet with youth at the school during the school day, which had been prohibited in the past. Another program persuaded the police agency to change a policy that prohibited hiring outreach workers with criminal backgrounds.

Other Steps That Coordinators Can Take

If there are few resources for a consistent community response to gangs, Coordinators and communities can still take steps to address gang issues. One of the most important is to educate schools and the community about the gang problem in your area and the consequences of involvement in gangs.



You can start by asking a local police officer or probation officer to come to a faculty meeting to lay out the situation of gangs in your community. Because gangs are all local, only local officials will be able to tell school officials what is happening in their area. You can ask the law enforcement officer to talk about the types of gangs in your school district, how big they are, what ages are involved, what they are into (protecting turf, selling drugs, etc.), and how they identify themselves (through clothing, graffiti, lettering, tattoos, etc.). If adults are involved, they may be recruiting members from schools through offers of free alcohol, drugs, or sex. School officials, including teachers, need to be aware of these signs of gang membership so that they can serve as an information source about youth possibly involved in gangs.

"You need to make sure when your staff are delivering this program they are aware of the ways gangs operate," Wyrick said. "You will have art teachers who are intrigued with street art. That piece of art is a clear message to other youth that this kid is involved in a gang. Adults and school-involved folks have to be educated. You don't have to know what a hand signal means to know it's a hand signal. You don't have to know what the letters mean to know that it is a moniker [nickname]."

According to Irving Spergel, a University of Chicago sociologist and gang researcher:

“Gang-related behavior may begin as early as elementary school. All school personnel will need to learn the high-risk factors and develop criteria for identifying youth at high risk and in gangs, bearing in mind that some gang youth do not exhibit such behavior, while some non-gang youth may display them. It will probably be necessary to obtain information from several reliable sources before confirmation of a particular youth as a gang member or at high risk.”

Teachers, counselors, security officers, and others will need to know whom to refer these youth to and about available resources, both in school and the community. You can also provide handouts to teachers and other school staff about gangs, including signs of gang membership and how youth can get out of gangs.

Click [here](#) for tips for youth on leaving gangs.

Looking Ahead

If your community does not have a coordinated response to gangs, the school principal could be an effective leader in motivating people to take action. Social service agencies, police, and others turn to schools when they want to reach youth. Because of that, schools are in a powerful position to exert leadership on an issue that can affect so many youth -- either by their involvement with gangs or by suffering from the presence of gangs in schools or in their neighborhoods. School leadership can take the stance that they are concerned about the safety of their students and reach out to other leadership in the community and become the catalyst for pulling together an organized response. At the least, schools should have the name of police officers they can share information with about gangs, and Coordinators can look into joining a community anti-gang task force.



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in PDF format.



Discussion Questions

Please think about the questions below and share your responses, comments, and/or any questions about today's material in the [Discussion Area](#) .

- ❖ How can your other work in violence prevention and school safety dovetail with work on gang prevention or intervention?
- ❖ What role should you as a Coordinator play in addressing gang issues in your community? Encouraging your principal to take an active role? Serving on an anti-gang task force? Spearheading a comprehensive effort?
- ❖ What are some practical steps you can take now to begin working on gang issues?

This completes today's work.

Please visit the [Discussion Area](#) to share your responses to the discussion questions!

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Setting Goals and Objectives for Gang Responses

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According to *Planning for Implementation*, an implementation manual on gang programs developed by the Institute for Intergovernmental Research, anyone seeking to implement a gang intervention or prevention program should take the following steps in setting goals, identifying objectives and planning activities.

The steering committee should first develop three to five goals that are general statements of outcomes. The following are examples:

- ❖ Reduce gang-related violent crime in the target area.
- ❖ Alleviate community residents' fear of gang activity.
- ❖ Reduce targeted youth gang members' rate of school failure and poor academic performance.

The next step is to identify one or more objectives for each goal. Objectives describe the desired outcome and results that can be measured at a certain time. The following are examples:

- ❖ Reduce gang-related assaults and batteries, as measured by law enforcement crime data, by 15 percent by Month 18 of the project and 30 percent by Month 36 of the project.
- ❖ Reduce the level of gang-related property crime, as measured by law enforcement crime data and community residents' perceptions, in the target area by 20 percent by the end of Year 1 of the project.
- ❖ Increase the number of project youth finding and keeping jobs for at least 120 days, as measured by project records, by 25 percent by the end of the Year 2 of the project.
- ❖ Increase school achievement of school-age project youth by two grade levels as measured by standardized math and reading test scores by the end of Year 2 of the project.

