

Understanding and meeting the needs of formerly gang-affiliated youth through tattoo-removal services

By

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Abstract:

Urban gang-affiliated youth are highly vulnerable but rarely identified as a public health priority. Two-thirds of Alameda County youth in the juvenile justice system surveyed expressed interest in tattoo removal to help them accomplish their ambitious educational and occupational goals. In response, the Alameda County Public Health Department created Project New Start, based on the framework of youth development and resilience, which provides tattoo removal, case management, and youth development services to formerly gang-affiliated youth. Participants ranged in age from 13-27 years, were majority female, and highly racially/ethnically diverse. The authors recommend that practitioners and policymakers create community-based, multi-pronged strength-based approaches to violence prevention, positive youth development and health promotion.

Youth in gangs and its lifelong impact

In 2008, there were approximately 27,900 active gangs and 775,000 active gang members nationwide (Egley, Howell, & Moore, 2010). Urban, Hispanic and African-American youth are disproportionately involved in gangs (Egley, Howell, & Moore, 2010). Moreover, gang involvement is occurring in younger ages and for longer periods of time (Howell, 2010). For example, about 9-11% of Oakland, California, middle and high school students reported being a member of gang, though the actual rate of involvement is estimated to be even higher (Kidsdata, 2010). The high prevalence and increase in gangs locally and nationally, especially among youth of color, deserve greater understanding of needs of these most vulnerable youth, the places where they live, and what works to meet their needs and improve their life trajectories.

Youth currently or formerly in gangs have higher unemployment rates, lower educational attainment, higher rates of substance abuse and mental health issues and recidivism, each of which are associated with poorer overall health and quality of life (Tibbs, 2000; Kelly, 2010; Prendergast, 2009; Axelsson, Andersson, Eden, & Ejlertsson, 2007; Lara, 2005). High exposure to violence, poverty and related risk

factors have shown to substantially increase a youth's likelihood of developing emotional and behavioral problems (Buka, Stitchick, Birdthistle, & Earls, 2001). Many gang members live in marginalized, highly stressful families, have their social development arrested, remain peer dependent, and are economically disadvantaged well into adulthood (Vigil, 2003; Krohn, Ward, Thornberry, Lizotte, & Chu, 2011).

The transition out of gang life

Getting out of gang life is often times difficult and dangerous (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011), and has been under-examined. Once an ex-gang member or affiliate has identified that he/she would like to exist and recover from gang life, it is an opportunity to intervene to help facilitate positive youth development. Supportive environments, peers and systems are essential to ensure effective coping and successful recovery.

Post-gang affiliation, there is tremendous stigma (Bullock & Tilley, 2008; Moore, 1985) faced by formerly affiliated gang youth not only due to their tattoos, but also their criminal records, lack of positive references and school or employment histories. Gang youth and former gang youth are typically marginalized and viewed as deficits or liabilities in society. Institutions and cultures such as schools are rarely tailored to successfully engage and ensure academic success of gang and other at-risk youth (Katz, 1997). The cycles of gang violence and economic disadvantage are mutually reinforcing (Thornberry & Christenson, 1984), compromising health and socioeconomic outcomes throughout the life course. With an eye towards gang prevention, early intervention, recovery, and resilience, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers must better understand and address the needs of gang youth by providing meaningful opportunities, positive environments and culturally responsive systems that respond to their needs and build on their strengths.

Tattoo removal: an opportunity to promote resilience and positive youth development

The Resilience and Youth Development Framework (Benard, 2004) focuses on the social, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development of the "whole child." This strengths-based approach promotes protective factors and builds upon assets in multiple contexts of a youth's life (e.g., individual, family, school, community) to tip the balance from vulnerability in favor of resilience and success (Youngblade, Theokas, Schulenberg, Curry, Huang, & Novak, 2007; Jain, Buka, Subramanian, & Molnar, 2012). Yet gang youth tend to have more risk factors and fewer protective or resilience factors (Li, Stanton, Pack, et al., 2002). Research and at-risk youth themselves concur that these youth also need comprehensive accessible and youth-friendly case management services, counselors, therapists, anger management and conflict resolution classes, and meaningful opportunities for civic or community engagement and relationship building (Reed & Decker, 2002).

Tattoo removal services are one opportunity to intervene and provide other needed resources and supports to ensure successful recovery for formerly affiliated gang members. Gang members often use tattoos to express gang affiliation and their ranking within the gang (City of Oakland, 2010). The California Penal Code 196.22 defines street gangs as “a group of three or more individuals having a common identifying symbol, and whose, members individually or collectively engage or have engaged in a pattern of criminal activity.”

