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A Recommendation to Law Enforcement to Participate in Community Based Gang Prevention and Intervention Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Gang prevention and intervention is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because gang violence and culture are having devastating consequences for communities across the nation. Not even rural areas once free from the crime and violence of youth gangs are immune. Law enforcement agencies should form collaborative partnerships with other agencies, community organizations, businesses, civic groups, and faith based institutions to develop anti-gang programs and strategies that are bested suited to achieve successful results for the unique ethnic, cultural, and demographic characteristics of the region.

The types of information used to support the researcher's position were found in government publications, articles, books, and various papers and publications. The recommendation drawn from this position paper is that there is no magic pill solution. The approach most likely to successfully impact a community's gang menace is for law enforcement to share the focus of gang prevention, intervention, and suppression with as many credible community stakeholders as possible.

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INTRODUCTION

With approximately 774,000 active gang members in the United States, gang crime and violence is a continuing problem for communities across the country (Egley & Moore, 2010). Currently, many law enforcement agencies focus efforts and resources solely on the suppression of criminal gangs and gang related violence. Agencies participate in task forces, maintain and share gang intelligence databases, request and enforce civil gang injunctions, as well target specific gangs and gang members for zero tolerance enforcement strategies. While these tactics should continue, the benefits are minimized in the absence of a more robust and holistic strategy that also includes prevention and intervention (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], 2010; Borg & Dalla, 2005; Jackson, 1998; Delattre, 2006).

Law enforcement organizations alone cannot be the sole entities involved in tackling gang problems. A collaborative multiagency and multidisciplinary approach will create a more diverse pool of expertise, share the burden of providing resources and funding, prevent duplication of efforts, and serve to illustrate a community's resolve to discourage gang activity and membership. This paper will examine some current gang prevention and intervention literature and programs directed towards gang members and at risk youth. Law enforcement should partner with other community stakeholders to create solutions and programs tailored to address the specific and unique local problems and gang environment and improve the quality of life for citizens within their jurisdictions.

POSITION

The best chance for any anti-gang initiative to be successful is to partner law enforcement with other agencies, community organizations, and faith-based groups to develop programs specific to the region. A great deal of research confirmed that anti-gang strategies need to be a collaborative community-based effort (Burnham, 2004; Borg & Dalla, 2005; OJJDP, 2010; Skogan, 2006; Wilson-Brewer, Cohen, O'Donnell, Goodman, 1991; Greuel, 2010; Jackson, 1998). The Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS), a major citywide, multi-agency program intended to fight crime and improve quality of life was initiated in April 1993 (The Chicago Community Policing Evaluation Consortium [CCPEC], 2004).

The CAPS initiative provides an award winning example of how simply coordinating a municipality's own departments can have a positive effect, where a collaborative task force between police, building inspectors, code enforcement, and city attorneys was so successful in forcing building owners to rejuvenate once drug and gang infested locations, that it not only reduced crime in the targeted sites, but for half a block around each property as well (Skogan, 2006). This successful initiative was only one small part of a greater overall crime reduction effort that involved many segments of Chicago governmental, community, and religious institutions. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), a division of the U.S. Department of Justice, recommended that an effective anti-gang strategy includes "at a minimum, representation from the following groups: law enforcement, corrections, probation/parole (juvenile and adult), schools, social services agencies, local units of government, faith based organizations, religious institutions, employment programs, and community

residents" (OJJDP, 2010, p. 6). Numerous professional and community assets should be involved to provide a wide range of services, such as tattoo removal, job training, parenting skills training, after school activities, GED classes, and conflict resolution techniques. By involving as many stakeholders as possible, the expertise, unique services, and capabilities of each group is brought to bear collectively in a united, comprehensive strategy against the gang problem (Greuel, 2010). Such arrangements also lessen the potential of having a wasteful duplication of services.

A serious concern for many who have administered anti-gang and anti-youth violence programs and curriculums is the lack of adequate funding (Wilson-Brewer et al., 1991). With current budgetary declines being experienced in most communities, funding for many programs is drying up. The city of Los Angles finances its successful "Summer Nights" (after hour's athletic, employment and family programs) with a combination of both city money and philanthropic funds (Greuel, 2010). Supporting agencies, organizations, and groups may consider incorporating together as a nonprofit to take advantage of certain grants that state agencies may not be eligible for (OJJDP, 2010). By pooling resources, multiple entities are able to achieve more than any one organization bearing the financial burden alone.

