

Youth Gang Prevention Efforts Are Taking Hold © 1998

By [Michelle Gaseau](#), Managing Editor-Corrections Connection

Recent research has confirmed what many in the criminal justice and law enforcement community long believed: Gang membership among youth is directly connected to crime and the severity of crimes correlate directly to the length of gang membership. The research is also a call to action.

Recent studies, such as the National Institute of Justice's "Comparing the Criminal Behavior of Youth Gangs and At-Risk Youths" by **C. Ronald Huff** (available at www.ncjrs.org) have outlined parameters for successful gang prevention programs. One strategy suggests agencies reach out to gang members or at-risk youth early on.

Youth gang experts say that the success of prevention programs also relates to an understanding of why youth join gangs in the first place. "We get the impression that gangs are recruiting. There is as much push (from youth) as there is pull (from gangs.) Sometimes recruitment is done for kids who have access to a weapon or a vehicle. More often the kids are striving for acceptance," said **John Moore**, executive director of the National Youth Gang Center.

Agencies have employed various methods to better understand gang involvement in their community from mapping gang crimes and the matching services to critical neighborhoods to providing job training to at risk youth. Being familiar with the factors that prompt youth gang activity is important to making such prevention programs work.

Gang Members Are Needy

Many times the youth that join gangs do so simply for acceptance or protection. Moore said that often kids who join the gangs say they do so because they thought they would get hurt. Other characteristics also put a youth at risk for gang membership.

According to research by **Finn-Aage Esbensen** and **D. Wayne Osgood** published last year by NIJ, the differences that stand out between a comparison of school-age gang members and non gang members include:

- Gang members reported living in single parent homes more frequently than non gang members, and
- Gang members' mothers and fathers or both were more likely not to have finished high school.

Moore said that educators, law enforcement officers, community service providers, community leaders as well as officials in the criminal justice system

need to be able to recognize these factors so they can target the most needy youth.

"We're dealing with the factors that make them susceptible -- they key off of things like neighborhood. Because these factors reoccur in various studies you can see that they are worth looking at," said Moore. "If the kid is in a family where only one parent is present but one adult is a non parent, his chances of joining a gang are three times as great."

Targeting Strategies

James Howell, adjunct researcher with the National Youth Gang Center said agencies would have better results if they reach youth prior to gang involvement. In some areas of the country, however, youth are predestined to be gang members. "It's easier to reach them before they get involved because of the bonding to gangs that occurs. That bonding process is more pronounced in chronic gang cities such as Chicago and Los Angeles. In the Hispanic barrios where there are intergenerational linkages, they practically grow up in them," Howell said.

In other communities Black, White and Asian youth are joining gangs for other reasons and in those areas prevention is the most promising.

In juvenile facilities, detecting and turning around at-risk youth may be even more of a challenge. Often youth offenders enter a detention facility looking for a role model. Those who have been in a gang will be looking to fill a void. "It is not what detention facilities are meant to do, but they can refer this kid to services that he may need," Moore said. The identification process is also important to target youth for prevention. "A kid who is a first time offender or a kid involved in status offenses are good candidates for prevention they are committing acts but they are a lower level of seriousness," he added

Cutting Loose

According to Huff's research, many young people believe they will be physically punished if they refuse an offer to join a gang, but in the four cities he studied, youths overwhelmingly said that nothing happened to those who refused to join a gang. In instances where youth did sustain physical harm, the injuries were seldom serious, the report said.

Howell agrees with the research. "It's easier to get out and easier to say no that commonly believed. Some gangs have jumping out ceremonies that are very violent and in some cases kids are beaten out just as they are beaten in. But those are very rare," he said.

Huff also suggests that when targeting the youth for prevention programs, agencies should keep in mind two opportune times for intervention. The best times to target them are when youth are in the "wannabe" stage prior to joining a gang and at the time of the first arrest, which is usually a property crime. Most kids interviewed for Huff's study were arrested for the first time at age 14, which shows how little time agencies have to reach these youth.

