

EDUC 491 – Conflict Resolution in School Settings

Of Cliques & Teen Gangs

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Abstract

Gang membership and violence are pervasive across the United States of America. Today, children, adolescent and young adults are susceptible to gang involvement. Gang members cross all ethnic, racial, gender, cultural, geographical and socio-economic boundaries. An alarming factor is that gang members are also getting younger and are also involved in criminal activities. The paper features 18 articles on cliques and gangs, highlighting issues such as the reasons children join gangs, gang power play, and the strategies that are used and can be employed to fight gang activity.

Gaustad, J. (1990). Gangs. *ERIC Digest Series Number EA 52*. Retrieved March 1, 2007, from <http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9216/gangs.htm>

The article gave an overview of gangs, why they form and how they spread. It also gave some suggestions on how school and communities can jointly fight gang activity.

The working definition for 'gangs' are "*juvenile and young adults associating together for serious, especially violent, criminal behavior with special concerns for turf*". This defense of turf (control of a physical territory or a criminal enterprise) often lead to extreme violence, so much so that non-gang members begin bringing weapons to school for "protection" from gang violence and robbery. The demographics of gangs are also discussed. The vast majority of gang members are male whose average age is about 13.5 years old in 1987. Asian, black, Hispanic, white and interracial gangs exist, ranging from a few members to thousands. Gang members are said to advertise their membership by using handkerchiefs and shoe laces of specific colors, jewelry, tattoos, jargons and hand gestures.

An interesting point brought up in the article is how the school board of South Eugene High School sought an injunction in Lane County Circuit Court to bar gang member 18 year old Robbie Robinson from the city's schools based on the reason that "*his mere presence at the school in clothing associated with gang membership constitutes a danger to the health and safety of students*". The injunction was granted. Although some citizens expressed concern about the constitutionality of the ruling, many applauded the action, seeing it as a preventive step.

The article mentioned how the gangs use juvenile gang members to act as lookouts and gang hit men knowing very well that the courts treat juveniles far more leniently than adults. These gangs are said to use financial gain to attract members, most of whom are impoverished youths with poor education and lack of access to decent jobs. The vast sums of money available through drug trade helped increase the size of gangs and retain members. Among the solutions offered to fight gang activity is to start prevention programs in the early elementary grades in order to circumvent gang influence. Schools are also told to have evening extracurricular activities where students can participate rather than hang out with their gangs.

Facts for Teens: Youth Gangs. (2002). *National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center.* Retrieved March 1, 2007, from <http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9216/gangs.htm>

Some alarming facts about youth gangs are highlighted in this article. Once thought to be an inner-city problem, gang violence has spread to communities in the United States (US). In 2002, there are more than 24,500 different youth gangs around the countries and more than 772,500 teens and young adults were members of gangs. These gangs are said to be responsible for much of the serious violence in the US.

Teen gangs are said to more likely commit serious and violent crimes as compared to other teens. A survey in Denver found that while only 14% of teens are gang members, there were responsible for committing 89% of the serious violent crimes. Gang members are at least 60 times more likely to be killed than the rest of the population.

The article also reported the statistics of female gang members. Although only 6 percent of gang members are female, a 11-city survey of eighth-graders found that 38 percent of gang members are female. The percentage of female gang members may not be particularly big; they are still an important concern. In a survey done by the *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, it was found that 78 percent of female gang members had been involved in gang fights, 65 percent are reported to be carrying a weapon for protection and 39 percent to have attacked someone with a weapon.

One of the points that I find interesting is how few teens are said to be forced to join gangs. In most cases, teens can refuse to join without fear of retaliation. Perhaps, this fact can be highlighted to teens in schools so that they will be aware that their lives will not be jeopardized if they say “No” to gang invitations.

Things You Should Know About Teens and Gangs (2005). *The Larry Elder Show*. Retrieved March 1, 2007, from http://larryelder.warnerbros.com/teens_and_gangs.html

Among some of the things discussed in the article are some early warning signs that a child may be involved in a gang. In a nutshell, a child can be suspected of being a gang member if he/she:

1. experiments with drugs
2. suffers a decline in school grades
3. plays truant
4. is unwilling to share regular meals or attend family gatherings
5. has poor family bonding
6. is rebellious at school or home
7. has a change of friends
8. keeps late hours
9. has large sums of money or new expensive items that cannot be explained

The Sacramento Police Department also listed some tips for parents on how to discourage their children from joining a gang. Parents are advised to do the following:

