

A Call for an Assessment-Based Approach to Gang Intervention

by

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Abstract

Among gang researchers, policy makers, intervention specialists, and other relevant stakeholders, it is generally agreed that results of U.S. gang intervention efforts over the past several decades have produced unacceptably poor results. While the reasons for this pattern are complex and a complete discussion of the factors that underlie these negative outcomes is beyond the scope of this discussion, a central factor is the failure to develop an assessment-based approach to the design and implementation of both community and individual intervention strategies. This article discusses the need for a shift to an assessment-based approach to intervention, and provides a review of relevant assessment domains.

Introduction

Among gang researchers, policy makers, law enforcement officials, intervention specialists and other stakeholders, it is generally agreed that results of U.S. gang intervention efforts over the past several decades have produced unacceptably poor results (for a review see Howell, 2000; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003). In fact, despite the enormous resources directed toward gang reduction efforts, according to Howell (1998) “the history of efforts to solve the youth gang problem in the United States is largely filled with frustration and failure” (p. 285). While a complete discussion of the factors that underlie these negative outcomes is beyond the scope of this discussion, one central factor is the failure to develop an assessment-based approach to the design and implementation of both community and individual

intervention strategies.

Lacking an assessment-based approach to intervention design, gang response strategies are generally informed by a combination of two flawed approaches. The first is based on personal observations, anecdote, and speculation that reflect the well intentioned albeit erroneous 'best guesses' of elected officials, law enforcement personnel, gang specialists, social service providers, and community organizations. The second is what Goldstein (1993 a,b) described as the "one-true-light" approach, which is characterized by "one-size-fits-all" interventions implemented with the assumption that they are appropriate to aid heterogeneous groups of people with radically different circumstances and needs. The historically poor outcomes associated with gang response strategies stands as a testament to the flawed nature of these approaches.

Given the limitations of this approach, it is not surprising that intervention strategies are rarely based in theory (Miller, 1990; Thornberry, 1998), nor do they consistently correspond to the causes of a community's gang problem (Curry and Decker, 2003) or reflect and address the needs of individual youth (Boerman, 2001; Goldstein, 1993a). Moreover, these approaches have oftentimes resulted in the development of ad-hoc and misdirected programs that actually worsen the problem and contribute to increases in criminal gang activity (Klein, 1995; Thornberry et al., 2003).

In order to address the need for development of community-wide strategies based on assessment data, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) launched its Comprehensive Gang Model (OJJDP, 2002). Using a community assessment approach, the model emphasizes the identification of the (a) characteristics of the gang problem as it manifests within the community, (b) factors that most directly contribute to the problem, (c) most appropriate neighborhoods and youth to target for intervention, (d) relevant community resources that can be brought to bear, and (e) obstacles to effective mobilization of those resources. Results from the community assessment then guide the development, implementation, and evaluation of assessment-based community strategies which maximize available resources and target the most at-risk and criminally active youth.

Unfortunately, while the OJJDP model represents a vast improvement in the development of community level interventions, no corresponding effort has yet been undertaken to encourage the design of assessment-based interventions for individual youth. Lacking any significant emphasis on gathering valid assessment data at the individual level, the failed "one-true-light" and/or the equally ineffective 'best guess' approach continue to serve as the foundation for the design and implementation of individual intervention strategies.

Reversing this pattern and replacing it with an assessment-based model is essential because as a population, gang members are more heterogeneous than homogenous and in order to increase the potential for positive outcomes intervention design must reflect those individual differences (Boerman, 2001). Specifically, gang members differ

radically from one and other across a spectrum of ecological variables that includes socioeconomic status, family, peer network, school, community, ethnicity, and culture. Similarly, they also differ along a continuum of intrapersonal variables including intelligence, emotional maturity, social skills competence, disability status (e.g., special education disabilities, psychiatric disorders), academic history, English language ability, and the effects of past and/or present exposure to violence and trauma. Addressing these ecological and personal variables effectively requires a process “prescriptive programming,” i.e., an assessment-based approach to individualized intervention planning that reflects an understanding of these variables in youths’ lives and their potential effect on the intervention process (Goldstein, 1993a,b).

Relevant Assessment Domains

At a minimum, assessment should examine the following domains: (a) family perceptions of gangs, (b) intra and inter-gang dynamics, (d) positive and negative experiences associated with gang involvement, and (e) perceived treatment needs. The following sections provide a brief overview of each of these domains and their importance in formulating individualized intervention strategies.

Family

Assessment of this life domain is crucial, as it is commonly recognized that having gang involved family members is a primary risk factor for gang membership (Cohen, Williams, Bekelman, & Crosse, 1994; Curry & Spergel, 1992; Decker & Curry, 2000; Moore, 1991; Moore, Vigil, & Garcia, 1983; Thornberry et al., 2003). Of particular concern is the fact that within families with histories of gang involvement, family pressure to resist intervention efforts may be significant. As such, it is important to determine the family’s position relative to the youth’s gang involvement and engagement in intervention. Are other family members gang involved? If so, are they immediate or extended family? What are the family’s perceptions and attitudes regarding the youth’s involvement in intervention and treatment? Specifically, are they supportive of intervention, or is the family likely to undermine those efforts?

