**Lessons Learned from the National
Evaluation of the Gang-free Schools and
Community Program**

by

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Abstract

This manuscript examines the qualitative lessons learned from the national evaluation of the Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP) Gang-free School and Communities (GFS) initiative (grant # 2001-JD-FX-K001). The Comprehensive Gang Model is based on the research of Irving Spergel and his evaluation of the Little Village Gang Violence Reduction project in Chicago. The GFS initiative is one of several adaptations of the Comprehensive Gang Model implemented by OJJDP. The model calls for the demonstration sites to identify and enroll gang-affiliated youth and implement five basic strategies to reduce gang crime and gang membership.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) developed a Comprehensive Gang Model to address developmental issues and risk factors associated with gang violence and crime. The model under consideration in this manuscript is the Gang-free Schools and Community (GFS) initiative. The GFS initiative is one of several adaptations of the Comprehensive Gang Model implemented by OJJDP. Prior initiatives included the "urban" replication at five sites and the "rural" replication at four sites. The Comprehensive Gang Model is based on the research of Irving Spergel and his evaluation of the Little Village Gang Violence Reduction project in Chicago (Spergel, 1995). The model calls for the demonstration sites to identify and enroll

gang-affiliated youth and implement five basic strategies to reduce gang crime and gang membership:

> 1. Community mobilization;
> 2. Social intervention;
> 3. Opportunities provision;
> 4. Suppression; and
> 5. Organizational change and development.
>
> The model seeks to reduce youth participation in gangs and reduce gang-related crimes and violence in the community.

The GFS initiative was implemented at four sites, which were required to:

- **Establish a Collaborative Structure**. OJJDP requested that each site hire a project coordinator; recruit Steering Committee members who represented law enforcement, the justice system, schools, and the community; establish an assessment team; develop a definition for "gangs" and "gang-related" crime; and oversee the assessment process and implementation planning;

- **Prepare a Gang Activity Assessment Report**. After conducting an initial "scan" to narrow the potential target areas, as well as developing a gang definition to frame the data collection, the sites were to obtain information on youth gang violence from police departments, schools, students (specifically including a survey on gangs developed by DRP, Inc.), gang members, and other sources. The data collection effort resulted in an assessment report; and

- **Prepare an Implementation Plan**. Based on the data collected, OJJDP requested that the sites develop a plan describing their approach to combating youth gangs and gang-related violence, including the strategies and activities to be offered during the implementation phase. The approach to implementation included the "five component strategies" found in OJJDP's Comprehensive Gang Model.

Over the past six years, the four GFS sites implemented their comprehensive gang reduction strategies. Using the findings from the assessment report, the four sites identified the final target area in which to implement project activities. The targeted youth gang members all resided in the target area. Guided by their definitions of "gangs" or "gang member," street outreach workers recruited youth into their program activities. Their goal was to enroll at least 100 youth from their target communities and neighborhoods.

The targeted youth received outreach and social services as prescribed by the comprehensive gang reduction model. Based on their initial data collection, the four sites developed a plan describing their approach to combating youth gangs and gang-related violence, including proposed intervention components and activities to be offered during the implementation phase. The five basic intervention components included: 1) family; 2) employment; 3) criminal; 4) social; and 5) education.

The family intervention component consisted of an array of activities designed to assist the families in coping with and overcoming issues related with their children's involvement with gang activities. These activities included hosting parent support groups, providing family counseling, and helping the family locate needed social services. The employment intervention component primarily involved providing job or specific vocational training, placing the youth in a job, or developing skills to obtain a job, such as resume writing. The criminal intervention component included assisting with pending or upcoming court-related matters or working with probation to give youth an opportunity to participate in the GFS program to reduce or avoid court-mandated punishments. The social intervention component included such activities as life skills training and substance abuse treatment. The education intervention component included assisting the youth to obtain a GED, reenroll in a public or alternative school, fill out college applications, and find a mentor or tutor.

Each of the four sites participating in the GFS adaptation had unique demographic characteristics and program structures. Common to all sites was the total enrollment of approximately 100 target youth and 100 comparison youth, with approximately 50 percent of the target youth enrolled for one year or longer. At the time of enrollment, a minimum of 75 percent of all youth from the four sites reported being gang members, having been in a gang from 1.8 to 4.6 years prior to joining the GFS program. The average age the youth reported first joining gangs ranged from 12.5 to 14.1 years of age.

