

Gang Prevention Research and Strategies



Gang Prevention: An Overview of Research and Programs

Highlights

This bulletin presents research on why youth join gangs and how a community can build gang prevention and intervention services. The author summarizes recent literature on gang formation and identifies promising and effective programs for gang prevention. The following are some key findings:

- Youth join gangs for protection, enjoyment, respect, money, or because a friend is in a gang.
- Youth are at higher risk of joining a gang if they engage in delinquent behaviors, are aggressive or violent, experience multiple caretaker transitions, have many problems at school, associate with other gang-involved youth, or live in communities where they feel unsafe and where many youth are in trouble.
- To prevent youth from joining gangs, communities must strengthen families and schools, improve community supervision, train teachers and parents to manage disruptive youth, and teach students interpersonal skills.

Guides for assessing community gang problems and implementing intervention and prevention strategies, part of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Comprehensive Gang Model, are available on the National Gang Center Web site (www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Publications).

Gang Prevention: An Overview of Research and Programs

Introduction

Since the mid-20th century, gang violence in this country has become widespread—all 50 states and the District of Columbia report gang problems, and reports have increased for 5 of the past 7 years. Despite the steady growth in the number and size of gangs across the United States and the criminal behavior and violence they spawn, little is known about the dynamics that drive gangs and how to best combat their growth. For instance, no consensus exists on how gangs form, and few gang prevention programs have been rigorously evaluated. This bulletin presents a compilation of current research on gangs, including data on the state of gang problems in the United States today, why youth join gangs, the risk factors and attractions that increase youth's propensity to join gangs, and how gangs form. The author examines how community members can begin to assess their gang problems and provide necessary enhancements to prevention and intervention activities. The bulletin also describes a number of effective and promising programs that may help prevent youth delinquency and gang violence.

Background

Trends in Gang Activity

Local youth gang problems in the United States increased during the 25-year period leading up to the mid-1990s (W.B. Miller, 2001). Whereas in the 1970s, only 19 states reported youth gang problems, before the turn of the 21st century, all 50 states and the District of Columbia had acknowledged gang activity. Gang problems reported by law enforcement in the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS)¹ peaked in the mid-1990s, followed by a precipitous decline (Egley, Howell, and Major, 2004). An overall 15-percent increase in youth gang problems reported in the NYGS

from 2002 to 2008 followed this decline, and all segments of the U.S. population reported increases in gang problems: suburban counties (22 percent), rural counties (16 percent), smaller cities (15 percent), and larger cities (13 percent) (Egley, Howell, and Moore, 2010). Only time will show whether the recent increase in gang activity is a lasting trend.

Students report a similar trend in gang activity in schools. In the mid-1990s, 28 percent of a national sample of students reported that gangs were present in their schools (Chandler et al., 1998). This statistic dropped to 17 percent in 1999 and then began to increase to 23 percent in 2007, approaching the level reported a decade earlier (Dinkes et al., 2009).

How Many Youth Join Gangs?

According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (a nationally representative sample of 9,000 adolescents), 8 percent of the youth surveyed had belonged to a gang at some point between the ages of 12 and 17 (Snyder and Sickmund, 2006). A survey of nearly 6,000 eighth-graders conducted in 11 cities with known gang problems found that 9 percent were currently gang members and 17 percent said they had belonged to a gang at some point in their lives (Esbensen and Deschenes, 1998; Esbensen et al., 2010). However, this percentage varied from 4 to 15 percent depending on location (see table 1). In a subsequent 15-city sample of adolescents (about 13 years old), almost 8 percent were gang members (Esbensen et al., 2008). Gang membership is even greater among representative samples of youth in high-risk areas of large cities, according to studies in Seattle, WA (15 percent); Denver, CO (17 percent); Pittsburgh, PA (24 percent); and Rochester, NY (32 percent) (Hill et al., 1999; Huizinga and Lovegrove, 2009; Lahey et al., 1999; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003).

Table 1. Gang Membership by Study Location

Location	Percentage of Youth Who Are Gang Members
Kansas City, MO	10.1
Las Cruces, NM	11.0
Milwaukee, WI	15.4
Omaha, NE	11.4
Orlando, FL	9.6
Philadelphia, PA	7.7
Phoenix, AZ	12.6
Pocatello, ID	5.6
Providence, RI	6.0
Torrance, CA	6.3
Will County, IL	3.8
Overall	9.1

Source: Esbensen et al., 2010, table 5.1. Used with permission.

Demographic Characteristics of Gang Members

The demographic characteristics of gang members vary by geographic location—mainly reflecting the demographic makeup of the youth population (Esbensen and Lynskey, 2001).

Race

According to the 2008 NYGS, half (50 percent) of all gang members are Hispanic/Latino, 32 percent are African American/black, and 11 percent are Caucasian/white (National Gang Center, 2010). Studies where youth self-report gang membership show more equal proportions of racial/ethnic groups in samples. For example, in a 15-city sample, racial and ethnic proportions of youth reporting gang membership were quite similar for whites (7.3 percent), blacks (8.3 percent), and Hispanics (9.0 percent), but larger (12.9 percent) for multiracial groups (Esbensen et al., 2008).

Gender

In the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, the male-to-female ratio of gang members was approximately 2 to 1 (11 percent of males versus 6 percent of females) (Snyder and Sickmund, 2006). But a more recent 15-city sample that used self-reports classified 8.8 percent of boys and 7.8 percent of girls as current gang members (Esbensen et al., 2008).

Starter Gangs and Gang Formation Theories

This bulletin examines how youth move from delinquency to joining gangs and how gangs form. Youth make a conscious choice to join a gang during adolescence, and multiple personal and environmental factors influence this choice.

During adolescence, peer groups and social networks form, each of which can positively or negatively influence a youth's life. Rather than immediately joining serious, violent gangs, some youth become involved in less delinquent groups, called "starter gangs."

Children and adolescents form starter gangs to introduce themselves to gang culture (i.e., distinctive attitudes, jargon, rituals, and symbols). In some areas, established gangs sometimes create cliques or sets composed of younger youth called "wannabes," "juniors," "pee wees," and the like (Vigil, 1993). Where members of starter gangs may engage in minor delinquent behaviors, gang members may be involved in serious and violent offenses.

