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## Gang development and school interventions

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## Gang development and school interventions

### Abstract

Gangs and their disruptive activities are increasing on school campuses. Once an inner-city phenomenon, gangs are attracting children in suburban, small town, and rural schools. Each morning the media presents new headlines about violent acts committed by, and against, those considered to be children by the legal system in the United States. The 1994 Gallup Poll reported that the public believed the main cause(s) for increased violence in the nation's public schools are increased use of drugs and alcohol, growth of youth gangs, the easy availability of weapons, and a general breakdown in the American family as very important (cited in Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1994).

GANG DEVELOPMENT AND SCHOOL INTERVENTIONS

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by  
Frances M. Miller  
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Gangs and their disruptive activities are increasing on school campuses. Once an inner-city phenomenon, gangs are attracting children in suburban, small town, and rural schools. Each morning the media presents new headlines about violent acts committed by, and against, those considered to be children by the legal system in the United States. The 1994 Gallup Poll reported that the public believed the main cause(s) for increased violence in the nation's public schools are increased use of drugs and alcohol, growth of youth gangs, the easy availability of weapons, and a general breakdown in the American family as very important (cited in Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1994).

Describing the alarming escalation in Los Angeles County alone, the Los Angeles Times reported that in 1985 there were an estimated 400 gangs and 45,000 gang members county-wide. There are about 800 gangs with 90,000 members, today (Cantrell & Cantrell, 1993).

Gang culture among young people, in itself, is nothing new. Youth gangs have been a major part of the urban cultural landscape, since at least the 1830's, when Charles Dickens described Fagan's pack of young boys roaming the streets of London, in Oliver Twist (Burnett & Walz, 1994). In this century, however, gangs have taken on a different character, and have become a growing problem in public schools, which historically have been considered "neutral turf."

A historical overview provides a perspective of where the gang phenomenon originated in the United States. The work of researchers such as Cummings and Monti (1993), Lockwood (1993), and Lal, Lal and Achilles (1993), explains the transition of gangs from "play groups," to the current "cultural" and "entrepreneurial."

In this paper, the author will attempt to provide the reader with an understanding of gang structure and a wide range of suggested interventions for combating gangs at school, from prevention, to coping with established gangs on school campuses. This information is intended to give the reader a sense of (a) where schools are in terms of addressing gang problems and (b) what interventions might be designed by school systems to address their special problems.

Even if there are no overt gangs in the schools, staff need to check for and be aware of gang activity. Awareness of gang indicators, cooperative action, and a clear "gang" plan can activate the "ounce of prevention" that may avoid the need for a "pound of cure."

The "ostrich syndrome", or denial (Taylor, cited in Spergel, 1995) approach to dealing with the expansion of gangs and gang activities, into suburbs, rural towns and rural areas, will not solve the problem. Either overtly, or by default, society in the United States has required educators to address many problems

that consume their time and energy. Being prepared may be one answer to dealing with the potential of gang presence in schools. Ignorance is a major impediment to successful work with gangs. Change is difficult, and the unknown can be frightening. A common-sense beginning is careful study and analysis of what is known about gangs. Action without knowledge is misdirected. Educators must talk about and deal openly with the growing problem of gangs in schools.

#### Historical Overview

Youth gangs existed in urban centers of the United States before the nineteenth century (Hyman, cited in Spergel, 1995). Youth gangs in the nineteenth century were often associated, as they are now, with second generation and sometimes later generation male adolescent, and young adult immigrant groups, or in-migrant groups (groups that move to a new part of the country), clustered in low-income neighborhoods of expanding or declining industrial, or post-industrial urban centers (Spergel, 1995). In American gang history, nearly every nationality is represented (Haskins, cited in Spergel, 1995).

The Five Points district of Manhattan was a poor, but relatively quiet residential area until about 1820, when the first Irish immigrants settled there. The first gangs were established in the face of poverty, squalid conditions, and great prejudice. They were mainly young adults or in their late teens.

Some of the gangs numbered in the hundreds; one gang claimed 1,200 members. They had distinctive names and dress. For example, the Roach Guards wore a blue stripe on their pantaloons, the Dead Rabbits wore a red stripe, and the True Blue Americans wore stovepipe hats and ankle length frock coats. The weapons used included pistols and muskets, knives, brickbats, bludgeons, brass knuckles, ice picks, and pikes (Haskins, cited in Spergel, 1995).

The early Five Points gangs expanded to or developed in a nearby community, the Bowery. The Irish toughs hung out in the beer gardens, out of which emerged the largest and most famous of the gangs of the period, the Bowery Boys. The chief activity of the Bowery Boys was brawling with gangs of the adjoining area, mainly the Roach Guards and the Dead Rabbits. The latter two gangs sometimes combined forces to fight the Bowery Boys. From the 1830's to the 1860's, these gangs engaged in battle, sometimes lasting two or three days, with "regiments" of soldiers in full battle dress, marching through the streets to the scene of a gang melee (Haskins, cited in Spergel, 1995).

