

An Overview of a Gang Diversion Collaboration Operated by the Carson Sheriff's Station in Los Angeles

by

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Abstract:

Gang members in Los Angeles contribute disproportionately to crime and violence. Outside of arrest and incarceration, law enforcement has another tool at their disposal in their efforts to reduce the societal burdens associated with gang membership: diversion. Youth with an interest in gangs and/or those who are gang-involved may be diverted to specific services available in the community based on their needs (e.g. mental health; substance use; employment; education; recreation). An idea promoted here is that through such services, youth might be further dissuaded from future gang involvement and/or gang-related offences and thus subsequent arrest and community penalties. This article provides an overview of a gang-diversion collaboration operated by the Carson Sheriff's station in Los Angeles. Recommendations on how to improve and replicate these diversion efforts are also offered.

Gangging in Los Angeles is a long-standing concern. Los Angeles has several hundred gangs with approximately 40,000 gang members in the city and perhaps around 100,000 in county (Advancement Project, 2007). The latest national gang survey indicates that approximately 731,000 gang members were currently active in the US (Egley Jr. & Howell, 2011). If the above figures are accurate, the Los Angeles area contains anywhere between 5 to 14% of the nation's gang members. Gang members are responsible for a disproportionate amount of serious crimes. For instance, for many years every other homicide in Los Angeles was considered 'gang related' (Egley Jr., Howell, Tita & Griffiths, 2011). Gang crimes are also expensive. For instance, according to Delisi and colleagues (2010), in terms of loss of production, the expenses associated with punishment and justice, and other

considerations, every murder costs society over \$17 million and each murderer costs around \$24 million. While these figures are debatable, they allude to the significant disproportionate costs absorbed by gang members in the Los Angeles area as both victims and perpetrators of homicide. The point about disproportionate costs is further underscored when taking into account the expenses associated with other serious offenses committed by gang members.

Various attempts have been launched to reduce the burden of gangs in Los Angeles. These include multi-agency citywide efforts, to community-based organizations (CBOs) that practice gang intervention, to suppression efforts among law enforcement, to prevention curriculums found in schools (see Klein & Maxson, 2006 for a review). Diversion is another available tool law enforcement has to discourage participation in gangs or intervene in the lives of gang-identified youth. The overall aim of diversion is to redirect youth away from the juvenile and criminal justice systems and provide alternative modes of supervision and individual treatment needs (Austin, Johnson & Weitzer, 2005). Diversion is practiced in many ways. These include late-night sporting programs (e.g. Derezotes, 1995), drug court programs (e.g. Fielding, Tye, Ogawa, Imam & Long, 2002), mental health court programs (Moore & Hiday, 2006), teen court (Godwin, 2000), and restorative justice (e.g. McGarrell, Olivares, Crawford, & Kroovand, 2000). Other ways diversion is practiced is through a system of referrals, often provided by law enforcement, to CBOs that provide services in relation to substance use, employment, family conflict, education, mental health, religion, and/or recreational activities (see Boutlier & Cohen, 2009 for a review). Some suggest that diversion programs have been effective at reducing subsequent offending (Krisberg & Austin, 1993; Sheldon, 1999). Others indicate that diversion programs are ineffective and may actually increase the likelihood of future offending (Greenwood, 1996; Lipsey, Codray & Berger, 1981).

Law enforcement in Los Angeles has practiced gang diversion. For instance, The Jeopardy Program, operated by the Los Angeles Police Department is one such practice. The Jeopardy Program has been around since the early 1990s and is currently active in several jurisdictions across Los Angeles. Anecdotal evidence (i.e. individual success stories) has emerged to indicate positive results of participating in the Jeopardy program (e.g. Kleinbaum, 2006). The Los Angeles Sheriff's Department also operates a gang diversion program – the Gang Diversion Team (GDT) at the Carson Sheriff's station. This article focuses on the GDT. The first part of the manuscript describes the operationalization of the GDT, including intake, assessment, and targeted measured outcomes. Here, data gathered by members of the GDT from two different periods are provided: January 2006 to February 2007 (Cohort 1); and March 2007 to February 2009 (Cohort 2). Next, a discussion is offered that provides recommendations to replicate and potentially improve the GDT's efforts.

