

Recent Literature on Approaches and Programs for Dealing with the Gang Phenomenon: Between Tradition and Innovation

by

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Abstract

In the last 15 years there have been a number of advancements in programs and approaches developed to deal with the gang phenomenon. In 1997 we conducted a review of literature in this area pertaining to Quebec; the present article highlights the most important changes in knowledge about dealing with gangs in North America reported since then. We focus on two approaches – suppression and community-based prevention strategies. Suppression, the strategy most often used in dealing with the gang phenomenon, appears to be becoming even more popular and the methods employed to achieve it are becoming more refined through diversification and the introduction of more comprehensive and expert-based initiatives. Community-based prevention, which was the first strategy used in attempts to deal with the gang phenomenon, is also gaining in strength and precision thanks to research that more clearly demonstrates its effectiveness and to multi-strategy approaches that encourage youth participation. In both cases, new trends present certain challenges, which are discussed. Our review suggests that, while multi-strategy approaches are increasingly being used, the literature on these projects reveals very little about the processes involved and the ways in which community networks and partnerships are formed and consolidated, although these networks are the basis of their innovations.

Introduction

Current statistics suggest that the phenomenon of gangs now affects thousands of individuals, many of whom are marginalized, and its continued expansion has become a matter of international concern (Hagedorn, 2005). While the first rigorous estimates from the 1970s found 52,000 active gang members, spread across 15 of the largest cities in the United States (Miller, 1982), in 2010 there were 756,000 throughout the U.S. (Egley & Howell, 2012). Furthermore, recent literature indicates that gang membership is related to earlier and more severe delinquency

(National Gang Center, 2007), increased violence and delinquency in school settings (Howell & Lynch, 2000), and increases in kind and incidence of high-risk behaviors. Girls are now increasingly likely to become delinquent, violent, and affiliated with a gang (Archer & Grascia, 2006) and departures from delinquent trajectories, for both sexes, are more difficult and less frequent (Sheldon, Tracy & Brown, 2004; Caldwell & Altschuler, 2001).

This portrait is not reassuring, although the literature also shows that this social problem does not develop linearly but instead follows a cyclical movement (Curry, Decker, 2003)¹ linked to issues of visibility and media notoriety (Rollwagen & Béland, 2012). Batchelor (2009) suggests that estimates of the extent of the phenomenon depend on the definition selected, which varies according to the source or organizations using it and may change over time (Tobin, 2008; Sheldon, Tracy & Brown, 2004; Curry & Decker, 2003; Esbensen, Winfree, He & Taylor, 2001).

The present situation is reminiscent of the one in Montreal in 1995, when these groups were a relatively new phenomenon and composed of either very young adolescents trying to emulate gangs or more-hardened young adults seeking to compete with criminal organizations (Hamel, Cousineau & Fredette 2004). Faced with an apparent surge in the phenomenon, the police department's first reflex was to attempt to eradicate these groups by suppressing them. However, they soon realized that suppression alone produced very few results, not only failing to eradicate the gangs but sometimes leading to increased violence, as well as strengthening the core base and leading some members to become even more committed to the group. The City of Montreal's police department (SPVM) wanted to develop a more effective strategy based on the most up-to-date information about both the phenomenon and the most promising action strategies and therefore asked us to conduct a review of the literature on street gangs and to carry out a field study.

Conclusions from the first review

We reviewed the available literature on preventive strategies and found several that focused on youths in an effort to raise their awareness and help them resist the influence of gangs (Palumbo & Ferguson, 1995). Programs where caseworkers failed to take into account what the youths already knew about the subject or where their message sounded like preaching produced few results. Outcomes were better when caseworkers worked in teams that involved police officers, who helped sensitize youths about the potential legal consequences of gang activities, and social workers, who provided information on the alternatives available if they found themselves in trouble.

We also considered several initiatives aimed at helping youths develop new interests or ways to occupy their free time (Lovell & Pope 1993). While these initiatives were criticized because their focus on recreation meant that the gang problem itself did not receive enough attention, it was also noted that such strategies

could help create ties between youths and their communities through time spent with significant adults (Thurman, Giacomazzi & Bogen, 1993). It was further suggested that these adults could then help in guiding these at-risk youth toward activities that required a greater investment on their part, such as going back to school or getting job training (Corsica, 1993; Jankowski, 1991; Spergel, 1995).