An urban historian surveyed a single Philadelphia newspaper from 1836 to 1878 and identified fifty-two differently named local gangs (Johnson, cited in Spergel, 1995). Johnson stated that violent gangs existed because of the concentration of poor



and adolescents, and that the pre-Civil War era of Philadelphia was one of its most "gang-plagued."

A New York historian of gangs wrote that by 1855 it was estimated that the metropolis contained at least 30,000 men who owed allegiance to gang leaders and through them to the political leaders of Tamany Hall and the Know Nothing or Native American Party (Asbury, cited in Spergel, 1995). The New York City Civil War draft riots were said to have been precipitated by young Irish youths in street gangs.

After the Civil War, internal population movement and the influx of European immigrants brought gangs of nationalities other than Irish, not just in northern cities, but in the South. White Southerners saw themselves as a minority of downtrodden people, discriminated against and denied status and identity. The South was in a state of extreme economic and social disorganization, and returning soldiers had difficulty finding jobs (Haskins, cited in Spergel, 1995). The Ku Klux Klan originated as a gang of young Civil War veterans who had returned to Pulaski, Tennessee. Six bored and discouraged soldiers formed a club to help make their lives more exciting (Spergel, 1995).

While the Klan was "terrorizing" the South, new immigrant gangs were forming in several of the large eastern cities, particularly in New York. German gangs formed in the Hell's Kitchen area about 1868, and a few years later the first Mafia

began operations. They set up their own standards of law and order along Mulberry Street. There were now thousands of gangs and satellites of gangs. These gangs were very similar to the gangs in the present time (Spergel, 1995).

The gang tradition has been particularly strong and persistent in California, and in the Southwest region of the United States in recent decades. Some gangs in Los Angeles date back sixty or more years. It is estimated that gangs are active in seventy of the eighty-four incorporated cities in Los Angeles. Donovan (cited in Spergel, 1995) reported that today many Hispanics in Los Angeles are fourth-generation gang members.

Youth gangs have also developed in a great many middle-sized and small communities and in suburban and rural areas throughout the United States and other countries, reflecting internal migration, usually of minority populations (Spergel, 1995). This "spread" of gang problems does not necessarily indicate an organized spread of gangs. Rather, local gangs, sometimes similar to youth gangs in other locations, develop because similar social conditions have arisen (Spergel, 1995).

#### Gang Transition: Historical to Contemporary

As the American population spread westward, so too, did the delinquent gang. Some of these early gangs, reflecting the definitions of the day, were largely mischievous play groups.

But with the passage of time and the growing influence of adult criminal behavior, as well as a number of other societal forces, "gang" took on increasingly violent tones. Thrasher (cited in Glick & Goldstein, 1994) in his landmark study of 1,313 Chicago-area gangs, sought to depict how such "play groups" evolved into delinquent gangs. He suggested that the play group turns into a gang when it begins to excite disapproval and opposition, such as when the gang may discover a rival or an enemy in the gang in the next block; its baseball or football team could be strongly competitive with some other team; parents or neighbors may look upon the gang with suspicion or hostility; the storekeeper or the police begin to pursue it; or some representative of the community tries to break it up. This is the real beginning of a gang, as members start to draw themselves more closely together. It then becomes a conflict group. Thrasher's study offered, for the first time, insights and dimensions of concern that remain true today, the topics are relevant in contemporary discussions of gangs and gang behavior (cited in Glick & Goldstein, 1994).

Juvenile gangs in the early decades of the 20th century, though at times involved in vandalism, fighting, theft, or other antisocial or delinquent acts, purportedly had an almost adventurously playful quality to them (Sheldon, cited in Glick & Goldstein, 1994). At least such a quaint perception seems to be

the case, from the highly violent gang perspective of the 1990s. Thrasher (cited in Glick & Goldstein) observed that the quest for new experience seemed to be present in the adolescent who finds the desired escape from or compensation for monotony. The gang actively promotes activities such as rough-housing, movement and change, games and gambling, predatory activities, seeing horror movies, sports, imaginative play, roaming outdoors, exploration, camping and hiking.

Thrasher and other researchers, including Whyte and Suttles (cited in Goldstein, 1991), emphasized the community-integrated character of youth gang members and street corner groups. The distinction between non-delinquent street groups, delinquent groups, and gangs was not usually made or observed in earlier research.

However, some early researchers did make close connections between youthful delinquent, and adult criminal groups or gangs (Goldstein, 1991). These relationships were weak or absent in much of the theory and research into gangs in the 1950s and early 1960s. The connections were rediscovered or reemphasized in the 1970s and 1980s (Goldstein, 1991).

How then, have Thrasher's "gang boys," whose leading predatory activity was stealing, smoking cigarettes, and engaging other gangs in conflicts, evolved into the violent, organized, and criminal groups that they are in the 1990s? A number of

theories have developed since the early 1900s to explain youth, or delinquent, gangs.

