



NATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION CENTRE

Building the Evidence – **YOUTH GANGS**

2007-YG-03

ADDRESSING YOUTH GANG PROBLEMS: AN OVERVIEW OF PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES

The National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) of the Department of Public Safety Canada is committed to developing and disseminating practical knowledge to address the problem of youth gangs. This research brief is designed to assist those who are concerned about youth gangs and who are working to help prevent youth from becoming involved in gangs or to help them leave gangs.

Despite the lack of quality evaluations that have been conducted to date to assess the effectiveness of youth gang prevention, intervention and suppression efforts, this literature review will provide an overview of some of the programs and practices that aim to address the complex issue of youth gangs.

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Review

The main objective of this review is to develop a more comprehensive understanding of what works, what does not work, and what is promising in terms of addressing youth gang problems. The document focuses primarily on assessing the effectiveness of select prevention, intervention and suppression activities related to gang-involved youth. It is based on a review of the empirical evidence drawn from well-designed evaluation studies, where possible. Where this high-quality research evidence was lacking, promising practices and lessons learned were also distilled and presented alongside model programs. It is hoped that the findings will, among other things, inform and strengthen future policy development, funding and program decision-making in Canada as well as enhance our knowledge and understanding with respect to how to respond effectively to chronic and emerging youth gang problems.

Readers should note, however, the recurrent challenges in the field of gang research. Several eminent gang researchers (e.g., Klein and Maxson, 2006; Esbensen, 2004; Reed and Decker, 2002) have observed that gang projects, programs and strategies have been, and continue to be, rarely evaluated. Moreover, many of those that have been evaluated have not been evaluated very well. This may be due to several factors. For instance, real-world conditions sometimes preclude the implementation of a true experimental design (Esbensen et al., 2002). Similarly, Howell (2000: 1) notes that, “because each youth gang and each community is unique, finding similar groups and communities for comparison is difficult.”

Despite the lack of quality evaluations 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.

Scope of Review

American scholars have given more attention to the subject of youth gangs than anyone else. The influence of the United States on the youth gang knowledge base cannot be overstated and, as such, readers should exercise some caution before readily extrapolating American findings to the situation or context in Canada. Nonetheless, an assessment of the American experience is extremely useful to understanding and informing the work that needs to be carried out here in Canada.

Methodology

In preparing this document, information was gathered from many diverse sources¹. A vast body of work was identified and over 300 scholarly journal articles, government reports, and books published between January 1st, 1986, and April 30th, 2007, were reviewed for possible inclusion in the literature review. The final selection, comprised of over 35 sources, primarily included those that focused on evaluation results and attempted to ascertain the effectiveness of gang prevention, intervention and suppression programs, policies and strategies.

Dating as far back as the pioneering work of Frederic Thrasher (1927), there is now over seventy-five years of accumulated research knowledge pertaining to youth gangs. This report relies, in large part, on the comprehensive reviews that have been conducted by others in recent years. For instance, the recent text by Malcolm W. Klein and Cheryl Maxson (2006) was particularly useful as it offered a thorough, up-to-date review of current literature and practice.

Definitional Issues and Challenges

The present document focuses mainly on substantive and practice-oriented, rather than methodological and theoretical, issues. Notwithstanding, it is important for the reader to be aware of some of the current definitional issues associated with the study of youth gangs.

For instance, Sullivan (2006) notes the various problems and challenges associated with the loose manner in which the term *gang* is used by the news and 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 implications both for understanding youth gangs and for developing and implementing solutions to address them (Short and Hughes, 2006). Similarly, Klein and Maxson (2006) argue that a clear, concise definition allows 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.

It may be prudent, therefore, for readers to educate themselves and be aware of some of the youth gang definitions that are being developed and used by scholars, policy-makers and practitioners. One popular example² is as follows: a youth gang is “any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (Klein and Maxson, 2006: 4).

RESPONSES TO YOUTH GANGS: PREVENTION, INTERVENTION AND SUPPRESSION

The response to youth gang problems in the United States and elsewhere, particularly over the past three decades, has produced three primary strategies: prevention, intervention and suppression.

Gang prevention programs typically focus on discouraging children and youth, especially those at high-risk, from joining gangs. Gang intervention programs, on the other hand, generally target active gangs and gang members. Lastly, gang suppression programs usually involve specialized gang units (typically led by the police and/or criminal prosecutors) that target gang members and their illicit activities through aggressive enforcement of laws.