However, there is a dearth of published public health literature on tattoo removal for gang-involved youth as a strategy to support positive youth development. In a search for articles related to tattoo removal for gang youth, we only found one article from almost 15 years ago in PubMed (Gurke & Armstrong, 1997). More generally, promising programs that offer a way out of gang life are rare. Homeboy Industries is one example, which offers job placement and educational opportunities for at-risk and former gang members (Boyle, 2010).

Project New Start

Project New Start (PNS) has been providing free tattoo removal services to at-risk, adjudicated or formerly gang involved youth and young adults (age 13-25) of Alameda County since the mid-1990s, in response to interest from youth in the juvenile justice system. In 1996, 67% of surveyed youth (n=600) in the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center were interested in removing their tattoos. PNS benefits from a multi-agency partnership and commitment: housed in the Community Health Services Division of Alameda County’s Public Health Department (ACPHD), Project New Start has received tremendous political support from Alameda County’s Board of Supervisors, Health Care Services Agency, and Probation Department.

PNS does not actively recruit youth; instead, youth who want change seek the program. Once a youth is linked with PNS, the first step is to conduct an intake assessment, which includes both a physical assessment of their tattoo(s) and a conversational assessment of the youth’s social support system, to determine the youth’s readiness to move beyond their former, negative gang lifestyle. Based on the identified needs and gaps, program staff work with participants to develop a case management plan. Over the course of their tattoo removal treatment which often lasts 1-2 years, the youth work towards accomplishing their individualized goals. In exchange for tattoo removal, the youth get involved in positive activities such as employment, education, vocational training, and community service. Project New Start has continued to pilot innovations on the models, including targeted case management, workshops, and mentoring for a small group of the most vulnerable youth, and a health and wellness check modeled after the Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative (2011) conducted by volunteer nursing students at Highland Hospital. Both of these initiatives were welcomed and endorsed by youth

participants. This strengths-based programs provides services and supports that build on youth assets and positive development, promote positive factors in addition to preventing risk factors, focus on environmental community-level change, being youth-driven, and operate in collaboration with multiple partners (e.g., public health, juvenile justice, social services, community-based organizations).

Hypotheses

This paper is designed to describe the youth who identify as formerly gang-affiliated in an urban county in California and who are interested in tattoo removal. We hypothesize that formerly gang-affiliated or gang-involved youth will be diverse demographically and have a wide array of unmet needs and strengths to be leveraged.

Methods

We present the characteristics of the formerly gang-affiliated or involved youth in Alameda County's tattoo-removal program, Project New Start, including their reasons for getting in and out of gang life, their identified needs and life conditions including risk and protective factors, and the types of services and interventions provided.

Our constituents' needs were assessed using multiple methods of both quantitative and qualitative data collection. Two focus groups were conducted with diverse stakeholders (including violence prevention partners and at-risk youth) to explore in-depth what their needs are and what would be most helpful. In addition, semi-structured assessments were conducted at intake with each individual, to track physical and mental health and educational outcomes for case planning and needs assessment purposes. We also conducted in-depth case record reviews and thematic qualitative analysis of 25 randomly selected cases from among youth enrolled in September 2010, and anecdotal evidence and stories from our participants and program staff inform our understanding. We calculated descriptive and analytic statistics with our quantitative data and identified themes from our qualitative data.

Results

Participant characteristics

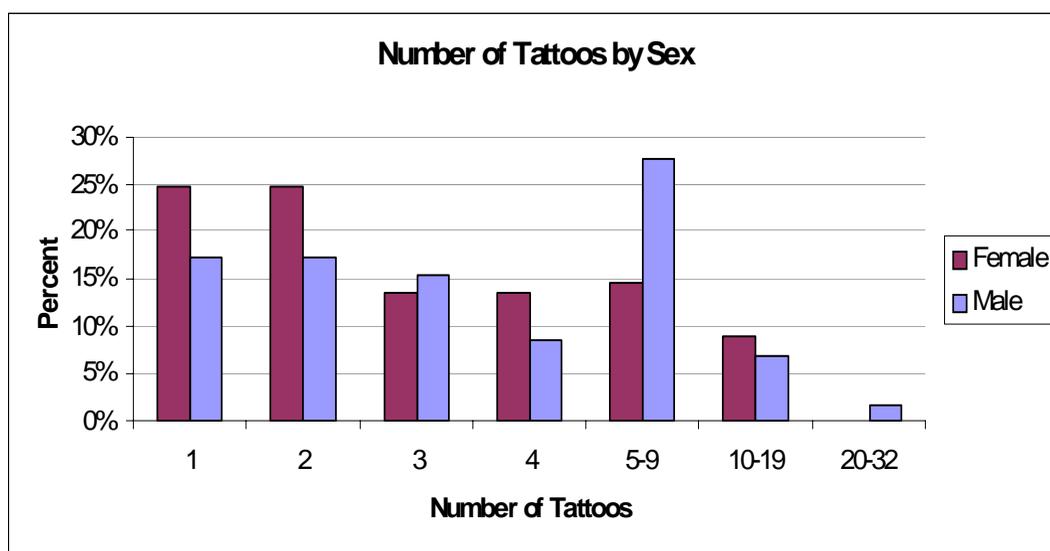
From 1996 to 2008, Project New Start served over 310 youth, between the ages of 13 and 27 (median age: 21 years). PNS clients were referred from over 50 local community-based social service providers and government agencies, including Juvenile Justice Center. Participating youth and young adults had gang, drug, or criminal tattoos. About 98% had a history of gang involvement or affiliation, and 37% were currently on probation, but only 4% were currently incarcerated. More than half (57%) served were female and 43% were male. Latinos made up the highest percentage of youth served (58%), followed by Asian/Pacific Islanders (15%),