1. Meet their children's friends
2. Occupy their children's free time by getting them involved in after school activities
3. Have an open and good communication with their children so that they can discuss any topic or problems easily
4. Spend time with their children by planning activities that the whole family can enjoy
5. Do not buy or allow their children to dress in gang style clothing
6. Set limits for their children so that they know what acceptable and unacceptable behavior is
7. Do not allow their children to write gang names, symbols or any gang graffiti on their books, papers, clothes, walls, or any other place
8. Teach their children to respect others' property
9. Be an informed parent by learning about gang and drug activity in your community

Bullying – For Girls. (2006, December). *Girlshealth.gov*. Retrieved March 1, 2007, from <http://www.girlshealth.gov/bullying/youthgangs.htm>

This article highlighted the difference between club, clique and gang. The important factor that distinguishes gangs from teen clubs, cliques and other social groups is the former involvement in criminal activity. Gangs used to be a concern of boys only but many girls nowadays are reported to join gangs or hang out with boy gang members.

The media and entertainment industry sometimes make gang life out to be thrilling, exciting and even glamorous. It seemed that girl gang members are more likely to commit crime than teens who are not involved with gangs. In fact, the prisons in the United States are filled with women who got their start as teen gang members. Most times, girls who want to join a youth gang must “prove” themselves through an initiation ritual that can involve getting beaten up or having sexual encounters with gang members.

The reasons given by girl teen gang members on why they got involved in gangs are:

1. *To feel a sense of belonging*

Some girls have parents who do not think that they will amount to anything or that they are troublemakers. These girls join gangs to feel belonged and appreciated.

2. *To identify with people like themselves*

Some girls of immigrant parents join gangs to be with other teens who understand them. These girls’ parents did not understand what it felt like to be an American teen and hence they cannot relate to their children.

3. *To feel powerful*

Some girls who were picked on in schools join gangs so that their harassers will be afraid to pick on them.

4. *For excitement*

Some girls feel bored after school and look for something to do. Joining gangs give them the thrill of hanging out with others and doing things together.

5. *To feel safe*

In environments where there is a lot of hatred between different racial groups, girls normally join gangs to have someone to look out for them so that they feel safe.

6. *To get money, to get basic needs*

Some girls long for nice clothes, music and other things that their parents cannot afford. By joining gangs, they sometimes get the things they desire like extra money or gold chains.

Grabianowski, E. (XXXX). How Street Gangs Work. *How stuff works. It's good to know*. Retrieved March 1, 2007, from <http://people.howstuffworks.com/street-gang.htm>

Grabianowski talked about how street gangs work and why people join gangs. He quoted the Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report that estimated 49 percent of gang members to be Hispanics, 37 percent to be black, 8 percent white, 5 percent Asian and 1 percent had another ethnicity. He elaborated on gang history and gang life (about ethnic gangs, turf gangs and prison gangs). He talked about how when a new gang member joins a gang, he must go through an initiation. Initiations range from “jumping in” or a beating issued by all the gang members or raping a new female gang member to participating in a mission (from stealing a car to engaging in a firefight with a rival gang).

What is interesting about this article is how the author suggested ways of stopping gangs. According to Grabianowski, while police presence is vital in keeping neighborhoods safe, a more successful long term approach is needed – to give people something to live for other than a gang. Some ideas include helping at-risk youth or current gang members to obtain an education or find decent jobs, organize community events such as dances, games nights or football games that will give youth something to do other than hang out with gang members. Block clubs and community centers will help bring the majority of people (non-gang members) together when they clean and maintain their streets clean and graffiti free. This sense of pride in where they live will help drive out gangs.

I am impressed with the Department of Justice’s “Weed and Seed” program which Grabianowski highlighted. This preferred method of gang suppression combines police enforcement (*weeding* out the worst gang members) with community activism and economic opportunities (*seeding* the neighborhood with the means to overcome negative conditions). There are currently more than 3,000 active Weed and Seed programs in the United States. Each site can receive up to \$1 million to help fund “*law enforcement, community policing; prevention, intervention, and treatment; and neighborhood restoration.*”

Madrid, D. (2007, February 9). School Matters – Future of Gang-banging Found on Today's Playgrounds. *New America Media*. Retrieved March 1, 2007, from http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=430b4d9c635080475ba0fd9c4c4d6318

This article illustrated San Jose's gang problem and how its future gang problem lies with elementary and junior high aged youth who are immersed in gang idealism. Madrid pointed out how residents are witnessing a new generation of young people exposed to a gang mentality at a shockingly early age. This new era of gang banging is labeled as "G-kid" era.

