

RESPONDING TO GANGS

This essay begins with a simple premise: if we don't understand our problems we aren't going to be able to solve them. This premise applies to challenges in a variety of fields: medicine, social services, education and juvenile justice. Criminal justice is replete with examples of well-intentioned efforts to curb gang crime and victimization that are based on incomplete or false understanding of the problem. Such examples include interventions that lack careful attention to implementation, are built on stereotypes or partial problem descriptions or lack sufficient "dose size" to make an impact. Oftentimes interventions are guided by media stereotypes rather than scientific approaches.



Perhaps the most important issue in addressing gangs is the need for more high quality evaluations. Many high-profile, high-cost interventions have not been adequately evaluated. For example, we do not have a good sense of whether police crackdowns on gangs produce crime reductions, nor do we fully understand the impact of gang truces on violence and gang recruitment. Civil gang injunctions have been used extensively in California. Despite their popularity and expense, not enough is known about their short and long term impacts. The programming and research literature on prison gangs and re-entry efforts also has large gaps, gaps large enough that we cannot recommend evidence-based alternatives.

Despite these shortcomings, a solid body of research built over the past two decades provides some direction. First, it is imperative to have clear definitions of problems and interventions. Some efforts to curb the deleterious effects of gangs target individual gang members while others target gangs themselves. The

evidence (Klein and Maxson, 2006; Curry, Decker and Pyrooz, 2014) supports targeting individuals rather than gangs. Interventions that target gangs often give them recognition and resources that strengthen their organizational structure as well as their position in the community. Another key element is the match between the level of criminal involvement and the depth of an intervention. It is important to distinguish individuals who are at broad risk for gang involvement from those who are actively and regularly engaged in serious gang crime.

Clearly, a different response to each individual is necessary. On the response side, the gang programming and evaluation literature identifies primary prevention as an appropriate response to the general population of youth and families who live in areas of high risk for gang involvement. Primary prevention is a less expensive and less invasive "dose" than targeted (also known as secondary) prevention. Targeted prevention is designed to provide a higher level of "dose" to children and adolescents at high risk for gang involvement, perhaps because of the neighborhood they live in or the involvement of other family members in gang activity. Interventions such as job training or counseling are best used with individuals who are gang members but not highly involved in the gang or gang crime. This is a more intrusive intervention, with higher costs than either form of prevention. Suppression - arrest, prosecution, imprisonment - is reserved for those most involved in crime, particularly long-term gang members or individuals who serve as leaders of gangs.

A key to this model known as the Comprehensive Strategy (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2010), depicted in the Gang Response Pyramid, is the match between the level of criminal involvement and depth of the response. Clearly, primary prevention would have no impact on serious and chronic gang members, and conversely it would be a waste of resources with potentially negative consequences to use suppression against individuals at risk for gang membership. Finding the right match can be enhanced by assessing individuals for the risk factors associated with gang membership. While there is some debate about the nature of such risk factors (see Howell & Egley, 2005; Klein & Maxson, 2006), there is clear agreement that the more risk factors an individual has, the earlier they begin, the more intensely they are held and the extent to which they take primacy over other risk factors, the more impact they have.

Working with youth in Los Angeles, Karen Hennigan and her colleagues (2015) identified five domains of importance for gang risk factors: 1) Personal factors which include antisocial tendencies, impulsive risk-taking and guilt neutralization; 2) Family factors, including parental monitoring and family gang influence; 3) Peer factors, including friends' negative influence and friends delinquency; 4) Accumulated critical life events, including critical life events (death of a parent or friend) in the last six months; and 5) Crime involvement factors, including high scores on self-reported delinquency scales.

Unfortunately, this set of risk factors does not distinguish very well between risk for gang involvement and risk for involvement in delinquency. While there is a growing body of work on risk factors, considerably less is known about resiliency. As Malcolm Klein (1996) has pointed out, even in the neighborhoods where gang membership is the highest, it is rare to find more than half of youth involved in gangs. While we do not know what keeps these youth out of gangs, it should be a high priority to find out.

A growing body of research has examined the process of disengaging from gangs (Decker, Pyrooz and Moule, 2014; Carson, Peterson & Esbensen 2014).

Perhaps most importantly, this research finds that a large number of individuals do leave their gangs, often without negative consequences. The exit process is helped along most often by family and maturational reform. It is important for agencies, police, and friends and relatives to recognize and not impede the exit process from gangs.

The state of research and practice in responding to gangs has not advanced to the point where it is possible to identify "best practices" based on advanced research designs such as randomized control trials (see Colorado Blueprints for example). There are many resources available, including a guidebook on prevention, *Changing Course*, by the Centers for Disease Control (2013) and the National Institute of Justice as well as a *Strategies to Prevent Gang Crime* published by the Office of Community Oriented Policing (Decker, 2008). That said, the state of knowledge does support the following generalizations. First, no single response to

gangs is likely to be successful, because the problem of gangs, gang members and gang behavior is complex and requires multiple responses. Second, the dose must match the magnitude of the problem. That is to say, where the gang problem is deeply entrenched in cities like Chicago and Los Angeles multi-faceted, long-term strategies must be mounted. In other cities where the gang problem is emergent, a lower level of intervention may be necessary. Third, the response must be tailored to the individual level of gang involvement. Serious and chronic gang members who engage in high levels of violent crime will require the suppression activities of the criminal justice system. Youth who live in neighborhoods plagued by gang violence who have not joined gangs will need substantial prevention and perhaps intervention services. Fourth, every intervention needs a well-defined problem statement, a carefully articulated intervention and must be evaluated with a rigorous research design. Finally, while more complex to design and implement, comprehensive interventions are most likely to produce positive outcomes. Such interventions must include law enforcement, community, education, juvenile justice, NGO and private sector involvement.

The gang problem did not emerge overnight; neither will it be solved with short-term or quick fix responses. Communities must adopt long-term strategies to respond to the multiple layers of gang problems. But the key will be a successful diagnosis of the problem.

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