Every community has unique crime patterns and gang problems. Not all gangs have similar characteristics, nor will they all respond to the same treatment. Programs must be culturally specific in order to concentrate anti-gang efforts and resources on the desired targeted population (Jackson, 1998). According to Spergel, "without appropriate analysis of the particular community's gang activity, the intervention into and prevention of these activities will be extremely difficult" (as cited in Burnham, 2004,

p. 306). OJJDP also supports an anti-gang programs that are designed based on assessments that recognize existing community dynamics, local gang crime patterns, and regional demographic factors (OJJDP, 2010). Burnham (2004) stated that "Uniformed assumptions about how gangs view the world or what norms or values they adhere to will not lead to successful outcomes" (p. 324). The city of Los Angeles, California, in a recent official assessment of its many anti-gang initiatives stated, "the success of any anti-gang program hinges on identifying the unique needs of communities to develop and deliver an optimal mix of coordinated services" (Greuel, 2010, p.13). Recognizing that demographics and gang culture can change over time, the Los Angeles report recommended that programs are reviewed and community needs assessments should be performed every three to five years (Greuel, 2010).

Not all gangs are involved in the same types of crimes or are structured in the same way. Differing strategies will also be required to target African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Caucasian gangs effectively (Jackson, 1998; Burnham, 2004; Wilson-Brewer et al., 1991; Skogan, 2006; Esbensen, Freng, Taylor, Peterson, Osgood, 2002). Country of origin is also an important consideration. Hispanic gangs based on Mexican culture differ from those from El Salvador or Puerto Rico. Asian gangs can be founded on a variety of cultures such as Chinese, Vietnamese, or Cambodian for example. Jamaican possess will vary from other African American gangs. Caucasian white supremacy gangs have differing motives than do Ukrainian street gangs and would require the development of much different anti-gang strategies. A 1996 study of the anti-gang and violence programs of five major cities conducted by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) concluded that, "Each city worked to find solutions

that fit its particular needs because no one anti-gang program works for all cities, given the diversity of region, race, and culture" (Burnham, 2004, p. 322).

Gang activity is no longer solely an urban phenomenon. Officials creating anti-gang programs should be cognizant to the differences between gangs in rural settings and those in the inner cities (Borg & Dalla, 2005; Esbensen et al., 2002; OJJDP, 2010; Burnham, 2004). Even though gang activity is on the rise in suburban and rural areas, most anti-gang efforts have been developed for and targeted at urban youth with little thought or evaluation of the success of these programs in more rural settings (Borg, & Dalla, 2005; OJJDP, 2010; Wilson-Brewer et al., 1991).

The majority of research on gangs has been concerned predominantly with male membership and involvement; only modest attempts have been made to see how particular intervention programs affect females in particular (Wilson-Brewer et al., 1991; Burnham, 2004). Girls and young women look towards gangs to fulfill many of the same needs as do males. Jackson (1998) stated that "They face all the risks boys do, and then some. They face a high risk of being raped, incurring health problems, dealing with pregnancy and children, becoming welfare dependent, and participating in violent criminal activity" (p.153). A "Building Conflict-Solving Skills" program in Topeka, Kansas suggested girls were more "solution oriented" than boys, and the girls showed the largest gains in knowledge (Wilson-Brewer et al., 1991, p. 25). Such findings seem to further emphasize that girls may respond to same program differently than boys and may benefit from anti-gang programs created separately from those administered to male participants, perhaps needing some focus on their self-esteem (Burnham, 2004).

Examination of much of the current research strongly suggests that identifying highly dedicated motivated people to administer is essential for the success of any anti-gang effort. According to the OJJDP (2010), "Program directors who generate passion and enthusiasm, and who inspire others, achieve solid results" (p. 11). Those involved, and particularly those who coordinate or facilitate a program, should view the initiative as more of a calling than a "nine to five" job. In relation to school based anti-violence programs, one study noted that if teachers were going to have a positive impact, it would "be best to first work with those who are both willing and able to become involved at a level required for effective program implementation" (Wilson-Brewer et al., 1991, p. 20). Jackson (1998) who developed the Gangbusters program, believed so sincerely that a strong and determined individual who is able to show a genuine commitment towards the youth served is crucial, that he dedicated an entire chapter in his book Gangbusters to the topic and titled the chapter "the committed facilitator: the cornerstone of any successful gang-intervention program" (p. 45).

