


Addressing Youth Gang Problems: The Importance of Research and Evaluation in Guiding Policy and Practice



Presentation at the Semi-Annual National Meeting of the
National Joint Committee of Senior Criminal Justice Officials
Meeting Theme: *“Working Together to Prevent Gang-Related Crime”*
The Radisson Hotel, Winnipeg, Manitoba
May 10th, 2007

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Overview of Presentation

Part I

- What is 'evidence-based' policy & practice?
- Why is research often ignored or under-utilized?
- Paucity of quality evaluations in the field of gang research

Part II

- Definitional issues & challenges
- Examples of youth gang definitions
- Risk & protective factors for gang involvement
- Responses to youth gangs: 3 basic categories
- Example of a 'promising practice' in response to youth gangs (i.e., OJJDP/Spergel Model)
- Example of a youth gang initiative that 'doesn't work' so well (i.e., G.R.E.A.T.)
- Example of a delinquency prevention 'best practice' that could potentially be applied to address the youth gang problem (i.e., Multisystemic Therapy)
- Youth gang knowledge base: lessons learned & key ingredients of promising approaches
- Gaps in our knowledge

Part III

- National Crime Prevention Centre's *Youth Gang Prevention Fund*

Part IV

- Closing Remarks
- References
- Suggested Further Reading



'Evidence-Based' Policy & Practice

“Evidence-based policy and practice helps people make well-informed decisions about policies, programmes and projects by putting the best available evidence from research at the heart of policy/practice development and implementation.”

(Davies, 1999)



...Yes, but...what about such things as people's:

- Experience?
- Expertise?
- Judgement?
- Skills?
- "Know-How" or Tacit Knowledge (that which resides in their heads)?



'Evidence-Based' Policy & Practice

Davies (1999) suggests that an evidence-based approach is one that can integrate and combine such things as experience, expertise and judgement with the best available external evidence from systematic research.



'Evidence-Based' Policy & Practice

In recent years, a great deal of attention has been devoted to the notion of 'evidence-based' policy & practice in many different fields and sectors (e.g., health, social services, criminal justice, etc.).

However...

A Word of Caution: Just because a policy or practice is called 'evidence-based' does not necessarily make it so (rhetoric vs. reality)!



'Evidence-Based' Policy & Practice

Decision-making in areas such as crime prevention / criminal justice policy & practice should be based on the highest quality research evidence available.

Regrettably, one can find numerous examples where key decisions have been based on fads, political expediency, anecdotal evidence and 'gut feelings' ... Sadly, research is often ignored!



Why is Research often ignored or under-utilized?

Possible explanations:

- Research is not always designed to be relevant to policy & practice.
- Research sometimes fails to have an impact/influence because of problems associated w/ timeliness, presentation, and/or manner of communication.
- Sometimes policy-makers and practitioners don't see research findings as central to their decision-making.
- Lack of access to research.
- Some researchers' poor comprehension of policy process.
- Ignorance or anti-intellectualism of politicians and/or bureaucrats.



Youth Gang Knowledge Base: What Do We Know To Date?

Recurrent challenges in the field of gang research:

- Gang projects, programs and strategies have been, and continue to be, rarely evaluated; and
- Many that have been evaluated haven't been evaluated very well.



Paucity of Quality Evaluations

With the aforementioned limitations/challenges in mind, it is difficult to speak about 'what works' or best practices.

In the 1990s, Klein et al. (1995) argued that very few gang control programs and policies have been demonstrated to be effective and that, "... the clues for the future have less to do with what might work, than with avoiding in the future what has not worked."

More recently, Klein and Maxson (2006) assert that, "...*the world of gang control can provide few guidelines for success, only continuing approaches that "feel right," [and] those that conform to conventional wisdoms.*"



So, what *DO* we know???

- Despite these and other major challenges, we still need to attempt a synthesis of what we think we know from the evidence to date and extract key elements to better inform policy and practice.



Definitional Issues & Challenges

- Sullivan (2006: 11) notes the various problems and challenges associated with the loose manner in which the term *gang* is used by the news & entertainment media, law enforcement, and scholars alike.
- Accordingly, confusion in public discourse and in scholarly analysis concerning how youth gangs are broadly defined has important consequences and implications both for understanding youth gangs and for developing/implementing solutions to address them.



Definition Example #1

Section 467.1 (1) of the *Criminal Code of Canada* states that a:

“criminal organization” means a group, however organized, that

(a) is composed of three or more persons in or outside Canada; and

(b) has as one of its main purposes or main activities the facilitation or commission of one or more serious offences that, if committed, would likely result in the direct or indirect receipt of a material benefit, including a financial benefit, by the group or by any of the persons who constitute the group.