African American (10%), White (9%), and American Indian (7%). The majority of youth served by PNS lived in Oakland (63%).

Getting and removing tattoos

PNS participants had an average of 4.6 tattoos (range: 1-32). On average, females had a fewer number of tattoos than males (t-test $p < 0.05$) (figure 1). The top three reasons youth reported getting a tattoo (figure 2) were: (1) Gang-related (to be part of a gang, or asked by the gang to do so in order to fit in), (2) Peer pressure, (3) They looked cool. Males were more likely than females to get a gang-related tattoo (72% vs. 38%). Females, on the other hand, were more likely to report getting a tattoo because of a love interest or for familial reasons.

Figure 1. Number of tattoos by gender among formerly affiliated or involved gang youth, Project New Start Participants (n=310), 1996-2008



On the other hand, the top five reasons formerly gang-affiliated youth wanted to remove a tattoo (figure 3) were, in descending order, to: make a positive change or a new start; avoid violence or become an ex-gang member; get a job; remove the mistake; be a role model. Males were more likely than females to remove a tattoo because they wanted to make a positive change or a new start, to avoid violence/to become an ex-gang member, and to advance professionally. Conversely, females were more likely than males to remove a tattoo because of a desire to be a role model, for self-esteem, to avoid embarrassment, or because they were going back to school.

Thirty-two percent of youth had five to nine treatments, 19% had ten or more, and 3% percent had 20 or more treatments. The maximum number of laser treatments necessary to remove tattoos was 62.

Multiple risk exposures

Qualitative analyses of case notes illustrate participants' multiple risk factors. Almost all PNS participants experienced violence directly as a victim or witness to different types of violence at home, school or in the community - many times due to affiliation with gangs, familial relations or neighborhood associations. Figure 4 displays a map of crime rates for thirteen cities in Alameda County, with highest rates of community violence concentrated in East and West Oakland, where many of the PNS youth lived. Violence became inseparable from these youth's everyday life; it threatened their lives permanently when they were affiliated with gangs. Most came from low-income families with difficult internal and external living environments that leave youth with little or no hope for their futures. They also faced discrimination either by a potential employer or school administrator who decided not to hire them or allow them into their school for fear of retaliatory violence and/or inciting customer fear. All of them had high level of anxiety, difficulty in sharing and opening up. Lots had never been to doctors or mental health providers, so had had no prior mental health assessments.

Lack of protective factors

In addition to being exposed to multiple risk factors in their lives, these vulnerable youth also lack protective factors fundamental for healthy development. Youth rarely reported having supportive, loving families and structured opportunities at home, in the community, or at school. They felt an absence of love, which has been identified as a basic developmental need (Benard 2004). Many youth also did not attend school or extra-curricular activities. Many youth also felt that they had not accomplished much in their lives. They did not have access to positive peers or mentors, or they do not know how to access that if available. They only socialized with people who influenced their lives negatively.

A 1998 focus group was used to identify what programs and services were needed to support at-risk youth like themselves when the program began; these needs remain relevant today. The youth participants themselves voiced the importance and need for: additional activities in the community, job, life and vocational skills workshops and trainings, supportive teachers, positive structured activities, recreational venues, sports opportunities, and school and professional supplies (figure 5). Providers and stakeholders who served and worked with at-risk youth mentioned similar needs and opportunities.

Future aspirations

Many ex-gang members or affiliates had high future aspirations for education or jobs. Despite the multitude of risk factors present, 99% of participants reported future goals related to further education, for example, graduating from high school, completing a GED, professional licensure, associates, bachelors, and masters degrees, and/or employment. (The 1% of participants that did not mention educational or occupational aspirations focused on their health and non-violent aspirations.) Their occupational aspirations often included professions in the public sector, including health and public safety.