Not all law enforcement officers have the same temperament, competency level, or enthusiasm in dealing with gangs or youth issues. Selecting the wrong people to work in these positions can have a negative effect and undermine the agencies credibility (Delattre, 2006). According to Delattre (2006), "Departments that deal well with youth violence and gangs assign to those units very good people who teach leaders in civic, educational, foundation, and corporate affairs what they need to know and those trainers formulate plans for coordinated activities" (p. 281).

The Ten Point Coalition (TPC), an alliance of black ministers in Boston who sought to end youth violence, would walk the streets of high crime areas late at night

(McGinn & Gendron, 2002). Although many of the youths eventually accepted and positively interacted with them, one of the ministers stated that "It was six weeks before they could get more than a 'what's up' from the kids" (McGinn & Gendron, 2002, pg. 11). The initiative grew to the point where the ministers would patrol school hallways and conduct home visits with police and probation officers at the homes of at risk youth (McGinn & Gendron, 2002). The program was eventually credited with lowering the homicide rate to a 38-year low and was highlighted by President Bill Clinton in a national radio address (McGinn & Gendron, 2002).

A violent seven-year war between two gangs in San Mateo, California inspired one police detective to request a transfer to the community policing unit (Peak & Glensor, 2002). The officer sought the assistance of mediation experts, probation officials, and other volunteers (Peak & Glensor, 2002). The officer went so far as to convince a judge to waive each gang members non-association clauses (a condition of most of their probations) so that once he established some form of trust with them, he was able to hold productive meetings with both gangs on neutral ground. In the years following this interdiction, there has been no violence between the rival gangs (Peak & Glensor, 2002).

Accounts of successful interventions often include examples of people involved with the program who are dedicated go the extra mile. Program facilitators and coordinators are often described as being committed enough to conduct after hours and sometimes late night home visits to at risk youth and their families (Delattre, 2006; McGinn & Gendron, 2002; Jackson, 1998; Greuel, 2010). Finding the right personnel who are so highly dedicated toward helping youth avoid or leave the gangster life is

difficult enough for any jurisdiction. When only one group or organization is tasked with this responsibility, the eligible pool of potential of highly motivated coordinators and facilitators will be extremely limited. This fact should further serve to strengthen the argument that it is advantageous for law enforcement to involve as many entities in the efforts to combat gangs.

COUNTER POSITION

In 1991, Phoenix educators and members of local law enforcement created Gang Resistance Education And Training (GREAT), an "innovative and comprehensive anti-gang program" (Esbensen et al., 2002, p. 143). Much like the Drug Abuse Resistance Education Program (DARE), a police officer teaches the GREAT curriculum to students in a school setting. Many law enforcement agencies have administered the GREAT gang prevention program. With a nationally recognized curriculum already available to police, some police leaders may believe that there is no reason to go to the trouble of "reinventing the wheel."

A five year evaluation of GREAT concluded that the program may have had a slight positive effect on students' attitudes but "no effects on their involvement in gangs and actual delinquent behaviors" (National Institute of Justice, 2004). The DARE program, to which GREAT is modeled after, has been criticized as a popular yet expensive and ineffective program (Borg & Dalla, 2005). The type of anti-gang programs recommended by this paper to be undertaken are more comprehensive and tailored to the needs of the local community. The GREAT program may have value as one single component of an early prevention strategy of a much larger and more robust plan that also addresses intervention and suppression. The GREAT program is not

focused specifically on high risk youth but is administered to all students (Esbensen et al., 2002). Additionally, children not enrolled in school do not receive the benefit of a program like GREAT (OJJDP, 2010).

Administers of a violence prevention program implemented in Boston found that "during initial development of the curriculum it became evident that school-based intervention alone was insufficient. Therefore, a community-based component was developed to reinforce nonviolent options learned in the classroom" (Wilson-Brewer et al., 1991). Follow up intervention efforts were targeted specifically in high violence neighborhoods (Wilson-Brewer et al., 1991). Researchers who examined numerous violence prevention programs concluded that programs that have been administered to tens of thousands of participants and or copied programs from other communities have often been done in haste to address serious violence but without regard to the success of those initiatives (Wilson-Brewer et al., 1991).