It does not include a group of persons that forms randomly for the immediate commission of a single offence.



Definition Example #2

The Montréal Police (2004) define a youth gang as:

An organized group of adolescents and/or young adults who rely on group intimidation and violence, and commit criminal acts in order to gain power and recognition and/or control certain areas of unlawful activity.



Definition Example #3

Klein & Maxson (2006: 247) offer the following definition of a youth gang:

any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity.



Definition Example #4

2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs:

a “youth gang” is defined as: a group of youths or young adults in your jurisdiction, under the age of 21, that you or other responsible persons in your agency or community are willing to identify or classify as a gang.



Definitional Issues

A good/clear definition of a 'youth gang' will allow us to better focus our efforts by setting aside groups such as adult crime groups, motorcycle gangs, prison gangs, and the vast majority of youth groups that infrequently participate in criminal activity.



Risk and Protective Factors

- Longitudinal studies of adolescents in Canadian and American cities (Montréal, Seattle, and Rochester) suggest that *the most important risk factors* for gang involvement include:
 - negative influences in the youth's life
 - limited attachment to the community
 - over-reliance on anti-social peers
 - poor parental supervision
 - alcohol and drug abuse
 - poor educational or employment potential
 - a need for recognition and belonging

Examples of Risk Factors Associated with Youth Gang Involvement:

INDIVIDUAL	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prior delinquency ▪ Illegal gun ownership ▪ Aggression or fighting ▪ Life stressors (e.g., being suspended or expelled from school) ▪ Violence involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Early sexual activity ▪ Anti-social attitudes ▪ Conduct disorders ▪ Desire for group rewards such as status, identity, self-esteem, companionship and protection ▪ Alcohol and drug abuse
PEER GROUP	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ High commitment to delinquent peers ▪ Gang members in class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Friends who are gang members ▪ Interaction with delinquent peers
SCHOOL	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Low achievement in elementary school ▪ Low academic aspirations ▪ Identified as learning disabled 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Negative labeling by teachers ▪ Low school attachment and commitment ▪ Few teacher role models
FAMILY	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Family poverty ▪ Low attachment to parents or family ▪ Family members in a gang 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Family disorganization, including broken homes and parental drug and/or alcohol abuse
NEIGHBOURHOOD / COMMUNITY	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ High crime neighbourhood ▪ Availability of firearms ▪ Social disorganization, including high poverty and residential mobility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Presence of gangs in the neighbourhood ▪ Availability or perceived access to drugs in the neighbourhood

Source: Adapted from Howell & Egley (2005)



Responses to Youth Gangs

3 Basic Categories:

- Prevention
- Intervention
- Suppression



Prevention

Gang prevention programs typically focus on discouraging children and youth, especially those at high-risk, from joining gangs.



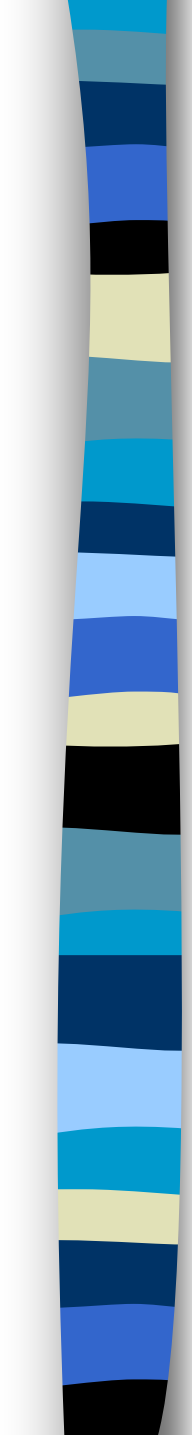
Intervention

Gang intervention programs generally target active gangs and gang members.



Suppression

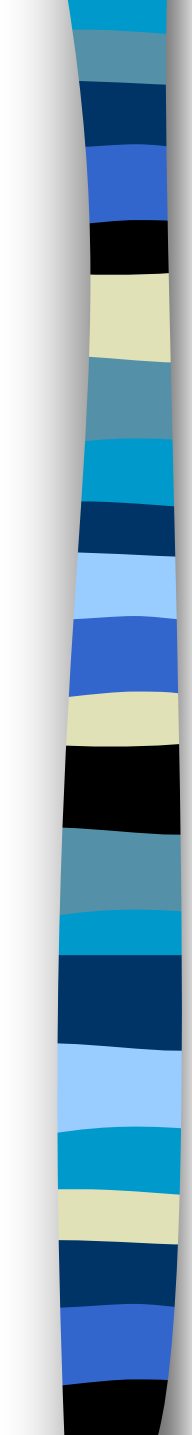
Gang suppression programs usually involve specialized gang units (typically led by police and/or criminal prosecutors) that target gang members and their illicit activities through the aggressive enforcement of laws.



