

In their own words: A study of gang members through their own perspective

by

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Abstract:

The purpose of the proposed study is to examine the perception of individual gang members in the City of Fort Worth, Texas. Specifically, individual gang members were interviewed in order to determine their perception towards gang involvement, community intervention strategies, and general themes associated with life as a gang member. Findings produced in this study have significant implications for prevention and intervention policies relevant to gang membership.

Introduction

Gang activity across the United States has flourished at an unprecedented rate (Shelden, Tracy, & Brown, 2004). The proliferation of gang members and gangs has been steadily increasing over the last several decades (Shelden et al., 2004). Gangs have plagued our society and are viewed as a domestic threat, wreaking crime and violence on innocent by-standers. What is often puzzling to researchers, law enforcers, community leaders, and others whom have a vested interest in a peaceful society is how and why this gang phenomenon continues to occur. In the North Texas region, gang activity appears to have been increasing as the demographics are changing. The gang culture in this particular region, has become extremely violent in which

persons no longer feel they need to understand the phenomenon but simply want to “stop it” (Vigil, 1988). While stopping the phenomenon is desirable, Vigil (1988) notes that this lack of analysis can only impede one’s desire (Vigil, 1988). It is imperative to have an understanding of the gang phenomenon before one can begin to generate positive social change in the streets, *barrios*, and ghettos across the country. To begin this venture, the term “gang” must be defined at both the national and state level.

Gangs Defined

The definition of gang is dependent on jurisdiction. One definition that has been considered by scholars and law enforcement alike was provided by Klein and Maxson (1989). Klein and Maxson (1989) define a gang as:

any denotable ...group [of adolescents and young adults] who (a) are generally perceived as a distant aggregation by others in their neighborhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name), and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of [illegal] incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or enforcement agencies p. 205.

In Texas, the definition of a criminal street gang also varies by jurisdiction. Some jurisdictions may provide a broad definition, while the rhetoric of others may be more specific. According to the Tex. Pen. Code Ann. (West 2008) § 71.01 (d) a criminal street gang is “three or more persons having a common identity sign or symbol or an identifiable leadership who continuously or regularly associate in the commission of criminal activities” p. 183. The Texas Attorney General, Greg Abbott (2001), released a report identifying four basic types of gangs in Texas. While there is a plethora of different individual gangs, some common patterns are evident (Abbott, 2001). The four general patterns or types of gangs that have been identified by Texas law enforcement agencies are: delinquent youth gangs, traditional turf-based gangs, gain-oriented gangs, and violent/hate gangs.

Texas: Types of Gangs

The four general classifications of gangs were identified into these typologies because gangs reflect different cultural and economic circumstances (Abbott, 2001). At the same time, the typologies are broad enough to encompass other, more narrowly defined categories, such as prison gangs and tagging crews. According to Abbott (2001), these different categories also call for different types strategies of prevention and intervention, and may also require different tactical responses from law enforcement, such as suppression.

The first type of gang identified in Texas was the delinquent youth gang. These types of gangs are more concerned with “having a good time.” The extent of their crimes consists of moderate drug use and may even engage in some property crimes, especially vandalism. One key defining point is that this type of gang may catch the attention of police and residents;

however, they have probably never been arrested.

The second type of gang is the traditional turf-based gang. According to Moore (1978) this intermingling of peer group and neighborhood identity is a core characteristic of many urban gangs. These types of territorial gangs are committed to defending their reputation and status of the gang and its neighborhood. According to Sheldon et al. (2004) these gangs are associated with a specific area or turf and who, as a result, become involved in conflicts with other gangs over their respective turf. Their criminal activities can sometimes be as serious as assaults, drive-bys, and homicides.

The third type of gang is gain-oriented. These types of gangs are also known as organized or corporate gangs. These types of gangs engage in criminal activities for economic gain. According to Abbott (2001), these groups may share many characteristics of turf-based gangs and may defend a territory, but may act together as a gang for economic gain. Their criminal activity has been identified as heavy use and sale of drugs, robbery, and burglary.

The fourth type are violent/hate gangs. These types of gangs are heavily involved in both serious and minor crimes, but with much lower involvement in drug use and sales. These types of gangs are known to commit assault, homicide, and/or an offense that could be reported under the federal Hate Crimes Statistics. According to Abbott (2001) this type of gang includes groups whose violence has an ideological or religious rationale, such as racism or anti-Semitism. Some prison gangs, as well as occult groups, could be classified under this typology. Many prefer to describe the above gangs by using the general term "street gang" (Klein, 1995). Demographics of gang members also differ from one gang to another.

Who are these gang members?