Researchers sometimes find it difficult to distinguish "gangs in embryo" from ordinary small groups of delinquents. A complicating factor is that very young gangs are extremely unstable. Adolescence is a time of changing peer relations and fleeting allegiances to both friends (Warr, 2002) and gangs (Curry, Decker, and Egley, 2002; Valdez, 2007).

Shifting membership and an intermittent existence characterize many gangs, especially those with younger members. Because involvement in a variety of peer groups is common during adolescence, in many situations, gangs should be viewed as social networks rather than as bounded "organizations" (Fleisher, 2006; Papachristos, 2006). Youth drift in and out of these groups, and even members may be unable to name all current members (Fleisher, 1998). In a recent survey of middle school students in nine cities, 25 percent of all gangs the students identified had been in existence for less than 1 year, and only 10 percent were said to have existed for 11 years or more (Esbensen et al., 2008).

The dynamics of gang formation are complex, and researchers and practitioners have studied them from psychological, sociological, and criminological perspectives (Thrasher, 2000; Redl, 1945; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Davis, 1993; Esbensen, Huizinga, and Weiher, 1993; Cureton, 1999; Lahey et al., 1999; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003; Tita and Ridgeway, 2007; Wood and Alleyne, 2010; Vigil, 1993). A very popular assumption is that they



In many large cities around the United States, serious gangs have been established for years. In these circumstances, one might anticipate and yet find it difficult to prevent a youth from joining a gang. For instance, the Chicano gangs in the southwestern United States that formed in the early 1900s (Vigil, 1993) were populated by second-generation, “marginalized” children of extremely poor, immigrant Mexican American families who found it difficult to adjust socially and culturally to the American way of life (Vigil, 2008). Youth naturally joined the gangs affiliated with their barrios (i.e., neighborhoods). After more than a half-century of continuous presence in some barrios, the Chicano gangs of Los Angeles have become institutionalized.

Attractions to Gangs

Factors that contribute to a youth’s decision to join a gang fall into two categories: attractions and risk factors (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). This section discusses attractions to gangs.

A common public perception is that most youth are coerced into joining a gang (Howell, 2007). Quite to the contrary, most youth who join want to belong to a gang. Gangs are often at the center of appealing social action—parties, hanging out, music, drugs, and opportunities to socialize with members of the opposite sex. The gang may be appealing because it meets a youth’s social needs.

Youth reported the following reasons for joining a gang, in the order of descending importance (Esbensen, Deschenes, and Winfree, 1999):

- For protection.
- For fun.
- For respect.
- For money.
- Because a friend was in the gang.

These are the typical gang attractions that youth acknowledge. Of these reasons, youth most commonly join gangs for the safety they believe the gang provides (Decker and Curry, 2000; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Peterson, Taylor, and Esbensen, 2004; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003). Another important influence is family members (especially siblings or cousins) who already are part of the gang (Curry, Decker, and Egle, 2002; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003), especially for Mexican American youth (Valdez, 2007). Youth also occasionally cite economic reasons, such as selling drugs or making money, for joining a gang (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996).

grow out of conflicts among groups of young adolescents (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Cohen and Short, 1958) and conflicts with the law-abiding community (Short and Strodbeck, 1974). Where gangs are not established, they may form under extreme community conditions—particularly when youth are alienated from key socializing institutions, especially families and schools.

A recent French study (Debarbieux and Baya, 2008) suggests that some gangs emerge from “difficult schools” that contain a small group of highly rebellious pupils. This group of students (4 to 5 percent of the student population) was responsible for most of the disorder and violence in 16 schools that were studied. In the most difficult schools, as many as 11 percent of all students were members of these gangs.

In this theory, adolescents form gangs when they are excluded from school for disciplinary reasons because school is a place that provides support, education, and social networks for youth. This exclusion may help solidify the group and lead toward gang formation. To become a law-violating gang, adolescents involved must commit to a criminal orientation (or willingness to use violence) (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). Secondarily, the group must take on a criminal orientation as “a gang” that is set apart from other groups in the community (Klein, 1995). This group may be further solidified by conflict with school authorities and the police.

When gangs are already established, researchers observe that the gang-joining process is similar to the manner in which most people would go about joining an organization. A youth typically begins hanging out with gang members at age 12 or 13 (even younger in some instances) and joins the gang between ages 13 and 15. This process typically takes 6 months to a year or two from the time of initial association (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Huff, 1996, 1998).

Ethnicity

In many large cities, the attraction of gangs is in part a byproduct of population migration (Adamson, 2000; Howell and Moore, 2010; Vigil, 2002, 2008). Diego Vigil suggests that this may be a result of the difficulties immigrant youth may experience in dealing with life in a new culture, combined with inadequate parenting and schooling. The language, cultural, and economic barriers they face “[leave] them with few options or resources to better their lives. Often, they seek a place where they are not marginalized—and find it in the streets” (Vigil, 2002, p. 7). Gang life also meets these youth’s need for family and community by filling the void that inadequate family care and schooling leave.

Popular Culture

Apart from personal reasons for joining a gang, media presentations make gangs seem very appealing (Miller, 1992). The “hip” lifestyle and sensational portrayals of gangs and their members have a significant influence, particularly on more susceptible youth, for reasons that Walter B. Miller (2001, p. 46) aptly explains:

In the 1950’s, the musical drama *West Side Story* portrayed gang life as seen through the eyes of adult middle-class writers and presented themes of honor, romantic love, and mild rebellion consistent with the values and perspectives of these writers. In the 1990’s, the substance of gang life was communicated to national audiences through a new medium known as gangsta rap. For the first time, this lifestyle was portrayed by youthful insiders, not adult outsiders. The character and values of gang life described by the rappers differed radically from the images of *West Side Story*. Language was rough and insistently obscene; women were prostitutes (“bitches,” “ho’s,” and “sluts”) to be used, beaten, and thrown away; and extreme violence and cruelty, the gang lifestyle, and craziness or insanity were glorified. Among the rappers’ targets of hatred, scorn, and murder threats were police, especially black police (referred to as “house slaves” and “field hands”); other races and ethnic groups; society as a whole; and members of rival gangs . . . Gangsta rap strengthened the desire of youth to become part of a gang subculture that was portrayed by the rappers as a glamorous and rewarding lifestyle.