Given that literally hundreds, if not thousands, of varied responses have been developed and implemented over the years to respond to the youth gang problem, it is simply not possible or even practical to provide an overview and assessment of each and every one in the present review. Furthermore, as stated earlier, the majority of these responses have not been rigorously evaluated. For these and other reasons, the following are provided as selected examples of promising approaches that contain elements of good practice, as well as those approaches that appear not to work so well.

WHAT DOESN'T WORK

Not only is it essential to know what works, it is equally important for us to know which youth gang responses are ineffective. Policy makers and practitioners wish to avoid wasting time, money and resources doing things that we already know, through high-quality research, simply do not work. They also want to know that the interventions they are supporting will produce more positive benefits than harmful side effects.

Suppression

Suppression alone does not work. Despite the fact that gang suppression is probably the best known and most practiced strategy in response to youth gang problems, it is generally regarded as less effective than many prevention and intervention approaches (Decker, 2007).



Incarceration

As with suppression, incarceration alone does not work. There is a growing recognition that not only do correctional institutions rarely rehabilitate, they also tend to further criminalize individuals, often leading to re-offending and a vicious cycle of release and imprisonment (United Nations, 2006). In fact, several research studies suggest that youth gang members are considerably more likely to be re-arrested and re-incarcerated following their release from custody than non-gang members (Benda and Tollett, 1999; Tollett and Benda, 1999; Benda et al., 2001; Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections Research and Development and the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2002 – cited in Olson et al., 2004).

Detached Worker Programs

Detached worker, also known as street gang worker, programs typically provide services and support to gang members in their own environment (Thornberry, 2002). With respect to this type of intervention program, it is important to review the seminal work of Malcolm Klein (1968). He found that earlier versions of this type of program actually led to increased gang crime as a result of detached workers inadvertently enhancing, as opposed to breaking, gang cohesion. According to Klein (1995: 137):

“In regard to the impact of prevention efforts, it would be wise to remember the importance of status and identity to potential gang members. Any prevention program that selects potential gang members and gives them special attention runs the risk of creating the problem it is aimed at preventing. Past programs in Chicago, Boston, and Los Angeles seem to have demonstrated this outcome.”

Moreover, Howell (2000: 16) asserts that although researchers differ in their views with respect to the effectiveness of the detached worker approach, “it must be concluded that, as a singular intervention, detached workers have not conclusively produced positive results.”

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

The G.R.E.A.T. program is a school-based, police officer-instructed classroom curriculum whose main objective is the prevention of youth gang involvement and delinquency. According to its official website³, the program was developed in 1991 through a partnership involving the Phoenix Police Department in Arizona and the United States Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. The program was modeled after the much touted, but largely ineffective, Drug Awareness Resistance and Education (D.A.R.E.) program. G.R.E.A.T. is an example of primary prevention whereby the program is

presented to entire classrooms without attempting to target active youth gang members or those youth who are at greatest risk for joining gangs. Very briefly, the G.R.E.A.T. program consists of four components: an elementary school curriculum; a middle school curriculum; family training; and, a summer program. The 13-session middle school component is the core, compulsory component.

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

Klein and Maxson (2006: 101) contend that four basic factors explain the failure of the G.R.E.A.T. program:

- a) It was founded on a conventional piece of wisdom that had no empirical basis, namely, the perception of efficacy of police officers delivering educational lessons in the classroom.
- b) the program relied on an untested conventional wisdom that certain attitudinal variables or life skills trigger the attractiveness of gang membership;
- c) the content of the program curriculum failed to incorporate the existing and growing knowledge base about gangs; and
- d) the program was not targeted at those most at risk of joining gangs.

PROMISING APPROACHES

OJJDP Comprehensive Gang (or “Spergel”) Model

To date, one of the best known and probably most evaluated responses to youth gangs is the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) *Comprehensive Community-Wide Gang Model*. It is essentially a balanced, three-pronged approach that encompasses prevention, intervention and suppression activities. Despite the various limitations and challenges that have been identified⁴, there are many lessons learned for those considering replicating this model.

A Brief History

Between 1987 and 1991, Dr. Irving Spergel and his colleagues at the University of Chicago collected and analyzed the policies and practices of agencies throughout the United States involved in combating gangs (Spergel et al., 2003). From this work, Spergel developed a comprehensive model program to reduce and prevent gang crime and violence. The model was piloted in the Little Village neighbourhood of Chicago, Illinois, starting in 1992.