The average age of youth gang members across the U.S. is 17 to 18 years old (Curry and Decker, 1998). However, various scholars have noted that the age of gang members is higher in cities in which gangs have been in existence longer (Klein, 1995; Spergel, 1995; Vigil, 1988). Such cities include but are not limited to Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Houston, and Dallas. The age range of gang members has been typically noted to be between 12 to 24 years old. Although younger members are becoming more common, it is the older membership that has increased most (Spergel, 1995; Vigil, 1988). Male gang members outnumber female gang members by a wide margin (Miller 1992; Moore, 1978). According to Snyder and Sickmund (2006) it was estimated on a national survey of law enforcement agencies that males comprised of 94% of gang membership, while females made up the difference. This span was found to be greater in late adolescence than in early adolescence (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993). Snyder and Sickmund (2006) have also noted that youth gang membership was estimated to consist of 41% juveniles and 59% young adults (18 or older). Furthermore, the racial and ethnic composition of gang membership has

been consistent from year to year on a national level (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). The authors estimated that in 2004, Hispanics made up 49% of gang membership, while Blacks comprised 37%. Whites consist of 8%, Asians 5% and other make up 1% of gang membership across the United States (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

Multiple Marginality and Risk Factors

Gang researchers have long known that there are multiple factors that put youths at risks for becoming gang members (Decker, 2003; Grennan, Britz, Rush, Barker, 2000; Jankowski, 1991; Moore, 1978; Thrasher, 1927; Vigil, 1988). In his book, *Barrio gangs: Street life and Identity in Southern California*, Vigil's (1988) theoretical framework is based on the concept of multiple marginality. Multiple marginality derives from various interwoven situations and conditions that tend to act and react upon one another; "Although interrelated, the unfolding and interpretation of these ecological, economic, social, cultural, and psychological features of the street gang suggest a developmental sequence" (Vigil, 1988, pg 1). Vigil (1988) states that this type of holism is more than looking at everything at once, but rather, it is a dynamic discussion at each level that enhances understanding of the complexity of gangs. The ambiguities of modern life and the ever changing political, social, economic, and psychological complexities must be accounted for in analytical approaches. Vigil (1988) states that most of the elements of gang theories are interwoven in the multiple marginality interpretation and that the major difficulty with these theories of emphases is that they lack historical development perspective that fail to utilize different methods to analyze the issue. Vigil (1988) explains that without ascertaining the historic dimensions of a person's or cohort's life, one could easily label a gang and its member's subculture merely on the basis of single interviews or isolated periods of observation.

"Multiple marginality" implies more than just many gang facets; it also entails the many situations and conditions that contribute to gang involvement and activities (Vigil, 1988). Although the importance of the multiple marginality argument initially emphasized the importance of historical-structural and cultural-ecological criteria, the sequence of events must be viewed as a whole (Vigil, 1988). A multidimensional analysis identifies the crucial weaves within the broader fabric of gang subculture. This multidimensional analysis must include the domains in which various risk factors exist. The domains include but are not limited to the individual, family, peer/group, school, and the community.

There are a myriad of deviant activities in which youths partake which may contribute to gang membership at the individual level. For example, Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, and Tobin (2003) noted that youth who use drugs and are also involved in delinquency are likelier to become gang members than those who do not use drugs and are not involved in delinquency. In addition, youths who participate in early dating, precocious sexual activity, and negative life events were also found to exhibit strong predictors of gang membership (Wyrick, & Howell, 2004).

Other individual level risk factors described by Hill, Howell, Hawkins, and Battin-Pearson, (1999) suggest that low autonomic arousal and sensation seeking behavior contribute to gang membership.

Some of the key family risk factors for gang membership described by Wyrick and Howell (2004) include the family structure (e.g. broken home), family poverty, child maltreatment, and gang involvement of family members. Thornberry, Huizinga, and Loeber (2004) noted that child maltreatment (e.g. physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect) that occurred at some point prior to age 18 is a risk for delinquency, which in turn, may lead to gang membership. Another key factor that has shown to be a strong predictor of gang membership at the family level is poor family management. Poor family management encompasses items such as poor parental supervision (monitoring) and control of children (Hill et al., 1999; Thornberry et al., 2003). According to Wyrick and Howell (2004), among these particular risk factors, poor family management may be the most amenable to change. This could be accomplished through parenting classes and family counseling.

Other research indicates gang members are more likely to experience violent victimization than non-gang members. Taylor, Peterson, Ebensen, & Freng, (2007) stated that gang members are more likely to be victims of retaliation (from other gang members), and involved in drug sales. In addition, youth gang members are even likely to be victimized by members of their own gang (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996).

School risk factors for gang membership have also been noted in a number of publications (Esbensen, 2000; Hill, Lui, & Hawkins, 2001; Thornberry et al., 2004; Wyrick & Howell, 2004). Some of these factors include low school achievement, truancy, and feeling unsafe in school. Esbensen and Deschenes (1998) found that educational attainment was predictive of gang membership for girls but not for boys. According to Howell (2003), low school achievement is related to low academic aspirations, a low degree of commitment to school, and teachers' negative labeling. Wyrick and Howell (2004) state that early tutoring and appropriate mentoring can address achievement, academic aspiration, and school commitment, which ultimately resolve truancy issues.