These "G-kids" are being nurtured in gang idealism in the formative years so by the time they hit their teens, they will be more seasoned and hardcore, making most gang-prevention programs useless. Madrid talked about how this social dynamic has existed for generations in some San Jose neighborhoods but is more widespread now, hitting the Asian and Latino communities like bushfire. One of the major contributing factors involves a part of the newly arrived immigrant population that has assimilated and adopted the gangster lifestyle as its own.

It is indeed alarming to see fourth and fifth graders taunting eighth grade boys while throwing up gang signs at them. The latter often dismiss the G-kids' acts as being childish. However, the author of the article stated that there is nothing funny about the situation; the younger "G-kids" might be seen as a joke now but they are going to be a force to be reckoned with. Madrid cautioned parents that they may mistake these kids' antics as cute or child's play. But in reality, the kids are taking in way more than they are acting out. These kids know too much for their age and romanticize the gang lifestyle, all thanks to the older kids in the neighborhood and postings of gang slurs on Web sites like MySpace.

Cliques and Fitting In. (XXXX). *National PTA*. Retrieved March 1, 2007, from <http://life.familyeducation.com/peer-pressure/self-esteem/36541.html>

This article concentrated on a milder form of teen gang – cliques. Parents are reminded of their children’s needs to belong especially during early adolescence. Children at the ages of 10 to 15 began to discover that a whole world exists beyond their family: peers. Their desire to fit in takes center stage and their thoughts and reactions revolve around friends and family. This shift from parents and family is deemed natural as the young adolescent’s task is to figure out who he or she is. Hence, the peer groups serves as a panel helping its members to define themselves.

Social power in cliques is highlighted in the article. As peers divide up, children form into cliques around a leader or two and the pack ‘announced’ that not everybody is welcome – certain children are dubbed as “worthy” while others are judged as “not good enough”. Cliques and peer groups have strict rules, dictating whom to talk to, sit with, and dress like. Acting out of sync means facing criticism, and since all young adolescent are sensitive to criticism, many find it difficult to stand up for themselves or for what is right. In this case, cliques rule.

According to sociologists Patricia and Peter Adler, there are four basic groups that define the middle school culture:

1. *The popular clique* – whose members have the most friends, and appear to be having all the fun
2. *The fringe group* or popular-clique wannabes – who mimic the rules set by the top caste
3. *The friendship circles* – small groups of several friends who opt for a look and culture of their own; defined by similar hobby or interest (skateboarders or computer ‘nerds’) or by a look or style (Goths, Preps, Punks)
4. *The loners* – who appear to have no friends and may envy the kids who seem to belong

Parents are reminded to guide their kids in their process of self-discovery. As much as these kids regard their peers as the jury, parents need to also provide safe and welcoming domains through the family life and perhaps the children’s bedroom; all of which deliver that sense of belonging that children crave.

Lyness, D. (2005, August). Coping With Cliques. *TeensHealth*. Retrieved March 1, 2007, from http://www.kidshealth.org/teen/school_jobs/bullying/cliques.html

D'Arcy Lyness elaborated about the clique cultures and gave some strategies to survive cliques. Cliques are defined as “*tight groups that usually have a strict code of membership and ways to act*”. Instead of being centered on shared beliefs and values, many cliques focused on maintaining status and popularity. People in cliques, unlike regular groups of friends, do everything together and end up dealing with lots of pressures and rules.

Cliques attract people for a myriad of reasons. Cliques give people a place where they can get social status and for those who feel more comfortable following, cliques offer a place where rules are clearly defined. Clique membership is tightly controlled by the leaders who are the social gatekeepers who decide who should be ‘hot’ and who should not. This type of membership is prevalent in cliques of girls.

The power struggle in cliques is quite intriguing. A person’s standing within the group is always under threat. Most of the followers cling to the leader or ‘queen bee’ not out of true friendship but because they want to keep their position in the group. The leader also worries about being popular and accepted as the outsiders do. She sometimes exclude seemingly likeable and popular girl from joining her clique as the latter may pose a threat to her. People in cliques use the tools of flattery, humiliation, or rumors to manipulate situations, hurt others in purpose and preserve their statues.

