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Youth Gangs
The Proactive Intervention Approach

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is being directed to problems with youth gangs in a proactive approach. The characteristics of gang members are mostly made of males with the average members being fifteen years of age and three or more siblings at home. These types of gang members are most likely to be involved in gang activity. In districts where parents are actively involved with youth gang issues, there are less problems than those districts without parental involvement. The statistical data from several accessible populations were examined as to whether districts which have adequate training programs experience less youth gang problems than those who do not.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to collect research in the field of youth gangs. The problem or issue to be examined is to study the different programs with emphasis on proactive methods. The intended audiences are the police chief of the Houston Independent School District Police Department and the school board of the Houston ISD. The sources of information were gathered from academic journals, publications, and magazines. The intended outcome of the project is to use the information gathered to evaluate the feasibility of the information to be used as a departmental policy.

There are several major theories that address the reasons for youth gangs and youth crime. Most of these theories focus on malfunctions or abnormalities within the social structure. According to Thompson and Hickey (1994), Merton Strain's theory is one of the most popular. Along with Merton, many other theorists, such as Beccaria, Lombroso, Shelton, Durkheim, and others have all contributed to the understanding of deviance and the core formation of youth gangs. In view of the myriad of theories and propositions that attempt to explain youth gangs and their behaviors, it is important to reiterate the significance of their presence in society.

Over the last ten to twenty years, youth gang activity and participation has increased drastically. The impact of youth gangs is experienced from neighborhood streets to the classroom at our local schools. At this point, it is imperative that we move from a reactionary position to a proactive posture.

There is a great challenge ahead of law enforcement personnel and others to create knowledge and information that will help us better understand this problem and, thereby, put us closer to a point where we can eliminate or resolve this great social crisis.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Gangs. The word has meant a number of things throughout history, but inevitably, most people have used it with a negative connotation. Looking at the history of the word gang in the United States, one finds that the term has perennially been used to denote certain social groups considered to be major social problems of the time. The research on gangs has had its own history, and the focus of this research has, in turn, been influenced largely by what society has considered the major social problems of the period. In the United States, the history of applying the term gang to describe certain groups active in the economy, starts with the western outlaws of the nineteenth century (Thrasher, 1928). All kinds of gangs were active in robbing stagecoaches, banks, mines, and saloons; some of the more famous were the Doolin, Dalton, and James gangs.

Gangs posed a particular threat to social control and people were concerned with understanding who these men were and what led them to become outlaws. As the nineteenth century moved toward its end, American society was faced with a new social problem; the social and economic assimilation of millions of immigrant workers from numerous countries into its cities (Thrasher, 1928). Some members of these groups saw opportunity for socioeconomic mobility in crime and pursued those opportunities. This led to what has since become known as organized crime; that is, the establishment of organizations designed to operate in various illegal economic markets. To the general public's alarm, these organizations became increasingly successful and by the 1920's and 1930's, they were often considered the primary social problem of the time; the Great Depression notwithstanding (Thrasher, 1928). Although these forms of collective behavior were illegal business organizations, they were labeled gangs by those who studied them.

Thus it was that the word gang originally used to refer to western outlaws, moved with the end of the frontier into the city and from the frontier wilderness to the urban wilderness. Although it is true that during this time the term gang was associated with organized crime, an analytical separation was also introduced between organized adult groups and those groups consisting primarily of young adolescents. A research by Frederick Thrasher and Herbert Asbury identified youth gangs as the socialization agents for the graduation of young delinquents to organized crime (Thrasher and Asbury, 1928).

Although youth gangs have long been a part of American life, today's gangs pose a greater threat to public safety and order than at anytime in recent history. Youth 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 (National School Safety Center News Service, 1991). Today's gangs are better organized, remain active for longer periods of time, have access to sophisticated weaponry, and are much more mobile. Youth gangs are not simply a big city or inner city problem, nor are they a problem of a particular race or culture. Gang membership crosses all ethnic and racial boundaries. Gangs also are spreading rapidly to a host of midsize and smaller cities. Suburban and rural communities provide attractive alternatives for recruiting members, marketing drugs, and offering safety from rival gangs (Ibid., 1991).