Discussion

We highlighted the risk and protective factors for gang youth, as well as reasons why formerly gang-affiliated youth originally got and then chose to remove tattoos. We, like Taylor, Lerner, von Eye, et al. (2003), identified that gang youth have many assets that can be used to promote positive youth development. This informs our understanding and contexts of gang youth using a large, diverse sample in a large urban county. We now discuss how this needs assessment influenced PNS practices and strategies.

Practice implications: strategic planning

Better understanding the needs of our population has certainly influenced our services and strategies to be more broad-based and integrated with youth development and case management. Recently, PNS embarked on a strategic planning process with all interested stakeholders and constituents, including the youth served, PNS core staff, volunteers, and key past and emerging partners (including school district and juvenile justice center). Using the youth development and resilience framework, and in order to continue to provide life-changing opportunities, support, and positive relationships to high-risk youth, PNS identified four overarching goals: expanding case management and counseling; ensuring successful transitions to schools and jobs; focusing on positive youth development through additional enrichment activities; and increased accessibility and outreach.

Tattoo removal is a life-changing opportunity

Tattoo removal is a unique opportunity to engage former gang affiliates or members, and understand and address their most immediate health needs of recovering from substance abuse or mental health problems, and to remove tattoos that would otherwise lead to increased stigma and reduced chances to obtaining a job or attending and staying in school. By considering health, educational, and occupational goals in addition to criminal justice outcomes, tattoo removals can help promote a holistic youth development approach. It also provides a substantial amount of time (commitments often range from 8 months to 1.5 years) to remove a

tattoo, build relationships, and intervene effectively. Since these are some of the highest risk individuals who have experiences in most cases as victims of cumulative detrimental effects (including violence and poverty), they need significant level of therapy and positive supports to turn their lives around.

Services and supports need to be community-based and youth-friendly

Project New Start was created in response to youth interest and need, and it remains focused around youth who seek out the program as a way to transform their lives, including in its strategic planning efforts. Project New Start practitioners recognized that youth had insights that would lead to more effective and useful interventions, and that the youths themselves were potential assets in reducing gang activity in Alameda County.

In addition to being youth-driven, PNS emphasizes cultural humility (see Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). As demonstrated by reaching out to La Clinica de la Raza in order to better serve PNS's Latino clients, having someone who speaks their language or looks like them, or someone who understands them and to whom they can relate, is critical for effective reaching this vulnerable youth population.

Inter-agency collaboration is essential

Providing a holistic intervention that addresses the educational, extra-curricular, health, and justice needs of formerly gang-affiliated youth is challenging and, by necessity, interdisciplinary. Project New Start's public health- juvenile justice collaborative mirrors the whole youth approach recommended by the resiliency literature, facilitating positive youth development in multiple domains. This is further reinforced by the expectations youth set in exchange for the free tattoo removal services, which often include educational and/or occupational attainment, community engagement, and staying out of the juvenile justice system. This multi-pronged approach operationalized at both the agency level and the individual level creates a structure for improving multiple domains in these youths' lives.

Multidisciplinary/multi-agency partnerships are necessary to create a supportive network to promote resilience and positive youth development. PNS represents a promising practice of how public health and juvenile justice can collaborate to form interdisciplinary interventions to address community violence and gang prevention.

Future directions

Additional in-depth success case studies and quantitative data are needed to better understand the underlying root causes of gang affiliation for Hispanic and/or African American youth, including cultural and familial reasons (Belitz & Valdez, 1994). We need to better understand the complexity and within-individual and environmental factors that these vulnerable youth continue to face and overcome, as well as multilevel longitudinal studies that examine the relevance of protective

factors as determinants of positive youth development and resilience. Growing multidisciplinary evidence also needs to be support better theoretical understanding of why younger youth, especially Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islanders, are joining gangs to meet their basic developmental needs (Yablonsky, 1959). Finally, there needs to be greater systematic evaluations of gang prevention and recovery programs that document what works for youth of color, accounting for acculturation and other family, school and neighborhood-level factors.

A comprehensive intake and ongoing assessment of former gang youth's needs and strengths is important to ensure individually-tailored treatment plan that comprehensively meets his/her immediate needs and long-term goals of healthy development and resilience. It is vital to use youth-friendly culturally-responsive strategies to engage and support formerly gang-affiliated youth towards recovery and success. The tattoo removal services, supplemented with counseling and case management services, youth development supports, and job and educational training opportunities are essential for ex-gang affiliated youth.

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