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Tribal Youth Gangs: Do We Know What Works?

Palm Springs, California
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Center for Court Innovation



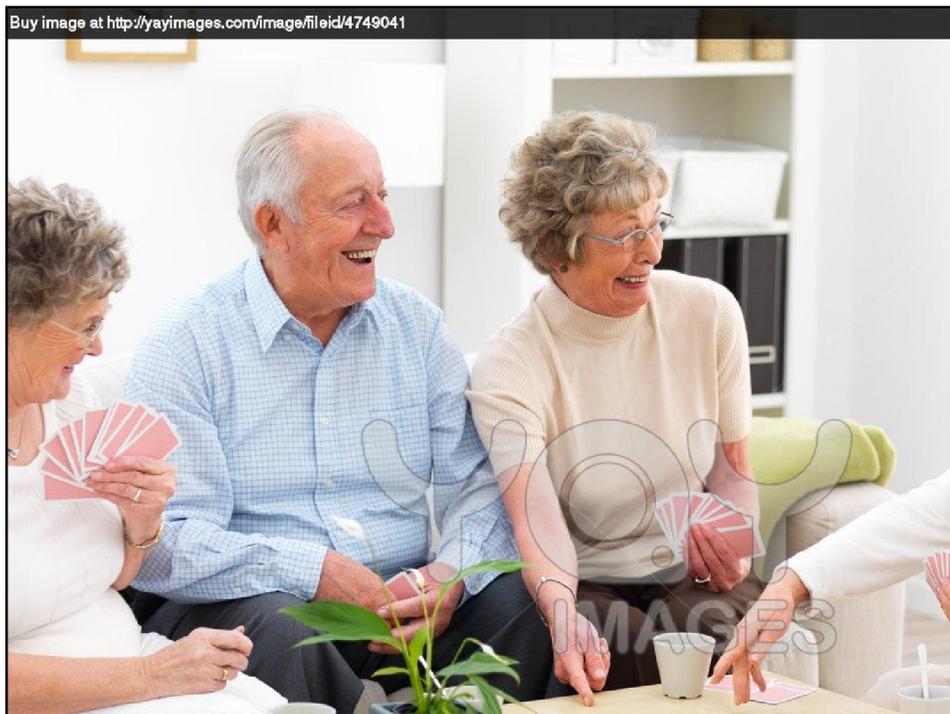
Demonstration Projects

The Center has helped to create dozens of problem-solving courts

Community Court
Drug Court
Domestic Violence Court
Reentry Court
Juvenile Intervention Court
Family Treatment Court
Youth Court
Mental Health Court
Integrated Domestic Violence Court

What Is a Gang?

A group of people, united in purpose which involves criminal intent?



What is a gang?

- Hard to fix a problem you can't really define...
- There is no one definition agreed upon.
- There are agreed upon characteristics:
 - Group of three or more
 - Sense of identity (names, signs, colors)
 - Criminal activity
 - Young people

Types of gangs

- Street gang- territorial. May be part of their name. "Main Street Maniacs"
- Youth gang- tends to be interchangeable with street gang, but with obvious focus on the age of the members

Types of gangs

- Racial/ethnic gangs- a gang's racial or ethnic make-up will tend to mirror its community. However, most gangs, even ones identified by race (Bloods, Crips) will contain members of other races/ethnicities

Types of gangs

- Hybrid gangs- for membership purposes, race and gender are not leading factors. For example, money-making gangs that sell drugs want salespeople regardless of race, gender etc.
- Female gangs- females tend to play a dual role. They can be both auxiliary members of male gangs and also form their own gangs made up of just females

Types of gangs

- Female gang membership (and female crime in general) on the rise.
- Caveat- girls involved in criminal activity were not always taken seriously.
- Gang organization ranges from nearly corporate structure (CEO, CFO, regional managers, middle management, low level workers) to no organizational structure (no leader or the leader changes frequently).

Types of gangs

- Researchers do not agree on the prevalence of the “initiation rituals.” It appears young people “grow into” the gang, while older people who want to join after a while, have to go through a ritual. The ritual can be violent (getting beaten or beating someone else), criminal (having to steal a car), embarrassing or, for women, sexual.