The first review pointed out that employment-oriented programs suffered from focusing on the skills needed to learn a trade that, in theory, would allow youths to integrate into society (Corsica, 1993) without addressing other important dimensions of their lives (Spergel, 1995). Without support to sustain them and give meaning to the responsibilities imposed by their new lives, relatively few persisted in the job market (Jankowski, 1991). This was particularly true for delinquent youth who had participated in rehabilitation programs, some of which had yielded good results (Gibbs, 1993; Hollin, 1993; Goldstein & Glick, 1994) but only in institutional settings. Most of the programs we identified did not provide for any help with the transition from institution to society, which meant that youths had to deal with influences in their regular environment on their own.

However, we also found that new approaches were being developed and were fascinated by the striking results achieved by multi-system approaches, which suggested that improvements in the social behavior of youths already at an advanced stage of delinquency, as well as in the functioning of their families, were possible. These programs approached youth rehabilitation from a comprehensive perspective, taking into account the dynamics within the family as well as between the family and other influential social systems, such as schools and peer groups (Henggeler, Melton & Smith, 1992; Borduin, Mann, Cone, Henggeler, Fucci, Blaske & Williams, 1995).

Prevention programs in school settings also obtained better results when they focused on the particular needs and aspirations of those in their programs (Kodluboy et Evenrud, 1993, Stephens, 1993). These programs were strongly influenced by the contemporary belief that on-site control and surveillance of gangs was necessary in order to remove such groups – and the fear they created – from the schools (Parks, 1995). Several experts, however, believe that such approaches led to a climate of insecurity that was harmful for all students, while comprehensive approaches, in which schools worked with the community, reassured students by suggesting that the school had more control of the situation (Kodluboy & Evenrud, 1993; Stephens, 1993).

In collaborating with the community, schools drew on a community-based approach that had been used in several other programs (Klein, 1995; Spergel, 1995; Howell, 1994). Despite the fact that these programs were unable to demonstrate the effectiveness of their approach, they continued to develop and to compete with programs that relied on a strictly suppressive approach. Programs aimed at suppression were often ineffective, as they were unable to provide an effective deterrent (Klein, 1995).

At the end of our first literature review, our conclusions regarding the characteristics of the best approaches were similar to those of recent authors (Howell, 2000; Short & Hugues, 2006; Chaskin, 2012). Approaches need to be comprehensive and integrated and a multi-strategy approach is better suited to dealing with the complexity of the gang phenomenon. Spergel (1995) was one of the first to propose an intervention model that incorporates community mobilization, access to social opportunities, social intervention, and suppression and works through organizational development. This last element, which encompasses the others, is based on understanding intervention as a continuum that involves prevention, intervention, suppression, and reintegration. To be effective, strategies need to deal with all aspects of the problem by enhancing the potential of services and action strategies already in place through coordination and the development of more systematic procedures or methods of operation (Coolbaugh & Hansel, 2000). The model has been tested (Spergel, Wa & Sosa, 2006) with interesting results, particularly in the development of innovative relations between police officers and community workers. Police officers developed a better approach to working with young gang members and, in some cases, street workers were able to provide information that prevented the arrest of the wrong people, which could have diminished the respect gang members had for the police.

The program also led to a reduction in gang-related crime, particularly among those who had had a history of, and numerous arrests for, violent crimes during the preceding period. However, the drop in crime was apparent only for the first three years of the five-year project, perhaps because those involved with the program were unable to create true alliances with the community. An advisory committee composed of volunteers from the community as well as representatives from social services and the justice system in the target area was set up to deal with this problem, but was quickly dissolved. Apparently, not only did many of its members disagree with the principle of coordination between services but numerous antagonisms between local groups, social agencies, church representatives, and members of the justice system made communication difficult. Spergel and his colleagues concluded that the challenge of creating effective inter-organization relations had not received sufficient attention (Spergel, Wa & Sosa, 2006).

Recent literature shows that multi-strategy approaches have continued to develop since Spergel (1995) began his work. While suppression is still at the center of many recent programs, it is seldom the only strategy, as might have been the case in the past, but is usually part of a constellation of strategies whose goal is to contribute to the development of youth and their community. Unfortunately, many multi-strategy projects fail to describe their processes and the means used to form and consolidate the community and partnership networks on which they rely, despite the fact that these networks are the mainstays of their innovations.