The author also offered some strategies to survive cliques:

1. *Know yourself* (values, interests and beliefs) and your reputation
2. *Stay involved in activities* that make you feel good about yourself
3. *Keep your social circles open* and diverse
4. *Speak out* (take a stand for your beliefs)
5. *Have a mind of your own* (true friends will respect your mind, your rights and your independent choices)

Groups of Parents, Gangs of Kids. (2000, January). *Parent Watch*. Retrieved March 1, 2007, from <http://www.parent-watch.com/articles/gangs.html>

This article dispelled the myth that gangs are born out of poverty. Many of us tend to see gangs as an antidote to disenfranchised young men who are alone, unsupported, and without an adequate self-image because of their socio-economic position. However, middle class kids (boys and girls) are joining in gang types of activity, if not becoming formal gang members. The author questions why these kids who have supportive families, activities, rituals and even scholarship funds are turning to gangs.

Teens especially need some basic parental leadership. They need mature leaders to help them accept responsibility and make improvements in their own behavior. Today's adolescent cannot count on one standard of behavior that has been consistently modeled for them by adults. The author argued that as an anxious leaderless group, these adolescent may attack each other in order to feel in control. They will drift into gangs as they feel they have no choice, that they need protection from each other. Many groups then move gradually into violence and serious crimes.

An attractive feature of the gangs is that it provides a code of behavior, a value system, direction and advice that may be missing in the home. Membership and allegiance can also give teens a feeling of omnipotence, a feeling that they can do whatever they want and escape the consequences. Being in a gang also provides power, status, protection, membership, activities, guaranteed friends, structure, mentors, excitement, brushes with death and the law, leadership opportunities, and outlets for frustrations. Kids who cannot keep up socially, academically or physically become vulnerable to social rejection, school failure and victimization. They then join gangs to avoid being victimized, only to find that they lose themselves and their moral directions in the process of belonging to the gang.

Well-organized gangs indoctrinate, train and convince members to work toward the group's goals. Independent thought is often discouraged because it erodes the foundation of the group. Thus, a parent who is able to provide clear rules and guidelines to a child can help diminish the power of gangs,

Travis, A. (2007, February 16). Shoot or be shot: cheap arms and local rivalries fuel teen violence. *Guardian*. Retrieved March 1, 2007, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/gun/Story/0,,2014530,00.html>

Travis wrote about the rise of teenage gang and gun culture in England and Wales. The Metropolitan police reported that gun crime is mainly committed by men aged 16 to 25. A disproportionate number are black men and the offenders and victims are getting younger. Illegal firearms are becoming increasingly accessible to younger offenders who appear more likely to use them recklessly. Some firearms can even be bought for as little as 50 pounds or 98 dollars. According to a research done by Portsmouth University criminologists who interviewed 80 convicted armed criminals, about half of them had been in a gang or “crew”.

Teen violence on the streets of Britain is the result of four types of gangs or crew:

1. *Close friendship group*

This group offers safety in numbers and physical backup. Members know each other from school or grew in the same neighborhood. Their conflicts tend to be localized and time-limited

2. *Associates*

Gang members or associates are known to each other but are not close friends. They interact socially, share spaces such as live in the same housing estates and engage in low-level crimes.

3. *Criminal crews*

This gang focuses on activities such as controlling the local drug markets and conduct armed robberies and other crimes. Crew members assume a degree of collective responsibility, both providing backup and as targets for rival groups.

4. *Organized crime networks*

Gang members in this group are almost always involved in “middle-market” drug dealing, armed robberies and quasi-legitimate enterprises such as door security.

Emotional literacy 'can tackle gang culture'. (2007, February 16). *Manchester Evening News*. Retrieved March 1, 2007, from http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/education/s/236/236471_emotional_literacy_can_tackle_gang_culture.html

Dr Larry Jones of the London Academy of Higher Education advocated the importance of *emotional literacy* in tackling gang culture. According to him, teaching children to control their emotions could stop us from creating a society of gangster. Emotional literacy program educates children on how to raise their self-esteem and withstand peer pressure and the dominance of gangs. Dr Jones mentioned that the root cause of the problems lies in the emotions and hence an education of the emotions is crucial.

Many children who are involved in gangs are underachievers and feel that they are not good enough. They need to know that there are other people who have felt like them and have overcome it. The media is also glamorizing guns as good things. All the talk about extending prison sentences have made some children want to go to prison as they believed that they would be cared for in prisons. Nowadays, when people talk about self-defense or jealousy, it is not about drugs but over small issues like boyfriend or girlfriend matters. Dr Jones mentioned that we need to change the way we look at life; we need to teach the young that they do not need to fight to be a man and there is no need to use a gun or knife.