OJJDP Comprehensive Gang (or “Spergel”) Model

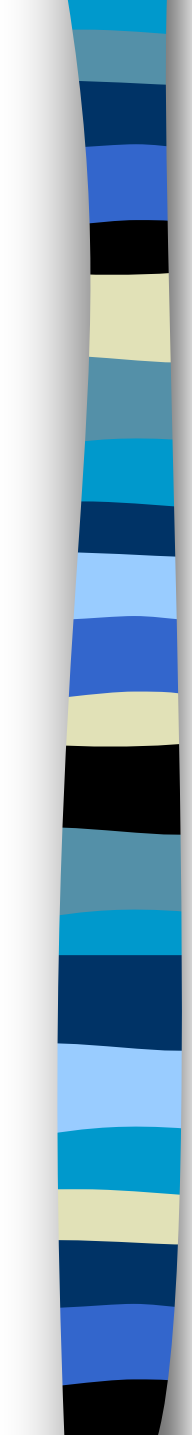
A Very Brief History...

- Based on the research of Dr. Irving Spergel and his U. of Chicago colleagues.
- Model was piloted in the Little Village neighbourhood of Chicago, Illinois in '92 .
- With some modification, this design gave rise to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's *Comprehensive Community-Wide Gang Model* in '95.



OJJDP Comprehensive Gang (or “Spergel”) Model (cont’d)

- Model program was implemented and tested in 5 sites across the U.S. (Bloomington-Normal, Illinois; Mesa, Arizona; Riverside, Calif.; Tucson, Arizona; and San Antonio, Texas).
- Since 1995, OJJDP has implemented this model in over 25 urban and rural locations across U.S.



OJJDP Comprehensive Gang (or “Spergel”) Model (cont’d)

- A balanced, three-pronged approach that encompasses prevention, intervention & suppression.
- 5 core components of the Model: community mobilization, social intervention, opportunities provision, suppression, and, organizational change & development.



OJJDP Model: Community Mobilization

- Mobilize local residents, youth, community groups, civic leaders and agencies to plan, strengthen, or create new opportunities or linkages to existing organizations for gang-involved & at-risk youth.
- Co-ordinate programs & services as well as the functions of staff within and across agencies.



OJJDP Model: Social Intervention

- Needs identified through street outreach.
- Provide programs and social services (via youth-serving agencies, schools, faith-based and other organizations) to gang youth and those at high risk of gang involvement.
- Using outreach workers to actively engage gang-involved youth.



OJJDP Model: Opportunities Provision

- Provide and facilitate access to educational, training and employment programs or services targeted to gang youth and those at high risk of gang involvement.



OJJDP Model: Suppression

- Conduct suppression activities via formal and informal social control mechanisms and hold gang-involved youth accountable for their actions and behaviours, including close supervision or monitoring of gang youth by criminal justice agencies and also by community-based agencies, schools and grass-roots groups.



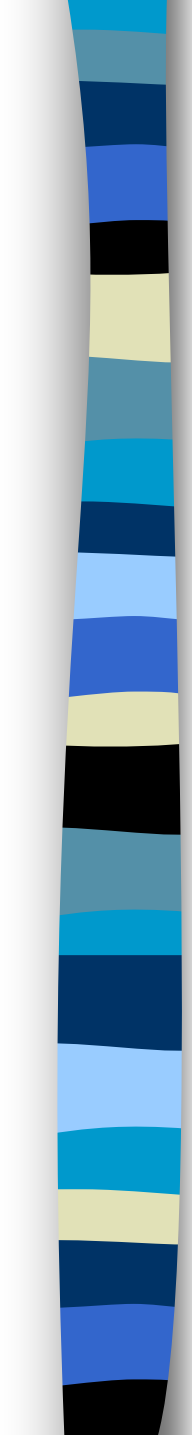
OJJDP Model: Organizational Change/Development

- Facilitate organizational change and development to help community agencies better address gang problems through a team “problem-solving” approach.
- Develop and implement policies & processes that result in the most effective use of available and potential resources within and across agencies.



OJJDP Model: Results

- Reductions in violence arrests, and also drug-crime arrests, of program youth.



OJJDP Model: Limitations & Challenges

- Serious implementation problems
- Political and organizational barriers
- Too complex for some (many?) communities to implement



Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.)