Methodology

This article revises and updates our 1997 review of the literature on gangs in Quebec (Hébert, Hamel, Savoie, 1997). A critical review, it provides a gauge of the knowledge accumulated on this phenomenon over the past 15 years and was obtained through a rigorous examination of the available literature, as well as analysis of selected works.

We began with a bibliographic search of the period from 1995 to 2012, applying the review methodology suggested by Jackson (1980) and Piolat (2002), as well as Rosenthal (1991) and Cooper (1998). We relied on various sites for scholarly articles and relevant research that provided access to regional, national, and international literature.² Titles were selected based on their quality, diversity, and relevance according to conceptual categories set out in the analytical framework, which was based on the design used in the first review (Hébert, Hamel & Savoie, 1997). We considered the extent of the phenomenon, its definitions and typologies, the organization and functioning of gangs, the characteristics of youth associated with them, experiences within gangs, the recruitment and exit processes,³ and promising prevention and intervention programs.⁴

We then performed a general inductive analysis (Blais & Martineau, 2006) to produce a critical review of the selected works. This made it possible to (1) document various aspects of the gang phenomenon based on knowledge acquired over the past 15 years, (2) identify emerging paradigmatic positions, and (3) compare the new information and emerging paradigms with those from the 1997 review in order to suggest new interpretations and new meanings for various aspects of the phenomenon (Paillé, Mucchielli, 2008).

Knowledge acquired in the past 15 years

Our review considers new approaches and programs developed in order to deal with the gang phenomenon and gang-related activities. We focus on research that involved some evaluation of the impact of the program or approach on youth and on criminality. As information in this area is most often found in US-based publications, much of our information comes from work done in the United States.

Suppression

Suppression is still the approach most frequently used to deal with the gang phenomenon (Howell, 2000). Police forces have always been the first element of the criminal justice system to respond to the gang problem and have developed a variety of methods to accomplish their mission. However, current suppression strategies for reducing rates of criminal activity attributable to street gangs and for preventing gang members from participating in these activities do not involve only police interventions but also rely on judicial and legislative interventions.

After having tried a variety of sweeps, raids, rousts, and crackdowns—which, for the most part, generated few results (Klein, 1995; Sheldon et al., 2004)—the police began to set up their own anti-gang units (Curry & Decker, 2003), whose members rely on the latest computer technologies and have developed a number of tools for collecting, cross-referencing, and sharing information on gangs, their members, and their activities (intelligence gathering), as well as computer mapping, geomapping and geocoding. Their results are used to produce geographical representations of gang activities to help identify at-risk areas as well as operational priorities.

While these new tools appear to have been successful, some experts note that the effectiveness of suppressive methods has seldom been rigorously and systematically evaluated (Curry & Decker, 2003) and suggest that the ability of such tools to solve the gang problem and reduce gang-related delinquency remains to be proven (Howell, 2000). Some programs, particularly those that target specific behaviors, locations, and individuals, have had some success (Weisel & Painter, 1997). For instance Operation Cul-de-Sac, which attempted to limit the criminal activities of street gangs by placing police barriers in areas where the gang problem was out of control, led to a significant reduction in street gang-related homicides and assaults. However, as the program has not been repeated, it is not clear if these results can be generalized to other communities (Lasley, 1998).

A selective approach is also used in the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's Operation Safe Streets program, in which the most active gang members are investigated. Those arrested are prosecuted through the judicial system, while others may be placed under intensive probation supervision and referred to education, employment, or family counseling programs tailored to their personal characteristics. Although this program has not been shown to have a significant impact on homicide, violent crime, and drug-related crime rates in Los Angeles, some studies note a reduction in local crime rates, perhaps related to displacement of drug-related crime (Lawton, Taylor & Luongo, 2005).

Tougher sentences for anyone linked to the gang world are also part of the suppressive strategies adopted by the U.S. in recent years. Some examples are civil abatement laws, anti-loitering ordinances, the Gang Congregation Ordinance, juvenile curfew ordinances, and the California Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act (STEP) (McCorkle & Miethe, 2001). Legislative approaches also include anti-gang ordinances and injunctions prohibiting known gang members from congregating in public places. Such strategies are often criticized for simply moving the problem to a neighboring area rather than correcting it and for increasing conflict between youth and police officers. Others, however, believe that such strategies may have a positive effect on neighboring areas, citing research that has shown a slight drop in crime in the neighborhoods surrounding the target area. Injunctions also make local residents feel safer and eliminate groups of youth loitering in the streets

(Maxson, Hennigan & Sloane, 2003).

