

PREVENTION IN ACTION

Teen Gangs: Integrated Interventions Work Best

PERSPECTIVE

Analyses of official crime statistics reveal a sharp increase in the arrest rates for homicide from 1983 to 1993, especially among youth. In response to increased numbers of homicide arrests, policies aimed at getting tough on youth crime were enacted, gun control laws were passed, boot camps were established, and children were waived from the juvenile justice systems into adult criminal courts.

From my perspective, those policies were grave errors, as they did not take into account an understanding of



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youth development and they failed to take a scientific, public health approach. Instead, those policies took a wrong-headed, reactionary, criminal justice approach to

youth violence. Despite the lack of evidence suggesting that body slamming the adolescent through the criminal justice system is effective, it is the approach that continues to prevail.

More than 100 years ago, the Institute for Juvenile Research began as the first child-guidance clinic in the United States, and the research of the day clearly established that the reasons that youth were delinquent were neither genetic nor biological. Rather, the juveniles' context – such as homelessness and poverty – was driving their behavior. Thus, the construction of social fabric around these wayward youth was determined to be necessary to prevent criminal behavior. The extent to which we have completely lost our way regarding those early lessons is fascinating.

Criminal justice is a much bigger, well-funded business than is the social service field, and too many economic forces are at work that ensure the success of the criminal justice approach at the expense of the ethical and humane approach to heal these social ills. Nevertheless, we must remember that evidence-based interventions do exist to prevent the descent of our youth into violence and gang activity. When delivered early and consistently enough, such interventions can – and should – be integrated into the current system of justice and social service.

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Youth violence and gang involvement account for one of the most pressing public health and safety issues facing our country, and unless intervention efforts are redirected to include preventive rather than punitive strategies, the danger is not likely to diminish, Harvard Law School professor Charles J. Ogletree told a House of Representatives panel.

In a 2008 hearing on gang violence titled, "What's Effective? What's Not?," Mr. Ogletree, who is also the founding director of the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race & Justice in Boston, testified before the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security that "public dollars spent on education and prevention are far more effective in stemming violence and discouraging gang affiliation than broadening prosecutorial powers or stiffening criminal penalties for young people accused of gang-related crimes."

Not only do the "get tough" approaches that focus on prosecution and incarceration show little evidence of deterring gang activity, "tactics focused on increasing prosecutions, expanding the definition of gang membership, and lengthening prison sentences will likely strengthen, not reduce, gang affiliations by isolating children and teenagers with antisocial peers and by removing them from healthier social environments and opportunities to participate in more positive outlets."

National statistics on youth gang activity back this up. Despite the increase in "anti-gang" legislation at the state and federal level over the past decade, the prevalence rates of youth gang activity remain significantly elevated, compared with recorded lows in the early 2000s, according to statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice 2008 National Youth Gang Survey.

In 2008, an estimated 32.4% of all cities, suburban areas, towns, and rural counties experienced gang problems, which is a 15% increase from 2002. Similarly, the approximate number of gangs and gang members estimated to be active in the United States increased by 28% and 6%, respectively, from 2002 to 2008.

Furthermore, more than one-quarter of the nation's public school students attend schools where gangs are present, according to the results of a national teen survey conducted by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University in New York (CLINICAL PSYCHIATRY NEWS, September 2010, p. 1). The survey shows that gang activity is an important marker of drug activity. Nearly 60% of teens in schools with gangs – almost twice as many as in schools without gang activity – reported that drugs were used, kept, or sold on school grounds.

The increasing youth gang presence has coincided with an increase in gang-related criminal activity. According to Justice Department statistics, state, local, and federal law enforcement in

2004-2008 reported a 13% increase in gang activity.

In a recently published study investigating the psychological processes associated with gang membership, investigators observed that core and peripheral gang members committed more minor and violent offenses, were more antiauthority, and were more delinquent than were non-gang members overall (Aggr. Behav. 2010 Aug. 17 [doi:10.1002/ab.20360]).

Additionally, the findings of several studies have demonstrated that gang members are responsible for a large proportion of all violent offenses committed during the adolescent years, although this is difficult to confirm because of the "widespread limitations of officially recorded data on gang crime," according to the U.S. Department of Justice National Gang Center.

Without question, the best interest of the public would be served by preventing youth gang involvement, but doing so cannot be achieved through

the juvenile justice system alone, according to Robert D. Macy, Ph.D., executive director of the Boston Children's Foundation and founder of the Boston Center for Trauma Psychology.

"Violent behaviors and gang involvement are maladaptive coping and survival strategies. Reducing violence and gang involvement, thus, cannot be achieved only through arrest and incarceration as primary treatments," he said. Rather, reducing the attachment to violence as a survival strategy requires "an evidence-based continuum of identification, assessment, and multidisciplinary treatment and psychoeducational programs for youth, youth offenders, and their caregivers."

Critical to these efforts is an acceptance of the growing body of research that explains how traumatic life experiences alter brain development, especially in children, and an understanding of "the way in which the environment, experience, the brain and body, and the social context interact and affect each other," Dr. Macy said. "These understandings, in turn, allow us to develop even more effective interventions to mediate the effects of trauma and thus, prevent violence among young people."

To be effective, interventions for youth who are involved in gang activity "must address integrated intervention and prevention protocols at multiple levels," Dr. Macy said. "We must use these multidisciplinary approaches and coordinate and intervene in family systems, with medical providers, the judiciary, the educators in public schools, public housing authorities, and others."

An example of a multidisciplinary, in-

tegrated approach to reducing youth gang involvement and violence is the Youth & Police Initiative (YPI) developed by the North American Family Institute (NAFI) in which groups of community law enforcement agents are paired with at-risk teens from high-crime neighborhoods to discuss drug use, violence, gang activity, and youth-police interactions.

Through structured presentations, group learning, and problem-solving activities, the teens and the police officers explore their values and their attitudes about race, violence, respect, and law enforcement. Role-playing, de-escalation techniques, effective communication strategies, and team-building exercises are incorporated into the curriculum and aid in the development of new initiatives to enhance community policing.

Each training ends with a celebration attended by the teens and the police officers, as well as family members, political and religious leaders, and members of the community. Teen participants are offered follow-up leader-

ship training by NAFI.

To date, the YPI initiative has been implemented in Boston, Baltimore, and White Plains and Yonkers, N.Y.,

and has been associated with significant increases in police officers' understanding of adolescent development and knowledge of urban socialization issues. The initiative also has improved the use of effective communication strategies between at-risk teens and police officers, according to Frank Straub, Ph.D., former commissioner of the White Plains Department of Public Safety, who credits that city's decrease in gang-related crime to the success of the program.

When it comes to the allocation of "gang-prevention dollars," the most judicious spending should focus on "investments in proven programs that equip young people with life skills and alternative opportunities for engagement," Mr. Ogletree stated in his testimony. "Additionally, programs and policies that treat problems related to conditions of poverty, educational failure, and isolation – all of which make gang membership attractive to youths living in communities of extreme disadvantage – have demonstrated their effectiveness and efficiency." The most promising programs, he noted, are those that begin in preschool and are sustained over time through middle school and high school; provide a web of support by including families, schools, and communities; and focus on individual, social, and cultural development. ■

By Diana Mahoney. Share your thoughts and suggestions at cpnews@elsevier.com.

The Youth & Police Initiative developed by the North American Family Institute is an example of a multidisciplinary approach aimed at reducing gang involvement and violence.