### Etiology of Gangs

Spergel (1995) presented poverty-related, social disorganization, racism, and personal disorganization theories, to explain the evolution to present gang description. He suggested, as did Goldstein (1991), that poverty straight and simple is not the root cause of gangs and the violence they produce. Poor families, particularly as they are concentrated in poor communities, have higher rates of personal and social problems. Yet, there is no straight-line relationship between poverty, and the production of gang problems. Social and economic environments, such as poverty, are a source of strain on youths. However, poverty is just one variable. At the heart of "strain" theory is the discrepancy between economic aspiration and opportunity, along with discrepancy-induced reactions such as frustration, deprivation, and discontent (Goldstein, 1991). Merton (cited in Goldstein, 1991) believed that antisocial behavior occurs when a certain section of the population cannot achieve success, while other sections of the population have no difficulty achieving success. Young people, then, find alternate routes to success goals that depend on the extent and nature of opportunities, legitimate or illegitimate, available to them. In some communities, alternate criminal means are integrated with

enough legitimate means to facilitate achievement of success. In other communities such routes are closed off. Gang subcultures develop in these communities. They are alternate systems devised so their members can achieve success under social and economic conditions where legitimate opportunities are in short supply. So, because of acquired poor motivation, limited education, and inadequate social relationships and job skills, youths are socialized to the lowest paying jobs, the welfare system, and street crime.

Miller (cited in Goldstein, 1991) concurred with this view. In Miller's early formation of lower-class theory and discussions of gang behavior, he did not view gang behavior as seriously aberrant, but rather as preparatory to adult roles in lower-class communities. Lower class delinquency was a normal response to sociostructural and cultural demands. The gang served normal socialization functions, and gang members were not regarded as particularly troubled psychologically.

In his writings after the mid-1970s, however, Miller (cited in Goldstein, 1991) emphasized the extremely violent behavior of gang members and essentially adopted a "culture of poverty" view to explain the self-perpetuation of gang life. He shared the view that lower-class cultural or subcultural theory is sufficient to explain the development of youth gangs. His definition of subculture is that it is a system of widely shared

beliefs and values and a set of characteristic behaviors used in organizing social process. A subculture arises because of people's efforts to solve social, economic, psychological, developmental, and even political problems.

Wilson's underclass theory (cited in Spergel, 1995) also rejects a simple "culture of poverty" thesis. Wilson suggested that those groups in socially isolated neighborhoods, particularly in African-American inner-city communities, have few legitimate employment opportunities, inadequate job information networks, and poor schools, resulting in weak labor force attachment, and increasing the likelihood that people will turn to illegal or deviant activities for income. He said that factors such as racial discrimination, changes in the economy because of relocated industries and restructured occupations, and political processes, have had the unanticipated consequence of widening class divisions among blacks, frustrating efforts to make effective adjustments to these changes. Many who have difficulty finding work in the regular economy become even poorer and may join the criminal underground.

Another set of major theories explaining the gang problem evolved around the notion of social disorganization (Spergel, 1995). These theories are independent of poverty-related theories, including underclass theory. Spergel (1995) believed that social disorganization better and more specifically explains

the origin of youth gangs. He contended that there is evidence that social and personal disorganization may be a more direct and powerful precipitant of the gang problem than is poverty or underclass.

Social disorganization refers to the ineffective articulation of elements of social structure, and even the personality system, at various levels of value, action, and relationship. At societal and community levels, social disorganization is often associated with, or a consequence of, large and rapid population movements of minority low-income or working-class groups. These population movements might be related to (a) social, political, economic changes or political disruption; (b) the influx of a minority population from another country, or from a central city to smaller cities, towns, or the suburbs; (c) war or revolution; (d) rapid industrialization; (e) a radical shift in the labor market; or (f) the failure of key socializing and control institutions, such as schools, law enforcement, employers, and youth agencies, to understand and develop policy and programs to appropriately meet the needs of a different, new, or changing population. These social structural elements may be distinct, yet interacting.

Social disorganization can provide the basic stimulus for the formation of youth gangs, usually (but not always), in interaction with the effects of poverty. The youth gang arises



under circumstances in which the social relatedness--usually the structural or connectedness--needs of its members have not been adequately satisfied by local community institutional capacities and arrangements. Vulnerable youths find each other and create, or join already established, peer groups to meet these needs (Powers & Jaklitsch, 1993; Spergel, 1995).

A principal factor and indicator of social disorganization across culture, race-ethnicity, and community, appears to be significant population movements (Spergel, 1995). This is not to deny that immigrant populations can arrive and settle in many communities, without the development of gang problems. This is particularly true when forces for family and cultural cohesion are strong. Bursik and Grasmick (cited in Spergel, 1995) stated that rapid population turnover can decrease the ability of a neighborhood to control itself in order to provide an environment relatively free of crime. This can occur because institutions that contribute to effective social controls are difficult to establish when residents are planning to leave at the first opportunity. Informal structures of neighborhood resident controls are less likely when local networks are in a continual state of flux, and when the local populations are heterogeneous, communication among the different groups is poor, and common local problems and goals and means to solve them are not present.