Operationalization of The Gang Diversion Team

Background

The city of Carson has approximately 3,400 gang members within a total of 16 different gangs. Of the active gang members, 72% are Hispanic/Latino, 23% African American, 4% Asian and 1% White.¹ Carson also borders other areas in Los Angeles with significant histories of ganging, including Compton to the North, Wilmington to the South, and Harbor Gateway to the West. The GDT began in January 2006 and is operated by one Sheriff's deputy, two Sheriff's employees, and four student interns Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm at the Carson Sheriff's station. This Sheriff's deputy initiated the program, and the station's captain allowed the deputy to focus only on the GDT. The GDT is funded by local grants and sponsorships used to fulfill basic operating needs. Since 2007, the GDT has received between \$5,000-\$20,000 per annum. In 2011, the Temple Sheriff's station adopted the GDT, and other Sheriff's stations in Los Angeles may follow suit.

Intake, assessment and evaluation

In order to qualify for the GDT, a youth must reside in the Carson area and either be at risk for joining gangs or already self-identify as a gang member. The primary goals of the GDT are to reduce or eliminate negative health and social outcomes related to gang activity. Out of all the cases received for both cohorts, approximately two-thirds of the youth who participate were walk-ins, meaning that they and/or their family members had willingly approached the GDT and requested participation. Of the remainder, 20% (Cohort 2) and 31% (Cohort 1) of the GDT's clients were referred by the schools and between 13% (Cohort 2) and 16% (Cohort 1) were referred by law enforcement. All youth who participate in the GDT are referred to do so and are required to complete a gang diversion referral form. This referral serves as a formal agreement between the youth, their family, and the GDT. The referral also indicates that information about the youth may be exchanged between collaborating agencies (e.g. schools; CBOs) in order to track and determine the youth's overall progress on targeted outcomes.

Upon referral, members of the GDT use an assessment form to gather background information about the youth. This form is broken down into five different themes: Medical (e.g. health insurance; mental health); Behavior (e.g. aggression; anger; defiance); School (e.g. grades, attendance, suspensions); Home/Community (e.g. family issues, gang affiliation, abuse); and Legal/Substance use (e.g. arrests in general, arrests for substance use, family history of substance use). Such information is recorded on a Yes/No basis. For instance, the 'Behavior' category in the assessment form lists a series of conditions such as 'defiant', 'emotional' and 'withdrawn/loner'. Upon intake, a member of the GDT reviews each theme and specific condition with a family member of the youth, and later with the youths themselves, and then ticks the appropriate boxes. This allows the GDT to

gather information about the youth's needs from two different perspectives.

Based on their needs, youth are then referred to participating CBOs offering various services and/or activities. These include mental health, job training, recreational facilities, school/education, religion/ faith-based, and counseling. Representatives who offer these services from the various CBOs then meet on a monthly basis at the Carson Sheriff's Station in order to discuss youths' progress. All data about the youths' overall background, CBOs they attend, and reported progress at the CBOs are stored into a computer database maintained by case managers of the GDT. As an incentive to successfully complete the particular regiment outlined by the GDT, youth are offered trips to sporting events, luncheons, movies, bowling, and/or various other fun activities. The time of completion depends on the number of services youth are referred and the achievement of targeted outcomes.

Case managers of the GDT determine one of four levels a youth is at in terms of needs and risk of gang membership. Level 1 youths require minimal services and little to no follow-up assessment. Level 2 youths report poor grades and poor school attendance, and/or have defiant attitudes towards authority. Level 3 youth have expressed an interest in gang involvement, associate with gang members, have poor grades and school attendance, display symptoms of mental health illness, have personality traits conducive to crime (e.g. anger), and/or are substance users. Level 4 youths are confirmed, active gang members and/or have an arrest record and/or are at risk of being on probation. Table 1 provides the sex, race/ethnicity, age and level of assessment for the youth who participated in both cohorts. Based on their level and particular needs, GDT case managers determine how long a youth should receive services. If deemed necessary by either the case manager, the youth, or the youth's family member, this time may be extended.