This information assists professionals to develop an understanding of how the family may shape a youth’s response to intervention, and to appropriately tailor intervention strategies. Stated differently, by identifying family variables, planners are able to proactively address the dynamics which may undermine intervention efforts, and better ensure that potentially positive family resources are brought to bear during the design and implementation phases of intervention.

Positive and Negative Aspects of Gang Involvement

Gang membership provides members with physical, psychological, and financial support, as well as an opportunity to transcend feelings of alienation and powerlessness in exchange for experiences—albeit transitory—of power, belonging, hope, identity, meaning, and

protection. Because interventions that encourage youth to disengage from gangs without providing alternatives that compete with these tangible benefits are likely to fail, it is imperative that the positive aspects of gang membership are identified so that intervention efforts can be designed in such a way as to address these pre-existing areas of youths' needs.

In addition to identifying the ways in which gang involvement has served youth in a positive manner, it is also important that the negative effects of their experience also be brought to light, as these provide meaningful leverage points in the intervention process. Not only does this aspect of the assessment process provide important information for intervention planners, it also affords youth an opportunity to examine the negative aspects of gang membership. It is well known that youth often decide to leave gang lifestyle because they realize the costs outweigh the benefits, and this process of reflection may assist them to assess the overall balance and provide the necessary impetus to engage in the intervention process.

Intra and Inter-Gang Dynamics

This component of the assessment process is intended to assist planners to develop an understanding of the dynamics that surround and define a young person's gang experience. These dynamics exert a powerful influence in facilitating criminal activity and violence (Cohen, 1955; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Decker, 1996; Deschenes & Esbensen, 1999; Jansyn, 1966; Klein, 1971; Miller & Decker, 2001; Miller, Geertz, & Cutter, 1961; Short & Strodbeck, 1965; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993; Thornberry et al., 2003) and these intra and inter-gang pressures may contribute to circumstances which have a negative effect on a young person's response to intervention.

What is the structure and composition of the youth's gang, i.e., characterized by stable, recognized leadership and rules, or more of an ad-hoc structure with transient or non-existent leadership and lack of designated rules? Does the gang include both youth and adult members? Is the gang's primary orientation criminal activity for profit, or is gang involvement primarily an attempt by members to meet social and emotional needs, with criminal activity occurring as a secondary function? Have the individual's crimes been committed primarily for his or her own gain or for the benefit of the gang as a whole? Has the youth experienced pressure from fellow members to commit crimes? Did the frequency and nature of their criminal involvement change upon involvement with the gang? To what degree, if any, has the gang's violent criminal activity been driven by relationships with rivals? Are members free to leave if they chose, or were there negative consequences associated with attempts to sever their ties to the gang? Understanding these dynamics is important, as intervention plans must take into account demands that arise from them, and youth are often unlikely to share this type of information unless posed with these types of direct questions.

Note: Assessment of these variables is intended to gather information about the context of youths' gang involvement that may

affect intervention needs as opposed to gathering information about specific past, present or future criminal activities that could result in criminal charges or self incrimination.

Perceived Intervention and Treatment Needs

Without an assessment-based approach to intervention, there exists no reasonable assurance that the needs of individual youth will be adequately identified and addressed during either the design or implementation phase of intervention. Therefore, assessment should provide youth an opportunity to identify, from their perspective, relevant intervention and treatment issues including the need for assistance in dealing with: (a) family resistance to their participation in intervention, (b) pressure from fellow gang members to remain involved, (c) danger posed by rivals, (d) school and educational deficits, (e) drug and alcohol issues, (f) psychotherapeutic needs, (g) job training and placement, (h) living arrangements and potential need for relocation to another neighborhood or community, (i) positive recreational opportunities, and (h) other specific needs not addressed elsewhere.

Conclusion

Intervening effectively with gang members poses a tremendous challenge, as the process is frequently affected in an adverse manner by variables over which gang specialists, human service providers, educators, parents, and oftentimes youth themselves exercise very little control. Entering into the intervention process without first identifying as many of these factors as possible and designing individualized strategies that address these variables too often dooms the process to failure. And while comprehensive assessment does not guarantee success, it does allow planners to design interventions that holistically align with the unique needs of individual youth, thereby increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes.

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Thomas Boerman has worked with gang-affected youth and adults within law enforcement, juvenile justice, social service and educational settings. Since 1995 he has provided organizational analysis, technical assistance, and professional development training to organizations across the U.S. and within Central America. He has developed a research-based gang member assessment instrument which will soon be available for use in the development of ecologically sensitive individual gang intervention plans. The author may be reached at: tboerman@comcast.net