Why do youth join gangs?

- Born into it.
- Family- support, structure, belonging
- Money/poverty- hard to convince a young person to go work for \$5/hour, assuming that job even existed, when he can make \$100 in 20 minutes
- Racism
- Safety/protection/survival skills (sometimes from the gang itself)

Why do youth join gangs?

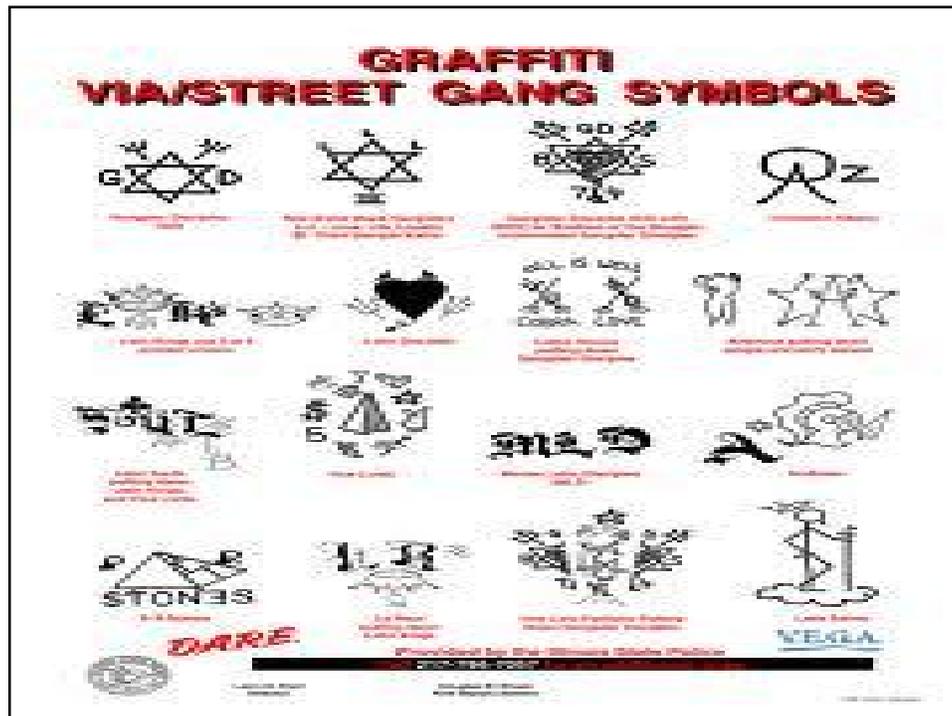
- Boredom (girls in particular)
- Socializing- parties, excitement
- Access to drugs/alcohol
- Rebellion
- Boosts self-esteem- older gang members give younger members responsibility, like carrying a weapon or selling drugs- ulterior motives

Why do youth join gangs?

- Most significant risk factors:
 - Availability of marijuana- how does this bode for places legalizing marijuana?
 - Early marijuana use
 - Early violence
 - Learning disabled
 - Low academic achievement

How youth gangs identify themselves

- Gang names-
 - can represent an area (referring to a street, town or city) or a housing project (“Parkside”)
 - Can refer to lawlessness (“the Outlaws”)
 - Animal names (“Cobras”, “Tigers”)
 - Royal titles (“Latin Kings”)
 - Religion (“The Popes and Disciples”)
- Symbols- logos or symbols they create (6 pointed star, 3 dots)



How youth gangs identify themselves

- Clothing- encompasses style (bandanas, denim jackets, hats) and color (Red = Bloods)
- Communication styles
 - Hand signals- modified from sign language
 - Graffiti- “newspapers of the street” (upside down gang name)
 - Gang graffiti vs. “tagging”
 - Tattoos- meant to show affiliation, intimidate, brag, identify, keep track





Tribal youth gang activity

- Large number of native youth joining gangs
- Ages range from 9-30, but largest group are teens
- Tribal youth gang members experience poverty, family violence, social isolation, drug/alcohol abuse- all risk factors for gang activity