Some U.S. studies have emphasized the potential advantages of increased gun control. In Chicago, for instance, investigators noted that, following the introduction of restrictive measures, youth from underprivileged neighborhoods had more difficulty obtaining ammunition (Cook, Ludwig, Venkatesh & Braga, 2007). These authors, like others (Tita, Braga, Ridgeway & Pierce, 2006), believe that although stricter gun laws may not prevent gang members from carrying guns as a status symbol, they may at least reduce the number of loaded weapons in circulation, and thus decrease the number of deaths.

Despite these successes, many experts remain skeptical of suppression as a way to deal effectively with the gang phenomenon (Decker, 2007) and the use of suppressive approaches alone, regardless of the particular strategy, is not widely supported (Decker, 2007). Several authors claim that it is impossible to solve the gang problem through tougher criminal sanctions alone (Brent, Flynn & Toombs, 2001). Although this approach may reassure citizens, its effectiveness has not been proven.

No suppressive initiative against gun violence has drawn more praise, or created more skepticism, than the first Operation Ceasefire program, launched in the mid-1990s in Boston, Massachusetts (Braga, Kennedy, Waring & Piehl, 2001). This method has been described in great detail in numerous papers; we focus here on its three main components, which continue to be replicated, with variable success, in different programs in a number of locations in the U.S.

The first component of the Boston model involves targeted deterrence based on the principle that the behavior of individual gang members can be influenced by swift and severe collective sentences imposed for premeditated delinquent behavior by any member of a gang (Tita, 2007). On this approach the entire gang is held responsible if one of its members is found guilty of a crime involving a firearm, based on the belief that gangs are a source of powerful collective norms that effect their members, who, faced with such measures, might lose interest in the group.

The second component of the model sets out measures that hold each gang member “responsible” for any commission of a previously prohibited behavior. When one member of a group offends, all members of the group are immediately visited by their probation or parole officer and risk being incarcerated if, for any reason, they have broken their release conditions. The authorities also have recourse to warrants for minor offenses, as well as the ability to garnish wages in order to pay fines or unpaid support allowances, to demand mandatory drug testing, and to assess delinquents’ eligibility for government-subsidized housing (Tita, 2007).

The third component conveys a social message – that there will be zero-tolerance with regard to armed violence. Boston is considered a pioneer in this field. There, members of a violent gang were brought together and informed about the new rules regarding behavior and the organizations responsible for implementing project

measures, which included local, state, and federal criminal justice agencies and prosecutors. Various providers of social services, such as vocational training, continuing education, public health, and tattoo removal, participated in the information sessions to ensure that gang members understood that there were opportunities for a future outside the gang and that they knew where to turn to obtain particular services.

Operation Ceasefire was effective in reducing the number of homicides involving youth and the number of assaults with weapons in Massachusetts (Braga, Kennedy, Waring & Piehl, 2001). However, the effects of this program were not maintained over time (OJJDP, 2007).

While suppression is still widely used, despite numerous critiques, police practices have evolved considerably in recent years. The police have become more effective in dealing with gang violence by insuring that suppressive measures are increased only slowly and fairly, while also seeing that intervention resources are provided to the youth concerned (Tita, Riley, Ridgeway, Grammich, Abrahamse & Greenwood 2003). This is indicative of another transformation in police practices, which now increasingly tend toward collaboration with other experts as well as with the community at large, thus following the recommendations of experts who stress the importance of such collaboration (Stinchcomb, 2002; Gebo, Boyes-Watson & Pinto-Wilson, 2010) and who maintain that the initiatives that helped reduce gang violence in Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia—as well as in many other cities in the U.S.—resulted from efficient collaboration between municipal justice agencies, state and federal government representatives, social service providers, community stakeholders, and, in some cases, experts in street gang intervention. Canada's National Crime Prevention Strategy came to a similar conclusion (Leonard, Rosario, Scott & Bressan, 2005). It has been convincingly demonstrated that the armed violence problem cannot be solved by local police work alone. In fact, the failure of some previously effective intervention programs is often attributable to the inability to maintain collaboration. In Los Angeles, for example, the decrease in armed violence, although short-lived, was real. But as soon as violence decreased, those responsible for assigning resources turned their attention to other problems and violence in the original target area quickly resumed (Gebo, Boyes-Watson & Pinto-Wilson, 2010).