Population change may result in disruption of existing institutional contact and service patterns (Spergel, 1995). The new population may be of a different racial or ethnic and/or class origin and class composition, usually lower-income. The established population group tends to comprise solid leadership or middle class elements. In the process of large-scale, rapid, social mobility or population change, patterns of relationship between the newcomer and established or residual groups are often strained. There is a failure to understand the other population's norms and values. Youth gangs are sensitive to these differences, and act out parental and community fears, threats, and hostile intentions through attacking or defending against newcomer groups at school, on the streets, and in other public places (Spergel, 1995).

The problem of social distance is particularly severe in school and law enforcement situations. The staff of these institutions and the newcomer populations or clientele to be served are in frequent contact with each other, but mutually acceptable, and co-productive relationships are not easily developed. The gang arises to provide the missing socialization, social support, and control functions. There seem to be only limited ways these different populations, groups, and organizations can work together (Spergel, 1995).

Youth gangs develop and thrive during times of institutional crisis and rapid change. Youth gangs entered a period of rapid growth, as well as innovative corporate development in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, in the 1960s. The change in the character of gangs and the increased severity of criminal gang behavior occurred during the height of the antipoverty programs, and in the midst of the civil rights movement. Economic conditions were improving for low-income groups, and additional civil and political rights were accorded to minority groups, yet youth gangs grew larger, better organized, and more criminalized (Spergel, 1995).

Within the theory of social disorganization, family disorganization is also viewed as a key social and psychosocial factor contributing to gang development. Coleman (cited in Spergel, 1995) observed that, at the end of the twentieth century, the family as an original building block of social organization has moved from the center to the periphery of society.

Racism is viewed as another theory, acting indirectly and powerfully on the creation and development of the gang problem, as well as a variety of other human problems (Spergel, 1995). In a recent New York State report on the youth gang problem, the concept of racism is divided into two components: personal and institutional (cited in Spergel, 1995).

Personal racism involves those attitudes that individuals hold, and subsequent behaviors that they perform which are prejudicial and discriminatory (Spergel, 1995). The effects of personal racism upon those who are its victims include the development of low self-esteem, feelings of hopelessness, and helplessness, as well as the acquisition of those aggressive behaviors which often characterize living with a hostile environment.

Institutional racism is the systematic denial of a group of people to the power, privilege, and prestige that is available within an existing culture or society. The fact that certain classes of people are denied access to the "in-group," and its resources, often leads to those very same individuals forming groups of their own, often anti-establishment in nature, which are then characterized by the established groups as "antisocial," such as gangs, posses, or clubs (Dunston, cited in Spergel, 1995).

Finally, it is important to focus on the individual motivations of youth for becoming and remaining a gang member, or personal disorganization theory. Within that broad topic fall intellectual development; personality development; environmental perspective; social maladjustment perspective; and the need for order, structure, and organization (Spergel, 1995).

Little is known about the intellectual, or cognitive abilities, or disabilities, of gang youths, as they may be distinguished from those of delinquent non-gang youths, or non-delinquents (Spergel, 1995). There are no comparative data on intelligence, school achievement, family, or personality factors within, or across gangs from the same or different cultural communities, and how these factors might be related to gang participation, and especially criminal behavior. To what extent the gang youth's developmental history in the family relates to his intellectual or school achievement is not known. It is known, however, that different youths in the same family are prone to gang and delinquency (Spergel, 1995).

More attention has been paid to the socio-emotional than to the intellectual limitations or disabilities of gang youths, in understanding the gang problem (Spergel, 1995). One view is that gang youths are reasonably normal. They simply adapt to extremely disadvantaged or socially disorganized contexts in ways that maximize personal survival, and preparation for marginal adult working careers. An opposing view is that gang youths are personally isolated, seriously disturbed, or maladjusted. All of these perspectives recognize that gang youths are mainly adolescents, passing through a stage of development that is normally filled with crises. In their passage from childhood to adulthood, peer group relationships are particularly important.

Adolescence is a transitional, marginal period where experimentation with new roles is expected and enacted. Biological and physical changes bring up the question of social maturity, for bodily changes should be accompanied by psychological behavior change (Vigil, cited in Spergel, 1995).

Vigil (cited in Spergel, 1995) using a cultural perspective, claimed that the drive to gang membership is based on an internal need to prove oneself and that the drive is almost ritual. Most members do so by exhibiting courage, bravery, and daring in street affairs, such as fighting, where their feats can be observed by other gang members. The inherent and/or socially conditioned drive to aggression seems to be considerably stronger in males than females, particularly during the adolescent years.

