

THE BILL BLACKWOOD
LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE OF TEXAS

JUVENILE GANGS
IN TEXAS:
PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

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285

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section	Page
Abstract	
Introduction	1
Historical, Legal or Theoretical Context	2
Review of Literature of Practice	4
Discussion of Relevant Issues	7
Conclusion/Recommendations	10
Bibliography	

ABSTRACT

This Policy Research Project provides a comprehensive discussion on how communities can implement the different programs available, to infiltrate and combat the problems confronting our communities infested with gangs. This paper will also help demonstrate how to diminish some gang related problems and how to prevent gang proliferation.

This presented research is important in the examination process which identifies the importance of educating juveniles as well as the community. Also discussed will be on how to motivate the community to become involved with juveniles in order to control gangs and drug involvement.

The major sources to be utilized in this Policy Research Project include, but are not limited to the following: U.S. Department of Justice, Weed & Seed In-Sites, as well as police journals and professional publications.

The information gathered from this Policy Research Project will assist the police officials as well as the community in developing and implementing programs to curb juvenile gangs. Also the importance of education and communication are emphasized.

Introduction

Prevention and Intervention are key factors one must implement in order for youths not to become involved with gangs and drug abuse. Prevention measures taken will be the intervention and disorganization of members through social opportunities, community mobilization, recreational activities, organizational development or change, and creating or restructuring the most important items missing from the members (Palumbo, D.J. 19 up).

Youths gangs have become more violent than ever before, they increasingly serve as a way for older or former gang youths to engage in illegal money making activities, especially drug trafficking (Speigel, 1992). Gang violence and gang related drug trafficking have risen. Gangs have developed in many mid-sized and smaller cities, as well as suburban communities (Speigel, 1990). The importance of knowing where and how the problem was first created is very important if agencies want to effectively combat the gang problem.

By educating the community, law enforcement officials can explain the importance of keeping youths involved in different programs available to youths. Also by becoming involved in their community, youths get a better understanding that there are better ways to spend their time instead of becoming involved with drug trafficking and gang involvement.

This research project will examine the policies of other communities that have been successful to date, as well as policies from other parts of the nation. Articles from professional publications and statistics from various law enforcement agencies were used also.

As a member of the community, it is vital that we become aware of the activities in our neighborhood. Through education and getting the community to communicate with each other, police officials can help them implement the programs discussed in this research project.

HISTORICAL, LEGAL OR THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Although juvenile gangs have existed in the cities of the United States almost as long as the nation itself, trends during the last two decades have alarmed school and community officials. Gangs, now more violent than ever, are spreading to new locations. The problem can erupt anywhere at almost anytime (Gustad 1990). Juvenile gangs, which at one time had primarily a social basis for their organization and existence, now are motivated by violence, extortion, intimidation, and the illegal trafficking of drugs and weapons (Borrego 1992).

In poorer communities, a breakdown of family and community structures may leave kids more receptive to gang recruitment. Gangs can form in any area where youth feel alienated from friends and families. Gang membership offers

status, acceptance, and self-esteem they haven't found anywhere else (Kammeyer, 1987). Gang membership also crosses all ethnic and racial boundaries. Juvenile gangs are not a problem of a particular race or culture. Juvenile gangs are spreading rapidly to mid-size and smaller cities. Suburban and rural communities provide attractive alternatives for recruiting, marketing drugs, and offering safety from rival gangs.

Juvenile gangs in most areas can be broken-down into four (4) sub-groups: delinquent youth gangs, gain-oriented gangs, traditional turf-based gangs, and violent/hate gangs (U.S. Dept. of Justice, 1993).

(1) Delinquent Youth Gangs

This is loosely structured group of young people who "hang-out" together. The group has a name and members have typically developed some identifying signs such as similar clothing style, colors, and/or hand signs. Members engage in delinquent or undesirable behavior often enough to attract negative attention from law enforcement and/or neighborhood residents and/or school officials. Usually members have not been arrested for a serious crime (Buhann, Jan 92).

(2) Gain-Oriented Gangs

This is a loosely structured, named group of young people and adults who repeatedly engage in criminal activities for economic gain (Buhann, Jan 92).

(3) Traditional Turf-Based Gangs

Also loosely structured, this group is committed to defending its reputation and status as a gang. It is usually associated with a geographic territory, but may simply defend its perceived interests against other rival gangs. Members are juveniles and young adults who typically use identifying signs such as clothing style, colors, tattoos and hand signs. The members usually mark their gangs turf with gang specific graffiti. Assault, homicide and drive-by shootings can occur as a result of rivalry between gangs (Buhann, Jan 92).

(4) Violent/Hate Gang

This group does not qualify as either a gain-oriented or a traditional turf-based gang, according to the definitions above. Typically, this group has developed identifying signs such as a style of dress, haircut, or insignia. This type of gang includes groups whose violence has an ideological or religious rationale, such as racism or satanism (Buhann, Jan 92).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE OR PRACTICE

January 1993, Denver, CO., Front Rangers Cycling Club-
Program designed to promote bicycle safety as well as to promote a healthy lifestyle (U.S. Dept. of Justice, April 94).

Youths were very responsive to this program. Youths saw that Police Officers were willing to listen and communicate with them. As a result, youths have become open and responsive with police officers.

March 1993, Weed & Seed Community/Problem-Oriented Policing Unit-This program was designed so neighbors in low income housing projects can keep a watch on one another and keep in direct contact with law enforcement officials(U.S. Dept. of Justice, Mar 93).

A milestone was achieved through a collaborative door-to-door effort to Weed & Seed Officers in cooperation with Neighborhood Network of United Way/Fight Back. Together, they informed the residents of the demonstration area of the Weed & Seed/Fighting Back program along with services and resources available through both. This effort allowed the officers to solicit input directly from the community. Community cooperation is steadily increasing(U.S. Dept. of Justice, July 94).