With some subsequent modifications, this design gave rise to the OJJDP *Comprehensive Community-Wide Gang Model* in 1995. This model program was implemented and tested in 5 sites across the United States: Bloomington-Normal, Illinois; Mesa, Arizona; Riverside, California; San Antonio, Texas; and Tucson, Arizona. According to Wyrick (2005, 2007), the OJJDP has implemented this model in over 25 urban and rural locations since 1995.

Core Components of the Model

The OJJDP (or “Spergel”) model includes five key strategies for dealing with gang-involved youth and their communities [Burch and Kane, 1999; Wyrick, 2005]:

- **Community Mobilization** – mobilizing local residents, youth, community groups, civic leaders and agencies to plan, strengthen, or create new opportunities or linkages to existing organizations for gang-involved and at-risk youth; and, coordinating programs and services as well as the functions of staff within and across agencies;
- **Social Intervention** – as identified through street outreach, providing 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; also, using outreach workers to actively engage gang-involved youth;
- **Opportunities Provision** – providing and facilitating access to educational, training and employment programs or services targeted to gang youth and those at high-risk of gang involvement;
- **Suppression** – conducting suppression activities via formal and informal social control mechanisms and holding 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; and
- **Organizational Change and Development** – facilitating organizational change and development to help community agencies better address gang problems through a team “problem-solving” approach that is consistent with the philosophy of community- and problem-oriented policing; also, developing and implementing policies and processes that result in the most effective use of available and potential resources within and across agencies.

Evaluation Results

With respect to the Little Village Gang Project in Chicago, Spergel (2007: 357) summarizes its effectiveness⁵ as follows using arrest history data:

“...program youth reduced their levels of total violence arrests, serious violence arrests, and drug arrests significantly more than did comparison youth and quasiprogram youth during the program period compared to the preprogram period. The reduction of serious violence arrests was more than 60 percent greater for program than for comparison seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds – the highest-rate offenders in that age group – controlling for other variables in the equation. The project had an across-the-board effect in reducing the levels of arrests for serious violence for all age groups in the program sample in relation to the comparison and quasiprogram samples. The project was particularly successful in reducing drug arrests for program youth compared to comparison and quasiprogram youth, who showed increased drug arrests. Program youth showed nonsignificant greater reductions in arrests for other types of arrests such as mob action, disorderly conduct, and obstruction of a police officer but no difference in the reduction of total arrests (mainly property crimes). The most significant reduction in all types of arrests was by the nineteen- and older youth across the three samples and, especially, in the program sample.”

There were, however, a number of challenges and limitations identified with this model. In 1997, interim process evaluation reports indicated slow start-up at the five aforementioned test sites as well as a significant number of serious implementation problems. The most notable of these was, arguably, a failure to clearly articulate the model sufficiently for the various sites to follow. Unfortunately, the first clear articulation of the Spergel Model was conveyed three and a half years after the programs had commenced, and well after the original Little Village model had been implemented [Klein and Maxson, 2006].

Furthermore, Klein and Maxson (2006) note that the complexities of carrying out the Spergel Model may have been beyond the capacities of many of the participating sites. They go on to argue that the model “is complex because it attempts at the same time to be both a statement of a conceptual or theoretical approach to gang control and a set of guidelines for implementing that approach. Most important is the phrase “comprehensive community-wide.” Unlike [other anti-gang programs] . . ., the Spergel Model wants to do it all. It aims to combine prevention, intervention, and suppression in a single package” [Klein and Maxson, 2006: 120].



Lastly, there were both political pressures (e.g., the mayor's office wanting to carry out an almost exclusive suppression approach) and organizational barriers to the program (Spergel et al., 2006; Spergel, 2007). It is essential, therefore, that certain barriers to program development and/or implementation be identified and addressed early on. Examples of barriers "may include turf battles, undefined organizational structure, lack of leadership, ambiguous goals, conflicting community attitudes, recruitment difficulties, high turnover in the Intervention Team or other key work groups, unbalanced representation of the community, inadequate conflict resolution processes, and fragmentation of efforts" (Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention, 2002: 63).

Spergel (2007: 327) warns that, "Comprehensive, community-based projects that require institutional change are highly vulnerable to failure. Few innovative – if even effective – programs survive, or develop further, unless they serve and sustain important organizational and political interests."

Boston Gun Project and Operation Ceasefire

A Brief History

The *Boston Gun Project* was developed in the mid-1990s as a problem-oriented policing intervention expressly aimed at reducing youth homicide and youth firearms violence in Boston, Massachusetts. The project commenced in early 1995 and implemented what is now known as the *Operation Ceasefire* intervention, which subsequently got underway by the spring of 1996.