Emotional literacy has its benefits; among others, the reduction of crime rates, fewer dysfunctional families and economic development.

Ward, J. (2004, August 19). Schools prepare for teen gangs. *The Washington Times*. Retrieved March 1, 2007, from <http://washingtontimes.com/metro/20040818-100625-4613r.htm>

The article highlighted the problem of increased gang violence in the District of Columbia (D.C). Police officials said there are nearly 7000 gang members in the D.C area where about half of them belong to the largest and violent gang, Mala Salvatrucha (MS). Schools so far have been sanctuary and that educators have not been educated about gang problems. Law-enforcement agencies are presently working with school administrators to educate the latter about how to identify signs of gang involvements among students.

The problem lies with the fact that Maryland laws prohibits school officials from volunteering information about students involved in incidents in schools. As such, police officials are not able to find out what is going on in schools. However, school officials can skirt identification issues by providing a student's nickname in responding to requests from the police. Schools have also organized weeklong camps for students with the aim of keeping them out of gangs. Such camps will be extended in the future.

A valid argument brought forth in the article is on how enforcement is only part of solving gang problem and that intervention and prevention are integral. Schools, families, and churches play significant roles in preventing teens from joining gangs. Gangs are savvy recruiters who know how to infiltrate a school environment and take control. Hence, it is very important for educators to realize the problems they are facing. They should learn what is attractive about these gangs that appeal to teens and only then can they learn how to counteract it. A grave message concluded the article, *"If you don't address the issues of gangs, it destroys the culture of the school."*

Dragan, O. (2004, December 28). Latino Youth Worker Steers Away From Violence and Gangs. *Voices of America*. Retrieved March 1, 2007, from <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2004-12/2004-12-28-voa32.cfm>

This article featured the effort of Jose Vanegas, an independent TV producer, who set up *Barrios Unidos* or United Neighborhoods of Northern Virginia, an organization that works with Latino youth to help steer them away from gangs and violence. Barrios Unidos provides a variety of services for kids from eight years old to teens in high schools, who have the possibility of getting into trouble, be involved in gangs and have problems at home.

The main objective of the prevention, intervention and alternative programs organized by Barrios Unidos is to give young people a positive view of themselves; an alternative to gangs and the street as a source of status, respect and sense of accomplishments. Among the activities of Barrios Unidos are the provision of courses, mentors, and role models to encourage young people to achieve their full potential; and the staging of fun activities such as dances and culture festivals. These young people are expected to be involved in the planning and organizing of such activities as this will lead them to bonding and the development of self-respect and a sense of community.

Vanegas shared his observations of the Latino high school kids. Most of them have a lot of issues at home and in school and are lacking both guidance and participation in their community. Hence, Vanegas involved them in making and distributing food for the day laborers who gathered at vacant lots in Northern Virginia. By communicating with the laborers, the youth found their small act of service to be very beneficial. They felt a sense of purpose to be able to contribute to the community.

Fu, S. (2001). How to Get a Friend Out of a Gang. *drDrew.com, Inc.* Retrieved March 1, 2007, from <http://www.drdrew.com/Topics/article.asp?id=1302>

One of the motivations for teens to turn to gangs is the lack of quality attention at home. Fu wrote about how teens whose parents are working constantly, turn to gangs to fill up their time. The other major reason for joining gangs is safety. When a large percentage of the neighborhood is in one gang or another, the teens have to acknowledge or declare an affiliation. If they refuse, they could be in a life-threatening situation.

According to Carol Woods, a licensed family therapist, girls are joining gangs in record numbers nowadays. They usually become involved through their associations with male gang members and their activities. As a result, they are subjected to so much violent behavior that it becomes natural for them to emulate the boys and form their own gangs for protection. Being in a gang is a way for the girls to feel their own sense of strength.

One of the ways to help teens to develop the courage to leave their gang is to help teen members to get a job or to push them to decide for themselves to get one. Woods also suggested investing more in their individuality and increasing their self-esteem so that they can outgrow the gang fad.

Woods suggested four things that will really make a difference in helping teens get out of gangs:

1. *Better family communication*
2. *Better economic opportunities*
3. *Improving school environments* – smaller classes, reading tutors, more teachers' aides, more discipline
4. *More involvement* by corporations, sports models, music models and rappers.