Increased media popularization of gang culture has led to the point that now, “most young people in America recognize the look, the walk, and the talk of gang members. Many mimic it in part or in whole. Many try it out as a personal style. Play groups, break-dancing groups, taggers (i.e., graffiti artists), and school peer groups

experiment with gang life” (Klein, 2002, p. 246). The diffusion of street gang culture in modern-day movies, music, and clothing merchandizing has served to intertwine gang culture with the general youth subculture.

Researchers have shown how youth experiment with gang life in several studies. In a St. Louis, MO, study of middle school students, more than half of the surveyed youth who had never been in a gang said that they had engaged in at least one kind of gang involvement (Curry, Decker, and Egley, 2002). More than one-third of the youth who had not been in gangs had gang members as friends, nearly one-third had worn gang colors, nearly one-quarter had hung out with gang members, and one-fifth had flashed gang signs. In a study of Florida middle school students (Eitle, Gunkel, and Gundy, 2004), only 5 percent of the sample of nearly 10,000 students reported having joined a gang, but half of the youth who had not joined had engaged in 1 or more behaviors that suggested “gang orientations” (Eitle, Gunkel, and Gundy, 2004, p. 101)—they had flashed gang signs, worn gang colors on purpose, drunk alcohol or gotten high with gang members, or hung out with gang members.

Friendships and Romantic Relationships

Many female adolescents are attracted to gangs because their friends or boyfriends have joined. One book looked at girls in San Antonio, TX, who hung out with male gang members (Valdez, 2007). Although they were not recognized as gang members, these girls were “distinctly integrated” into the male gangs (Valdez, 2007, p. 87). They began hanging out with the gang in childhood, just before age 12, and at the time of the study, 40 percent reported having a boyfriend in a gang and 80 percent said they had a good friend in a male gang. Gang associations led to the girls’ involvement in delinquent and criminal activities, including holding drugs (55 percent), selling drugs





(31 percent), and holding weapons (27 percent) (Valdez, 2007). Hence, program development and service delivery should not ignore gang associates.

Risk Factors for Joining Gangs

This section examines risk factors—forces that push youth toward gangs or increase the likelihood that affected youth will join a gang.² Researchers cannot predict whether a particular individual will join a gang. Rather, research shows that individuals who possess certain risk factors have an elevated chance of joining a gang.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP's) Strategic Planning Tool (www.nationalgangcenter.gov/SPT) includes a list of risk factors that predict juvenile delinquency and gang membership because virtually all youth who join a gang previously were involved in delinquent acts (Hill et al., 1999; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003). To compile this list, the National Gang Center (NGC) analyzed a number of studies of children and adolescents who were surveyed over several years. The studies examined risk factors for serious and violent delinquency or gang involvement (Loeber and Farrington, 1998, 2001; Howell and Egley, 2005). The risk factors discussed in the Strategic Planning Tool also draw heavily on the two more comprehensive reviews on this topic (Loeber and Farrington, 1998, 2001).³

The following discussion of risk factors for gang involvement summarizes longitudinal research shown in the OJJDP Strategic Planning Tool. Other kinds of studies, particularly ethnographic research that provides insights into how particular risk factors may operate, supplement this discussion. The discussion organizes these risk factors into five domains: individual, family, school, peer group, and community, based on a systematic literature review (Howell and Egley, 2005).

Individual Risk Factors

A number of personal risk factors make children more likely to join gangs.

Antisocial behavior. Children whose antisocial behavior consistently worsens are most likely to join gangs. These behaviors include early involvement in delinquency, aggression, violence (without a weapon), alcohol or drug use, early dating, and precocious sexual activity (Craig et al., 2002; Lahey et al., 1999; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003). In adolescence, other forms of violence emerge—such as attacking someone with a weapon—that may also predict joining a gang (Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003).

Alcohol and drug use. Alcohol and drug use also predict joining a gang (Huizinga and Lovegrove, 2009). These two early problem behaviors increase the likelihood of later gang involvement, particularly when alcohol or drug use is extensive and involves marijuana (Hill et al., 1999; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003).

Mental health problems. Although little research has been done on the subject, evidence suggests that certain mental health problems in young people increase their risk of joining a gang. These problems include conduct disorders, externalizing behaviors, hyperactivity, and depression (Howell and Egley, 2005). Davis and Flannery (2001) noted that gang members in juvenile corrections facilities “often are admitted with histories of physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, psychiatric disturbances, post-traumatic stress disorder, cognitive deficits, poor self-esteem, and other problems” (Davis and Flannery, 2001, p. 37).

Victimization. Children who are victims of abuse or neglect are more likely to join gangs (Fleisher, 1998; J.A. Miller, 2001; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003). Forms of violent victimization outside the home, such as assaults, also increase youth's risk of joining a gang (Peterson, Taylor, and Esbensen, 2004; Taylor, 2008; Taylor et al., 2007, 2008).

Negative life events. Youth—particularly boys—who experience negative life events also are more likely to join gangs (Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003). These events

include failing a course at school, being suspended from school, breaking up with a boyfriend/girlfriend, having a fight or problem with a friend, and the death of someone close.

Family Risk Factors

From birth, parents are critical in promoting child development (Loeber and Farrington, 2001). Early on, weaknesses in family structure (e.g., a single-parent household, multiple family transitions, or caretaker changes), poverty, and general financial stress are potent risk factors. These adversities diminish effective parental supervision and control and disturb the development of strong family bonds (Howell and Egley, 2005). Other factors compromise parents' capacities to encourage their children's growth and development, including lack of education, attitudes that condone violence inside and outside the home, and child abuse or neglect (Howell and Egley, 2005). If family members are involved in gangs or criminal behavior, this can lead youth to join gangs and alienate them from a healthy family life (Moore, 1991; Vigil, 1988).

School Risk Factors

Most studies that examine school-related risk factors for juvenile delinquency and gang membership have only examined a student's level of academic achievement—which is a strong predictor for gang membership. For example, poor school performance on math tests predicts male gang membership (Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003). However, studies of school experiences now include measures of “school climate” (Gottfredson et al., 2005) and student “connectedness” to schools (Resnick, Ireland, and Borowsky, 2004). Future gang members perform poorly in elementary school and generally have a low degree of commitment to and involvement in school (Hill et al., 1999; Le Blanc and Lanctot, 1998) and weak attachment to teachers (Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003).