Tribal youth gang activity

- Cultural influences undermined/lack of cultural champion
- Break down of family structure
- Gang culture can enter a reservation by a returning gang member or through schools that have native and non-native students
- Can result in being hybrid gangs (not just Tribal members- Latinos, African Americans)

Tribal youth gang activity

- Tribal youth gang members are 30% more likely to be referred to juvenile justice system after arrest than non-gang members
- Tribal youth gang members are 50% more likely to receive the most serious sanctions than non-gang members (such as removal from the home)

Tribal youth gang activity

- Should a youth involved in a gang receive harsher treatment than one who commits the same act but isn't in a gang?
- States and the federal government have tried to outlaw gangs, but it's not easy to do- remember the discussion about definition? 1st Amendment- freedom of association. Religion-based, but...

Tribal youth gang activity

- 34% of tribes feel that tribal gang activity is on the rise
- Larger communities are much more likely to report gang activity
- More than 75% of tribal youth gang members are under 18
- Most common tribal youth gang crime is property crime, however over 20% is drug selling and 15% serious assault

Tribal youth gang activity

- Gang members who commit crime tend to commit crimes both individually and collectively

Myths debunked

- Most youth gangs are loosely organized, short-lived and cause few problems. The bulk of gang crime is caused by a small group.
- For most young people, gang involvement is short lived. Few who enter a gang stay involved for more than a year.
- Most victims of gang violence are other gang members.

So, we now know the problem...

What's the solution?

- Step 1: Identification
- Find out the gang prevalence in your community. Not that hard to do. Just ask
- Most gang members are taught to be proud of their gang membership and will tell you. Facebook. Twitter

Identification

- Look for gang graffiti. If you see graffiti that makes no sense to you, but still looks like "something" (more than just scribbles) chances are it's gang graffiti--marking territory, sending messages or threats
- Police (or others) can get trained on how to read and interpret gang graffiti, hand signals, tattoos
- Ask teachers

Solutions

- Prevention
- Intervention
- Suppression

Prevention

- Perhaps biggest risk factor is family-related. Kids tend not to run to something, they run from something
- Focus on parents. Early intervention. Substance abuse counseling. DV intervention. Parenting skills classes. “Strengthening Families”
- Take delinquent behavior seriously

Prevention

- Pro social activities. Midnight basketball. Community service
- “Not about us without us.” Ask the youth- what can be done? They will have suggestions- maybe good ones...
- Make it hard for gangs to recruit--keep the kids busy, disallow gang colors
- Get police involved in the community. Not as just law enforcement- coaches, mentors, classroom presenters

Prevention

- As soon as someone becomes aware a child is even associating with a gang member, tell the parents immediately
- DARE and GREAT- very effective at getting children to not fear police
- Intergenerational cultural activities
- Institute curfews
- Talk to the kids!

Intervention

- Act quickly--as soon as you learn a youth is becoming gang involved
- Sudden truancy can be a sign. It's a sign of something. Address immediately with school and family
- Provide a resource (hotline) for gang members who want to leave a gang--it can be a complicated process. Offer counseling, GED classes, tattoo removal

Intervention

- Family, family, family. Don't forget to assist the family. All the great work you do with a teenager goes out the window if when he gets home his older brother throws up a gang sign

Suppression

- Police must be trained in gang recognition and gang suppression techniques
- Sweeps, focusing on hot spots, saturation policing, truancy and curfew enforcement
- Education--all grades and parents.
Causes and outcomes of gang activity
- Access available resources, including FBI or other federal agencies if appropriate--they have anti-gang task forces

Suppression

- Create gang units and task forces
- Community policing/positive police interactions
- Neighborhood/community patrols
- School resource officers
- Tribal council leadership to mobilize resources and make gangs a priority

Suppression

- Creating stiff gang-related legal penalties (complicated)
- Using civil lawsuits (i.e. injunctions)
- DO NOT WAIT

New Research

OJJDP Tribal Youth Gang Study

- Being conducted by Center for Court Innovation and Tribal Judicial Institute
- Will help understand the scope of tribal youth gang activity
- Identify promising strategies
- Study is ongoing—will be completed in about 2 years

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