Schools become involved with youth gangs for several reasons. Since younger gang members and most potential gang members attend school, it has become a prime recruiting ground. Gang members who go to school often stake out specific areas as their turf, which can lead to violence on the campus.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE OR PRACTICE

Students, parents, law enforcement, the courts and local community leaders must be involved in the process of developing a unique gang prevention and intervention plan specifically for their locale. Timing also is a critical factor. Schools can do a number of things to reduce the level of gang activity on campus. A vibrant extracurricular program can give bored students other things to do with their time rather than joining gangs.

Most importantly, administrators should establish clear behavior guidelines that specifically prohibit gang activity and encourage responsible citizenship. Several school districts forbid wearing gang paraphernalia or apparel that identifies a student as a gang member. Sometimes just wearing the wrong colors can place a youngster in jeopardy (National School Safety Center News Service, 1991). More and more school districts are implementing model dress codes that clarify and define acceptable appearance standards. Great care must be taken in creating such guidelines to maintain the delicate balance between an individual's first amendment right to free expression and the school's responsibility to provide a safe and secure educational environment. Providing adequate support and protection for victims of gang related crime is critical. If students or staff members do not feel safe in reporting gang crimes, then the situation will only worsen. In-service training and gang counseling services can offer a sense of support.

Police give fifteen tips (National School Safety Center News Service, 1991) to parents and educators to help in identifying gang members. These are: 1) gang tattoos, 2) gang garb that could include the color of clothing, types of clothing, head covering, or methods of grooming, 3) gang markings or slogans on personal property or clothing, 4) literature that indicates gang membership, 5) group membership, 6) being arrested with another gang member, 7) attending functions sponsored by the

gang or known gang members, 8) obtaining information from a reliable informant, 9) getting statements from relatives identifying the youth as a gang member, 10) receiving indication from other law enforcement agencies that a youth is a gang member, 11) exhibiting behavior fitting police profiles of gang related drug dealing, 12) being stopped by police with a known gang member, 13) loitering, riding, or meeting with a gang member, 14) selling a distributing drug for a known gang member, and 15) helping a known gang member commit a crime. It only takes exhibiting one of these characteristics for a youth to be considered a gang "wanna-be" or "hanger-on". Two of these can result in a youth being labeled an associate gang member. Displaying five or more of these attributes can cause police to label someone as a hard-core gang member.

After reviewing all of the literature, recommendations were made that Houston ISD adopt a program similar to that of the Santa Maria, California model developed by Alisal High School in Salinas, California which was the Conflict Resolution Team (Hearn and Panizzon, 1989). The program has two components. The K.O./O.K. which is to reduce student involvement in gangs and the violence which they engender. The first component of the O.K. portion has been to establish conflict resolution centers at the campuses in the community. The second is the K.O. component which is the "Knockout" portion of the program. It teaches students in grades five through eight about realities, negative aspects, and legal consequences of gang involvement. The program can be very hard-hitting and graphic in its approach, but it is also truthful and informative. It is designed to be taught by a law enforcement or probation officer in the classroom. The O.K. portion of the program is intended to build the students up, to increase their self esteem and decision making skills, and to let them know "they're O.K.". Components make up the O.K. part of the project which are lessons and activities on self-esteem for upper elementary, junior high or middle schools, and high

schools. Each set of lessons is called "Bridges", because they are about corrections, about building trust, openness, understanding, respect, approval of love between individuals. Although this program has been funded through the Office of Criminal Justice Planning, a curriculum guide for each of its components will be made available to anyone at its conclusion. Thus, aspects of the program can be replicated without outside monetary assistance, provided appropriate staff can be made available to carry out the project, which the Houston ISD Police Department can offer. With the adoption of this program, violence can be reduced in the Houston Independent School District.