Community-based prevention

The collaborative strategies used by police today are based on principles similar to those used in the first approaches to overcoming gang delinquency. Those first measures, which were based on work done by Shaw (1930) and Shaw and McKay (1942), relied on community organization to counter the negative effects of social disorganization. They were first put into practice in the Chicago area, with the Chicago Area Project, in which local communities were given the social and political

power to undertake neighborhood improvement. As Klein (1995) explains, the project was guided by the belief that 1) delinquency stems in large part from participation in a group rather than from the individual, 2) community structures contribute to the development of delinquency, and 3) community development and organization—giving residents the power to identify problems and determine solutions—can contribute to its decrease.

This strategy was abandoned for a time, possibly because it was too ambitious and it was difficult to determine whether it was effective in dealing with gang crime. As well, in some cases surveillance operations created by citizen and parent groups to defend themselves and their communities proved to be dangerous as residents ended up as police informants (Spergel, 1995). It is also very difficult for residents to undertake efforts to deal with delinquency; projects thus often deviate from their original goals and end up addressing less-threatening community problems by offering leisure activities, tutoring, and social assistance.

However, experts have never lost interest in community organization, and programs based on these principles are still considered useful (Chavis, 2001; Chinman, Hannah, Wandersman, Ebener, Hunter, Imm & Sheldon, 2005). For example, the strategic framework of Communities That Care (CTC) is based on using community-wide social development in planning and managing crime-prevention activities (Hawkins, Oesterle, Brown, Arthur, Abbott, Fagan & Catalano, 2009). The Chicago Area Project (CAP) and the House of Umoja as well as the Crisis Intervention Network in Philadelphia, have remained active, although they have been unable to demonstrate their effectiveness empirically (Mendel, 2000). The lack of information on the success of community-based prevention projects is due to both absence of rigorous evaluation and the difficulty of measuring the impact of community organization on the proliferation of street gangs. Some researchers have suggested that it is difficult to define the scope of such projects (Bousquet & Lenoir, 2009), and this may also be the case with their objectives and goals. It is sometimes difficult to pinpoint the true object of social and educational projects. Is the social element a direct target for intervention or is it a tool to reach other targets, such as gangs and their young members? Whatever the case, Klein (1995) believes that it is highly probable that the Chicago Area Project in particular contributed to reducing the delinquency rate in the neighborhoods where it was tried and confirmed that it is possible for residents to promote the development of services within the community and to organize to confront the gang problem.

Recent literature shows that some community-based prevention programs are now finally able to demonstrate their results more accurately. This is particularly the case for the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, which combines intervention and community organization. The program first assesses the needs of young gang members, based on the findings of a committee composed primarily of school representatives, parents, police, and probation officers. Youth are then directed

toward appropriate programs to meet these needs, particularly those that provide access to life-style alternatives through training and employment, and development of social skills. Youth who have benefitted from the project may also be hired as street workers. However, interventions do not focus exclusively on the individual, since the intention is also to organize truces between gangs and reduce the number of crimes attributable to gang wars. Although the program has not been independently evaluated, figures show a substantial decline in the number of violent incidents reported to the FBI for the area covered by the project (Howell, 2000).

Several programs address both at-risk youth and young gang members, not only to improve their living conditions overall but also to implement an access-to-opportunities strategy. This approach is used by the Gang Prevention and Intervention Program of Albuquerque's Youth Development Inc. (YDI), whose strategy is to keep young people away from the gang world by finding constructive ways to keep members of gangs occupied. During the seven-week program, at-risk youths and young gang members participate in community life, are introduced to peaceful conflict resolution techniques, and receive legal aid, advice on finding work, and psychological support (OJJDP, 2007). The Inner-City Games (ICG) program offers a similar program in which at-risk youth take part in sports as well as educational, cultural, and community activities to help improve their self-confidence and self-esteem, and especially to learn to say "no" to drugs, violence, and gangs. Formerly confined to the City of Los Angeles, ICG is now present in 12 American cities and serves more than one million young people (OJJDP, 2007).

