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Tribal Youth Gangs: Do We Know What Works?

Palm Springs, California
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Center for Court Innovation

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Demonstration Projects

Technical Assistance

GOALS:

- Reduce Crime
 - Aid Victims
- Strengthen Communities
- Improve Public Trust in Justice

Demonstration Projects

The Center has helped to create dozens of problem-solving courts

Community Court

Drug Court

Domestic Violence Court

Reentry Court

Juvenile Intervention Court

Family Treatment Court

Youth Court

Mental Health Court

Integrated Domestic Violence Court

What Is a Gang?

A group of people, united in purpose which involves criminal intent?



What is a gang?

- Hard to fix a problem you can't really define...
- There is no one definition agreed upon.
- There are agreed upon characteristics:
 - Group of three or more
 - Sense of identity (names, signs, colors)
 - Criminal activity
 - Young people

Types of gangs

- Street gang- territorial. May be part of their name. “Main Street Maniacs”
- Youth gang- tends to be interchangeable with street gang, but with obvious focus on the age of the members

Types of gangs

- Racial/ethnic gangs- a gang's racial or ethnic make-up will tend to mirror its community. However, most gangs, even ones identified by race (Bloods, Crips) will contain members of other races/ethnicities

Types of gangs

- Hybrid gangs- for membership purposes, race and gender are not leading factors. For example, money-making gangs that sell drugs want salespeople regardless of race, gender etc.
- Female gangs- females tend to play a dual role. They can be both auxiliary members of male gangs and also form their own gangs made up of just females

Types of gangs

- Female gang membership (and female crime in general) on the rise.
- Caveat- girls involved in criminal activity were not always taken seriously.
- Gang organization ranges from nearly corporate structure (CEO, CFO, regional managers, middle management, low level workers) to no organizational structure (no leader or the leader changes frequently).

Types of gangs

- Researchers do not agree on the prevalence of the “initiation rituals.” It appears young people “grow into” the gang, while older people who want to join after a while, have to go through a ritual. The ritual can be violent (getting beaten or beating someone else), criminal (having to steal a car), embarrassing or, for women, sexual.

Why do youth join gangs?

- Born into it.
- Family- support, structure, belonging
- Money/poverty- hard to convince a young person to go work for \$5/hour, assuming that job even existed, when he can make \$100 in 20 minutes
- Racism
- Safety/protection/survival skills (sometimes from the gang itself)

Why do youth join gangs?

- Boredom (girls in particular)
- Socializing- parties, excitement
- Access to drugs/alcohol
- Rebellion
- Boosts self-esteem- older gang members give younger members responsibility, like carrying a weapon or selling drugs- ulterior motives

Why do youth join gangs?

- Most significant risk factors:
 - Availability of marijuana- how does this bode for places legalizing marijuana?
 - Early marijuana use
 - Early violence
 - Learning disabled
 - Low academic achievement

How youth gangs identify themselves

- Gang names-
 - can represent an area (referring to a street, town or city) or a housing project (“Parkside”)
 - Can refer to lawlessness (“the Outlaws”)
 - Animal names (“Cobras”, “Tigers”)
 - Royal titles (“Latin Kings”)
 - Religion (“The Popes and Disciples”)
- Symbols- logos or symbols they create (6 pointed star, 3 dots)

How youth gangs identify themselves

- Clothing- encompasses style (bandanas, denim jackets, hats) and color (Red = Bloods)
- Communication styles
 - Hand signals- modified from sign language
 - Graffiti- “newspapers of the street” (upside down gang name)
 - Gang graffiti vs. “tagging”
 - Tattoos- meant to show affiliation, intimidate, brag, identify, keep track



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Large green graffiti text at the top of the wall.



POUR TOUJOURS

Large blue graffiti text in the middle of the wall.



MERCI AUX COMMERÇANTS.

Small blue graffiti text at the bottom left.







