Gang-Impacted Youth:
Costs and Consequences

2016

Abraham Magaña
YDC Prevention/Intervention Specialist
Youth Development Council
The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention has reported that 30% of cities, towns, and rural counties have reported gang crimes (Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention, December 2015). Nationally, gang-related homicides have increased by more than 20% (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, December 2014). Gangs are increasingly recruiting younger children who are engaged in criminal activity. Nearly half of high school students report that there are students at their school who consider themselves to be part of a gang and one in five students in grades 6-12 report that their schools has gangs (National Gang Center, Summer 2013).

Over the course of a lifetime, a high-rate criminal offender can impose between $4.2 and $7.2 million in costs on society. (U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) However, the costs are relatively low during the early years of a chronic offender’s life – totaling about $3,000 at age 10 (U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). This finding suggests that early prevention efforts that focus on youth in high-risk settings before problem behaviors develop can result in large cost savings to communities.

Far from the I-5 corridor, the frontier community of Ontario (Population 11,091), in Eastern Oregon, is considered to be one of the least safe and most dangerous communities in the state (Chastaine, 2014) (Kolmar, 2015). Over a five year period (2011-2015) 546 gang-related crimes occurred in the Ontario area (City of Ontario Police Department, 2012-2014). In Southern Oregon’s Jackson County, 16 different gangs have been identified (Jackson County, Oregon, 2014). It is estimated that there are over 120 gangs that exist in Multnomah County alone (Multnomah County, 2014). In Portland and East Multnomah County, gang activity is on the rise, currently at pace to exceed last year’s number of violent gang crimes (Brown, 2016).
Data reported to the Youth Development Council (YDC indicated over 150 gangs and gang sets are located throughout Oregon (Oregon Youth Development). Gang members often are males who are recruited in their teens or even younger if they’ve grown up in the gang life because of parents or relatives being gang involved. Youth at risk of joining a gang often have an excess of free time not made up of pro-social roles or activities. They often feel alienated from their family, school, or community and have limited access to mainstream employment and resources (Moore, 1998).

Youth involved in gangs face a host of consequences ranging from physical violence, jail and even death. The consequences are not only limited to the youth, but also the family members of gang involved youth. Children of incarcerated gang members have had issues associated with mental health, depression, attention, disorders and are at high risk of foster care placement, burning homeless, having reduced social supports and increased likeliness of dropping out of school (Peterson, Fontaine, Kurs, & Cramer, June 2015).

Female-involved gang youth often face additional consequences that male youth do not. Female youth will often join a gang to escape sexual or physical abuse in the home, but once part of the gang, can experience domestic violence, bear and care for children as a youth, be forced into prostitution and commit crimes for the gang, often re-experiencing the same traumas they tried to escape when they joined the gang (Wolf & Gutierrez, 2012).

Even short-term involvement in gangs during adolescence has been linked to long-term consequences. Gang-involved adolescents, when compared to adolescents who were not gang-involved, were half as likely to graduate from school and as adults were 3 times as likely to report committing a crime the preceding year, over 3.5 times to report
receiving income from illegal sources and more than 2 times likely to have spent time incarcerated the preceding year (Gilman, Hill, & Hawkins, 2014).

A survey of gang-involved youth in Oregon finds that one of the main activities associated with gangs is drug sales (Multnomah County, January 2014). Youth also report joining gangs to make money (Multnomah County, January 2014). For the 2015-2017 biennium, the Youth Development Council (YDC) made funds available to address youth gang involvement and violence throughout Oregon. Eight sites responded and report gang activity occurring in their community.

**Key Findings**

- Gang-impacted youth face numerous factors (lack of safety, mental health, education, job readiness and employment) that need to be addressed
- Gang-impacted youth have limited access to mainstream opportunities
- Youth report earning money as a top reason for joining a gang
- Research shows significant drop in youth violence among employed youth. In order for them to be successful, they need soft skills and other workforce readiness training.

**OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model: A Strategy That Works**

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) Comprehensive Gang Model has been proven to reduce serious and violent crimes, decrease criminal activity and gang involvement, and increase success in educational and job opportunities. The model, used by the Youth Development Council as a collective impact structure for communities, involves five strategies for addressing gang-involved youth and their families. This model is a framework for the coordination of multiple, data-driven anti-gang strategies among agencies such as law enforcement, education,
criminal justice, social services, community-based agencies, outreach programs and grassroots community groups. The five strategies are:

**Community Mobilization:**
Involvement of local citizens, including former gang members and community groups and agencies, and the coordination of programs and staff functions within and across agencies.

**Opportunities Provision:**
The development of a variety of specific education, training, and employment programs targeting gang-involved youth.

**Social Intervention:**
Youth-serving agencies, schools, street outreach workers, grassroots groups, faith-based organizations, law enforcement agencies, and other criminal justice organizations need to be reaching out and acting as links between gang-involved youth and their families, the conventional world, and needed services.

**Suppression:**
Formal and informal social control procedures, including close supervision or monitoring of gang youth by agencies of the criminal justice system and also by community-based agencies, schools, and grassroots groups.

**Organizational Change and Development:**
Development and implementation of policies and procedures that result in the most effective use of available and potential resources to better address the gang problem.