DISCUSSION OF RELEVANT ISSUES

Communities and schools have adopted anti-gang programs that reach beyond the "in school" policies and procedures. These programs focus on changing the behavior of gang members, not merely on controlling it. According to Spergel, Curry, Ross, and Chance (1989), schools and local officials in a national survey deal with the gang problems in one of five ways. These are: 1) suppression (including prevention and supervision), 2) social intervention (including treatment for youth and their families), 3) social opportunities (including education, training, and jobs), 4) community mobilization (including program development among justice agencies), and 5) organizational development or change (including special youth agency crisis programs). Suppression was employed in 44 percent of the programs, followed by 31.5 percent using social intervention. Only 10.9 percent employed organizational development, 8.9 percent used community mobilization, and 4.8 percent provided social opportunities (Clark, 1992).

Since gang-related activity is increasing, it appears obvious that a more comprehensive plan is required to stop the gang problem and keep additional youths

from becoming involved in gangs. In order for any program to be successful, family, schools and communities need to be involved in the process (Clark, 1992). Several programs are in effect that have enjoyed degrees of success. The Tulsa Police Department and the city's East Central High School developed a unique Crime Stoppers Program to address the rising crime problem (Chance, 1990). This approach was aimed at the general prevention of crime, not just gang related crime. School administrators, community leaders and students formulated a plan that allowed students to have easy access in reporting crime. An administrative liaison was appointed to act as a buffer between students and the school. Crimes beyond the school's jurisdiction were given to the police department. This program was successful in lowering crime because it actively involved the students and the community (Ibid., 1990).

Granada High School in San Fernando Valley developed a plan for action to stop gangs and related violence in their schools. The high school, characterized by an outstanding record for academic excellence, was also plagued by gang activity thus indicating that gang problems are not limited to only schools with poor academic records. Granada High School began creating a neutral safe environment by identifying the nature and actions of gangs (Rattay and Lewis, 1990).

They implemented prevention policies and procedures that other schools were initiating, however, they went further than simply controlling students' "in school" behavior. Policies went into effect to help students with academic tutoring and literacy skills. Teachers and administrators met with people to discuss gang motivation and how to stop additional youth from joining gangs.

Students who were gang members or substance abusers were offered weekly counseling. The school staff also became informed about gang activity in the community. The staff worked with local officials in developing intervention strategies.

This program has been successful because teachers, students, and the community worked together to create safe havens for at-risk youths (Rattay & Lewis, 1990).

In 1988, Del Mar High School in San Jose, California began to experience gang infiltration as a result of transfers, family mobility and growth of gangs in local communities. The problem grew rapidly and soon gangs were prominently displaying their colors at school and disrupting the learning environment. Del Mar High School officials did not hesitate for long. They immediately developed an open line of communication between staff, students, parents, police and local community. The teachers began patrolling the school for signs of violence and San Jose Police visited the campus regularly. The school administration identified all gang members and began to monitor their activity. Members received counseling or were removed from the school. The school sought outside professional help, high visibility and open communication with the entire community. Their quick action kept the gang problem from escalating out of control (Shaw, 1989). Police visits to Del Mar High School dropped from an average on 1.5 per day to one per week (Shaw, 1989).

Since the reemergence of contemporary gangs in the United States, Los Angeles has been considered the "gang capital of the world". Los Angeles has an unusually high number of murders and other crimes as well. In 1987, 350 gang related murders occurred in the city; an 80 percent increase since 1985 (Speirs, 1988).