Job Corps is a U.S. federal program designed to help youth from underprivileged areas become responsible, employable, and productive citizens by providing them with material resources, moral support, and information, as well as technical and theoretical knowledge. In one evaluation of this program, conducted in 2000 (Schochet, Berghardt & Glazer, 2000), 11,787 youth participated in follow-up interviews over a 30-month period. A group of youth assigned to the program was compared with a control group of youth who had participated in an employment program other than Job Corps. The results show that youth who participated in Job Corps saw a larger increase in their average weekly wages: in the last quarter of the 30-month follow-up period, the average weekly income per Job Corps participant rose by \$18, an 11% increase, compared with an average increase of only \$13 for youth in the control group. Arrest rates decreased by 22% among youth who had participated in Job Corps, with the most long-lasting effects for those between 16 and 17 years old. Results show that arrests of participating youth drop at the beginning of their experience with the program, and then diminish gradually during the follow-up period, reaching a final decrease of 40% before their departure from the program. The positive effects on those between 16 and 17 are striking, with a revenue increase of nearly 20% at the end of the follow-up period, as well as an 80% rise in the number of participants earning a high-school diploma or increasing their

general knowledge. Moreover, arrest rates dropped by 14% and incarceration rates by 26%.

Also worth mentioning is Youth Inclusion Program (YIP), which involves community, social, and educational strategies and is aimed at reducing crime and antisocial behavior in underprivileged neighborhoods with high crime rates by creating safe places where youth can learn new skills, participate in social activities, and receive help with their studies. People who can provide a positive influence, such as volunteer mentors and social workers, help youth change their attitudes toward school and crime. Through a range of agencies—notably young offender–intervention teams, as well as police, social services, local school authorities, and schools—the program, which starts a new group twice a year, is made available to fifty at-risk youth between 13 and 16 years of age from the same neighborhood. A variety of means, including house calls and phone calls, are used to encourage target youth to join the program, although participation is entirely voluntary. The program is 10 hours per week for a year, for a total of 500 hours. Activities and interventions focus on risk factors most pertinent to the youth in the group and can include programs involving education, training, culture, media, mentoring, health, addiction prevention, family relations, sports, mutual assistance, and the environment (Burrows, 2003).

An independent, nation-wide evaluation was conducted to determine the effectiveness of YIP during its first three years of operation. The results revealed that arrest rates dropped by 65% among the 50 participants who were considered most at risk of committing a crime. Furthermore, the severity of the offences committed decreased by 68% (according to the Youth Justice Board’s criteria), whereas even the most successful of the other programs rarely succeed in reducing crime by more than 6.3% in neighborhoods where they are implemented (Burrows, 2003).

These results confirm that strategies designed to provide alternatives to gang life are among the most effective, especially when the alternative is a job, even if it is a low-paying one (Wyrick, 2006). Moore and Vigil (1993) note that the access-to-employment programs established in the 1960s during the all-out war against poverty unarguably helped reduce delinquency in Los Angeles neighborhoods where gangs had a strong presence. Fleisher (1998), in his study of Kansas City gang members, notes that the shift from an illegal work situation (drug dealing) to legal employment resulted in a concomitant reduction in the crime rate among the youth concerned. Fleisher suggests that the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s (OJJDP) Comprehensive Community-Wide Approach to Gang Prevention, Intervention and Suppression should be used to deal with the gang problem in that region, in an effort to strengthen the community and overcome its inability to meet the needs of young gang members, which he considered to be an important cause of the gang problem.

Meeting the needs of youth is the objective of Females Obtaining Resources and Cultural Enrichment (FORCE) (OJJDP, 2007). Initially, this program helped reach 400 girls, most of whom were Afro-American, as well as their families. It addressed housing needs first, before offering various additional services as well as a range of recreational and personal-development activities. By the end of its second year, the program had proved to be so successful that project instigators were forced to expand the coverage area to include even more of the participants' families and to serve an older clientele.