One of the strongest predictors for gang membership is association with peers who engage in delinquency (Thornberry et al., 2003). For example, Agnew (1992) noted that time spent with delinquent peers resulted in self-delinquency. Warr & Stafford (1991) also reported that knowledge of friends' delinquent activity was 2.5 to 5 times more important than friends' attitudes about delinquency. Moreover, Battin-Pearson, Guo, Hill, Abbott, Catalano, and Hawkins (1997) reported that the strongest predictors of sustained gang affiliation were a high level of interaction with antisocial peers through a variety of measures, including exposure to delinquent peers, attachment to delinquent peers, and to commitment delinquent peers. Howell (2003) also reported that association with aggressive peers, whether or not they are involved in delinquency, was a strong predictor. However, Howell (2003) states that limiting a youth's choice of friends can be difficult. The author states that

a more feasible approach would be to increase adult supervision.

According to Esbensen (2000), the community is the domain examined most frequently in regard to both the emergence of gangs and factors associated with joining gangs. Socially disorganized communities may provide potential gang members with the availability of drugs, delinquent youth, feelings of being unsafe, low levels of neighborhood attachment, and low levels of neighborhood integration (Howell, 1993). Wyrick and Howell (2004) state that each of these risk factors may be difficult to modify, and social change is often slow. There is little debate that gangs are more prominent in urban areas and they are more likely to cluster in economically distressed areas. The emergence of gangs in such high-crime communities has a negative influence and provides ample opportunity for at-risk youth to join gangs (Bjerregaard & Lizotte, 1995; Esbensen, 2000).

Current Study

One of the most widely-held principles of social science research is to maintain a professional, distant, and objective approach to both the subjects involved in the research and the findings. This approach allows for an unbiased and almost clinical response to policy recommendations and, in many cases, sets the stage for additional research to further substantiate the initial findings. While there is much to support this approach, it is occasionally impossible for the researchers to follow this principle. On rare occasions, the interactions with subjects in a study are so compelling and the information obtained of such force that it is not possible to maintain this distant and dispassionate approach. Such was the case for the current study.

“In Their Own Words” allowed our research team to interact in a structured, small, focus-group with gang members from Fort Worth, Texas. With their distinctive dress, colors, hand-symbols, and portrayal in the media, gang members tend to cause a degree of apprehension and, in some cases, fear. This reaction, while understandable, makes it extremely difficult to engage in a meaningful dialogue with gang members to determine the basis for joining and maintaining gang membership. This is believed to be a serious mistake since preconceived notions were dismissed as a result of these focus group meetings. There are, however, no illusions about the detrimental and dangerous aspects of gang membership. In spite of the thrilling and exciting portrayals depicted in myriad forms of popular entertainment, there is nothing glamorous or noble about gang membership. Gang members face the very real possibility of being a victim of gang violence every day (Taylor et al., 2007). This was repeatedly substantiated by the gang members in the focus groups. Danger and fear, backed by personal experiences, are a normal part of a gang member’s life from a very early age. However, beyond the very real sense of personal danger gang members experience on a regular, every-day basis, there are significant costs to society.

Specifically, the first cost involves the burden gang activity places on every phase of the criminal justice system, from police to the correctional system. The second are the costs incurred by schools, health services providers, and social service organizations in responding to the

consequences of gang activity. Of greater concern, however, are the long-term costs to communities as a result of the loss of potential productivity from a large, and growing, segment of the population (Esbensen, 2000). In the strictest sense, gang membership is dangerous in the short term and debilitating in the long-term. There are simply no good outcomes resulting from joining a gang.

The current study moves beyond the preconceived notions and largely ineffective policies currently in place to prevent gang membership. It also provides insights into how gang members can find ways to lessen the impact of gang activities in their lives. As is the case with most issues as serious as this, there are no simple solutions. However, this research supports the fact that continuing with current policies to address gang membership and its consequences is approximately the same as failing to act. The findings of the current study are supported by the collective voices and experiences of young men and women who are actively involved in gangs.

Methods

Although the concept of “multiple marginality” was discussed there was no theoretical framework for this particular study. The current study was based on grounded theory. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967) the basic idea of grounded theory analysis is to read and re-read a textual database and “discover” (or label) variables called concepts, categories, or themes. This type of approach allows for the observation of interrelationships between variables. The qualitative approach utilized focus groups to acquire relevant data. The study consisted of ten sessions that were held on a weekly basis from September to November, 2007. Each session was comprised of two groups of ten gang members who were interviewed by designated researchers. The sessions lasted from 60 to 90 minutes each, and were held in the evenings. The sessions were recorded using digital audio recorders. By the tenth session, theoretical saturation was reached. According to Krueger and Casey (2000), this is the point when researchers stop gaining new insights from focus groups. Abridged transcripts were produced by the research team in an effort to provide central themes encapsulated in the final report.