A French study (discussed on p. 4) identified current or future gang members among a small subgroup of students “who consider that everything is wrong with school and that teachers are awful, who commit aggression more

often than others, who are punished repeatedly and more frequently than the others, and who have developed a feeling of hatred and rejection of everything that represents order” (Debarbieux and Baya, 2008, p. 214). These students most often attended the most difficult schools—schools characterized by greater levels of student victimization, self-reported violence, poor student-teacher relations, and systems of punishment that pupils did not accept well (Debarbieux and Baya, 2008, p. 212). Other research suggests that poorly functioning schools with high levels of student and teacher victimization, large student-teacher ratios, poor academic quality, poor school climates, and high rates of social sanctions (e.g., suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to juvenile court) hold a greater percentage of students who form and join gangs (Bernburg, Krohn, and Rivera, 2006; Debarbieux and Baya, 2008; Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 2001; Morrison and Skiba, 2001; Thornberry, Lizotte, et al., 2003; Weisel and Howell, 2007). For example, nearly 8 of 10 gang-involved youth referred to juvenile court in Durham, NC, had been suspended, truant, expelled, or otherwise disconnected from school (Weisel and Howell, 2007).

In addition, negative conditions in difficult schools can increase future delinquency (Hemphill et al., 2006; Huizinga and Henry, 2008; Kaplan and Damphouse, 1997), which also increases gang membership (Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Hill et al., 1999; Thornberry, Lizotte, et al., 2003).

Feeling unsafe at school may also predict gang involvement (Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 2001; Vigil, 1993). Students who feel vulnerable at school may seek protection in the gang.

Peer Group Risk Factors

One of the strongest risk factors for gang membership is associating with peers who engage in delinquency (Thornberry, Lizotte, et al., 2003). Aggressive and antisocial youth begin to affiliate with one another in childhood, and this pattern of aggressive friendships continues through adolescence (Kupersmidt, Coie, and Howell, 2003; Warr,

2002). Association with aggressive peers during childhood and early adolescence is a strong predictor of joining a gang (Craig et al., 2002; Lahey et al., 1999), as is the experience of having been rejected by peers (Huizinga and Lovegrove, 2009).

Community Risk Factors

As children grow older and venture out from their families, community conditions become a greater influence. Gangs tend to cluster in high-crime and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods (Pyrooz, Fox, and Decker, 2010; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003; Valdez, 2007; Vigil, 1988). When gangs cluster in these neighborhoods, a number of negative conditions may arise, including (Howell and Egley, 2005):

- A greater level of criminal activity.
- A large number of neighborhood youth involved in illegal behaviors.
- Widespread availability and use of firearms and drugs.
- A small level of neighborhood attachment (i.e., positive feelings of belonging and being valued).

Unfortunately, in most distressed neighborhoods, schools, churches, and other community agencies and institutions do not provide adequate gang prevention and intervention services (Thrasher, 2000). In the worst conditions, “collective efficacy”⁴ may be lacking (Morenoff, Sampson, and Raudenbush, 2001).

Risk Factors: A Summary

Children who are on a trajectory of worsening antisocial behavior, including child delinquency, are more likely to join gangs during adolescence. Gang members tend to have more risk factors than other serious and violent offenders, and these factors can often be placed in

multiple developmental domains. In essence, one can think of gang entry as the next developmental step in escalating delinquent behavior (Craig et al., 2002; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993). Gang membership is not a product of several specific risk factors, but the result of the accumulation of many varied kinds of risk factors (Krohn and Thornberry, 2008).

Risk factors in each of the five developmental domains operate collectively to increase youth’s propensity to join gangs. Youth who initiate delinquent behaviors and exhibit aggression or violence at an early age (individual); experience multiple caretaker transitions (family); have numerous school-related problems (school); associate with other aggressive, gang-involved delinquents (peers); and live in communities where they feel unsafe and where many youth are in trouble (community) are at a higher risk of joining a gang.

How Risk Factors Work

Risk factors predict increased risk for developing a problem or disorder. They also help determine the pathways that some children and adolescents take when they become involved in juvenile delinquency and gangs. However, the presence of specific risk factors does not guarantee the development of specific problem behaviors.

Risk factors function in a cumulative fashion—the larger the number of risk factors, the greater the likelihood of a negative outcome, such as joining a gang. In a Seattle study, children younger than age 12 who experienced 7 of 19 measured risk factors were 13 times more likely to join a gang than children with only 1 risk factor or no risk factors (Hill et al., 1999; Hill, Lui, and Hawkins, 2001). The likelihood of joining a gang is even greater when youth experience multiple risk factors in multiple domains. For example, Rochester researchers (Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003) measured seven risk-factor domains—neighborhood characteristics, family/sociodemographic characteristics, parent-child relations, school, peers, individual characteristics, and early delinquency—and found that 61 percent of the boys and 40 percent of the girls who had elevated scores in all seven domains were gang members. In contrast, when youth experienced risk in only four to six domains, about one-third of the boys and one-fifth of the girls joined a gang.

Abundant evidence exists to show that common risk factors cause various problem behaviors. Many of the same factors that predict delinquency also predict school failure, poor physical health, physical abuse, teen pregnancy, and drug use (Durlak, 1998). Future gang members share several of the same risk factors seen in future serious and



violent adolescent offenders, including association with delinquent peers, drug and alcohol use, school problems, and family problems (Howell and Egley, 2005). As youth accumulate more of these risk factors, they are more likely to become involved with gangs as opposed to violence (52 percent of gang members experienced 11 or more risk factors, compared with 36 percent of violent offenders) (Esbensen et al., 2009).

Still, risk factors do not cause youth to join gangs. Rather, they increase the probability that youth will join gangs. Additionally, the features of the specific gangs in an area and the type of activities they engage in, such as violence, may influence risk factors for joining a gang. For example, a Chicago study found that the neighborhoods with a high level of general violence “are not necessarily the same neighborhoods that have high levels of gang violence” (Papachristos and Kirk, 2006, p. 80).