The environmental perspective of personal disorganization suggests an answer to why certain youths engage in gang-related, especially violent, behavior mainly in the defects of the social, cultural, or economic environment rather than in the youth himself or herself. The environmental perspective is reflected in learning theory, which states that joining a gang and adopting delinquent gang behavior are an outgrowth of a natural social learning process in certain low-income and/or transitional areas. Positive reinforcements exist for deviant gang behavior and joining a gang, and punishments for not participating in its activities (Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton, cited in Spergel, 1995).

In the social environment explanation of personal disorganization, the gang member's behavior is seen as functional to his or her survival in a particular social context that requires him to join and do "crazy things" he does as induced by the gang's social status system. Few of these youths have experienced anything but severe economic or status deprivation. They find themselves about to enter adulthood without the education or training needed to compete successfully in the labor market. Hustling or fighting could be considered to be a functional adaptation to their social environment (Krisberg, cited in Spergel, 1995).

In the social control or personal maladjustment perspective of personal disorganization, the explanation for why the youth becomes a gang member and participates in gang-motivated delinquent behavior, shifts from the social environment to certain characteristics of youth. Social control theory is based on the assumption that it is not external environmental pressures, but the strength of internal controls that regulates behavior, and more important, that restrain the natural impulse to delinquency (Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton, cited in Spergel, 1995). The focus of control theory has been on the acquisition of norms by the individual that constrain and channel behavior in a legitimate direction. Weak internal controls may result from defects of socialization during childhood, particularly through

weak family structure or a defective pattern of supervised parental relations. Delinquency results from a breakdown of previously established personal controls, particularly during adolescence, as well as from social disorganization, or weakening of the legitimate sources of external control, more generally through school, peers, and community agencies (Elliott, cited in Goldstein, 1991).

Social control theory and its variations (Goldstein, 1991) have particular support in the substantial empirical literature convincingly demonstrating the broad and deep influence of family factors upon the likelihood of delinquent behavior. Some of these factors are parental criminality; parental social difficulties such as excessive drinking, frequent unemployment, poor parental supervision and monitoring; poor discipline practices (excessive, erratic, or harsh); as compared to parents of non-delinquent youths, greater parental regard for deviant behavior; greater likelihood of becoming involved in coercive interchanges; more frequent modeling of aggressive behavior; and the provision of less support and affection (Goldstein, 1991). Families of delinquent youths also often display a lack of shared leisure time, intimate parent-child communication, and parental warmth. In addition, parental reports suggest lack of attachment to the children and poor identification with the role of parent (Goldstein, 1991). Being prepared may be one answer to dealing



with the potential of gang presence in schools. Ignorance is a major impediment to successful work with gangs. Change is difficult, and the unknown can be frightening. A common-sense beginning is careful study and analysis of what is known about gangs. Action without knowledge is misdirected. Educators must talk and deal openly with the growing problem of gangs in schools.

#### Definitional Perspective

What constitutes a gang has varied with time and place. Puffer (cited in Goldstein, 1991) defined a gang as one of three primary social groups. These three are the family, the neighborhood, and the play group. The play group is the gang. All three are restrictive human groupings formed in response to deep-seated but unconscious need, the need for belonging.

Later, Arnold (cited in Goldstein, 1991) defined gangs as a group of six or more persons who can identify an instigator among their number, or who have a group name and who have experienced, as a group, two or more incidents of conflict with other like groups or legal authorities, without openly opposing the moral validity of the social order, or norms.

Spergel (1989) described the gang as having descriptive organizational characteristics, symbols, and a range of specific and general criminal activities, particularly violence, drug use and sales. The most frequent descriptive characteristics used to

define a gang member are symbols, or symbolic behavior, self admission, identification by others, especially the police, and association with gang members.

The most recent view defines gangs as pathological, violent and criminal. Miller (cited in Goldstein, 1991) surveyed 160 criminal justice and youth service agencies, inquiring into their respective definitions of gang. As reflected in his definition, six major elements emerged from the extensive survey:

1. Being organized;
2. Having identifiable leadership;
3. Identifying with a territory;
4. Associating continually;
5. Having a specific purpose; and
6. Engaging in illegal activities.

Several years have passed since the Miller survey, and reflecting the increasing violence in society at large, definitional inclusion of violent behavior seems necessary (Goldstein, 1991). As society has increased its involvement in drug use and abuse, apparently so, too, have American gangs. Although gang youths still spend a great deal of their time together "hanging out," currently reported levels of aggression and drug involvement make older definitions of gang as a play group, a social group, or an athletic group seem quaint (Spergel, 1989).

Previous definitions have changed, because the character of gangs has changed. They may have the afore-mentioned identifiable characteristics, as do many of the gangs in California, Illinois, and elsewhere. Or, less characteristic, they may be loosely organized; have changeable leadership; be criminally active; associate regularly; and engage in not only illegal, but also, legal activities. Nevertheless, they are more violent and more drug involved, and these two characteristics must be included in establishing a contemporary definition of gangs (Goldstein, 1991).