The initiative represented an innovative partnership between academics and practitioners who worked together to diagnose the city's youth homicide problem and to develop and implement viable responses (Braga, Kennedy, Piehl and Waring, 2001). The Boston Police Department and researchers from Harvard University initiated the project by approaching other key criminal justice and social service partners and stakeholders in the city to participate on a working group and support a research-based process. These stakeholders initially included: the departments of probation and parole, Streetworkers⁶, the Office of the Suffolk County District Attorney, the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the U.S. Attorney's Office, Department of Youth Services, and the City of Boston School Police.

Core Components of the Project

Briefly, the Ceasefire intervention had two strategic components:

- 1) a head-on law enforcement blitz on illicit firearms traffickers supplying youth with guns, and
- 2) the "pulling levers" deterrence strategy to prevent youth gang violence.

The second component involved deterring the violent behaviour (especially gun violence) of serious gang offenders by actively focusing criminal justice attention on a small number of chronically offending gang-involved youth responsible for much of Boston's youth homicide problem. This involved such actions as (National Institute of Justice, 2001: 2):

- Targeting gangs engaged in violent crime.
- Reaching out in an open manner to members of the targeted gangs.
- Delivering a direct message that violence would not be tolerated under any circumstance.
- Reinforcing that message by "pulling every lever" legally available (e.g., by applying the appropriate police, criminal prosecution and/or probation sanctions) when violence occurred.

In addition to enforcement efforts, and in keeping with its new neighborhood policing strategy, Boston employed numerous prevention and intervention initiatives. Working with community partners, the city built on existing services in the communities to create a more extensive and effective continuum of services.

Some examples of intervention and prevention programs aimed at at-risk youth that were implemented simultaneously with Operation Ceasefire include: the *Boston Community Centers' Streetworkers Program*, the Streetworkers (a coalition of Boston social service workers), probation and parole officers, and, later, churches and other community groups offered gang members services and other types of assistance (Braga et al, 2002). Similarly, a *Youth Services Providers Network* was created and implemented through a partnership of many of Boston's youth service organizations and city agencies to address teenage runaways, dropout prevention, mentoring, job training and placement, tutoring, and building leadership skills.

The Operation Ceasefire intervention is a comprehensive strategy to address gun and gang violence. Operation Ceasefire itself was highly customized to the goals of the collaboration, the particular nature of the youth violence problem in Boston, and the particular capacities available in Boston for incorporation into a strategic intervention. It was then integrated into a broader crime reduction strategy for the city of Boston.

Evaluation Results

Using generalized linear models that controlled for trends and seasonal variations, one evaluation found that the *Ceasefire* intervention was related to significant decreases in youth homicides per month [-63%], “shots fired” calls for police service per month [-32%], and gun assaults per month [-25%] in Boston. Roxbury, the highest risk city district, saw a 44% decrease in youth gun assaults per month (National Institute of Justice, 2001). Even after controlling for other factors that may have played a role in the sudden reductions (e.g., changes in the employment rate, changes in Boston’s youth population, changes in city-wide violent index crimes, etc.), it was found that *Operation Ceasefire* remained associated with significant decreases in the monthly number of youth homicides and measures of non-fatal serious violence (Kennedy, Braga and Piehl, 2001).

Furthermore, a comparative analysis was conducted whereby youth homicide trends in Boston were compared to regional and national trends in 29 major New England cities and 39 major U.S. cities. It was found that a unique program effect was associated with the intervention (Braga, Kennedy, Waring, and Piehl, 2001).

The researchers acknowledge, however, that it is simply not possible “to say with certainty what caused the falloff in youth homicide in Boston or exactly what part Operation Ceasefire played. . . . Because Ceasefire was conceived as an intervention aimed at interrupting the overall dynamic of violence in which all Boston gangs and gang members were involved, the operation could not be set up as a controlled experiment, with certain gangs or neighborhoods excluded for purposes of comparison” (Kennedy, Braga and Piehl, 2001: 43).

Philadelphia’s Youth Violence Reduction Partnership (YVRP)

A Brief History

Drawing some lessons learned from Boston, where a similar collaborative effort took place and combined intensive supports with intensive surveillance, representatives from law enforcement and youth-serving agencies in Philadelphia decided to find out whether a similar approach could “lead to a dramatic reduction in youth homicides” in Philadelphia. They created the Youth Violence Reduction Partnership (YVRP).