"If we don't intervene successfully at that point, there is a significant probability that they will continue to be involved with the gang and that their offense pattern will become increasingly serious and increasingly likely to include drug sales, more serious property offenses, and serious crimes against persons," Huff said.

Huff recommends such efforts as police/prosecutorial-based diversion programs and probation-based intervention programs targeting this population of offenders.

One specific strategy that some probation officers in Columbus, Ohio have used, Huff said, is a "probation godfather" approach. The probation officer requires an offender to take a leave of absence from the gang, which allows service providers to work with the offender without being in direct competition with the gang's influence. Parole officers could use the same strategy.

Successful Programs and Strategies

Several cities and organizations across the country have created gang prevention programs that are showing promising results. Many of these efforts have been highlighted by the likes of the office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and assisted by agencies such as the Office of Justice Programs' Executive Office for Weed and Seed. The following is a sampling of the successes.

San Jose, Calif.:

In 1990, the mayor of San Jose created an ad hoc committee to look at gang problems in the city following a period of denial of gang problems, according to **Richard de la Rosa** of the mayor's office. The recommendations from that committee included creating policy and targeting at-risk youth in the city. One aspect of the gang prevention focus is working individually with each community to let residents choose the best way to use resources. De la Rosa said the mayor's office holds community meetings, outlines potential programs that can be offered to at risk youth and then allows the residents to vote on which programs should get the money in their neighborhoods. The mayor has been able to spend \$1.5 million each year on youth programs. Those programs include a zero tolerance for weapons program in the schools. At risk juveniles identified by this program are mandated to attend special classes geared to their needs. As a result, the program has had an 89 percent success rate with recidivism

Houston, Tex.:

The Mayor's Anti-Gang Office in Houston has had success with its programs for at risk youth and adult gang members. A specially created probation program matches designated probation officers with caseloads devoted only to gang affiliated offenders. Anytime an offender who is confirmed to be a gang member receives a suspended sentence from a Harris County District Court or county court, judges place them on a special caseload. The court places more stringent conditions of probation on these offenders. These conditions can include no contact with other gang members, which helps break up the ability for the gang to socialize and commit crimes. It also gives the offender an excuse to pull away from the gang lifestyle, said **Kim Ogg**, director of the mayor's anti-gang office. Also curfews can be placed on juveniles and adults of 8 to 10 p.m., 365 days a year. And, probation officers accompanied by police may be allowed to visit the probationer unannounced at the probationer's home. The police department and gang probation officers meet weekly to discuss offenders and issues that arise. "We also have a treatment program. It's important for gang offenders to experience group therapy," said Ogg. She said the program give probation officers more "teeth" by associating with the police and the police learn more about the offenders, who are more willing to share information with probation than the police. As a result of this program and others, the city has seen a 26 percent reduction in gang crime between 1995 and 1997. For more information you may email Ogg at: Kogg@myr.ci.houston.tx.us

King County, Wash.:

King County, Wash., Jail officials have had a myriad of juvenile issues to deal with as a result of recent legislation that places serious juvenile offenders in the adult population. One of those issues is separating youth gang members. According to **Gabe Morales**, classification program specialist, jail officials meet regularly with community leaders, police officials, state corrections officials, and others to hammer out ways to address the gang problems, work on prevention programs, and discuss successful methods. "We found the gangs have a better network than we do," Morales said. Inside the jail, officers keep a list of gang enemies so that they can be observed and do have some youths they will keep separate from others. Generally, the jail does not separate youth offenders but rather enforces a "get along" philosophy. "Behavior is a big issue in our point system. We do have some areas of the jail for certain age groups," Morales said. Corrections and law enforcement personnel also have the use of a gang database that keeps information about confirmed gang members, their signs, graffiti etc. "We can validate involvement, signs, graffiti, and obtain referrals from other law enforcement agencies. We're trying to standardize it statewide," he added. One important aspect of the system that makes it comply with privacy laws is that gang members are purged from the system if they have no illegal activity for five years. Gabe.Morales@metrokc.gov