March 1993, Seattle, WA., Community Police Team-Conducted several forums at area schools where students were given the opportunity to speak and be heard concerning law enforcement policies and other items.

Efforts were made to reach-out to youths in order to get a better understanding on what youths need and want. Several youths expressed their concerns about police tactics and

procedures. They suggested that in order to bridge the gap between the police and young people, the department should make greater efforts to educate and communicate with them(U.S. Dept. of Justice, Sept. 93).

February 1994, Eagle Pass, TX., Neighborhood Crime Watch Program-Program designed to get neighbors together in order to work with law enforcement officials to keep neighborhoods safe from crime.

Meetings have been conducted throughout the town. Response has been good. More feedback is needed though. Due to lack of funding and cooperation from people, some areas still do not want to become involved. Most people fear retaliation if they become involved with the Neighborhood Crime Watch Program.

A substantial percentage in crime rate has been affected by these programs mentioned above. As in the Neighborhood Crime Watch Program, a program designed so people in their community can report and deter criminal activity, the crime rate has remained steady, though in cities like Kingsville, Alice and Corpus Christi, crime rates have dropped from 50% & 60% to 30% & 40% and dropping every year. Communication and education are also very important with these programs. All programs deal with educating youths to stay away from gang activity and drugs. While youths are learning and understanding the importance of staying away from drugs and

gang activities, they are also communicating with police officials. They learn to trust and look up to police officers which in turn become role models for these children (Clarke, J. Oct 94).

In contrast, Front Rangers Bicycle Club deals mainly with the issues of gang involvement and drugs. Also an exceptional program for youths by creating the "role model" image. Weed & Seed programs were designed specifically for low income housing projects and have been very successful in that area. Community Police Team has opened new doors for youths in order for them to communicate with police officers and to educate them to stay away from gang involvement and drugs.

Discussion of Relevant Issues

All programs mentioned have mainly the same goal: to open lines of communication between young people and law enforcement officials. All programs were developed so that young people could feel more comfortable becoming involved with their community by doing something good that would be well received by others in their neighborhood. Self-esteem along with having positive role models and encouragement are vital factors young people need in their lives, so they can believe in themselves (Leershen, 1991).

Educating youth about gang involvement and drug awareness are key issues. Through the programs mentioned in the

previous section, youths can be educated as to why they should not become involved with gangs and should shift their energies and time to more constructive activities. By becoming involved in your community, you learn to deal with issues concerning your neighborhood. Together, the community joins forces to deter crime(Lyons, J. et al, 1992).

The opportunities available through the implementation of gang intervention programs are that young people can become involved with law enforcement officials in a positive and constructive way. Youths get to see first hand what it's like to work with police officers. They also get a better understanding of how law enforcement officials want to work with youths and not against them. Another benefit is that these juveniles are getting educated on why they should avoid gang involvement and drugs.

The constraints faced are that not all young people are willing to become involved with law enforcement officials. The main reasons are fear and peer pressure. Many youths feel they are betraying their friends by becoming involved with law enforcement officials. Many youths are intimidated by their friends and social contacts that they should avoid law enforcement officials or face the consequences. Through education, youths will understand and become involved and not feel that they are betraying anyone. Through education and communication, youths may learn that police officers are not

their enemies, rather police officers are there to help, educate, listen, and understand the needs of today's youth.

Another aspect of vital importance are role models. Juveniles look up to people that do, not follow. If these youths are given proper role models, they will be inclined to follow in their foot steps. Proper role models could be leaders in the community, law enforcement officials, teachers or citizens that might have had a similar background as some of the youths and have succeeded in reached goals. Also very popular among youths are sports figures. Juveniles tend to favor these due to the tremendous financial success most sports figures have.

Communication by sports offers excellent challenges and youths can feel that they can excel at what they set their mind to do. This is why the program PAL (Police Athletic League) is very popular. In this police officers set-up different sports events and youths tend to become more involved without realizing that they are contributing to the community in a positive way. Since juveniles are inclined to listen to sports figures, it is easier to educate by this method.

Cost varies with each program. Also, considered is the size of the town/city and how well the community is responding to each program. Federal and state grants are main sources for these programs. Other sources would be from the Crime Prevention Association and donations from private entities.

In researching this project, this writer found that education and communication are vital assets in dealing with juveniles. Community involvement is also essential in order for programs to succeed.

CONCLUSION

Knowing and understanding where and how the problem of juvenile gangs are started, also what can be done to stop youths from becoming involved with gangs and drugs is researched throughout this project. Prevention and intervention are vital when dealing with young people. Juvenile gangs have become a way of life in low income communities. Income for these juveniles is generated from engaging in illegal money making activities, mainly through drug trafficking.

By applying similar programs in small communities, youths become more aware through education on the effects of what gang involvement and drug abuse can do to them. Young people have lots of energy and if their energies can be directed into these programs, the programs become more effective. Youths are always looking for someone to listen to them, especially if there is no one at home who is willing to take an interest. Role models can play an important part in a young persons life. This is why alot of times youths become involved with gangs and drug abuse. Through education and communication,

youths become aware that there are people who do take interest in them.

Community programs are proven to be an effective measure. There are 7 elements in ensuring that community programs become and stay effective:

- Be sure it gets done
- Build it in from the start
- Examine both process and results
- Assess changes in feeling & perception as well as fact
- Measure only what you can use
- Use what you measure

By using each of the above, you can assess or examine your program in light of its purpose, confidently proclaim success and learn ways to improve and enhance your effort (U.S. Dept. of Justice, Sept 93).

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