Risk factors also interact with protective factors that keep youth from becoming delinquent. Youth who experience more risk factors than protective factors may be prone to serious juvenile delinquency and other problem behaviors. Nonetheless, in extremely high-risk conditions, youth need more than a simple majority of protective factors to overcome multiple risk factors (Stouthamer-Loeber et al., 2002, 2008). The gang literature has suggested numerous possible protective factors that might discourage youth from joining a gang (Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993; Esbensen, Huizinga, and Weiher, 1993; Hill et al., 1999; Howell, 2004; Klein and Maxson, 2006; Li et al., 2002; Maxson, Whitlock, and Klein, 1998; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003; Wyrick, 2000). However, the research is far too limited to compile a research-supported list of protective factors at this time; hence, potential factors are not presented here.

Gang Intervention: Strategies, Services, and Tools

This section discusses how communities can identify gang problems, develop a framework for intervention, and implement strategies.

Community Assessments

When starting a program for delinquency and gang prevention, a community should conduct a gang-problem assessment to identify elevated risk factors that lead to child delinquency and gang involvement. Communities must define youth gangs, locate them, and identify and target the youth who are at greatest risk of joining (Bjerregaard, 2002; Esbensen, Winfree, et al., 2001; Howell, 2009). Because every community has its own characteristics, each must agree on a unique definition that will guide its data collection and strategic planning. The



following are widely accepted criteria among researchers for classifying groups as youth gangs (Bjerregaard, 2002; Curry and Decker, 2003; Esbensen, Winfree, et al., 2001; Howell, 2009; Klein, 1995; Oehme, 1997; Miller, 1992; Spergel, 1995):

- The group has three or more members.
- Members share an identity, typically linked to a name and, often, other symbols.
- Members view themselves as a gang, and others recognize them as a gang.
- The group has some permanence and a degree of organization.
- The group is involved in an elevated level of criminal activity.

As part of its Comprehensive Gang Model, OJJDP has published *A Guide to Assessing Your Community's Youth Gang Problem* (www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Content/Documents/Assessment-Guide/Assessment-Guide.pdf), a user-friendly resource to assist communities that are conducting a gang-problem assessment (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2009a). This guide simplifies the data-collection process, helping communities determine types and levels of gang activity, gang crime patterns, community perceptions of local gangs and gang activity, and gaps in community services for gang prevention. Ideally, the assessment should provide an understanding of the “evolution of gangs in time and space” within the city, community, or neighborhood (Hughes, 2006). To help communities understand their unique gang situation, an assessment should answer these questions:

- **Who** is involved in gang-related activity and what is the history of these gangs?
- **What** crimes are these individuals committing?
- **When** are these crimes being committed?

- **Where** is gang-related activity primarily occurring?
- **Why** is the criminal activity happening (e.g., individual conflicts, gang feuds, gang members acting on their own)?

In addition to helping communities answer these questions, OJJDP's Comprehensive Gang Model promotes a problem-solving approach to gang-related crime, asking communities to identify:

- Neighborhoods with many risk factors for gang involvement.
- Schools and other community settings in which gangs are active.
- Hot spots of gang crime.
- High-rate gang offenders.
- Violent gangs.

To assist with these identifications, the OJJDP Strategic Planning Tool provides the following:

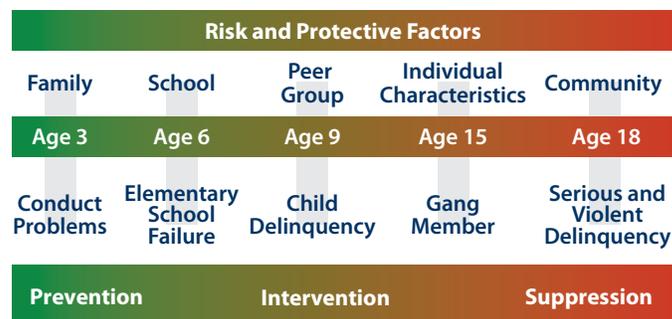
- A list of risk factors for delinquency and gang membership organized by age.
- Data indicators (i.e., measures of risk factors).
- Data sources (from which relevant data can be retrieved).
- A Community Resource Inventory, where community planning groups can record information on existing programs. This helps planning groups identify program gaps.
- Information on promising and effective juvenile delinquency and gang programs.
- Hyperlinks connecting risk factors with effective programs that address them.
- Strategies that address specific risk factors for various age groups.

The next step is to identify program gaps and develop and coordinate a continuum of prevention and intervention program services and sanctions, in concert with a targeted strategy of community and government agency responses to serious and violent gang activity. Prevention and intervention services should be directed to the neighborhoods, schools, and families from which gangs emanate.

A Framework for Intervention

A framework for delinquency prevention and early intervention is shown in figure 1. Because gang membership is presented as a pathway to serious and violent delinquency, delinquency prevention programs must work to target gang involvement. The top section of the figure shows the major risk factor domains that influence youth: family, school, peer group, individual characteristics, and community. At birth—or beginning in the prenatal period for some infants—the biological family is the central influence on infants and children. During preschool, and especially in elementary school and onward, the array of risk factors expands as some children are exposed to negative influences outside the home (particularly school problems and delinquent peers). Family, school, and peer influences continue from childhood to young adulthood, although family influences gradually fade as friends become more important. In addition, individual characteristics and community factors can come into play at any point during childhood and adolescence.

Figure 1. Framework for Delinquency Prevention and Early Intervention



Prevention and intervention efforts are organized around age periods, from about age 3 into young adulthood. The middle section of figure 1 illustrates the process that leads to delinquency and gang involvement if prevention and intervention efforts are not successful. The bottom section of the figure illustrates which category of intervention is most appropriate (prevention, intervention, and suppression measures), given youth's age and progression toward gang involvement and serious delinquency.

Research supports the progression from conduct problems to gang involvement to serious and violent offending (Howell, 2003; Howell and Egley, 2005). Concentrated disadvantage at the community level, family problems, and individual characteristics lead to early childhood problems (aggression and disruptive behavior). Each of these events increases the likelihood of delinquency in childhood and gang membership in adolescence. From one-fourth to one-third of disruptive children are at risk of becoming child delinquents, and about one-third of all child delinquents later become serious, violent, and chronic offenders (Loeber and Farrington, 2001).

Strategies for Delinquency and Gang Intervention and Prevention

Current research suggests three distinct strategies for early intervention with predelinquents and delinquents. The first strategy is to intervene at the individual level with at-risk children, particularly disruptive children. The second strategy is family prevention, and the third strategy is school- and community-level prevention (see Farrington and Welsh, 2007, and Welsh and Farrington, 2007, for illustrations of these strategies with research-based delinquency prevention programs).