**Nothing Stops a Bullet Like a Job**

This is the motto of Homeboy Industries, arguably the largest, most successful organization serving former gang youth, adults and their families in Los Angeles, California. It accomplishes this by offering a diverse set of programs based around an
individuals' needs. Their approach incorporates case management, mental health, parenting instruction, education, and job training for youth and adults transitioning out of the gang lifestyle. 70% of their trainees who completed their involvement with Homeboy Industries stayed out of prison and found gainful employment (Homeboy Industries, 2013).

Research conducted on a summer employment program targeting youth 14-24 from high violent crime neighborhoods, found all youth participants obtained employment while 70% of the comparison group in the research remained jobless all summer (Sum, Trubsky, & McHugh, July 2013). Twenty-two areas were examined measuring an improvement or deterioration in risky, deviant or violent behavior. Youth showed improvement in 19 of the 22 areas while the comparison group showed improvement in three, but deterioration in the area of risky, deviant or violent behavior. Program involved youth also showed significant behavior improvement in using alcohol, selling or using drugs, and listening to one's parents, teachers or supervisors, spreading false rumors or lies about others, and picking on others by chasing them. Other areas of change include involvement in a physical fight during the past 30 days, being attacked or threatening someone, with a weapon other than a gun, and damaging or destroying someone's property. When program participants were asked how they spent their summer earnings, 68% bought clothes, shoes and personal items, but 60% also reported giving money to a parent. Half put money in a savings account, while 40% bought school supplies (Sum, Trubsky, & McHugh, July 2013).

A recent study examined the impact of a summer youth jobs program in high violence areas. The study was comprised of minority youth, ages 14-21 (average age 16), where 90% were on free or reduced lunch, with average grade of a C, missed around 6 weeks of school, 20% had been previously arrested, 20% had been victims of a crime, lived in neighborhoods with unemployment averages of 19% and high rates of violent crime
(Heller, 2014). Three hundred and fifty youth were given fifteen hour-a-week jobs and 10 hour social-emotional learning classes. The remaining students served as a control group not participating in the summer job experience. Arrest data was examined during the duration of the study and 13 months after and findings demonstrate a decrease in violent crime of 43% among the youth working when compared to the control group not involved in a summer job.

**Creating a Path to Employment**

Often the perception is that for a gang member to leave or disassociate from a gang they must be “jumped out,” suffer some sort of expulsion process involving violence or death. This may not always be the case, but caution and safety must always be a concern when working with youth who are trying to transition out of the gang culture. Factors that should be explored with youth gang members are internal and external identification as a gang member or associate, mental health/substance abuse issues, dependence on the gang for social support, and whether the youth is part of a multigenerational gang (Arciaga & Gonzalez, 2013).

Someone intervening and working closely with a youth gang member should develop a plan that works to assess and ensure a youth’s safety in their process of transitioning away from gang involvement or activity, before proceeding to address other factors that affect a youth's ability to transition into employment. In order for gang impacted youth to transition successfully to an employment opportunity he or she has to be prepared with necessary skills and abilities to properly carry out tasks and services of a job. Gang-impacted youth have been shown to have suffered high rates of trauma that can manifest itself through angry outbursts, emotional numbness, impulsivity, and risky behavior (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network).
A youth has to be prepared to choose an alternative to the gang life style. For this to happen it must be determined what needs a youth has before they can successfully transition into training or employment. Do they have anger management problems? Have support at home? Previous work experience? Do they have a high school diploma or GED? Once a youth's pressing needs are met, then steps can be taken to enroll and support a youth in job readiness program or work experience opportunity that prepares them for transition to full-time employment or access higher education.

**Recommendations**

- **Prioritize and make funding available that directly seeks to prevent and reduce the number of gang-affected and gang-involved youth in Oregon.** These youth are susceptible to risk factors contributing to low educational engagement, school suspension or truancy issues, involvement in the juvenile justice system, and criminal behavior.

- **Form collaborative community partnerships.** By various community stakeholders and service providers coming together to form collaborative partnerships, a common strategy can be developed to reduce risk factors leading to youth gang involvement. The Stanford Social Innovation Review’s *Collective Impact Model*, one of the more successful models of collaboration, uses five key conditions that distinguish collective impact from other types of collaboration: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and the presence of a backbone organization. The OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model mirrors that model at the law enforcement/community level.

- **Require implementation of evidence-based, research-based and practice-based approaches.** Through the utilization of these practice approaches agencies can
implement programming that has been proven to be successful, producing positive outcomes and the biggest return on investment.

- **Require utilization of OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model strategies.** The OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model is provided for free through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. It has been studied, researched, and proven to be effective in combatting and reducing the presence of gang activity throughout the United States.

- **Make targeted, focused investments in identified communities currently experiencing gang violence in order to suppress and curtail the violence and implement positive program models.**

- **Develop systems to identify youth at risk of gang involvement no later than the freshman year of high school to effectively help guide them towards a path leading to high school completion and connects them to the labor market or higher education.**

Gang impacted youth safety must be ensured during their process of transitioning away from gang involvement. Their needs must be assessed and supported before going forward with having them placed in a job training or job placement program. Ensure they have the necessary skills, abilities, and support to follow through and complete a job training program.
Works Cited