Sample

Interviews were conducted for $N=200$ gang members in the city of Fort Worth, TX. Males consisted of 81% of the sample size while females made up 19% of the sample size. The high percentage of females was purposively initiated by the researchers in order to acquire an over-sample of the female perspective on gang membership. Several of the focus groups comprised of all female sessions. The sample size consisted of 35% African-Americans and 65% Hispanics made up the remainder of the sample. The average age of the participating gang members was 17 years-old. The range was between 7 years-old up to 22 years of age. In addition, 8 Boys and Girls Club counselors were interviewed to observe the unique analysis. These counselors work on a daily basis with the gang members. One counselor, in particular, was consistently referred to by the gang members, Ms. Margaret.

Focus Group Summary

The value of focus groups provides a rich source of qualitative data in a relatively unstructured format. This format allows for a much higher degree of interaction, and probing on the part of the focus group facilitators. On the other hand, focus groups do not lend themselves to the same level of strict statistical analysis that could be accomplished through the use of survey instruments using a 5 or 7 point scale of responses. For purposes of the current study, however, the focus group format provided a much more robust and informed perspective of how gang members perceive their world and social structures.

In order to provide as much structure as possible to the responses, the facilitators asked the questions related to the same themes or topics to each group. This summary section provides an overview of the group's responses and a general level of analysis to each theme. These themes and a summary of responses are discussed below. When appropriate, relevant commentary to expand the analysis was included. The responses from each of the groups showed a surprising level of consistency. While there were differences, and these will be noted when appropriate, the gang members' responses were fairly uniform across all of the groups. While this level of consistency and uniformity was not expected, it does add credibility to the findings and conclusions.

In addition to the focus groups involving gang members, two additional interviews will be presented in this section. The first is an interview with a group of Boys and Girls Club counselors. These counselors interacted with gang members on a daily basis and provided them with an important perspective on the realities and consequences of gang membership. The research team was extremely impressed with their dedication and commitment to reach out to gang members and provide positive alternatives to gang activities. The second interview was with "Ms. Margaret." Several gang members named Ms. Margaret as the single most important positive influence in their lives. Her insights proved extremely valuable to our study. On an individual basis, her tireless efforts in trying to communicate with and create positive choices for gang members are noteworthy and nothing short of heroic.

Themes

"How old were you when you joined a gang?"

Responses to this question ranged from as young as 7 years of age to 22 years old. For most, gang membership started at the lower end of this range, between 12 to 15 years of age, as opposed to the top. This is consistent with the national trend of the average age being 17-18 years old (Curry & Decker, 1998). A few respondents reported gang membership as early as 7-8 years of age; however, the credibility of these responses are somewhat dubious. In all likelihood, a 7 year old would be aware of gangs, possibly have a gang member in their immediate family, or "hang-out" with gang members. But, active participation in an established gang at this age is highly unlikely.

In addition, the researchers also learned from these responses that

gang membership is fairly common at the middle school level in the public education system. The school domain as a risk factor has been consistently highlighted in gang literature (Esbensen, 2000; Hill, Lui, & Hawkins, 2001; Thornberry et al., 2004; Wyrick & Howell, 2004). At this point, however, it is significant to note that gang affiliation and activity starts at a young age and, as time progresses, grows stronger as a gang member moves from middle school to high school or, in some cases, drops out of the educational system altogether.

Self-proclaimed gang membership starts at a fairly early age and becomes a permanent part of a gang-member's social awareness. This was true for both Hispanic and African-American gang members and for male as well as female respondents. While the level of an individual's activity within the gang varied, identification with the gang and strong senses of affiliation with the gang were consistent characteristics across all focus groups.

“How did you get involved in gangs?”

In the majority of cases, becoming involved in a gang was regarded as a matter of growing up. In other words, it was simply the thing to do. Based on the responses from the groups, it would appear unusual for a young man or woman growing up under these conditions to not become a gang member. Gang membership is grudgingly accepted, or at worst tolerated, within family units. Several respondents indicated they became involved, and remain involved, in gangs because of a broken and dysfunctional primary family unit as noted by Wyrick and Howell (2004). Many of the interviewees reported an absent, or part-time, father or stepfather in the home. Some respondents reported an abusive relationship within the home and that gang membership actually allowed them an escape route from this abuse. Such cases of child maltreatment are depicted by Thornberry et al. (2004). It was highly unusual for our respondents to indicate that other family members were not currently involved with a gang or were involved at some point in their recent past. It was also interesting to note that within the gang member's immediate neighborhood, gang membership is also viewed as a normal part of the maturation process. Esbensen (2000) has discussed the neighborhood or community risk factor as being a strong predictor of gang affiliation.