Overview of the National Evaluation

The authors served on an evaluation team that conducted the national impact evaluation of the model. The evaluation featured: 1) implementation of data collection activities designed to capture both process and impact outcomes; 2) development of individual site program logic models or theories of change specifying immediate, intermediate, and long-range outcome measures; and 3) articulation of four case studies that focused on the grant sites' continuing efforts to develop collaborative capacity to implement the GFS model.

The process evaluation focused on the efforts of the local stakeholders to build a successful collaboration with participation from the school system, community, law enforcement and justice system agencies, and a variety of both public and private youth-serving agencies. The impact evaluation focused on the development and collection of performance outcome data related to the targeted youth gang population, their families and peers, the participating schools, and the targeted communities. The evaluation team developed an impact evaluation design that measured both program implementation and outcomes appropriate to the schools and participating communities. This manuscript will focus on the lessons learned from the national evaluation.

Data Sources and Methods

In order to address the evaluation's goals and objectives, and answer the key impact assessment questions, the following data collection activities were conducted.

Developed Site-Specific Logic Models. The evaluation team, working with key stakeholders at each GFS demonstration site, developed program logic models to identify outcome measures. The workshop team reviewed with the participants each site's implementation plan within a preliminary logic model framework for its program. During subsequent follow-up activities, the evaluation team worked with a planning group from each site and identified process, intermediate, and long-term measures to assess achievement of its goals and objectives.

Developed Data Collection Procedures. The evaluation team worked with the program's technical assistance provider to implement the project MIS protocols and data collection procedures for the GFS sites. For each target youth enrolled in the program, referral, intake, service plans, and follow-up tracking data were recorded in the program's electronic MIS system. Approximately 100 target youth were enrolled in the GFS program at each site during the three-year demonstration period.

Assessed the Sites' Collaborative Capacity. The evaluation team assessed each site's collaborative capacity as it implemented its GFS plan and asked the local staff at each site to complete the *Implementation Activities Inventory*, a quarterly report on the project's steering committee and implementation team's activities. The evaluation team also conducted case study interviews with the projects' key stakeholders and project staff to assess the administrative and organizational capacity of the GFS program. These interviews provided an outside perspective of the program's collaborative structure and achievements.

Identified a Matched Cohort Population. The evaluation team worked with each site's local stakeholder agencies to identify a representative matched cohort sample of gang-involved youth. The evaluation team collaborated with the juvenile justice agencies, probation departments, the local schools, and other agencies referring youth to the program to develop criteria for selecting a group of youth to serve as a matching cohort. Approximately 100 cohort youth at each site were matched with the grantee's target youth during the three-year demonstration period. The evaluation team collected basic demographic and crime history information on the matched sample to ensure that the cohort youth were statistically similar to the target population. The cohort sample, along with the target youth, was tracked over time to assess differences in subsequent criminal and gang-related activities.

Conducted Data Collection. The evaluation team initiated data collection for each youth enrolled in the GFS program. The evaluation team completed the 92-item *Gang Membership Inventory* (GMI) with each youth. The GMI assessed the youths' attitudes and perceptions about gangs, gang membership, gang violence, involvement in gangs, substance abuse, and criminal activities.

Collected Gang Crime Data. The evaluation team worked with the sites to develop procedures for gathering gang-related and other personal and property crime statistics from the local law enforcement agencies. These data were collected and aggregated on a monthly basis in order to provide as many data points as possible for subsequent trend line analyses. The project team also worked with the local stakeholders to identify matching communities from which to extract similar crime data.

Conducted School and Community Focus Groups. The evaluation team conducted three waves of teacher and school administrator focus group interviews in the program's target and comparison communities, and three waves of community resident focus group interviews. These focus groups included representative groups of teachers and administrators from similar schools in the program's target and comparison communities. Three rounds of focus group interviews with community residents from the target and comparison neighborhoods provided the evaluators with useful data to assess community impact.

Conducted General Student Population Focus Groups. The evaluation team conducted focus group interviews with representative general student populations in the program's target and comparison areas' schools to assess their perceptions of changes in gang activities and violence in their schools during the demonstration period. These focus groups were conducted during each of the three years of the GFS demonstration. A representative sample of

students from high schools, as well as from similar schools in the comparison areas, was identified to participate in the focus groups. The focus groups examined the students' attitudes about gang presence and activity in the school, as well as their concerns with safety in and around the school campus.

Collected Target Population Tracking Data. The evaluation team collected recidivism and other justice system outcome data on the target and matched cohort youth. The evaluation team tracked both the target and matched cohort youth throughout the GFS demonstration period to collect recidivism data for gang-related and other criminal offenses. For the target youth these data were extracted from the MIS tracking database. For the matched cohorts these data were gathered from police, probation, prosecutor, and court records.