In order to ascertain 'success', youth at different levels have unique benchmarks devised by the GDT. Assessments have occurred from as early as 3 months and as late as 6 months after initiation, and were conducted by case managers of the GDT via surveys. Youth in Level 1 were deemed successful if they completed participating in the activities for which they were referred. Youth in Level 2 were deemed successful if they improved in school, respected authority and refrained from delinquency. Level 3 youth were successful if had not become gang members, improved their grades and attendance, and completed or be in the process of completing the activities for which they were referred. And Level 4 youth were successful if they were no longer a gang member, had not committed a crime, and completed or be in the process of completing the activities for which they were referred. Table 2 provides data on the percentages of youth who achieved these outcomes from both cohorts. These percentages are for youth had reached all the targets within the specific Level, as opposed to one or two of these outcomes.

For Cohort 2 only, members of the GDT also broke down success rates by demographic and other characteristics of the youth. For instance, success rates

differed significantly by the sex of the youth. Whereas 84% of females across all levels successfully reached their targets only 48% of males did so. This may have to do with the fact that females in the GDT were more likely at Levels 1 and 2 and that males were more likely at Levels 3 and 4. Who the youth lived with also indicated slightly different success rates. For instance, the success rate across all levels for youth who reported living with both parents was 50%, whereas the success rate for youth living with only one parent or with other relatives was 47%.

Table 1: Sex, race/ethnicity, age and level of assessment

	Cohort 1 (n=109)	Cohort 2 (n=188)
Male	71%	69%
Female	29%	31%
Hispanic/Latino	56%	52%
African American	27%	31%
Asian/Pacific Islander	9%	7%
White	8%	5%
Aged 6-8	2%	0%
Aged 9-13	21%	3%
Aged 14-17	67%	39.5%
Aged 18+	10%	57.5%
Level 1	3%	6%
Level 2	37.5%	34%
Level 3	22%	34%
Level 4	37.5%	26%

Table 2: Measured and achieved outcome

	Percent who achieved outcome	
	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
Level 1	100%	67%
Level 2	54%	88%
Level 3	63%	52%
Level 4	39%	69%

A final aspect recorded in terms of success rates were the number of follow-up appointments the youth had with members of the GDT. Youth were ranked as having between 1 to 3, 4 to 6, or 7 or more follow up appointments. Level 1 youth had no more than 3 follow up appointments and no reported differences emerged in these and success rates at this level. For Levels 2 and 3, youth with more follow up appointments were more likely to successfully reach their target goals, and in some cases this was considerable. For instance, for Level 2 youth with 7 or more follow ups, the success rate was 100%, whereas youth in the same level with 1 to 3 or 4 to 6 follow ups, the success rate hovered around 60%. Likewise, for Level 3, while no real differences emerged between youth with 1 to 3 or 4 to 6 follow ups (each around 35%), 60% of the youth who had 7 or more follow ups were successful. This pattern

was not repeated with Level 4 youth, though. About half of the youth with 1 to 3 follow-ups met their target goals and this number climbed to around 62% of youth with 4 to 6 follow up. However, success dropped to 40% for youth with 7 or more follow up appointments.

Discussion

Given that Los Angeles is often considered ‘the gang capital of the nation’, it seems fair to believe that effective gang programs would have thus far emerged. But this is not the case. The paucity of evidence of effective, gang-specific endeavors is daunting. In some cases, no efforts have been made to document the results of gang programs in Los Angeles – either by program staff or by third-party evaluations; in other cases, it remains unclear if the reductions in gangs or gang-related crimes are directly related to any specific gang-reduction effort (Klein & Maxson, 2006).

As Klein and Maxson (2006) note, doing ‘something’ is better than doing ‘nothing’ about gangs in Los Angeles. The simple fact that the Los Angeles Sheriff’s department has something like the GDT is thus commendable. Attempts to measure the potential effects of this ‘something’ are, perhaps, the next logical step in the right direction, and another noteworthy aspect of the GDT is that it provided measures of its efforts. In doing so, the evaluation component of the GDT has managed to provide what most gang programs in Los Angeles have not. The GDT makes no claims to have reduced crime or gang crime in the Carson area but rather indicates the percentage of youth at different levels that have completed targeted outcomes. Another commendable aspect of assessment and evaluation has to do with the GDT’s attempt at identifying youth at different levels of risk for gang membership and/or involvement in offending. Many interventions, particularly educational curricula, provide *all* youth with the same ‘dosage’ of services, ignoring youths’ differential levels of risk for gang or criminal involvement. ‘At risk’ youth is an all-encompassing term, but some youth are more at risk than others and acknowledging this is important. The GDT also operates in an area with a significant history of ganging and crime. For instance, during 2006 and 2007, the homicide rate in Carson was about three times higher and the robbery rate about twice higher than the national average.² Moreover, about 1 in 10 of the city of Los Angeles’ gang members reside in the Carson area. These facts render any claim that the GDT is operating in a ‘gang light’ or ‘crime light’ community difficult to assert.