Data on the number, nature, structure, and functioning of delinquent gangs, especially accurate data, are hard to obtain (Goldstein, 1991). No national level agency has assumed responsibility for the systematic collection and reporting of gang-related information. Each city or region is free to, and does, formulate its own definition of gang and decides what gang related data to collect. Compounding the difficulty in obtaining adequate, accurate, objective, and relevant information are gang youths themselves. Hagedorn and Macon (cited in Goldstein, 1991) recommended being wary of information about gangs. Gang members are quite adept at telling social workers and policemen self-serving lies. Glib misinformation is, in fact, a survival tool for many gang members. It is easy for outside people (and that is practically everybody) to believe social workers and policemen

because they have direct contact with gang members. Yet this direct contact is often managed by the gang members themselves, sometimes for survival, sometimes even for self-glorifying exaggeration.

Given this caution, what is known about demographics of the contemporary gang? In Miller's 1974 national survey (cited in Goldstein, 1991), Philadelphia and Los Angeles reported the highest proportion of gang members to their respective male adolescent populations (6 per 100). For the other survey cities, comparable ratios were New York (4 per 100), Chicago (2 per 100), Detroit and San Francisco (less than 1 per 100). The combined rate for all six cities was 37 per 1,000, or approximately 4%. Overall numerical estimates, for the group of six cities, ranged from a low of 760 gangs with 28,500 members, to 2,700 gangs with 81,500 members. As has consistently been reported in earlier decades, gang members in the surveyed cities were predominantly male; age 12 to 21; residing in the poorer, usually central city areas; and come from families at the lower occupational and educational levels. Gang youths were African American (1/2), Hispanic (1/6), Asian (1/10), and non-Hispanic white (1/10), and strongly tended to form themselves into ethnically homogeneous gangs.

Needle and Stapleton (cited in Goldstein, 1991) surveyed police departments in 60 American cities of various sizes. Half

the cities with populations between 250,000 people and 500,000, and more than one-third of the cities with between 100,000 and 250,000 people reported gang problems. Delinquent youth gangs were no longer to be seen as only a big city problem. Gangs have spread to smaller cities and urban areas. The popular belief about this spread is that big-city gangs are intentionally exported (especially Los Angeles's Crips and Bloods). The reality appears to be a bit more complex. While a modest amount of such "franchising," "branching," or "hiving off" apparently occurs, most midsize and smaller city gangs appear to either originate in such locations, or are started by non-resident gang members via kinship, alliance, the expansion of turf boundaries, or the movement of gang members' families into new areas (Moore, Vigil, & Garcia, cited in Glick & Goldstein, 1994).

By 1989, according to yet another, and particularly extensive, survey conducted by Spergel, Ross, Curry, and Chance (cited in Goldstein, 1991), delinquent gangs were located in almost all 50 states, a few in the north-central mountains and perhaps northeastern United States being possible exceptions. As a group, 35 surveyed cities reported 1,439 gangs. California, Illinois, and Florida especially had substantial gang concentrations. Spergel et al. report that three jurisdictions in particular have especially high numbers of youth gangs: Los Angeles County (600), Los Angeles City (280), and Chicago (128).

Of the total of 120,636 gang members reported to exist in all the surveyed cities combined, 70,000 were estimated to be in Los Angeles County, including 26,000 in the city of Los Angeles; 12,000 were estimated to be in Chicago. Spergel et al. reported that while 14% of their survey's law enforcement respondents and 8% of other respondents believed that the gang situations in their respective jurisdictions had improved since 1980, 56% of the police and 68% of the non-law enforcement respondents claimed that their situation had worsened.

Males continue to outnumber female gang members at a ratio of approximately 20 to 1. Gang size is a variable function of a number of determinants, including density of the youth population in a given geographical or psychological area (i.e., the pool to draw on), the nature of the gang's activities, police pressure, season of the year, gang recruitment efforts, relevant agency activity, and additional factors (Spergel, cited in Goldstein, 1991). Approximately 5% or less of gang crime is committed by females. Females join gangs later than do males, and leave earlier. The age range of gang membership appears to have expanded, to from 9 to 30 or older, as gang involvement in drug dealing has increased. Younger members are often used as look outs, runners, and so on, with the knowledge that if they are caught, judges and juvenile law tend to be more lenient when the perpetrator is younger. Older members tend to remain in the gang

as a result of both the profitability of drug dealing and the employment opportunities for disadvantaged populations in the legitimate economy. Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Whites are America's gang members. Spergel et al. (1989) reported a degree of specialization in the nature of the criminal behavior predominantly engaged in by these ethnically different gangs. According to their findings, Hispanic groups engage in turf-related battling, Asians engage in a variety of property crimes, Black gangs are more involved in drug trafficking, and White gangs engage in both organized property crimes and vandalism. Such semi-specialization may result more from acculturation patterns, access to criminal opportunities, and community stability than ethnicity.

#### Identifiers/School Response

Jankowski (cited in Lockwood, 1993) has studied gangs for 10 years and says that the gang has been a very stable institution in low income areas in the United States for more than one hundred and fifty years. Based on his experiences, he suggested that members of school staffs can begin to deal effectively with gangs by conducting some basic research on gangs in their area. He believes that it is always good to know what gangs operate in the area and who in fact might be in them. This type of reconnaissance is done in Los Angeles many times in the schools.