It has been noted in minority and economically challenged areas where gang activity thrives that there is a lack of trust in police. Police have been described as being perceived as occupying armies who brutalize and unjustly profile and harass the young residents of these communities (Skogan, 2006; McGinn & Gendron, 2002). Given the animosity that exists in those areas that need gang prevention and intervention, perhaps these challenges are best left to others, such as teachers and social workers. There are those who question whether law enforcement should be involved in unconventional roles other than as crime fighters (Peak & Glensor, 2002).

However, as servants to the community, it should always be the goal of law enforcement to strive to improve their relations between themselves and all segments of

society. To simply shrug off crime prevention responsibilities onto others and deal strictly with detection and apprehension is not effective and is contrary to the principles of Community Oriented Policing and Problem Solving (COPPS) (Peak & Glensor, 2002). Chicago's history of police corruption contributed to negative public confidence in their police department (Skogan, 2006). Evaluation of CAPS over a ten year period revealed a consistent increase in public confidence in the police with a leveling in the 2000s (CCPEC, 2004). When middle class African Americans were included in the CAPS process, they were "excited about this new opportunity to alley themselves with police," and Chicago police "received a warm welcome" (Skogan, 2006, p. 14).

In Riverside, California, officials implemented the Building Resources for the Intervention and Deterrence of Gang Engagement (BRIDGE). Evaluators of the program stated it had no effect in deterring youths away from gangs (OJJDP, 2010). The reason cited for the programs failure is that it relied almost exclusively on suppression tactics to the exclusion of targeted prevention and interdiction initiatives that were originally an intended part of the program (OJJDP, 2010).

The now well established concept COPPS suggests that law enforcement should be in the forefront of not only crime fighting, but also in taking the initiative to prevent and solve crime problems (Peak & Glensor, 2002). In one instance, the lackluster results of the Tucson Comprehensive Gang Program was blamed on poor cooperation between agencies, which resulted in a focus almost exclusively on social services with little involvement by the Tucson Police Department (OJJDP, 2010, p. 42). Anti-gang programs that are successful include the leadership or significant participation of law enforcement (Burnham, 2004; OJJDP, 2010; Peak & Glensor, 2002; McGinn, &

Gendron, 2002; Delattre, 2006). Because of their understanding of local gang culture, resources, interaction with prosecutors and corrections, access to crime records data, and high visibility in any community, law enforcement is in a unique position to play a significant role in any gang prevention or intervention strategy. Gang suppression activity by law enforcement should not be undertaken unilaterally without consideration for a community-wide, anti-gang strategy.

RECOMMENDATION

Law enforcement cannot engage solely in gang suppression activities and ignore the responsibility of working as partners with other community stakeholders to address the prevention and intervention side of the equation. Law enforcement leadership who are truly concerned with reducing gang membership and violence should seek out its most competent and motivated personnel. The agency's executive officer should solicit and forge partnerships with a wide range of interested agencies, businesses, educators, community groups, and faith-based and religious organizations. Law enforcement working collaboratively with the community has shown to have the greatest results and is the most efficient use of limited assets. A formal organizational structure should be established and necessary memorandums of understanding should be secured. While all successful anti-gang efforts all share some common features, gang culture is ever-changing and evolving and single one-size-fits-all program, such as DARE, should not be touted as an agency's only gang prevention effort. A thorough analysis of the community's gang problem and culture should be examined, and appropriate strategies need to be developed based on the unique gang environment and local resources and capabilities available.

Although not the topic of this paper, any comprehensive anti-gang program should also establish a procedure for proper evaluation even before the implementation phase. In a fiscal environment of dwindling resources, agencies and organizations are obligated to show that their efforts are having a measurable impact. The expertise of local academics could be sought to aid in this regard as an additional partner in the effort (Wilson-Brewer et al., 1991).

Expecting multiple organizations to work seamlessly and in harmony is admittedly a tall order. Simply getting a municipality's separate departments to work together is a tremendous challenge given the differing bureaucracies and missions. Not to even make the effort or arguing that such an undertaking is not the purpose of law enforcement, however, is unacceptable and does not hold with the finest traditions of police work and community policing.

It should be the goal of law enforcement to earn the confidence of all its citizens. Being involved in neighborhoods where law enforcement has traditionally been seen in an adversarial light should provide opportunities for an agency to show that crime fighting is but only one of many strategies it is willing to employee along with other stakeholders to reduce crime, the fear of crime, and improve the quality of life for all residents. A community's youth are its most precious resources, and law enforcement is in a unique position to take the lead in coordinating efforts to minimize the harm and destruction that gangs perpetrate upon communities.

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