Established in 1999, the YVRP is a multi-agency effort involving criminal justice agencies (e.g., police, probation) and youth-serving organizations (e.g., street workers) that aims to reduce the incidence of youth homicide through intensive supervision and an array of support services for those children and youth,

aged 7 to 24, at the highest risk of killing or being killed (McClanahan, 2004). Many of the young people are typically under court supervision due to drug-related or violent offences. The initiative helps to connect participants with school, work and counseling while ensuring that they abide by their probation conditions.

Core Components

The partnership’s strategy includes:

- 1) identifying specific “youth partners” who would receive help by reaching a consensus among the agencies on which youth 14 to 24 years of age in the targeted areas;
- 2) connecting the youth to community supports and programs through “streetworkers” who develop personal relationships with the youth partners;
- 3) intense supervision of the youth partners by teams of police and probation officers;
- 4) graduated sanctions for non-compliance, with the ultimate being a request to a judge to return violators to custody; and
- 5) gun suppression through a zero tolerance policy for any youth partner who had or handled a gun.

The YVRP Model consists of two key elements (McClanahan, 2004):

- **Increased Supervision and Monitoring** – Community workers, police and probation officers share the responsibility for the intensive supervision of YVRP participants. At least four times per month, probation and police officers jointly visit participants, and their families, at their homes and places of employment. Probation officers then make two or more additional visits at the participants’ homes, work, or at school. In addition, the probation officers schedule formal meetings with participants at the probation office. Likewise, street workers attempt to visit participants eight times each month in the community and eight more times at home.
- **Increased Support** – Probation officers and community workers share the responsibility for connecting participants, and their families, with a collection of support services related to, for example, school, housing, employment, health care, and substance abuse treatment.

Evaluation Results

According to McClanahan (2004: 3), “Preliminary evidence . . . suggests that YVRP is stemming homicides and keeping high-risk youth and young adults alive in targeted communities.” Further evaluation, however, is required to assess the effectiveness of this model.



DELINQUENCY PREVENTION BEST PRACTICE

Far too often, gang researchers and practitioners have become short-sighted and isolated from mainstream discoveries and insights in the social sciences and other domains (Short and Hughes, 2006). It is imperative, then, that relevant findings and developments in criminology and other related fields must also be brought to bear directly on the youth gang issue. For instance, there is now ample and accumulating evidence (see, for example: Shaw, 2001; Greenwood, 2005; Farrington and Welsh, 2007; Welsh and Farrington, 2007) that the conditions under which children and youth grow up are crucial for their mental and physical health as well as their emotional, social and intellectual development. The quality of early childhood care, as well as parental and family relationships, is especially important in this regard. This and other research pertaining to protective and early risk factors for general delinquency certainly have direct implications for developing and implementing effective responses to youth gangs.

“It is time to move forward from gang studies as a bounded field of inquiry toward a broader concern with youth violence and the diverse forms of youthful collective behavior” (Sullivan, 2006: 35). Accordingly, there are several delinquency prevention best practices that could potentially be applied to address youth gang issues. For example:

Multisystemic Therapy (MST)

Overview

MST⁷ is an intensive, family- and community-based treatment model that addresses the various determinants of serious criminal and anti-social behaviour in adolescents and their families. It targets chronic and violent male and female young offenders, usually aged 12 to 17, and their families. The primary goals of MST are to reduce anti-social and other clinical problems in the adolescent, reduce out-of-home placements, and empower families to resolve future difficulties. This is achieved by providing parents with the necessary skills and resources required to raise teenagers, and giving youth the skills they need to adequately cope with a collection of individual, family, peer, school and neighbourhood problems and challenges (Henggeler, 1998; Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2006).

MST uses a home-based model of services delivery. This model helps to, for instance, overcome obstacles associated with service access, increase family participation and retention in treatment, facilitate the provision of intensive services whereby therapists typically have low caseloads, and enhance the maintenance and sustainability of treatment gains. It views individuals as being situated within a complex network of

interconnected systems that include individual, family, and extra-familial (e.g., peer, school, neighbourhood/community) factors. Intervention, therefore, may be necessary in any one or a combination of these systems. Furthermore, MST endeavours to promote behaviour change in the youth's natural environment, using the strengths of each system to facilitate change (Henggeler, 1998; Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2006).