An additional notable aspect of the GDT has to do with potential savings. For instance, the annual per bed cost of incarcerating juveniles at a probation-run camp in Los Angeles is over \$30,000 (Nieto, 2008). Given these figures, if the GDT prevented one youth from entering the camp system every year, it would cover its operating costs for a year and a half. Diversion here thus potentially has a big payoff. ‘Bang for the buck’ is important to consider when determining effective approaches towards reducing the burden of gangs in Los Angeles.

To be sure, the GDT also has significant, interrelated problems in terms of its operationalization and evaluation. For one, members of the GDT collected data on outcomes, not an independent third party. Individuals who are a part of any type of gang effort are likely to offer biased support and third-party evaluations potentially reduce that bias. Another problem with the GDT: to what extent is it targeting general risk factors for delinquency versus *gang specific* risk factors? As gangs are a particular group, any gang efforts must target particular aspects of youths' lives that increase their risks for gang membership above and beyond simple risks for delinquency. Thus, the GDT could benefit from more of a focus on how services offered to youth target gang-specific risk factors.

More significant issues revolve around the intake measurements and outcomes utilized by the GDT. Regarding intake measurements, each general theme (e.g. Behavior; School) examined has a number of issues below them (e.g. defiant; poor grades). Upon intake, GDT staff determines whether a youth has these issues in their lives or not based on speaking with the youth and one of the youth's family members, often a parent. A more sophisticated measurement of these issues might be drawn from Likert-type scales. Here, rather than dealing in absolutes (i.e. Yes/No), members of the GDT might be able to assess the *extent* of specific issue on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being not really problematic and 5 being a serious). For instance, a condition under the theme 'School' is fighting. Many youth fight in school, but not all of them are at the same level of risk for delinquency and gang membership. The *frequency* of school fighting, though, might provide a more accurate assessment. More focus on the frequency of the various issues within youths' lives the GDT examines upon intake may better help determine the level and intensity of service provision each youth needs. In relation to this, when the GDT measures the 'success' of each youth, they could examine the extent that these various issues have decreased. As is, some disconnect is apparent in the intake and assessment of youth and what determines success in relation to the services they receive. An additional recommendation is to have standardized time periods to assess the youth. As is, 3-6 months is too big of a gap to assess youths' success. Moreover, 3-6 months only gets at short-term effects of their participation in the GDT. Examining the youth at later stages after they complete the work outlined by the GDT (e.g. 1–2 years) may provide evidence of long-term effects.

Another way intake and assessment of the GDT may be improved is by modeling them on risk assessment tools that have been tested for reliability and validity. For instance, the Youth Services Eligibility Tool (YSET) has been championed by some gang researchers in Los Angeles and the Los Angeles' Mayor's Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development as being effective for determining levels of risk for gang involvement and the necessary required services to preclude such involvement. However, the GDT's time and manpower may be an obstacle towards utilizing YSET or other similar instruments. Currently, the GDT's

gang assessment is quick – perhaps 10 minutes – and is conducted by student volunteers or Sheriff’s office staff. The YSET takes about an hour to conduct and should be delivered by someone with at least rudimentary training in administering these types of questionnaires. Moreover, to properly interpret the data collected by the YSET would likely require someone with at least intermediate levels of experience with statistics. Whether student or other volunteers of the GDT currently possess such skills is doubtful.

The GDT by itself will never be able to completely ease the burden of gangs in Carson or any other area where it operates. Nonetheless, the GDT remains a viable and important aspect of overall gang-reduction efforts in Los Angeles that should be partnered with continued gang prevention, intervention and suppression efforts. Collaborations fostered by the GDT should be replicated throughout Sheriff’s stations in Los Angeles and elsewhere. Researchers and academics should assist the GDT and other gang diversion programs improve and measure their efforts vis-à-vis the above recommendations.

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Notes:

¹ Data provided by the Carson Sheriff's Station.

² Nationwide homicide and robbery data from the Uniform Crime Report. Carson homicide and robbery data retrieved from <http://www.city-data.com/city/Carson-California.html>.