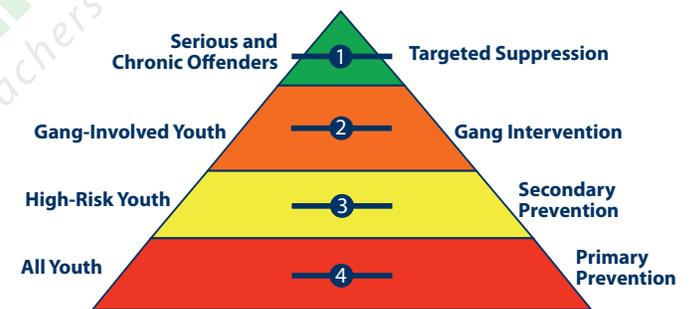
If these intervention strategies address risk and protective factors at or slightly before the developmental points at which they begin to predict later gang involvement and other problem behaviors, they are more likely to be effective (Institute of Medicine, 2008).

A balance of prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies is important for success in any community (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention,

2008; Spergel, Wa, and Sosa, 2006; Wyrick, 2006; Wyrick and Howell, 2004). Prevention programs target youth at risk of gang involvement and help reduce the number of youth who join gangs. Intervention programs and strategies provide sanctions and services for younger youth who are actively involved in gangs to push them away from gangs. Law enforcement suppression strategies and intensive services target and rehabilitate the most violent gangs and older, criminally active gang members.⁵

Figure 2 presents a model that is useful for planning a continuum of programs and strategies in a community with gang problems. Group 1, at the top of the triangle, represents serious, chronic, and violent gang and nongang offenders. These offenders make up a relatively small portion of the population, but commit a disproportionately large share of illegal activity. Group 2 consists of gang-involved youth and their associates, who make up a relatively larger share of the population. These youth are involved in significant levels of illegal activity but are not necessarily in the highest offending category. They typically range in age from 12 to 24 years old. Group 3 is made up of high-risk youth—7- to 14-year-olds who have already

Figure 2. Gang Prevention and Intervention Strategies



Source: Wyrick, 2006.



displayed early signs of delinquency and an elevated risk for gang membership but are not yet gang involved. Most of these youth will not join gangs, but they represent a pool of candidates for future gang membership. Group 4 represents all youth living in a community where gangs are present.

These four groups should be targeted with the four basic strategies for combating gangs:

- Members of group 1 are candidates for targeted enforcement and prosecution because of their high level of involvement in crime and violent gangs and the small probability that other strategies will reduce their criminal behavior. These individuals may represent as few as 4 to 8 percent of offenders, but they may account for the majority of all adolescent crimes in some communities (Loeber and Farrington, 1998).
- Members of group 2 are candidates for intensive treatment services and supervision. Such services should include group therapy, family therapy, mentoring, and cognitive-behavioral therapy—consisting of as much as 40 hours of direct contact over a 130-day period (Deas, 2008).
- Members of group 3 are candidates for secondary prevention services, which are less intensive than those provided to group 2 but more intensive than those provided to youth in the community at large.
- Members of group 4 receive primary prevention services.

Primary prevention refers to services and supports that reach the entire population in communities with large amounts of crime or gang activity (Wyrick, 2006). These

efforts address needs or risk factors and are available to all youth and families in a community. Government, local schools, community organizations, or faith-based organizations may deliver these services. Examples of primary prevention include public awareness campaigns, one-stop centers that improve access to public services, school-based life skills programs, community cleanup and lighting projects, and community organizing efforts.

Secondary prevention refers to programs and services directed toward youth who have already displayed early signs of problem behavior and are at high risk for gang involvement (Wyrick, 2006). As Wyrick explains, for many people, this group is recognized as the top prevention priority because youth in this group are most likely to confront the decision of whether or not to join a gang in the near future. If secondary prevention programs offer attractive alternatives, they can provide socially rewarding, healthy, and accessible social opportunities that serve to divert a youth's time and attention from the gang lifestyle. In addition, "effective support systems are necessary to address specific social, emotional, and psychological needs and challenges faced by adolescents," particularly high-risk adolescents (Wyrick, 2006, p. 56). Last, Wyrick emphasizes, program staff must hold adolescents accountable for their behavior; program staff should demonstrate and enforce clear expectations for appropriate behavior.

Promising and Effective Programs for Gang Prevention

This section discusses promising and effective primary and secondary prevention programs, as shown in figure 2 and described above.

This bulletin provides examples of effective and promising gang-related prevention programs that nine federal agencies identified in systematic reviews beginning in 2005 (Howell, 2009). Programs are scored on the following widely accepted scientific standards for judging program effectiveness:

- The soundness/clarity of the program's framework.
- Program fidelity (i.e., adherence to original program operation guidelines).
- The strength of the evaluation's design.
- The empirical evidence demonstrating that the program prevents or reduces problem behaviors.

Programs in the database fall into one of the following classifications:⁶

- **Level 1** programs have been scientifically proven to prevent delinquency, reduce risk factors, or enhance protective factors for delinquency and other juvenile problems. These programs employ a high-quality research design (i.e., an experimental design and random assignment of subjects). Programs in this category are designated "exemplary" or "model" programs and are considered very effective.
- **Level 2** programs have been scientifically proven to prevent delinquency, reduce risk factors, or enhance protective factors for delinquency and other juvenile problems. These programs employ an experimental or quasi-experimental research design with a comparison group. Evidence from program evaluations suggests these programs are effective or potentially effective, but this evidence is not as strong as for the level 1 programs.
- **Level 3** programs display a strong theoretical base. They have been demonstrated to prevent delinquency and other juvenile problems or to reduce risk factors or enhance protective factors. They employ limited research methods and do not require a control group in their research design. The programs in this category appear promising, but their success must be confirmed using more rigorous scientific techniques.

Few gang-related programs have been rigorously evaluated (Howell, 1998, 2000; Klein and Maxson, 2006), which means that most of the prevention programs described here are rated "promising." These programs are included here because programs do not need to produce dramatic results to have practical utility in dealing with gang problems. The effectiveness levels of programs that follow are shown in parentheses as L-1, L-2, or L-3.