However, the strongest predictor for gang membership is association with peers who engage in delinquency (Thornberry et al., 2003). Friends also played an important part in becoming involved in a gang. The lure of “hanging out” with friends, using drugs and having sex were seen as significant benefits from gang membership. One respondent stated, “Me, I kicked it with a bunch of dudes that I looked up to, you know what I’m saying? I was just a young dude around all the guys that I kicked it with. So, I looked up to all of them, because, you know what I’m saying? They doing it like I want to do. We all doing it now like they were doing it back then, you know what I’m saying?” There was also a sense of support from and solidarity with friends who were also gang members. However, gang members realized that there was a significant level of difference between

support from family and support from friends. To paraphrase one respondent; friends will not bail you out of jail, but family will.

It is also important to note that gangs and gang membership are viewed as dangerous and potentially deadly. While a romanticized and idealized viewpoint of gangs as presented in some forms of popular entertainment and music provides a sense of attraction for gang membership, there is a palpable awareness of the potential for dire consequences when one claims gang affiliation. Several focus group participants reported seeing fellow gang members assaulted, seriously injured, and sometimes killed as a direct result of gang affiliation. While this sense of fatalism was very prevalent, it did not deter the focus group participants from claiming gang membership or participating in gang activities. In another sense, there was a realization that not being part of a gang exposed an individual to the same degree of danger without the solidarity, or protection, afforded by gang affiliation.

“How did you become a gang member?”

Gang members in the focus groups stated that they were not recruited to become affiliated with a gang. Nor did they see the need to actively recruit new gang members. As stated earlier, gang affiliation is viewed as a regular part of growing up in the neighborhood. As for why they joined a gang, the respondents indicated it was not something to “think about. You just there already.” Selecting which gang to join depended on several factors. These factors included, but were not limited to: family members’ past or current affiliation with a particular gang; neighborhood and location; influences by friends; and race and ethnicity.

Gang initiations ranged from being violent, or “jumping in,” to having to prove one’s ability to engage in gang related activity, e.g. car burglaries, street fights, drive-by shootings, etc... without hesitation. “And right there, that’s when you really see what kind of heart the guy got, you know what I mean? If he goes up and starting hitting it, you jumped on the floor and you start covering it up, you know, that when you start...” said one of the gang members who was interviewed. Loyalty to other gang members was also very important during this testing phase of gang membership. In any case, most respondents indicated that gang initiations were not particularly symbolic or meaningful. In some cases, “hanging out” with other gang members and actively engaging in gang related activities were viewed as the most likely path to full acceptance.

Respondents were also questioned about leaving a gang. In some cases, one leaves a gang simply by moving a good distance out of the neighborhood. In most cases, a member’s level of gang related activities tend to decrease with age and additional family responsibilities: Specifically, having a child and maintaining full-time employment. However, several respondents indicated that they would be available to participate in gang activities, regardless of family and job responsibilities, if the gang called them and asked them to participate. In this sense, as long as a gang member stays in the neighborhood and associates with fellow

gang members of the same age cohort, gang affiliation is not really terminated. In this regard, it appears as one respondent noted, "You can never leave a gang."

"Is there anything that could have prevented you from joining a gang?"

Most respondents indicated that there was very little that could have been done to prevent them from joining a gang. Since most had family members who were either active or former gang members, formal sanctions from family members against joining a gang were largely ignored. In some cases, gang membership had been multigenerational, so it was expected for them to join a gang. However, it was not unusual for gang members to note that the absence of a father, or father figure, in the family contributed, to some degree, to their decision to join a gang. In many cases, gang members reported very negative reactions from their mothers when they discovered their child's gang membership. But, this negative, and sometimes severe, reaction did not deter the decision to join.

It was also interesting to note that the respondents stated that most so-called gang prevention programs presented in the schools were largely ineffective. These programs were viewed as irrelevant and, for the most part, a waste of time. Several respondents stated that the programs would have had some impact had they been presented by former gang members, especially if these former gang members had served time in the prison system.

In any case, the decision to join a gang may have been tempered if gang members had supportive and in-tact families that provided stability and sufficient financial resources to provide essential and discretionary material goods: Or if they had received direct, honest, committed, and long-term intervention by a trusted family member or friend, especially if this person was a former gang member. Finally, organizations that provide recreational programs and educational assistance in a non-threatening and safe environment, such as The Boys and Girls Club, were listed as potential sources of intervention.