Burnett & Walz (1994) noted that the perception of gangs as omnipotent frequently leads school personnel either to react harshly with overly punitive and restrictive actions, or to be so intimidated that they refrain from taking any action at all.

Jankowski (cited in Lockwood, 1993) suggested that sharing information with other school staff can reduce the feelings of ineffectiveness and powerlessness. Sharing information can result in some strategic plans that are geared to dilute the collective power of the gang members. Passing information along can allow staff to disperse groupings of students so that they do not actually come in contact with each other especially during noon hour, lunch time, or any kind of recess time. It is good to have a visible authority figure who either disperses the groups or is constantly evident so that there is a presence that tells the groups that someone is ready to take immediate action if things "get out of hand."

Another strategy that can work, according to Jankowski (cited in Lockwood, 1993) is separating individuals. Isolating individuals is very strategic, in terms of diffusing gang recruitment and can be done more easily at the junior high level than the senior high level, where students are more restricted to campus.

A different strategy is to engage school staff in an ongoing dialogue and negotiation with gangs (Jankowski, cited in



Lockwood, 1993). At some schools, school personnel get into a dialogue with gangs. That is, they do not deny there are gangs; they try to work with them. They identify who the gangs are, who the leaders are, and then hold weekly meetings to see what issues need to be resolved, to find out what kinds of positive experiences the gangs are interested in doing such as school dances and other social activities.

Jankowski (cited in Lockwood, 1993) also provided suggestions for times when things get out of hand. School officials need to call in whatever kind of force that they have at their disposal as deterrents. They can inadvertently encourage recruitment in gangs if they do not provide protection, because if somebody who is not in a gang is hurt, then the message is that unless a person joins one of the gangs he or she will not be protected.

Burnett & Walz (1994) stated that what is needed is a strategy that mobilizes school and community resources to offer viable alternatives to youth gang membership. To be successful, strategy must be built upon reasons for why gangs develop and attract youths, and school personnel must find ways to address students' feelings of powerlessness and loss of self esteem. A strategy that embodies an understanding of "gang psychology" increases the probability that gangs will be less able to attract new members and retain old members.

Burnett & Walz (1994) and Nielson (1992), agreed that targeting vulnerable students for special assistance and support is an essential first step in identifying those students who are gang members or possible gang members. Care must be taken to correctly assess whether a student is a gang member, a "wannabee" (considering membership in a gang), acquainted with gang members but not involved in gang activities, or emulating gang behavior to gain attention. Trying to identify what a gang is and who its members are is difficult. Many definitions include deviant or criminal behavior as a prerequisite. Students who are associated with gangs are identified by correlating certain anti-social behaviors at school with their association with a group that identifies itself with a name, logo, and specific attire. These high-risk students are further identified by frequent disciplinary problems, poor academic achievement, association with known gang members off campus, and lack of involvement in school or community clubs, athletics, or other positive group activities.

Other gang identifiers include: (a) distinctive symbols used in graffiti, on clothing and in jewelry such as stars with 5 or 6 points, crowns, with pointed or rounded tops, or rabbit heads with straight or bent ears; (b) signals, such as arms folded in a certain way, or fingers used to form distinctive hand signals; (c) graffiti on buildings, streets or property, to mark

a gang's territory; (d) subtle or obvious choice of color in clothes or specific brands or styles of sportswear, hats, shoes, bandannas, jewelry, and haircuts; (e) symbols or names tattooed on arms, chest, or elsewhere might indicate gang membership; (f) sudden changes of mood or behavior, unexplained poor grades, and secretive friendships or meetings (Cantrell & Cantrell, 1993; Huff, 1989).

Early identification of students who might drift toward gang affiliation is the first step in intervention. When gang interest or fascination is observed or heard of, intervention is necessary. Intervention at the "wannabee" stage is the most effective means of prevention to avoid the lag time that aids gang growth (Nielson, 1992; Trump, 1993).

Nielson (1992) also believed that working closely with parents of at-risk students is effective. He suggested, as did Burnett & Walz (1994), that creating an inviting and safe school climate is important, and the close collaboration of the staff, parents, law enforcement, and social services agencies is necessary to establish an environment that is less conducive to gangs and gang behavior taking root in the school.

Trump (1993) agreed that the time to act is as soon as school personnel see signs that gangs are forming in their district. Gang activity varies from region to region, and each school system's response will need to vary accordingly. One rule

holds true: over-reacting and resorting to extreme measures will do little to alleviate gang violence.