Because electronic databases contain comprehensive information on programs, the programs are not described in detail here, and only a few are presented.⁷ Communities should consider several programs to determine how to best meet their needs.

Primary Prevention Program

The Gang Resistance Education And Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program (L-2) is a school-based gang-prevention curriculum that has demonstrated evidence of effectiveness (Esbensen, Osgood, et al., 2001). Law enforcement officers offer middle school students a 13-week curriculum that describes the dangers of gang involvement. The lesson content emphasizes cognitive-behavioral training, social skills development, refusal skills, and conflict resolution. The G.R.E.A.T. program also offers an elementary school curriculum, a summer program, and training for families (www.great-online.org).

Secondary Prevention Programs

The Preventive Treatment Program (L-1) in Montreal is an excellent example of an early intervention program that has reduced gang involvement, even though it was not developed with this purpose in mind. It was designed to prevent antisocial behavior among boys ages 7 to 9 with a low socioeconomic status who had previously displayed disruptive behavior in kindergarten. The program improved school performance, reduced delinquency and substance use, and showed that a combination of parent training and childhood skill development can steer some children away from gangs before they reach midadolescence (Tremblay et al., 1996; Gatti et al., 2005).

Aggression Replacement Training (ART) (L-2) is a secondary prevention program for highly aggressive and delinquent youth that has demonstrated evidence of effectiveness. It consists of a 10-week, 30-hour cognitive-behavioral program administered to groups of 8 to 12 adolescents. During these 10 weeks, youth typically attend three 1-hour sessions per week on skill streaming, anger control, and moral reasoning training. ART showed positive results when tested with gang-involved youth in Brooklyn, NY (Goldstein and Glick, 1994; Goldstein, Glick, and Gibbs, 1998).

CeaseFire-Chicago (L-2) is a community-level, gun-related violence prevention program that has demonstrated effectiveness in gang crime prevention (Skogan et al., 2008). The program sponsors a strong public education campaign to instill the message that shootings and violence are not acceptable, which works to change community norms regarding violence. It provides alternatives to violence when gangs and individuals on the street are deciding whether to engage in violent actions.



Additionally, CeaseFire–Chicago strengthens communities, gives them the ability to exercise informal social control, and mobilizes them to reverse the epidemic of violence. It specifically targets dangerous activities of carefully selected members of the community who have a great chance of either being shot or being shooters in the immediate future. Generally speaking, program outreach workers, called “violence interrupters” (most of whom are former gang members), work on the street and in hospitals to mediate conflicts between gangs and especially individual gang members, but they also intervene on behalf of clients to stem the cycle of retaliatory violence. Outreach workers carry caseloads of 15 clients for whom they broker services, assist with employment, and provide direct counseling and support services in many ways.

The OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression Model (L–2) (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2008) is a strategic planning process that has demonstrated evidence of effectiveness in reducing gang-related crime (Spergel, 2007; Spergel, Wa, and Sosa, 2006). The model was initially used to reduce the level of gang violence among youth involved in violent Chicago gangs. It successfully integrated outreach activities (including mentoring) and a variety of services with surveillance and suppression strategies (Spergel, 2007; Spergel, Wa, and Sosa, 2006). The next iteration of the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model added primary and secondary prevention components (Wyrick, 2006). Early evaluations of this second model have shown positive results in the gang reduction programs in Boyle Heights in Los Angeles and the Southside community in Richmond (Hayeslip and Cahill, 2009), and have shown promising outcomes for the North Miami Beach gang reduction program. Although an independent evaluation of the Pittsburgh and Houston Gang-Free Schools projects was not completed, these appear to be very promising

school-based programs (see Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2008).

Striving Together to Achieve Rewarding Tomorrows (CASASTART) is an effective family- and school-centered program (L–2) designed to keep high-risk 8- to 13-year-old youth free of substance abuse, delinquency, and gang involvement. CASASTART works through a partnership between the lead agency, schools, and the police. Compared with control group youth, CASASTART clients were less likely to report at followup the use of any drugs, involvement in drug trafficking, and violent acts.

Boys & Girls Clubs Gang Prevention Through Targeted Outreach (L–3) is a promising program that fills at-risk youth’s (ages 6 to 18) desire for gang membership (i.e., a need for supportive adults, challenging activities, and a place to belong) with an alternative social activity that reinforces positive behaviors (Arbreton and McClanahan, 2002).

Boys & Girls Clubs Gang Intervention Through Targeted Outreach (L–3) is a promising program that recruits gang-involved youth into club membership to decrease gang-related behaviors and contact with the juvenile justice system.

The Broader Urban Involvement and Leadership Development Detention Program (L–3) is a promising program with four components that work with community youth, gang members, adult mentors, and adjudicated youth in detention centers.

Movimiento Ascendencia (Upward Movement) (L–3) is a promising program for Mexican American girls to prevent them from joining gangs and to reduce the gang involvement of active members.

Some so-called gang “programs” are more properly classified as “structures” in which beneficial program activities (such as gang awareness) are provided along with limited therapeutic program services. Gang Resistance Is Paramount (L–3) performs both of these functions (Solis, Schwartz, and Hinton, 2003), providing a school-based anti-gang curriculum, recreational activities, gang awareness education for parents, and counseling for parents and youth.

The Mountlake Terrace Neutral Zone (L–3) (Thurman and Mueller, 2003) primarily provides a promising program structure. The center serves as a safe place where at-risk youth can voluntarily congregate, engage in social activities, and receive counseling and other problem-solving services.

A Model for Prevention

Before choosing any of the aforementioned programs, services, or activities, communities and neighborhoods that have gangs should complete a comprehensive assessment that identifies elevated risk factors for gangs and how gangs affect the local community. An assessment protocol is available to assist communities in conducting such an assessment through the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model. An implementation guide is also available. These resource materials can be found online at www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Publications (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2008, 2009a, 2009b).

OJJDP's Comprehensive Gang Model helps communities develop a continuum of gang prevention, intervention, and suppression programs and strategies. Prevention programs target youth at risk for gang involvement and reduce the number of youth who join gangs. Intervention programs and strategies provide sanctions and services for younger youth who are actively involved in gangs. Law enforcement suppression strategies target the most violent gangs and older, criminally active gang members. A balanced and integrated approach is most likely to be effective (Hayeslip and Cahill, 2009; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2008; Spergel, 2007; Spergel, Wa, and Sosa, 2006).