Therefore, many of the pinnacle anti-gang programs were initiated in the Los Angeles area. A five-point program was developed in 1989 to deal with some of the Latino gangs in Los Angeles, however, these ideas provide a good basis for stopping gang activity regardless of race or ethnicity (Schwartz, 1989). The five point program works as follows: 1) Gang problem has been downplayed in the schools. Gangs

should be ignored, except when essential to keep school order. Educators can concentrate on education and socialization, rather than simply on control. 2) Educators need to be reoriented about gang youths. They need to realize that being a gang member is only one aspect of the youth's life, and that he or she has other individual characteristics. This step represents a major change from most anti-gang programs because it encourages one to ignore harmless gang customs and symbols. The elimination of rules surrounding gang behavior makes it easier for gangs to shed their deviant image, 3) Teachers need to receive accurate information about gangs that sensitize teachers to youth. Students need to feel positive about student-teacher relations. To not feel threatened or demeaned by teachers, youth gang members need to realize that they are legitimate members of the school who are expected to perform academically and to participate in school activities, 4) Students must have alternatives to gang life that allow for healthy interaction with other students, 5) A guidance team to deal with gang members needs to be established. This team should consist of counselors, teachers, specialists, and parents.

By following these five steps, some schools in Los Angeles area have been successful in dealing with some of the gang problems (Schwartz, 1989). Youth gangs are not just a metropolitan problem anymore. According to Stover (1986), "No one knows how quickly gang activity is spreading", but one federal study conducted by Needle indicates that one-third of the cities surveyed, with populations over 250,000, reported gang problems (Moriarty and Fleming, 1990). Gangs and their related problems have surfaced in suburbs all over the country. Park Forest, a suburb of Chicago, has developed its own plan for dealing with local gangs. The gang members in these suburban schools often come from Chicago as their families, trying to escape the crime and poor schools associated with inner cities, move to the more peaceful suburbs. These students want to be accepted by their peers, but that is often difficult

and the youths revert to their old behavior. Therefore, Rich East High School, in Park Forest has developed a ten-step gang prevention program that works effectively with suburban youth: 1) be honest and admit there are problems in the school, 2) get smart; become aware of gang behavior and banish all gang paraphernalia, 3) identify the school's leaders; get them on your side and reward good behavior, 4) do not close the doors at the end of the class day, 5) work with the police to solve the gang problem, 6) involve transfer students in activities, 7) educate the teaching staff on gang activity, 8) get parents on the side of the school and educate parents to signs of gang activity, 9) find role models to interact with at-risk youths, and 10) provide career counseling for marginal students. This program emphasizes extensive involvement with the school and the community (Moriarty & Fleming, 1990). It appears that the more successful prevention programs are those that emanate from the community; those based on a community coalition model.

All of these programs are targeted at alleviating the problems of gangs in schools and communities. It is essential that gang members and at-risk youths have alternatives to gang activity (Reum, 1992). After-school and community-wide activities can provide educational and emotional support. Improving the overall school environment can lead to less violence and disruption in the community (Hellman & Beaton, 1986).

As stated previously, changes in the community are also necessary. Changing unpleasant social conditions, such as unemployment, poverty and discrimination should lessen gang and crime problems.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conflict and violence have become a disturbingly common part of life on many school campuses and in many communities. Certainly violence is a cause of concern for everyone; administrators, teachers, parents and students.

In spite of the fact that problems and conflicts have a certain inevitability about them, violence is totally unacceptable. Thus, it is in every one's interest to look for innovative ways to solve problems in peaceful, harmonious ways. How conflicts are handled is the key to whether they are a positive or negative force in school life. In fact, the existence of conflict can provide educators with all kinds of possibilities for teaching something meaningful and of lasting significance in preparing students for living effectively both in school and in the larger community. Teaching students the art of conflict resolution can make a significant contribution to almost any school campus, whether it is relatively free of violence or not. Listening to and understanding other points of view can provide opportunities to learn, grow, and broaden perspectives and deepen understanding of the world.

It is this writer's recommendation that the Houston Independent School District expand the K.O./O.K. program. This program, where implemented, has helped to lighten the load on disciplinarians through the conflict resolution teams. Selected students in this program have been trained to mediate school conflicts, many of which are gang related. These teams have provided mediation for their peers during the past year and a half, reducing outbreaks of violence and their corresponding suspensions and expulsions. When properly implemented, mediation techniques have proven to be extremely powerful, providing a positive avenue by which students can resolve conflicts without resorting to violence.

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