The National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise (NCNE) subscribes to the same principles as FORCE. Its mission is to help communities become organized and autonomous through the implementation of Violence-Free Zones, which are based on community intervention as well as on the idea that breakdown of the family unit is a major risk factor for gang membership as well as for violence. The instigators of Violence-Free Zones hope to fill the gap caused by the absence of a father—a problem for numerous gang members—and to overcome the social and economic impact of this absence on the organization of family cells through mentoring and re-parenting strategies in addition to vocational training and access to employment. As a general rule, Violence-Free Zones favor cooperation between the institutional, private, and community sectors, as well as participation by youth who have successfully made the transition from delinquency to model citizen (National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, 1999). The OJJDP (2007) currently funds several Violence-Free Zone projects in cities such as Dallas, Indianapolis, and Los Angeles.

Violence-Free Zones concentrate not on employment but on elements that affect the structures of target youth's communities. The focus is on the family cell, in contrast to other recent programs that deal with the social and economic conditions of at-risk populations. For instance, Empowerment Zones and Enterprise Communities, both subsidized by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, attempt to rebuild the social tissue of gang-occupied neighborhoods (OJJDP, 2007). These programs try to stimulate economic and social development in underprivileged urban areas and have taken previous criticisms of employment-centered programs into account. The 1997 review noted that programs focusing solely on vocational training were not unanimously supported by experts, who criticized such programs for training youths for non-existent jobs (Hébert, Hamel & Savoie, 1997). Questions were raised about programs devoted strictly to the development of skills and competencies, noting that social structures also needed to be strengthened in order to provide real opportunities for future workers. It seems, however, that recent programs such as those discussed above are more comprehensive and target not only individuals and their productivity but also communities and their capacity to make room for these people. Some programs even use social development strategies that give youth true status in projects intended to transform their community. They thus address a symbolic dimension—the sense of

belonging—to give not only a function but meaning to these youth’s transition into the community.

Discussion

The results from our new review highlight some interesting facts. For instance, they show that new programs adhere to the fundamental principles of the first initiatives for dealing with the gang phenomenon. They also indicate that several such projects have succeeded in balancing, organizing, and even measuring the effects of their intervention, to such an extent that they have realized the long-standing recommendations from the experts in the field in favor of comprehensive, integrated approaches involving multi-strategy actions (Spergel, 1995; Coolbaugh et Hansel, 2000; Howell, 2000; Short & Hugues, 2006; Chaskin, 2012). This is particularly true for the police, who have diversified and transformed their interventions over the past 15 years through action plans that increase connections with other experts and help maintain close ties with the community at large. However, we also saw that community-based prevention is increasingly structured around targeted objectives, an approach that is making it possible to achieve new goals through the successful mobilization of communities not just to keep delinquent youth under surveillance but to get them involved and give them significant roles.

These advances are not trivial and are even more impressive given that the literature on gangs provides almost no operational indicators to help in developing such large-scale projects. We are particularly aware of this problem, as from 2000 to 2005 we were responsible for a similar program, which was run with support from Canada’s Department of Justice and the Solicitor General as part of the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention. The project, “Youth and Street Gangs,” was carried out in three districts in the Montreal area. Residents and other stakeholders combined their skills to develop and implement local action plans designed to prevent the gang phenomenon.

At that time, we had no reference point other than the knowledge we had gained through our research on the gang phenomenon and were far from being prepared for the development of such an initiative and for the technical difficulties involved in implementing new community-based structures and interventions. More fundamentally, we were not prepared for the social challenges involved in this process, which emerged in meetings and negotiations between various groups, many of whom had different beliefs about how intervention should take place, as we attempted to work out which groups would take on various responsibilities.

To support the actors during this process, we had to create room for dialogue and then lead the discussion, bringing to light the partners’ various points of view, identifying their areas of agreement, and assessing the possibility of creating new alliances and taking new positions that would allow groups to be part of the action and the consensus (Hamel, Vézina & Cousineau, 2008). We were fortunate in our

choice of liaison officers, as they played a crucial role in achieving our goals. Initially, their role had been to help participants from various milieus organize meetings and coordinate activities. They also acted as intermediaries between participants and the research team, enabling communication across what sometimes seemed to be a cultural divide, as well as encouraging consolidation of the network. Their position allowed them to work partly behind the scenes, outside the official meetings, which allowed partners to speak freely and made it possible for the liaison officers to provide relevant information that helped overcome snags and resolve misunderstandings. The liaison officers had to focus first on communication within the groups they were coordinating, allowing the members to get to know one another and then to respect and, occasionally, even to forgive one another, since in some cases former partnerships had been difficult experiences. Communication made it possible for groups to see beyond individual stakes, develop some solidarity, and truly collaborate.

