Perspectives on Gangs and Gang Violence

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Topic: Youth Protection and Child Safety

The stereotypical media image for youth gangs is only partially accurate. According to the Justice Department, a gang is a well defined group of youths between 10 and 22 years old." To be considered a "youth gang" a group must be involved in a pattern of criminal acts. The criminal acts, especially acts of violence, serve to cement the group together. Researchers Norman Randolph, Alan McEvoy and Edsel Erickson observe that "sharing the anticipation, danger, harm and excitement of a gang's exercise of brutality against outsiders creates feelings of a common identity and shared purpose." They go on to say:

"Clearly, occasional acts of group violence define group boundaries, create or reinforce group identities, and bind members together in a common cause. Yet it is the shared vicarious reconstruction or anticipation of violence that is so much more relevant to bonding than is violence per se."

Howell points out that violent behavior "is not the only behavior in which gang members partake. For the most part, gang members "hang out" and are involved in other normal adolescent social activities, but drinking, drug use and drug trafficking are also common."

"A pre-requisite for participation in the organization's programs should be an agreement that no gang related activities should be brought into the program. Violation of this agreement should result in suspension and possible termination of participation privileges."

Demographic studies of gangs cited by Howell show that the typical age range for a gang is 12–24 with the average age of gang members 17–18 years old. The average age tends to be older in cities like Los Angeles and Chicago where gangs are well established and have been in existence for longer periods of time. Male gang members outnumber female gang members by a wide margin. Traditional gangs average about 180 members and specialty gangs — drug traffickers — are much smaller with only about 25 members on average. The ethnicity of gang members is 48% African-American, 43% Hispanic, 5% white, and 4% Asian. The preponderance of African-American and Hispanic representation in gang membership is not due to a predisposition to gang activities, but rather overrepresentation in those areas most conducive to gang activities.

Researchers give several motivations for joining a youth gang. These reasons include:

- Enhanced status or prestige among friends.
- Increased income from drug sales and other criminal enterprises.
- Protection from other gangs.
- Social relationships giving a sense of personal identity.
- Coercion into joining.

Researchers into gang activities recommend that youth-serving organizations be alert to signs that indicate possible gang activity. According to Ronald D. Stephens, Executive Director of the National School Safety Center at Pepperdine University, the signs include:

- *Graffiti* — Gangs use graffiti to mark their territory. When another gang disputes territory they often cross out the rival gang's graffiti and replace it with their own.
- *Colors, jewelry and distinctive clothing* — Gangs generally establish distinctive clothing to signify

affiliation with a particular gang. Unwary youths wearing similar clothing may become victims of gang rivalries.
- *Physical confrontations and staredowns* — Increasing violence may signal the presence of gangs.
- *Beepers, pagers, and cellular telephones* — Youths who carry electronic communications tools may be involved with gang drug activity.
- *Drive-by shootings in the community* — Drive-by shootings are most often the result of competition between gangs for territory.
- *"Show-by" display of weapons* — Usually a precursor to drive-by shootings. Gang members will drive by brandishing weapons to demonstrate their capacity for deadly violence.
- *Racial conflict* — There is a high correlation between racial conflict and gang membership. Many gangs are formed along racial and ethnic lines for protection and affiliation.
- *Community history of gangs* — Communities with a history of gangs are more likely to have an established gang presence with gang membership including representation from several generations.
- *Increasing presence of informal groups calling themselves a "posse," "crew," or some other socially questionable name* — Informal groups with seemingly benign, yet revealing, names may be the first step to becoming involved with a gang.
- *Tattoos* — Often, gang members have tattoos that symbolize their gang affiliation.

Use of Weapons

Weapons are a cause as well as a response to the violence that young people perceive in the world around them. In 1997, nearly one-fifth of high school students reported carrying a weapon (gun, knife, or club) in the prior month. Males are more likely than females to carry weapons and Latinos and African-Americans are more likely to carry weapons than their white counterparts. Often, young people carry weapons to protect themselves from the violence that they fear. There is a high correlation between carrying weapons and youth gang activity.

Many school systems and other youth serving organizations have adopted a zero tolerance policy toward weapons — especially guns. The prohibition against guns in school settings is a requirement of the federal Gun Free Schools Act (GFSA) (PL 103 382) passed in 1994 that requires any student who carries a firearm to school to be expelled for not less than one year. The GFSA includes in its ban other explosive devices including tear gas, pipe bombs, and even starter pistols that fire blanks. The requirements of the GFSA extend to any school that receives funds from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Weapons bans extend beyond firearms and explosive devices and include knives, slingshots, brass knuckles, blackjacks and hand held personal defense sprays. Some weapons bans have also applied to implements, such as nail clippers and combs with long pointed handles.

To detect weapons, schools and other youth serving organizations use a combination of metal detectors and personal searches. Dress codes often ban the wearing of loose clothing that can hide weapons. Some organizations and schools also ban large purses and backpacks.

There is a fine line between the implementation of policies to keep weapons out of your organization's activities and respecting the privacy and civil rights of the children in your program.

Risk Management Considerations for Controlling Gang Influence

Organizations offering services to children and youth should check with their local police departments to determine if there is a significant gang presence in the community and the kinds of gangs that may be present. Local police departments may also be able to provide information concerning gang relationships, particularly gang conflicts that may impact the organization's program. They may also provide staff training for resisting the influence of gangs in your program.

Intake or registration information for youths in programs where there is significant gang activity should include a notation of present or past gang affiliation or of gang affiliations of other family members. A pre-requisite for participation in the organization's programs should be an agreement that no gang related activities should be brought into the program. Violation of this agreement should result in suspension and possible termination of participation privileges.

Premises should be kept free of graffiti. Allowing gang related graffiti to remain on your premises is an invitation

for other gangs to cover it with theirs — possibly creating a gang war on your doorstep. Graffiti should be removed as soon as possible. Some surfaces may be treated with a graffiti resistant surfacing to make cleaning graffiti easier.

Increased supervision of activities may be necessary to prevent violence between members of competing gangs. Often increased supervision may be obtained from volunteers who live in the community. Former gang members and off-duty police officers should also be considered as potential volunteers.

Involvement of young participants in rule making can increase their commitment to compliance with rules. All participants should understand the value of a violence free program where they can feel secure from physical danger.