- a school-based, police officer-instructed classroom curriculum.
- modeled after the Drug Awareness Resistance and Education (D.A.R.E.) program.
- G.R.E.A.T. program consists of: elementary school curriculum, 13-session middle school curriculum, family training, and summer program.



Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.)

- Results: A 5-year longitudinal evaluation found that, while G.R.E.A.T. educated young people on the consequences of gang involvement & had modest positive effects on their attitudes toward the police, it failed to reduce youth gang membership or future delinquent behaviour (Esbensen, 2004).



Why did the G.R.E.A.T program fail?

- founded on a conventional piece of wisdom that had no empirical basis (i.e., a D.A.R.E.-like program of police officers delivering educational lessons in the classroom was effective).
- program curriculum failed to incorporate the existing and growing knowledge base about gangs
- not targeted at those most at risk of joining gangs.

(Klein and Maxson, 2006)



Multisystemic Therapy (MST)

- an intensive family-based treatment that addresses the known determinants of serious anti-social behaviour in adolescents and their families.
- those factors in each youth's social network that are contributing to his/her anti-social behaviour are specifically targeted.
- examples: improving caregiver discipline practices; enhancing family affective relations; decreasing youth association with delinquent peers; improving school performance and attachment; developing an indigenous support network of extended family and friends to help caregivers achieve and maintain such changes, etc.



Multisystemic Therapy (MST)

- evidence-based: specific treatment techniques are integrated from those therapies that have the most empirical support, including behavioural, cognitive-behavioural, and the pragmatic family therapies.
- delivered in the natural environment (e.g., home, school, community).
- treatment plan is designed in collaboration with family members and is, therefore, family-driven as opposed to therapist-driven.
- proven to have positive effects on serious, violent, and chronic juvenile/young offenders



Lessons Learned & Key Ingredients of Promising Approaches

- Programs that institute multi-agency or multi-sectoral approaches show promise in reducing gang-related (violent) crime.
- A comprehensive, balanced approach (i.e., prevention, intervention and suppression activities) seems to work best.



Lessons Learned & Key Ingredients of Promising Approaches

- Efforts must begin with an accurate and thorough diagnosis of the youth gang problem.
- Clearly defined programmatic goals and objectives alongside measurable activities.
- Proper targeting.



Lessons Learned & Key Ingredients of Promising Approaches

- Establishing a central lead agency (or inter-agency) or community organization.
- Appointing a Co-ordinator.
- Recognizing group processes in general and the distinctive elements of youth gang processes more specifically.
- Collecting data prior to, during, and following program implementation must be given more priority.



Gaps in Knowledge

For example:

- Programming in Cdn. context?
- “What Works” with female gangs, Aboriginal gangs, ethno-cultural gangs, etc.?
- Urban vs. suburban vs. rural youth gangs?
- Relationship between youth gangs and adult/organized crime gangs?



Youth Gang Prevention Fund

- Provides time-limited funding for anti-gang initiatives in communities where youth gangs are an existing or emerging threat.
- It supports the development and implementation of tailored interventions aimed at youth who are in gangs or at risk of joining gangs.



Objectives of the YGPF

- Invest in communities where gangs are an existing or emerging threat.
- Invest in initiatives targeting youth in gangs or at greatest risk of joining gangs.
- Address specific risk & protective factors associated with youth violence & gang membership to mitigate the risks of gun violence & gang activity.
- Provide alternatives to gangs in order to help youth develop pro-social competencies & attitudes.
- Support knowledge & evidence-based community interventions that target gun violence & gun-related issues by tackling their root causes.



Types of Projects Eligible for Funding

Projects will:

- Provide youth with the knowledge, skills & support needed to resist joining gangs.
- Address the individual, family, school & community risk factors associated with youth violence (via, for example, individual/family counselling, mentoring, problem-solving and conflict resolution skills, socialization & recreational opportunities).
- Work with youth already involved in gangs to help them exit.
- Provide the support ex-gang members need to avoid returning to the gang lifestyle (e.g., remedial education and skills development).
- Add to the body of knowledge on evidence-based best practices for addressing gun violence & gang-related issues from a Cdn. perspective.



Closing Remarks

- The issue of youth gangs is a complex, multi-faceted problem requiring a range of responses.
- It is very important to assess, through rigorous evaluation, the effectiveness & cost-effectiveness of our efforts.
- Equally important, our decision-making should be based on the highest quality research evidence available.



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Suggested Further Reading

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Thank You

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For more information on the National Crime Prevention Centre or its *Youth Gang Prevention Fund*, please visit:

- www.publicsafety.gc.ca/ncpc
- www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/cp/ygpf_index-en.asp