Provided Database Management and Analyses. As part of the process, impact outcome data from the demonstration sites were forwarded to the evaluation team that developed procedures to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the designated databases. Gang crime data trends were analyzed comparing the target and comparison neighborhoods. These data were analyzed using interrupted time-series statistics. Target youth recidivism outcomes were analyzed for comparison with the matched cohort sample using appropriate logistic regression analyses.

LESSONS LEARNED

Beyond the quantitative outcomes that will be presented in a forthcoming manuscript, other lessons learned are in the form of more qualitative experiences and inferences from observations over the course of the evaluation. The primary lessons learned from the four sites involved in this project fall into seven broad categories: 1) community capacity; 2) role of the project coordinator; 3) location of the grant; 4) parental and community member involvement; 5) range of interventions offered and age span of clients eligible to participate; 6) title of the project; and 7) data collection and analysis issues.

Community Capacity

During the grant proposal review process, a community's ability to handle the demands of a federal grant award may need to be given major consideration. Communities that do not have services in place and prior existing relationships with organizations established (with Memorandums of Understanding – MOUs – in place) may be indicators that the grantee will not be able to provide the necessary interventions to their clients. Thus, a community capacity assessment should be part of the grant application.

Intervention programs such as GFS are commonly awarded to poverty-stricken communities with high crime rates. From a social service perspective, this is a logical option since intervention programs are often needed in these communities. Nevertheless, when the communities are in cities that are beleaguered with financial problems and budget cuts, the financial issues tend to impede the level of services, programming, and activities that are available to young people and their families. Federally-funded programs like GFS need the support of surrounding community organizations and police departments in order to be completely successful, but budget constraints severely restrict the support. Additionally, local budget constraints may hamper the institutionalization and sustainability of the program in the future.

Role of the Project Coordinator

The role of Project Coordinator is one of the most critical elements contributing to the success of the project. The title "Project Director" would perhaps be more reflective of the duties and responsibilities of this individual. For example, the common traits of successful GFS Project Coordinators included the following: 1) having an ability to network and effectively communicate the issues; 2) being already integrated within the city's existing organizational infrastructure (e.g., within the school system, the mayor's office, etc.); 3) having in-depth information about key project issues; 4) being employed by only this grant or in combination with other grants targeted toward similar or complementary issues; 5) maintaining a deep long-term commitment to the project; and 6) an understanding of basic research principles. Furthermore, the role of the GFS Project Coordinator requires the individual to serve as the liaison to various oversight entities (the Steering Committee, the Intervention Team, etc.); therefore, the Project Coordinator should have outstanding interpersonal skills and an energetic and outgoing personality. In most cases, the GFS Project Coordinators that did not possess most or all of the above-referenced traits were not successful at building or sustaining a thriving project throughout the life of the grant and beyond.

Location of the Grant

Three of the four GFS sites had educational institutions as grantees, and one of the sites had a law enforcement agency as the grantee. Intervention programs that contain both an education and criminal justice piece may be more productive when situated and managed within school systems (e.g., Board of Education), as opposed to law enforcement agencies. Law

enforcement agencies naturally tend to focus on suppression components rather than embracing a more broad-based approach leading to an uneven pursuit of activities. School systems, on the other hand, are mainly focused on the well-being of the students, which oftentimes encompasses education, mental health, and security issues, and are concerns of the GFS program.

Additionally, with these intervention programs housed within educational institutions, they should promote constant input from teachers and administrators working in the schools with the young people on a daily basis. Most school personnel build trust and personal relationships with the youth, and they can encourage the young people to participate and flourish in a program like GFS. The school personnel also have in-depth information about a youth's behavior, home life, and overall personal and academic needs more than a director of an organization or law enforcement agency, which is necessary knowledge in a project of this nature.

Parental and Community Member Involvement

During the tenure of the GFS projects, parents and community members had limited involvement in the projects; they primarily served as focus group participants. However, after myriad discussions with the parents, community members, project coordinators, and outreach workers at the various sites, the national evaluation team noted that parents and community members were key constituents in the success of the GFS project. Therefore, parents' and community members' involvement on the Steering Committees and Intervention Teams may be key to learning the true tone and inner-workings of a community and to getting young people to actively participate in the intervention programs. In fact, it may be imperative to have community members who have been active in the neighborhood to serve as outreach workers because young people seem to relate to, respond to, and respect these individuals more. Outreach workers from the participating neighborhoods have a strong record and seem to be better predictors of referring youth who will benefit from the intervention programs and who will stay active in the programs.