But, given the significant impact that the neighborhood, family, and friends who are involved as gang members have on the decision to join a gang; it is dubious that any one intervention could have prevented gang membership. One respondent stated, "It's like how you tell me not to do it when you do it, you know what I'm saying? I mean, I know that you're not suppose to think like that, you what I saying, but I mean growing up, you know like, his brother and stuff like that... how is old his brother gonna tell him not to do it when he did it?" The influence of the neighborhood, with these other social structures of family and friends, is so pervasive and strong that it seems unlikely that gang intervention programs would totally negate the desire to join a gang, as evidenced by one respondent's view: "At that time you really don't see it as I'm going to push so hard to get away from the gang life. It's more like you're getting dragged in and you don't even know it."

“What dreams do you have?”

Perhaps one of the most surprising findings of the focus groups was the discovery that so many gang members still held aspirations for legitimate careers and, in some cases, attending college. In fact, several interviewees are currently attending community colleges. More than one respondent indicated they seriously considered becoming a police officer, as ironic as that might seem. Many respondents indicated a desire to play soccer, basketball, or football, at the professional level. In many cases, gang members simply did not see why they could not pursue and realize their dreams because of their involvement with gangs.

One interpretation of this response is that gang membership is not viewed as ruling out having a successful life and career on a long-term basis. Gang membership and gang activity are regarded by the respondents as a normal part of growing up. Some have become gang members, and then proceeded on to other things later in life. The benefits of belonging to a gang; e.g. solidarity, protection, involvement, and status, were important as a means of growing up in the neighborhood and with one's friends. In short, there were no social stigmas attached to gang membership. Respondents recognized that certain gang activities involved criminal acts and these acts carried long-term consequences. But, absent these consequences, involvement at some level with a gang was not viewed as having severe repercussions.

Some respondents really had no dreams or aspirations beyond gang membership. Of course, one might interpret this reaction as a normal means of response from a disaffected and unmotivated teen-ager. However, in this case it is important to keep in mind that gang members are in a double bind when it comes to moving into adulthood. In the first place they are dealing with the emotional disorientation all teen-agers experience to some degree. But, beyond that they are dealing with the dangerous and debilitating consequences of gang activity.

Therefore, based on the responses received, it is inaccurate to marginalize and write-off every young person involved in gangs. Many were found to be engaging, intelligent, and self-aware. On the other hand, several gang members either have unrealistic ambitions or, sadly, no dreams or ambition at all beyond living as gang members.

Counselors

The Boys and Girls Club counselors were also interviewed to allow insight from a perspective not often observed in gang literature. These counselors work with gang members on a daily basis. Many grew up in the same neighborhood where they now work. Some were gang members and had family members who were gang members. However, each experienced, to some degree, gangs as they grew up. Their comments were always illuminating and many times poignant. The counselors provided valuable insights that reinforced and expanded the responses we heard from gang members in the focus groups.

Each counselor was motivated by a very strong desire to help kids. While this is not surprising, it is impressive when one considers the

problems and issues these counselors encounter on a daily basis. Additionally, there is a very real potential for violence and personal harm any time these counselors work with rival gangs and gang members.

The counselors reinforced the idea that the lack of an intact family and the absence of a permanent father figure in the household both played significant roles in determining gang affiliation. This was true in both African-American and Hispanic households. Beyond that, poverty and the neighborhood conditions that poverty inevitably breeds reinforces the desire to become actively involved in gangs. There is a very strong sense, according to these counselors, that young people growing up in these neighborhoods will repeat the same cycle of gang membership that the counselors did when they were younger. As one of the counselors stated; "When you're in the ghetto, you're poor. Everybody is poor. There's no middle (class)."

The counselors also noted that, to a large degree, all the systems in place that were designed to help teen-agers growing up in these neighborhoods do not work. In their opinions, the public school system failed to provide an education and was, for the most part, disinterested in working with teen-agers to give them the skills they needed to avoid gang membership. Churches in the community were not meaningfully engaged with the young people who most needed the attention. Instead, these institutions directed their attention and resources to their own members. Finally, the counselors expressed considerable concern about the interactions between police officers, especially younger, inexperienced officers, and young people. There is a strong perception that, regardless of the nature of the encounter, officers act in a condescending and disrespectful manner toward young men and women in lower-income neighborhoods. More often than not, interactions with the police were highly confrontational even though this level of confrontation was not warranted or justified. This perception leads to unnecessary animosity and tension between the police and young people in even the most ordinary encounters on the street.

When the counselors were asked if they achieved any level of success with gang members, the majority responded that success could only be achieved by removing the gang members from their neighborhoods. Their experience on field trips with gang members was the first indication of a potentially successful intervention. The act of exposing gang members to a different view of life, a view not over-run with poverty and desolation, provided a meaningful, but unfortunately brief, view of what life could be like.