On a highly individualized basis, treatment goals are developed in collaboration with the family, and family strengths are used as levers for therapeutic change. While the intensity, frequency and duration of sessions are determined by individual and family needs on a case-by-case basis, the usual duration of MST is approximately 60 hours of contact over a four-month period.

Evaluation

MST is based on the best empirically-validated therapies (e.g., cognitive behaviour and the pragmatic family therapies). It is a treatment approach proven to have positive effects on serious, violent and chronic young offenders. Some evaluation studies of MST (see, for example, Henggeler et al., 1998) have demonstrated for serious young offenders:

- reductions of 25-70% in long-term rates of re-arrest,
- reductions of 47-64% in out-of-home placements,
- extensive improvement in family functioning, and
- decreased mental health problems for serious young offenders.

In contrast, a four-year randomized study of MST conducted in Canada (see Leschied and Cunningham, 2002; Cunningham, 2002) concluded that there was no treatment effect on any of the measurable outcomes between the experimental and control group.

Lastly, it should be noted that MST has achieved very favourable outcomes in the areas of cost-effectiveness⁸ in comparison with more traditional mental health and youth justice services, such as incarceration and residential treatment.

Wraparound Milwaukee

Overview

Wraparound Milwaukee is one of many examples of the wrap-around approach⁹. It is a community-based, highly-individualized system of care which serves children and youth with serious emotional, behavioural and mental health needs, and their families. The basic philosophy underlying this approach is to identify precisely the community services and supports that a family needs and provide them as long as they are needed.

Project Wraparound has been implemented in many different sectors including child welfare, education, juvenile justice, and mental health (Burchard et al., 2002).

This wraparound approach is based on an identification of the services families really need to care for a child with special needs. It identifies the personal, community, and professional resources to meet those needs, and it *wraps* those services around the child and family. Youths can be referred to the program by probation officers or child welfare workers. The program targets children who meet the following criteria:

- They have a current mental health problem identified through an assessment tool.
- They are involved in two or more service systems including mental health, child welfare, or juvenile justice.
- They have been identified for out-of-home placements in a residential treatment center.
- They could be returned sooner from such a facility with the availability of a wraparound plan and services.

If Wraparound Milwaukee determines that enrolment is appropriate, the youths are court-ordered through the dispositional process or delinquency orders. The components include care coordination, a child and family team (CFT), a mobile crisis team, and a provider network.

Evaluation

To date, there have been several studies that have been conducted which support Wraparound's effectiveness. For example, two randomized clinical trials, conducted in New York and Florida, showed favourable results for children and youth participating in the wraparound process. There were, for example, decreases in behavioural symptoms, thought problems, and rates of delinquency (Evans et al., 1998; Clark et al., 1998). In addition, an evaluation of Wraparound Milwaukee demonstrated major improvements for delinquent youth in terms of their functioning at home, at school, and in the community (Milwaukee County Behavioral Health Division, 2002).

LESSONS LEARNED AND KEY INGREDIENTS OF PROMISING STRATEGIES

A review of the current literature and practice suggests specific program-related factors that are likely to improve the effectiveness of youth gang prevention, intervention and suppression activities. The following appear to be key elements or "ingredients" of promising approaches.

Strategic Planning

Effective and comprehensive planning is the cornerstone to good project or program development and implementation. The benefits of planning are numerous. They include, for example, improvements in coordination and cooperation, a multi-disciplinary or multi-sectoral analysis of youth gang and related problems, more effective allocation of human and financial resources, and the establishment of clear program goals, objectives and priorities. Effective planning will also serve to accurately identify and prioritize a given community's issues and needs, and reduce duplicative services and resources.

An Accurate and Thorough Diagnosis of the Problem

The nature and scope of youth gangs can vary greatly across and within communities. Therefore, general knowledge about youth gangs in a given neighbourhood or community should be supplemented with information gathered through a local assessment or audit of gang problems (Wyrick and Howell, 2004).

A community's efforts should always begin with an accurate and thorough diagnosis of youth gang, crime, victimization and related social problems. Unless this is done at the very outset, meaningful progress in developing and implementing an effective response is unlikely to occur.

In addition, the description must be well-matched to the capacities of the agencies and personnel involved. According to Kennedy, Braga and Piehl (2001: 47), "this process of arriving at an account of the problem that is relevant in policy and operational terms – not just in causal and historical terms – may be an important element in the problem-solving process."