Range of Interventions Offered and Age Span of Clients Eligible to Participate

Programs like GFS may have greater long-term success with juveniles and young adults if intervention strategies are intermingled with prevention strategies and are offered to both younger and older individuals. More and more youth are getting actively involved in gang-related and juvenile delinquent activities at a younger age, especially in elementary school. Also,

as witnessed in the GFS program, individuals are tending to stay in gangs for a longer period of time, with families that have multiple generations participating in the same gang. GFS sites had individuals as old as 24 participating in the projects. Thus, a model that incorporates both prevention and intervention strategies that are age appropriate (e.g., 8 to 24 years old) may yield greater benefits over time for society generally and the youth population specifically.

As mentioned above, the national evaluation team assisted each of the sites in developing logic models. In an interactive manner, the national evaluation team assisted the sites to review the assessment findings and then identify performance measures that captured outcomes associated with the GFS strategies, intervention components, and prevention activities. The initial logic model categorized all of the activities under the five key strategies: 1) Suppression; 2) Organizational Change and Development; 3) Social Interventions; 4) Opportunities Provision; and 5) Community Mobilization. The sites' Intervention Teams met on a regular basis throughout the course of the projects to review and discuss individuals who had been referred to the projects and to develop a case plan that included specific interventions. Interventions included family (e.g., assistance with locating services for the family such as counseling or health care), employment (e.g., assistance in receiving training or finding a job), criminal (e.g., assistance with case management), social (e.g., assistance with drug treatment or anger management issues), and educational (e.g., assistance with obtaining a GED or placement in an alternative school) components. The sites tried to provide a set of comprehensive wrap-around services to the participants in an attempt to treat the entirety of the problem not just one aspect.

A holistic intervention program that specially benefits the needs of the young person and his or her family seems to have some positive effects. A holistic program may include opportunities for education, employment, mentoring, mental health counseling, and parenting classes for the young person and his or her family. Lack of employment and good-paying job opportunities are some of the biggest issues in all of these cities.

The sites should have flexibility in selecting some of the interventions for the enrolled youth so they can target their unique needs. For instance, in addition to the more common and obvious youth interventions, such as employment and educational opportunities, the sites should be urged to customize intervention programs according to the cultural issues and needs of the individuals in each city. Some young people in GFS needed extra help with learning and understanding the English language, and others needed

major assistance with drug, alcohol, and mental problems. Furthermore, some of the youth lacked positive role models, so they may benefit more from a strong mentoring component in an intervention program.

Title of the Project and Language Use within the Project

At the outset of the projects, each of the sites participating in the GFS program tailored the original project name from the generic *Gang-free Schools and Community Project* to one that better reflected its city's character and needs. Each also worked to define project-specific terminology. Collaborating with a Steering Committee in the assessment and implementation phases, each site developed unique definitions for "gang member," in addition to the criteria for identifying "gang-related youth," and "gang-related crime." Some of these closely resembled the associated state's existing definitions, with minor modifications. The sites required precise definitions so they could determine which youth would be eligible to participate in the projects and receive intervention services and how to identify which crimes to track for evaluation purposes.

Using the term "gang" in the project name or during school or community discussions with parents and youth hindered the projects' street outreach workers and other staff when recruiting youth involvement in the project. The parents and participating youth did not like the label "gang member" because they interpreted the term to be negative and derogatory. Some thought an admission of gang affiliation would lead to an increased targeting of themselves and their gang members by law enforcement. In addition, some youth voiced concerns about being identified as a gang member due to mandatory sentencing laws related to gang affiliation. They expressed their beliefs that if they were arrested and convicted for a crime and the court knew of their gang affiliation, then they would receive additional time added to their sentence. However, this belief was not always the case as illustrated by one site's state statute on what constitutes a "gang member" or "gang-related activity." The state Supreme Court held unconstitutional the sentencing enhancements based on those definitions.

The gang label also did not resonate with some of the sites' city officials and administrators. City agencies participated as partners at the sites and city officials and administrators sat on Steering Committees and other committees associated with the project. City officials did not want their city known for having gang members and gang-related crime. The rationale behind this belief is that the city would be viewed as less attractive to reside in, visit, and spend dollars in. Further, outsiders may think law enforcement is ineffective if they cannot control the gang problems of the city, leading

residents and visitors to have safety concerns.