It became apparent that some groups, before they could put together an action plan, needed to develop a frame of reference that identified and confirmed their common position, making it possible for them to find a way to work with other groups who were essential to future action. In order for networks to be formed and then take action, all players involved had to be extremely patient as well as confident of their place within this particular community. They needed to be reassured that their specific expertise was acknowledged by others and recognized as essential to youth development.

However, despite all our attempts to unite the partners and consolidate the networks, we still could not find a valid solution to some obstacles. Some controversies turned out to be so deep-seated that the only solution was to revise the composition of the networks as in some cases actors were unable to carry out the proposed interventions, knowing that other members of their committee disagreed with them about the goal of the enterprise, the validity of a multi-strategy approach, or even the relevance of dealing with young gang members directly rather than just with the gangs and the violence and crime they generate.

Of course, these observations already date back a few years and knowledge about the gang phenomenon has become increasingly refined, so that such divides would now be unlikely. But controversies are natural, if not essential, to any change and the knowledge we had developed on gangs had not prepared us for these dynamics. Fortunately, we were able to look to other fields and learn from work in organizational sociology and social innovation (Gauthier, 2006; Harrisson & Vézina, 2006) as well as in community psychology and social development (Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh & Vidal, 2001). Research in these areas directly addresses the possibility of potential inequality between actors as well as resistance, conflict, and controversy, which can affect their ability to take action. We found that it was important to identify with targeted communities and join them in their efforts,

rather than using them strictly as test locations and holding them responsible for the success or failure of the project.

Conclusion

Such considerations suggest that we must pay particular attention to organizational development and change. But, even more, they lead us to reflect on knowledge transfer processes and the role that researchers can play in them. We believe that the knowledge developed over the past 15 years on the gang phenomenon and the solutions needed to deal with it forces us to take such processes into account – the complexity and potential of the strategies proposed in the current literature cannot be put into action through linear processes that consist of sequential, orderly steps of dissemination, planning, and task division, as has been attempted in the past. Instead, it is necessary to collaborate with users and accompany them in the appropriation processes that will enable them to make the relevant knowledge available to their networks of influence. In other words, the challenges inherent in the solutions recommended by gang-prevention experts require researchers to go beyond providing knowledge to participating in the processes that facilitate its use. Without this commitment, the only ones to truly benefit, besides a very small number of youths, will be other experts, who are always happy to have new data to juggle.

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END NOTES:

¹ The 2006 National Youth Gang Survey (Egley, Howell, Major, 2006) reported 785,000 gang members in the U.S., so 2010 figures suggest there has been a decline in gang membership.

² Selected research sites: PsycINFO, PsycArticles, Sociological Abstract, Sage Journal online, Centre de documentation du CJM-IU, Journal of Gang Research, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National Youth Gang Center, Institut national de prévention de la criminalité, Centre national de prévention du crime, Centre international de prévention du crime, Gendarmerie Royale du Canada, Société de criminologie du Québec, Association des services de réhabilitation du Québec, Service de police de la ville de Montréal, Centre québécois de ressources en promotion de la sécurité et en prévention de la criminalité, Blueprints for Violence Prevention, National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices, and Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

³ Developments in knowledge about definitions and typologies, organization and functioning of gangs, and the characteristics of youth associated with gangs will be discussed in a future article. The present articles concentrates on intervention and prevention.

⁴ The diversity of the themes covered required the use of a variety of key words: gangs/street gangs/organized crime; juvenile gangs/youth gangs/young offenders; gang culture/gang ethnicity; gang crime; activities/gang violence/youth violence/gang drugs/gang substance abuse/gang behavior adolescence; gang estimates/ gang prevalence; gang affiliation/exit/disaffiliation and gangs; youth gang membership/gang involvement/persistence and gangs; networks and gangs/embeddedness and gangs/share capital and gangs; gang risk factors; gang intervention/prevention/intervention programs/comprehensive approach/treatment; gang involvement and victimization; girls and gangs. In total, 473 references were indexed.