It should also be noted that the work these counselors perform takes a significant toll on their personal life in two areas. First, many have children of their own and realize the potential for gang involvement is real and threatening. They know, in some cases from first hand experience, that gang membership has no long-term positive outcome. Like all parents, they are concerned for their children's future. But their concern is heightened by their own life experiences and the consequences they saw growing up. Second, the time demands, stresses, and frustrations of their jobs weigh

heavily upon their ability to spend time and interact with their spouses and children. Their commitment does not end at five o'clock and it is not unusual to respond to calls for help in the middle of the night and on days off. Many times, this response to a late night call is because one of the teen-agers they work with has been seriously hurt or even killed as a result of gang activity. In short, this is not an easy job.

Still, the interviewers were struck by the staff's commitment and dedication they bring to their work. While they all believe more resources, in terms of money for programs and additional staff is essential, they also believe success is possible. They honestly believe there is still hope for the young men and women involved in the programs at the Boys and Girls Club. They mentioned several success stories and these stories support their sincere and heartfelt desires to help kids avoid the mistakes of the past.

Ms. Margaret

Finally, as the last part of the data gathering phase of the study, the team interviewed "Ms. Margaret." This is a very inspiring and devoted person, to say the least. She is driven to help children caught in the spiral of broken families and impoverished neighborhoods. She reinforced what we had heard many times before about the damaging consequences of absent fathers, broken homes, and the resulting gang membership. "Then this is what they label dysfunction. It's really not dysfunction. They have never really been told. They have never been told. We know what it is to go home and we have the luxury that we can have a choice to eat what we want to eat. They never will."

Ms. Margaret also noted that in many cases, even when the mother is part of the household she is frequently abusing drugs, especially crack. "It's going to have to be an environment change because there's no sense in working with them when a great majority of them are dead. A great majority of time they're going right back to their home base. And one thing that you'll find about them, I don't care how bad and trifling that mother is, they cling to that mother. They cling to that mother. I don't care how bad she do..." Ms. Margaret also describes some of the success stories.

Success, according to Ms. Margaret, requires that an adult provide an opportunity for and support necessary to achieve success. In her experience, this usually comes from a coach recognizing the potential in a young person and supporting the realization of that potential in spite of occasional failure. Even with these successes, there is an overwhelming sense of sadness and melancholy to Ms. Margaret's remarks. She recounted the number of funerals she attended over the years for young mothers and young gang members. With an even greater poignancy she mentioned that the sons of one young woman could not attend her funeral because they were in the penitentiary.

In the midst of her sadness, Ms. Margaret was supported by a strong sense of faith and the assurance that she is doing what God wants her to do. She regards her mission as divinely inspired and supported and she is not bashful expressing this to the young people she comes in contact with on a daily basis. It would be easy to become cynical about the basis of her faith

and question her understanding of the enormity of the social and economic issues surrounding gangs and gang membership. But, one story related to us by a gang member in an earlier focus group supports everything Ms. Margaret stands for and believes in. Specifically, a participant in one of our first focus groups told us that he was severely beaten and remembers laying on a concrete floor bleeding and in fear for his life. He then realized that the blood was being wiped away from his face and someone was caring for him. Ms. Margaret, an African-American woman, came to the rescue of a young, Hispanic man and cared for him. The young man called Ms. Margaret “his angel.” According to the counselors and many of the gang members, Ms. Margaret is an inspiration to them all.

Recommendations

Strengthen Family Structures

One of the most consistent findings in all of our focus groups was that gang membership and the lack of an intact family structure were strongly correlated. The family structure as a predictor of gang membership has been consistently noted in gang literature (Thornberry et al., 2004; Wyrick and Howell, 2004). The lack of a strong, positive, paternal direction was noted by almost every focus group participant. Those that had their fathers present stated the patriarchal presence was “come and go.” Also, when a surrogate father figure existed in the home they were either ineffective or, on occasion, abusive. Consideration should be given to develop programs to strengthen family structures and support responsible parenting. These parenting responsibilities need to stress active involvement in and awareness of children’s activities.

Improve Neighborhood Conditions

Another consistent theme we heard in the focus groups was that gang activities and gang signs were prevalent, and unavoidable, in neighborhoods. According to Howell (1993), socially disorganized communities may provide potential gang members with the availability of drugs, delinquent youth, feelings of being unsafe, low levels of neighborhood attachment, and low levels of neighborhood integration. Removing gang signs and establishing anti-gang programs at the neighborhood level provides an opportunity to mitigate the influence exerted by established gangs. However, suggesting that so-called “Zero Tolerance,” i.e. suppression programs, by law enforcement are the only source for addressing this issue can be counter-productive in addressing the gang phenomenon. While these programs may be effective, they are best used in narrowly defined situations and include involving the community to the fullest extent possible. One of the themes we heard in the focus groups was that the police often treated youths in these neighborhoods, regardless of their level of gang involvement, as hard-core gang members. It must also be understood that supporting active suppression by law enforcement officials against criminal activities related to gangs, is tactical and short-lived. These strategies are not perceived to be effective on a long-term basis and, in fact, have negative

consequences on creating a positive police influence in neighborhoods where gangs are most active. Social change should begin with the reconciliation of strained relationships between law enforcement officials and the community at-large. Only then can the community, particularly gang members, not be so reluctant to discuss openly with police about activities.

