Tribal Youth Gangs: Do We Know What Works?

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Center for Court Innovation
GOALS:

- Reduce Crime
- Aid Victims
- Strengthen Communities
- Improve Public Trust in Justice

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.

• 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).

• 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 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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