Burch, J. H. & Chemers, B. M. (1997, March). A Comprehensive Response to America's Youth Gang Problem. *Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention*. Retrieved March 1, 2007, from <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/fs-9640.pdf>

According to a study done by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), gang activity is “*getting worse*” as they extend beyond the inner cities into smaller communities and suburbs. The OJJDP outlined several coordinated strategies that might reduce gang problems:

1. *Community mobilization* (including citizens, youth, community groups and agencies).
2. *Social and economic opportunities* including special school, training and job programs – this is especially critical for older gang members who may not leave the gang due to maturation and the need to provide for the family.
3. *Social intervention* (especially youth outreach and work with street gangs directed at mainstreaming youth).
4. *Gang suppression* (formal and informal social control procedures of the justice system and community agencies) – community-based agencies must collaborate with juvenile and criminal agencies in surveillance and sharing of information under the condition that protect the civil liberties of youth and the community.
5. *Organizational change and development* (the allocation of resources among involved agencies and the integration of the above strategies).

The article also highlighted a key OJJDP initiative – *The Boys & Girls Clubs of America's Gang Prevention through Targeted Outreach Program*. At-risks youth are recruited into local Club programs in a non-stigmatizing way through a referral network that link the local clubs with courts, police, schools, social service and other agencies. Once the youth are in the Club, they are provided with case-managed recreational and educational activities focusing on personal development to enhance communication skills, problem solving and decision making. Thus, the program gives youth the alternative to gang life.

Hill, K. G., Lui, C. & Hawkins, J. D. (2001, December). Early Precursors of Gang Membership: A Study of Seattle Youth. *Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention*. Retrieved March 1, 2007, from <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/190106.pdf>

The article discussed the Seattle Social Development Project – a longitudinal study of youth living in high-crime neighborhoods. The project identified the early precursors of youth gang membership and how the knowledge can facilitate the development of more effective interventions to prevent youth from becoming involved in gangs.

Among the findings include:

1. Compared to youth who are not gang members, youth who are gang members more often commit assault, robbery, felony theft; indulge in binge drinking; use and sell drugs and are arrested. They are twice likely to carry guns and three times more likely to sell drugs.
2. 52 percent of the youth took part in the National School Lunch/School Breakfast Program at some point in the fifth, sixth or seventh grade.
3. Youth in Seattle joined gangs through adolescence; most of them joined at age 15 – the age at which most students make the transition to high school.
4. Youths from neighborhood where marijuana was most available were about 3.6 more times to join gangs as compared with other youth.

The findings of the Seattle study of more than 800 youth suggested that youth join gangs as a result of antisocial influences in neighborhoods, antisocial tendencies in families and peers, failure to perform well in school and early initiation of individual problem behavior. In fact, youth who were the most behaviorally and socially maladjusted in childhood were most likely to be gang members for several years.

The study showed that there are 21 predictors of gang memberships. Although the figure seems daunting, anyone such as a parent, brother, teacher, friend or member of the community can find ways to reduce the chances that a youth will become a gang member. The risk of gang membership will be greatly reduced if those efforts are coordinated.

Boyle, K. (1992). *School's a Rough Place: Youth Gangs, Drug Users, and Family Life in Los Angeles*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Boyle wrote about “*gang bangers*” or gang members who have been responsible for drug distribution (especially crack cocaine) and “*gang banging*” in Los Angeles (L.A.). Gang banging (not having sexual connotation) includes the various forms of gang activities that members engage in to protect turf and defend honor. Gang banging ranges from name calling to homicide that includes the ever-growing numbers of drive-by shootings.

A detailed description of a drive-by was illustrated by the author. A drive-by usually begins by three or four gang members stealing a car. There is an informal rotation among the members for the different roles: driver, designated shooter and ride-alongs (this may include girls). The group enters the neighborhood of the rival gang and approaches the house of the person who had started the incident (it could be a ‘staring’ matter or other longstanding vendettas). If there is no one visible, the house may be sprayed with bullets and that may be a symbolic enough retribution. The group will want to kill a particular person but will shoot into a crowd if necessary. Bystanders are often killed. Then the shooters leave the scene and the car is abandoned. The group will then return to their neighborhood and celebrate the event, even while anticipating a retribution drive-by aimed at them. Alcohol (usually beer), marijuana and some phencyclidine (PCP) fuel such social activities.