Then, the steering committee should develop activities and services for each objective. The following are examples of how activities and services might be stated:

- ❖ Train and place 25 youth in jobs in Year 1 of the project.
- ❖ Provide anger management class to project youth.

- ◆ Offer three hours a week of tutoring in math and reading to each school-age youth in project.
- ◆ Provide training for employers for working with target population.
- ◆ Inform parents of target youth of their child's gang affiliation.
- ◆ Initiate tattoo removal program.
- ◆ Modify school policies as necessary to promote academic achievement of target population.

Source:

Planning for Implementation (2002). Tallahassee, FL: Institute for Intergovernmental Research.

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Ideas for Programs for Elementary, Middle, and High School Students

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Irving Spergel, a University of Chicago sociologist, who is one of the best-known researchers of gang activity, makes the following suggestions of programs and approaches that could be appropriate for elementary, middle, and high school students.

In some elementary schools, several methods are used to prevent gang activity and substance abuse and to control youth who begin to engage in gang-related behavior. They include the

- (1) Anti-Drug and Gang Curriculum
- (2) Self-esteem and Values Change Curriculum
- (3) Peer Tutoring, Counseling, and Conflict Resolution Teams
- (4) Violence Reduction Programs
- (5) Multicultural Diversity

Where possible, new academic programs should be integrated into the existing curriculum (i.e., health, social studies, or English classes to prevent or control gang activity).

In high school and middle schools, gang and gang-prone youth need to master the academic skills required to finish high school and later obtain employment. Some of these youth cannot cope with the rules and academic requirements in conventional schools and will require additional services. These students can achieve the mastery of basic skills in three possible ways:

- (1) Supplementing the academic core curriculum with remedial classes during and after school
- (2) Targeting gang and gang-prone youth for enriched programs within their school
- (3) Placement of some gang and gang-prone high school students into alternative educational programs

"A curriculum that combines academic and vocational preparation is particularly useful for gang and high-risk youth", according to Spergel. "Strategies that provide economic opportunity for them will reduce gangs and gang violence. Legitimate jobs, as youth get older, are an alternative to street crime and hustling."

Source:

Spergel, I. & Alexander, A. (1991). *School Technical Assistance Manual*. Rockville, MD: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

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How Youth Can Get Out of Gangs

The National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations offers these suggestions to youth for getting out of gangs:

You can walk away from gangs.

For most gang members, the gang they belong to meets some kind of need in their life; for safety, love, excitement, or money. When a gang member learns that he or she can meet these needs in other ways, the gang may lose its appeal, and this person may decide to walk away from the gang life. However, being a gang member is far more dangerous than the typical dangers faced by most of today's teenagers. For that reason, the issue for many gang members is not if they will decide to stop being a gang member. The issue is whether they will live long enough to make that decision.

Make a plan for getting out.

When gang members decide that they want to leave the gang, there are a few simple steps they can follow:

Never tell the gang that you plan to leave. You may be beaten or even killed.

Begin spending your time doing other things. Instead of spending time hanging out with your gang friends, find something else to do during that time. Look around. There are possibilities everywhere: sports, recreation centers, Boys and Girls Clubs, arts programs, drama, school activities, and even spending time with your family.

Try to stop looking like a gangster. For many gang members, dressing down makes them feel safe because other people are afraid of the way they look. As you begin to believe in yourself, you will find that you don't need to make other people feel afraid in order to feel good about yourself. Stop wearing the clothes that you think have a gang meaning.

Find other things to say, other things to do, and other people to do them with. (Hint: This is much easier if you stop dressing like a gang member first). Stop hanging out with gang members, talking like a gang member, and acting like a gang member.

Get good at making excuses. Your parents can probably help you with this, but if not, try asking a teacher for help or maybe just an older friend. Some former gang members have said that when they started trying to leave the gang, they stopped taking phone calls from their gang friends, or had their family members tell their friends from the gang that they were busy or involved in some other activity.

Find people who will support you and believe in you.

Getting out of a gang isn't easy, but it can be done. Young people across America make the decision to have a better life every day. Find people, especially adults, who think that you are special and will keep telling you that. In your mind, think of a supportive adult wherever you go (school, neighborhood, rec center) whom you can touch base with if you have a problem or

need to talk. Then use these people to help support you as you change with good advice and assistance. Finally, begin believing in your power to change. Gangs are a dead-end street. No matter who you are, what you have done, or where you love, you deserve better.

Source:

National Alliance of Gang Investigators. Written by Michelle Arciaga, and updated/reprinted with permission of the Salt Lake Area Gang Project, Salt Lake City, Utah. Also available on-line at <http://www.nagia.org>.

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