There are many tools and resources available to assist in assessing a community's youth gang problem as well as planning strategies to address it.¹⁰

Comprehensive and Integrated Approaches

It is generally recognized that no one crime prevention measure or approach on its own is likely to significantly prevent or reduce crime. Given the diversity of communities and the multi-faceted nature of youth gangs, there are no quick-fix or "one-size-fits-all" solutions. In most cases, the most effective overall approach to the youth gang problem is one that incorporates prevention, intervention and suppression activities. Suppression, for example, on its own is not effective; it needs to be integrated into a broader, more comprehensive strategy.



There is both a sound theoretical basis and a growing body of empirical evidence to support the principle that long-term, comprehensive approaches (e.g., multi-agency or multi-sectoral collaboration; a combination of prevention, intervention and suppression activities) will likely have the greatest impact on a community's youth gang problems (Wyrick and Howell, 2004; see also Maxson and Klein, 2006). However, developing and implementing a comprehensive community-wide approach may not necessarily be a practical option for every community or jurisdiction, for a variety of legitimate reasons. A viable alternative, therefore, is for communities to adopt strategic risk-based responses to youth gang problems (Wyrick and Howell, 2004).

A strategic risk-based response consists of 3 basic elements:

- a general understanding of youth gangs combined with a thorough knowledge of youth gang problems and related issues at the local level;
- an understanding of how a variety of risk (and protective) factors relate to the early onset and persistence of local gang problems and youth violence; and,
- the implementation of state-of-the-art policies and practices to respond to youth gangs (Wyrick and Howell, 2004).

According to Wyrick and Howell (2004: 20), "Once a community pinpoints its most prevalent local problems and links them to specific risk factors, it is [better] able to develop strategies that address the root causes of those problems."

Multi-Sectoral and Multi-Agency Approaches

Since the factors placing youth at risk of gang involvement are multi-dimensional and overlapping, a cross-cutting approach which engages several key community players is essential. This could include partners and stakeholders from such sectors as criminal justice (e.g., police, criminal prosecutions, probation, and victim services), housing, recreation, social services, child welfare, education, health, church groups, community organizations, and the voluntary sector.

Interagency collaboration confronts the fragmentation of services that can happen across different agencies, and consists of four key elements (see Osher, 2002):

- Agreed upon and institutionalized mutuality and common goals,
- Jointly developed structure and shared responsibility,
- Mutual authority and accountability for success, and
- Shared resources and rewards.

It is important to clearly articulate at the outset what the roles and responsibilities are of all partners and stakeholders.

Establishing a Lead Agency and Coordination

At the outset, it is important that a central lead agency (or inter-agency group) or community organization be identified to administer funds, co-ordinate the various program components, and monitor progress with respect to implementation and assessing effectiveness. As Kennedy, Braga and Piehl (2001: 45) point out, "Different problems and different settings no doubt require different arrangements. Having such a locus of responsibility, however, seems likely to be an important element in applying the problem-solving approach."

In the case of the Operation Ceasefire intervention mentioned earlier, prior to a working group being set up there was no locus of responsibility. "Although the police, probation officers, Streetworkers . . . and others were toiling away, their efforts had no center; no person, or group of people, were responsible for understanding and acting against the problem of youth violence in Boston" (Kennedy, Braga and Piehl, 2001: 13).

For the 'Spergel Model', the police were the lead agency. However, it should be noted that this is not a requirement and that other community agencies or organizations could potentially fulfill the role of lead agency.

In the case of the 'Spergel Model', Klein and Maxson (2006) argue that, for the model to be successfully implemented, a competent and experienced on-site coordinator to manage the various individuals and agencies involved and constant monitoring is a necessity.

Proper Targeting and Different Levels of Intervention

According to Klein and Maxson (2006), targeting generally refers to the specific types of individual youth or youth groups that a program expects to impact. As an example, from the prevention perspective, this means attempting to identify, at an early stage, those youth, groups or communities that can reasonably be assumed to become gang-involved. Klein and Maxson (2006: 249) go on to further point out that:

"The more broadly the targets are defined, the less efficient the program becomes This is why knowledge of gang-joining predictions . . . becomes crucial to prevention in the individual sector and why an appreciation of crime patterns . . . can help one to focus on the more problem-producing youths, groups, and communities. The issue of targeting, whether for prevention, intervention, or suppression, is really one of correct targeting. This requires knowledge about gangs generally and local gangs specifically. [Also]..., one should have generic data in mind and gather local data prior to designing a gang control program."

Strategies for addressing youth gang problems should be developed at both the micro (e.g., individual gang members) and the macro (e.g., gangs as entire units) levels. However, Klein and Maxson (2006) argue that the majority of programs and strategies focus on only one of these levels.