About 59 percent of 700 gangs in L.A. are Latinos and 39 percent are African-Americans. Although some Latino and Asian gangs (two percent) actively participate in the distribution of illegal drugs, it is the African-American gangs that are most active dealers. Profits from the drug deals seem to provide an additional motivation for the members to join and remain loyal to the gang. The juveniles, who do not receive heavy penalties when caught by the police, are less concerned about the dangers of drug dealings. They seemed to spend their drug earnings as fast as they made it, although some reported giving money to their parents and family members as gifts or as their contribution towards rent or house payments.

Bracki, M. A., Dolson, B. M. & Maurice, K. (1997). Pre-Teen Gang Members: The Father Connection. *The American Psychological Association Annual Conference*. Chicago, Illinois.

The paper discussed the family factor and the father connection in relation to gang involvements. American children are increasingly left physically and emotionally without adult supervision and support. The children of poor family are neglected as their parents work long hours and are frequently absent while the middle and upper class parents are caught up in pursuing their careers, failing to make emotional investments for their children. The breakdown of the family support system has been exacerbated by socioeconomic factors such as divorce and the prevalence of single-parent families. Therefore, to compensate for the lack of family stability, children seek surrogate families and parental role models through their involvement in gangs.

The alienation from parents is often cited as the initial cause of adolescent turning toward delinquency and gang membership. The authors also cited studies done on gang members who are “*highly aggressive, as a reaction to authoritarian fathers.*” The aggression of gang youth are due to the absence of fathers, producing a female dominated household that required aggression to reassert one’s manhood. A predilection toward gang involvement is evident in young men whose fathers are present but detrimental in their lives. Many gang members have been physically, psychologically or sexually abused by fathers or father-figures while growing up. A study of a prison treatment program for youthful offenders showed that more than 50 percent admitted they were gang members and over half of them were raised by mothers only, the father having abandoned them at an early age.

I agree with the authors when they say that a necessary component of any successful counseling intervention program for gangs is the recognition of the child’s need for strong, male role models and father figures, A program that aggressively include the father or a big brother or other male family member in a mentoring situation may be beneficial to the young person in the long run. Programs such as “Big Brothers” with a high assertive training program for participants may just be the answer to help gang members return to the right path.

After thoughts

"I'm youth, I'm joy, I'm a little bird that has broken out of the egg"

James M. Barrie
Scottish dramatist & novelist (1860 - 1937)

Just like the little bird that has broken out of the egg, teens are grappling with their new-found 'freedom' from the childhood stage where parents were the center of their world. Teens face the need to belong (to be in cliques) and the need to be accepted by their peers. They are influenced by Hollywood's portrayal of the coming of age and exercising individuality albeit in a rebellious mode. After all, James Dean was a rebel without a cause and look how much he is revered, these teens exclaimed. The articles and studies on teen gangs indicated a certain frustration teens go through trying to gain acceptance and approval from friends and peers. A child no more but not yet a man or woman, these teens look for some form of structure from their mature 'brothers' or 'sisters'.

It is interesting to note that many blame peer pressure and underachievements in school that push these teens into joining gangs. Nevertheless, the root factor is the lack of family support and parental guidance. The child without a secure family life is forced either into aggression or delinquency or into apathy or despair. Children from all ethnic groups and socio-economic class are growing up in families that are not meeting their need for love and security. As such, the gang has become a substitute family.

Some may argue that it is not wrong for teens to want to belong, to be in groups of like-minded people who care about them. Having a group of friends or belonging to a clique or gang may seem harmless. But the problem lies when these teens cannot differentiate friendly outings from joining in petty criminal activities. The articles reviewed confirmed the need for these teens to prove their worth to their new 'family'. By joining in the gang's activities, they are getting the attention and nods that are lacking in their life.

I am very much in agreement with the strategies that have been advocated by the authors of the articles and studies. Schools and law enforcement agencies can only do so much. Millions of dollars can be spent on programs that steer teens away from gangs. But the most effective strategy would be a coordinated program that involves the teens' parents and family members. Even the most rebellious gang member has a soft spot for his or her family members who remain as important figures in his or her life

To quote President Franklin Roosevelt who said "*we cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future*", we must thus put in a concerted effort in developing our youth and ensuring that they have the opportunities to be good and responsible citizens. And to do that, we must start by educating the parents on the importance of providing a supportive family environment for their fragile teens.

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