Points to Consider

Preventing youth from joining gangs is challenging, and most programs have not shown noteworthy results (Howell, 1998, 2000; Klein and Maxson, 2006). Several factors contribute to this challenge. They seek a place where they are accepted socially and find it in the streets (Vigil, 2002). Most youth who join gangs experience many risk factors and family, school, and community problems. Joining a gang can be a natural process for many youth in socially and economically deprived areas of large cities. The gang may already be there, in their neighborhood, and their friends and relatives often belong to it. The gang's promises of protection gradually envelop these youth.

Another major problem is the lack of gang awareness in schools, among community leaders, and among parents. A national study showed that, in the 10 percent of schools with the greatest student gang participation rates, only 18 percent of principals recognized that gangs were a problem in their schools (Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 2001). Fortunately, school resource officers and safe and drug-free school coordinators recognize gang activity more frequently (North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and Department of Public Instruction, 2008).

Despite obstacles, communities can take steps to prevent youth from joining gangs. The first level of prevention involves changing the experiences that propel children and adolescents into gangs. It involves strengthening the core social institutions, such as schools and families, which sometimes let youth down in the early years of their lives. Moreover, communities must provide interventions for youth at high risk for delinquency and gang involvement early in life, specifically targeting areas where gang problems are serious and more permanent. Programs should target girls and boys and both white and minority youth.

Interventions such as effective school-based gang prevention programs are much in demand, and practical steps in integrating them with other measures that increase school safety have been identified (Lassiter and Perry, 2009). Poor implementation of gang-related programs in schools is a significant problem (Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 2001). For effective implementation, delinquency and crime reduction programs that target children and adolescents must adhere with high fidelity to the requirements of the original model and target high-risk offenders (Lipsey, 2009).

Moreover, no programs have been developed specifically to prevent gangs from emerging. In the meantime, to prevent youth from joining gangs, communities must employ multiple strategies and services, including:

- Addressing elevated risk factors for joining a gang.
- Strengthening families.
- Reducing youth's conflicts.
- Improving community-level supervision of youth.
- Providing training for teachers on how to manage disruptive students.



- Providing training for parents of disruptive and delinquent youth.
- Reviewing and softening school “zero tolerance” policies to reduce suspensions and expulsions.
- Ensuring that punitive sanctions target delinquent gang behaviors, not gang apparel, signs, and symbols.
- Providing tutoring for students who are performing poorly in school.
- Increasing adult supervision of students after school.
- Providing interpersonal skills training to students to help resolve conflicts.
- Providing a center for youth recreation and referrals for services.
- Providing gang awareness training for school personnel, parents, and students.
- Teaching students that gangs can be dangerous.
- Providing training for school resource officers in mediating conflicts.

Conclusion

A community with an emerging youth gang problem is not alone. Many small cities, towns, and rural areas are experiencing gang problems for the first time. In some communities, officials jump to the conclusion that gangs are present because local youth display gang symbols (such as the colors and hand signs of big-city gangs), but these conclusions can be mistaken because these actions alone do not necessarily signify a genuine problem. Local groups of youth often imitate big-city gangs, generally in an attempt to enhance their self-image or to seek popularity and acceptance among their peers. Although community officials and residents may encounter episodic or solitary signs of gang activity in an area (e.g., graffiti, arrest of a nonlocal gang member, and other isolated incidents), absent further conclusive and ongoing evidence, this does not necessarily indicate an “emerging” gang problem that is likely to persist. Communities should undertake a systematic assessment of the troubling behavior that local youth display before developing a plan of action. This bulletin has provided user-friendly tools to assist in such an assessment, on which communities can base a tailored and appropriate action plan.

Endnotes

1. The National Youth Gang Survey, started in 1996 and administered annually, measures the presence, characteristics, and behaviors of local gangs in jurisdictions

throughout the United States. The National Gang Center conducts the survey. Each year, the center surveys a nationally representative sample of law enforcement agencies.

Standard survey questions examine the presence or absence of gang activity, the number of gangs and gang members, the number of homicides involving gangs, and an assessment of the gang problem from the previous year. Survey results are presented online at www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Survey-Analysis.

2. Researchers do not agree on the most important risk factors for gang membership. Three credible lists of such risk factors have been generated (Howell and Egley, 2005; Klein and Maxson, 2006; Huizinga and Lovegrove, 2009). Howell and Egley’s research is detailed in the discussion in the main text of this bulletin.

Klein and Maxson’s (2006) compilation was drawn predominantly from cross-sectional studies (14 of the 20 studies they reviewed are in this category). The cross-sectional studies measure both risk factors and outcomes at the same time, hence the causal ordering cannot be determined with certainty; what appears to be a predictor could well be an outcome of gang involvement.

Huizinga and Lovegrove (2009) compiled a short list of research-supported risk factors from an analysis of a number of longitudinal studies. This list was limited to factors that proved especially strong in at least two study sites. This method is sound, but the drawback is that only 11 of 35 statistically significant risk factors met Huizinga and Lovegrove’s stringent criteria. Consequently, this listing provides few distinctive risk factors. This is problematic because research clearly shows that youth who have numerous risk factors in multiple domains are most likely to join gangs (Krohn and Thornberry, 2008). Moreover, research has established that the prevalence of risk factors varies from one community to another (Loeber and Farrington, 1998). Therefore, each community should examine a broad array of research-supported risk factors to identify those that apply to that community.

3. For more detailed information regarding this literature review, see the “Research Review Criteria” in the “Risk Factors” section of the OJJDP Strategic Planning Tool (www.nationalgangcenter.gov/SPT).

4. Collective efficacy is the propensity of residents to work together for the common good of a neighborhood.

5. These components are also integrated in the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2008).

6. The OJJDP Model Programs Guide (www2.dsgonline.com/mpg), an online tool that offers a database of evidence-based, scientifically proven programs that address

a range of issues, including substance abuse, mental health, and education, uses the same program rating scheme. This guide contains more detailed information on the programs in OJJDP's Strategic Planning Tool, including evaluation information.

7. The OJJDP Strategic Planning Tool provides additional information on the gang prevention programs described briefly here and other programs. To learn more, see www.nationalgangcenter.gov/SPT.





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