Primarily because of these reasons, some of the sites that originally used the word "gang" in their project titles changed the names to be more appealing to parents, youth, and city officials who might potentially participate in the projects. In addition, some sites developed memorable acronyms focused more on youth and not gang issues. A project name or project terminology that does not use the word "gang," but instead reflects that the purpose is to diminish juvenile delinquency through intervention and/or prevention may increase youth enrollment and participation in the program.

Data Collection and Analysis Issues

The national evaluation team encountered numerous issues with regard to data collection and analysis. The most challenging issues included varying definitions of gangs and gang-related crime, measuring and tracking gang crime, and working with the sites' MIS.

Defining Gang Crimes. Most law enforcement agencies do not have a procedure for identifying whether a reported crime was "gang-related." This process is further complicated as the nature of youth gangs and their associated criminal behaviors evolve over time. Traditional indices to identify gang crimes, such as tagging and use of "gang colors" may not be present or identifiable when the crime is being reported. As a result police must use "secondary" criteria by answering questions such as, was the crime committed by a group of youths, did the suspects have tattoos or other symbols, or was the crime committed by known gang members? Project staff as well as local law enforcement officers should be trained in identifying these "secondary" criteria for the classification of "gang-related" crimes. However, in a multi-site project these "secondary" criteria should be defined at the site-level in order to account for localized differences in gang-activity.

Measuring "Gang-related" Crime. Given the subcultural nature of gangs, gang-related crimes are a difficult phenomenon to measure; however, there were several confounds to this evaluation that could have been prevented thereby increasing the validity of the data. Project staff at each site and local stakeholders developed a coding system to review reported crimes in the target communities to determine if they were gang-related. Because the methodology for classifying crimes was determined at the project site-level, the methodology varied greatly by site. The methodology implemented to classify crimes as gang-related appeared tenuous in certain cases. Most of the police departments that participated in GFS did not have a formal classification system for determining whether a crime was gang-related;

police officers did not appear to receive consistent training on gang-related issues of their community, and independent raters and reviewers used at some sites may not have had any training or rigorous methodology for coding. Instruments used to capture the number of gang-related crimes were not consistently used, respondents may not have had proper training on the coding system, and the instruments utilized within sites were not consistent over time. An increased emphasis on methodological training and more rigorous implementation of analytic measures would increase the reliability of the data collected.

Project Staff Utilization of MIS. A data collection system was developed to gather participant information and to track performance throughout the GFS program. The database system was developed centrally and distributed to all project sites, which trained outreach workers to manage and update records on program participants. The project staff reported frustration using the MIS, and the data documented by the system was not consistent and in some cases appeared unreliable. In order to create a more flexible system and to retain the fidelity of participant observations, the MIS database could be developed at the site-level, working with local stakeholders who could better inform the descriptive variables included in the system. A "custom tailored" MIS would ease the data collection process and allow for more descriptive data that would be relevant to that particular site. Customized database systems would not only serve the interests of a cross-site evaluation, but would also have direct benefits for each local site. Project staff at some sites described additional features of a data collection system that could have served in the sustainability of the project. For example, one of the requested features included the ability to visually articulate intervention efforts with each youth, and to describe participant progression using site-specific milestones. Project site staff felt that this would be beneficial to both staff working directly with GFS youth who would be able to see progress of participants through the program and local stakeholders who were essential in the maintenance and sustainability of the project.

Data Collection Methodology. Outreach workers and project staff were provided instructions and training on how to properly use the MIS to record project relevant information and ongoing intervention efforts for each youth. This training did not include instructions on research and data collection methodology. The lack of consistent rigorous methodology exacerbated normal difficulties in data collection and translated into the documentation of irrelevant information and the loss of evaluation-relevant information. Consequently the data collected, in general, was difficult to analyze. From an evaluation perspective, poor data collection methodology resulted in

limitations to the final analyses, and these problems may also have impacted projects themselves if staff members were relying heavily on the database to drive intervention efforts. Although project staff received some training in the use of the MIS, instructions should have included a methodology component. Instructions on recording youth-outreach worker interactions, coding types of intervention efforts, and a better quantification of program dosage would have had significant advantages to both the evaluation team as well as site staff.

CONCLUSION

These lessons learned are critical to future implementation of programs similar in scope and breadth. While some of the lessons might appear trivial in nature, such as the mere name of the project, they can have a profound impact and unintended consequences on the project activities and its population. Other issues, such as the highly significant role of the project coordinator, have not been well understood heretofore and require further investigation. Lessons and implications about the location of the grant or range of services available seem obvious now, but were not so at the outset of the grant period. Other lessons, such as the importance of community capacity, need to be consistently reinforced during the grant application and pre-award period so the grantees have the foundation to build a successful project.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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