A local working definition and action plan that can be implemented relatively early will help avoid lag time that aids gang growth. Involvement of police, social services and community organizations in developing comprehensive strategies for dealing with gangs is necessary (Trump, 1993). Factors to consider are issues such as the dress code. Clothing is a primary form of gang member identification, and in areas where gang activity threatens the school environment, school boards feel pressured to respond. At this point, they begin to experience conflict between the Constitutional right to freedom of expression and the need for a safe school environment. Past court decisions (Lane, Swartz, Richardson, & Van Berkum, 1994) have given school boards and school administrators latitude to establish student dress codes in schools; however, until recently, the courts offered little guidance on gang attire. Only one court case has dealt directly with the issue of gang attire. In *Oelsen v. Board of Education of School District No. 228*, a lower court ruled against a high school student who challenged an Illinois school district's rule forbidding gang activities--including the wearing of gang-related jewelry. Specifically, the court ruled that a dress code prohibiting earrings was constitutional, provided the school district

established a rationale for the policy. The rationale the school district developed specified a need to curb documented gang activity in and around schools (Lane et al., 1994).

Before a school board revises the dress code policy on gang attire, they must make certain they can justify the steps they are taking. When school boards have been able to document a problem with gangs and gang attire, the courts generally have been willing to listen. In designing such policies, it is recommended that the policy is explained to students before it goes into effect and that informal warnings to first-time and infrequent violators be issued. Schools should keep detailed documentation of problems and disruptions caused by gang confrontations to ensure an unbiased appeals process at every level (Lane et al., 1994).

The next factor in a comprehensive action plan involves rules and consequences. School personnel may minimize the need for policies that specifically address gangs if there is a comprehensive student handbook that identifies expectations for student behavior and outlines the consequences for all students who break the rules. Student handbooks include a section on freedom of expression and dress codes. School personnel must explain suspension and expulsion procedures carefully and describe the appeals process. A well-written handbook can help

ensure that all students are treated fairly, firmly, and consistently (Trump, 1993).

Staff members should review and revise student handbooks each year, present them to students on the first day of each school year, and review them with students during assemblies and in each classroom. Each student should be asked to sign a receipt indicating that he or she received the handbook, and teachers should maintain lists of those signed receipts--an excellent way to counter students who say that they did not know that the rule existed (Trump, 1993).

In addition to publishing and reinforcing the rules in the student handbook, schools need an effective training program, which should include sessions for staff at both building and district levels. Educators often learn what little they know about gangs through the distorted lens of the entertainment industry. Too often, training programs focus almost exclusively on the sociology of gangs or focus too much on gang graffiti or clothing. A balanced training program that reduces stereotypes and helps staff members approach gang issues rationally is needed. Such training reduces overreaction by eliminating the fear of the unknown (Trump, 1993).

One part of the training should be helping staff members understand the motivation for joining gangs. Also, the training needs to emphasize that "Just Say No" programs are too simple to

be effective in preventing students from joining gangs. Instead, teachers must get students to weigh honestly the costs and benefits of belonging to a gang, and recognize the long-term negative consequences of gang behavior (Trump, 1993).

Finally, teachers should not ignore opportunities for teaching about nonviolent ways to solve problems. If a teacher sees a fight in the hall and the students' attention is focused on it, the teacher should not simply shut the door and continue the math or science lesson as though the fight had never taken place. Instead, the teacher needs to address the reasons for the fight and ways to avoid such conflicts in the future (Trump, 1993).

### Conclusion

Gang participation has existed in the United States for many decades. Youth will constantly seek supportive and nurturing relationships. They want to feel good about themselves, and they want to be recognized for their deeds. When they do not find these things in their families, immediate environment, or at school, they likely will pursue other avenues. If these avenues are positive and socially acceptable, the youth are congratulated in society. If another path, like joining a gang, is chosen, they are ostracized by mainstream society. However, being a member of a gang is likened to being a member of a family; both environments provide a sense of belonging, importance and

fulfillment of need. The downside of being a gang member is frequently the participation in deviant, criminal and violent deeds. Parents and school personnel must understand the nature of the gang, the attraction it holds, and the need it gratifies if they are to compete for these youths from a position of strength (Martinet, 1993).

The intent of this paper has been to provide some of the information necessary to identify gang presence and help community leaders begin to plan strategies for dealing with gang presence. Jankowski (cited in Lockwood, 1993) suggested that there is no point in trying to eradicate gangs because it will not happen. Gangs are an organizational response to inequality and poverty. They have become even more so recently, and they have more people staying in them for longer periods of time. They are basically quasi-capitalist organizations, so members will act in an entrepreneurial manner; they will have business relationships, such as selling products and making deals. Trying to eradicate gangs is a waste of energy.

Instead, Jankowski (cited in Lockwood, 1993) suggested that schools provide long-term alternatives, such as job programs. School and community leaders need to join forces to evaluate existing programs and determine the needs they have, including gang youth and at-risk youth, not only college prep level youth. All youth need the opportunity to function in mainstream society



and to feel that they are capable of doing something worthwhile. The decisions made by school and community leaders to acknowledge gang presence and then develop coping strategies is necessary to ensure inclusion of all students, at school and then in the mainstream of society.

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