Gang Prevention Programs in Elementary Schools

One of the most important findings of our research was the young age at which young people claim gang membership and engage in gang activity. Our suspicion was that serious gang involvement started in middle school. According to one respondent, "Our school done beefed up (security) because of us. It's got to the point now you got gangs at every corner of the block; you know what I'm saying? That's because of us. You can't (be) in there running your mouth cause, for us, we aint gonna do nothing. If we don't catch you out front we catch you in the hallway, restroom, lunch, anywhere."

Literature on schools as a possible risk factor for gang membership is consistent with the current study (Esbensen, 2000; Hill, Lui, & Hawkins, 2001; Thornberry et al., 2004; Wyrick & Howell, 2004). According to the current study, it was determined that most gang members were already involved in gang activities when they had reached middle school or very soon after they enrolled. Therefore, it would be far more effective to begin gang intervention programs near the end of elementary school. The effectiveness of such programs at the middle school and high school level is highly problematic from the perspective of our focus group participant.

Gang Prevention Messages Must Come from Credible Sources

Focus group participants regarded most of the current gang prevention programs as ineffective not so much because of the message, but because of the status of the person delivering the message. Sporadic presentations by speakers from the law enforcement community or the educational system were not viewed as particularly effective, or having an impact, by our participants. On the other hand, when these programs are presented by former gang members, especially when these gang members were recently incarcerated, they are perceived to be much more meaningful. The line of thought is that at least some of the younger potentials would be scared into avoiding gang activity; however, not all youth will listen to the advice. "You may save some of them, but not all of them." It was previously noted that many gang members are aware of the potential dangers of gangs, but seem to have the perception that they will "get through" gang involvement without suffering serious, long-term consequences.

Individuals Matter

The work of the Boys and Girls Club counselors and individuals like "Ms. Margaret" matter and are important. Programs that remove young people from the relatively closed world of their immediate neighborhood seem to have a positive impact on focus-group participants. In essence, it is

important to show these young men and women that another, more positive, world really does exist.

Multimedia

According to Hill et al. (2001), efforts of intervention and prevention must be addressed in the different aspects of a young person's life. In addition, the authors state that there is no single solution, no "magic bullet" that will prevent youth from joining gangs. However, evidence has suggested that education is "key" to gang prevention (Esbensen, 2000; Hill et al., 1999; Moore, 1978; Thornberry et al., 2003; Vigil, 1988; Wyrick & Howell, 2004).

One avenue for addressing gang prevention through education is the use of multimedia. This avenue of education may be especially useful in allowing parents to identify gang paraphernalia, more specifically, the gang culture expressed by their children. Through multimedia, parents of gang members can explore gang culture, family morals and values, and parental roles and responsibilities.

Shelden et al. (2004) stated that parents often deny their children's gang affiliation and place the blame for illegal behavior on someone else. These same parents can, in many instance be uncooperative with teachers, school administration, and even law enforcement officials.

Shelden et al. (2004) suggests that parents somehow cannot accept the fact either 1) their child is involved in wrong doing 2) there is no hope for redemption, or positive change for their child. Offering special programs, such as a multimedia experience can offer parents ideas on how to deal with their children. These mainstream (television, news) and secondary (internet) media outlets should educate parents and children alike on gangs, their destructiveness, and how to avoid being drawn into them. Multimedia can effectively allow for gangs and gang membership to appear less attractive and prepare individuals to resist gang pressures.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the perception of gang members relevant to different topics associated with gang membership. Through their own words, members have discussed the reasons why they become members. Perhaps the most often cited reason was because they have friends or family members who are either interested in joining a gang, or are already members themselves. Observing those individuals who may already be members of a gang with money, guns, and women appeal to the young males who live in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods. In addition, the absence of a father figure plays a role in whether someone joins a gang. Finally, according to the respondents, the notion of protection, which was believed to be a major role prior to the interviewing process, was not a significant reason for joining a gang.

Dissuading someone from joining a gang is no simple task. Many have tried (including the Boys and Girls Club); however, it remains a difficult undertaking. The majority of the interviewees who were contemplating leaving (or stated they were looking to get out) were aging

out of the gang lifestyle. These members were considering leaving in an effort to support their families; however, they mentioned they would still answer when/if the gang called upon them. Loyalty to the gang is emphasized throughout the initiation period, and therefore it is difficult to simply walk away.

It is the hope of the authors that this particular study will serve as the platform by which others will contribute to the existing body of knowledge relevant to gang related themes.

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