Klein and Maxson (2006: 249) contend that the more successful prevention, intervention and suppression strategies will be those that recognize group processes in general and the distinctive elements of youth gang processes more specifically. Similarly, it is important to distinguish between the different types of gang structures. There are, of course, several gang typologies that exist (see, for example, Klein and Maxson, 2006). The important point to note here is that differences exist between youth gangs. Klein and Maxson (2006: 250) assert that different gangs, “tend to display different kinds of members and are . . . likely to yield different responses to various control strategies. To . . . be unaware of the differences can lead in some cases to ineffective programming and in others to programs that make matters far worse.”

CONCLUSION

Much is still not known about youth gangs. For instance, there is a limited body of knowledge pertaining to youth gang programs targeting specific populations with diverse needs. In particular, more research is needed on effective strategies to address the needs of members of female, Aboriginal, and ethno-cultural youth gangs. Furthermore, issues around the relationship between youth gangs and adult crime groups, as well as the differences and similarities between urban gangs and those found in suburban or rural areas, need to be further explored.

According to Short and Hughes (2006: 11), “We need to know a great deal more about the processes that give rise to gang formation, identity, and behavior, and about processes of individual and group adaptations at different levels of explanation. Closer attention must be paid to the dynamic linkages between gangs, gang members, and their physical and social environments.” Unfortunately, time and time again, crime and violence are viewed as *the* defining aspects of youth gangs and the only behaviours worthy of continued empirical interest (Hughes, 2006).

Despite the thousands of projects, programs and strategies that have been developed and implemented to date, one lesson is clear: the diversity and complexity of the youth gang problem defies an easy solution or single strategy (Wyrick and Howell, 2004).

To further improve our likelihood of success, it will be important for future research and evaluation to examine the diversity of youth gangs, compare the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of various program modalities, and delineate the range of access points (e.g., pre-gang involvement vs. youth already engaged in gang activities and behaviour), settings and delivery modes. Perhaps more important, our decision-making around, for example, policy and practice issues should be based on the best available research evidence.

In conclusion, as we develop more knowledge about what works, we will also be challenged to identify ways to translate the lessons learned into policy and practice to prevent and reduce youth gang involvement.



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Notes

- 1 It should be noted that this is a comprehensive review of the literature, as opposed to a full systematic review. The literature review conveyed in this document is not intended to be an exhaustive inventory of books, journal articles and other sources pertaining to addressing youth gang problems. Rather, it is meant to be an overview of recurring themes found in the literature from over the past thirty years.
- 2 According to Klein and Maxson (2006: 4), "This is the consensus nominal definition agreed to by a consortium of more than 100 American and European researchers and policy makers from more than a dozen nations meeting in a series of eight workshops between 1997 and 2005 [the Eurogang program]."
- 3 <http://www.great-online.org/history.htm>. Accessed on March 30th, 2007.
- 4 For a discussion of some of the problems encountered during the implementation of the *OJJDP Comprehensive Community-Wide Gang Model*, the reader should consult Klein and Maxson (2006) and Spergel (2007).
- 5 For a more detailed look at the effectiveness of the Little Village Gang Project in Chicago, the reader should consult Spergel (2007).
- 6 The Streetworkers were a special group of city social service workers who dealt almost exclusively with the most at-risk street youth, "trying to connect them with services, keep them out of trouble, and mediate disputes" (Kennedy, Braga and Piehl, 2001: 10).
- 7 For more information on Multisystemic Therapy, please visit the following website (<http://www.mstservices.com>) or consult Cunningham (2002).
- 8 For further information, refer to the Washington State Institute for Public Policy's cost-benefit analysis of several violence prevention and reduction programs. Its 1998 report is entitled, *Watching the Bottom Line: Cost-Effective Interventions for Reducing Crime in Washington*.
- 9 For a more detailed description of the philosophy and essential elements of Wraparound, please consult Burchard et al., 2002.
- 10 For example, the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) Gang Reduction Program created the *Strategic Planning Tool*. The tool is available on-line at: <http://www.iir.com/nygc/tool/default.htm>. Also, OJJDP released two documents in June 2002 (e.g., *A Guide to Assessing Your Community's Youth Gang Problem* and also *Planning for Implementation*) which are available on-line at: <http://www.iir.com/nygc/acgp/assessment.htm> and <http://www.iir.com/nygc/acgp/implementation.htm>.