Tribal youth gang activity

- Large number of native youth joining gangs
- Ages range from 9-30, but largest group are teens
- Tribal youth gang members experience poverty, family violence, social isolation, drug/alcohol abuse- all risk factors for gang activity

Tribal youth gang activity

- Cultural influences undermined/lack of cultural champion
- Break down of family structure
- Gang culture can enter a reservation by a returning gang member or through schools that have tribal and non-tribal students
- Can result in being hybrid gangs (not just Tribal members- Latinos, African Americans)

Tribal youth gang activity

- Tribal youth gang members are 30% more likely to be referred to juvenile justice system after arrest than non-gang members
- Tribal youth gang members are 50% more likely to receive the most serious sanctions than non-gang members (such as removal from the home)

Tribal youth gang activity

- Should a youth involved in a gang receive harsher treatment than one who commits the same act but isn't in a gang?
- States and the federal government have tried to outlaw gangs, but it's not easy to do- remember the discussion about definition? 1st Amendment- freedom of association. Originally religion-based, but...

Tribal youth gang activity

- 34% of tribes feel that tribal gang activity is on the rise
- Larger communities are much more likely to report gang activity
- More than 75% of tribal youth gang members are under 18
- Most common tribal youth gang crime is property crime, however over 20% is drug selling and 15% serious assault

Tribal youth gang activity

- Gang members who commit crime tend to commit crimes both individually and collectively

Myths debunked

- Most youth gangs are loosely organized, short-lived and cause few problems. The bulk of gang crime is caused by a small group.
- For most young people, gang involvement is short lived. Few who enter a gang stay involved for more than a year.
- Most victims of gang violence are other gang members.
- Leaving a gang not a life/death proposition (but can still be complicated)

So, we now know the problem...

What's the solution?

- Step 1: Identification
- Find out the gang prevalence in your community. Not that hard to do. Just ask
- Most gang members are taught to be proud of their gang membership and will tell you. Facebook. Twitter

Identification

- Look for gang graffiti. If you see graffiti that makes no sense to you, but still looks like “something” (more than just scribbles) chances are it’s gang graffiti--marking territory, sending messages or threats
- Police (or others) can get trained on how to read and interpret gang graffiti, hand signals, tattoos
- Ask teachers

Solutions

- Prevention
- Intervention
- Suppression

Prevention

- Perhaps biggest risk factor is family-related. Kids tend not to run to something, they run from something
- Focus on parents. Early intervention. Substance abuse counseling. DV intervention. Parenting skills classes. “Strengthening Families”
- Take delinquent behavior seriously

Prevention

- Pro social activities. Midnight basketball. Community service
- “Not about us without us.” Ask the youth- what can be done? They will have suggestions- maybe good ones...
- Make it hard for gangs to recruit--keep the kids busy, disallow gang colors
- Get police involved in the community. Not as just law enforcement- coaches, mentors, classroom presenters

Prevention

- As soon as someone becomes aware a child is even associating with a gang member, tell the parents immediately
- DARE and GREAT- very effective at getting children to not fear police
- Intergenerational cultural activities
- Institute curfews
- Talk to the kids!

Intervention

- Act quickly--as soon as you learn a youth is becoming gang involved
- Sudden truancy can be a sign. It's a sign of something. Address immediately with school and family
- Provide a resource (hotline) for gang members who want to leave a gang--it can be a complicated process. Offer counseling, GED classes, tattoo removal

Intervention

- Family, family, family. Don't forget to assist the family. All the great work you do with a teenager goes out the window if when he gets home his older brother throws up a gang sign

Suppression

- Police must be trained in gang recognition and gang suppression techniques
- Sweeps, focusing on hot spots, saturation policing, truancy and curfew enforcement
- Education--all grades and parents.
Causes and outcomes of gang activity
- Access available resources, including FBI or other federal agencies if appropriate--they have anti-gang task forces

Suppression

- Create gang units and task forces
- Community policing/positive police interactions
- Neighborhood/community patrols
- School resource officers
- Tribal council leadership to mobilize resources and make gangs a priority

Suppression

- Creating stiff gang-related legal penalties (complicated)
- Using civil lawsuits (i.e. injunctions)
- DO NOT WAIT

New Research

OJJDP Tribal Youth Gang Study

- Being conducted by Center for Court Innovation and Tribal Judicial Institute
- Will help understand the scope of tribal youth gang activity
- Identify promising strategies
- Study is ongoing—will be completed in about 2 years

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