Gang Impacted Youth: Costs and Consequences

Gangs in Oregon

Far from the I-5 corridor, the frontier community of Ontario (Population 11,091), in Eastern Oregon, is considered to be one of the most dangerous communities in the state (1) (2). Over a five year period (2011-2015) 546 gang-related crimes took place in the Ontario area (3). In Southern Oregon’s Jackson County, 16 different gangs have been identified (4). It is estimated that there are over 120 gangs that exist in Multnomah County alone (5). In Portland and East Multnomah County, gang activity is on the rise, currently at pace to exceed 2015’s number of 193 violent gang crimes (6).

Youth involved in gangs face a host of consequences ranging from physical violence to jail and even death. The consequences are not limited to the youth, but also the family members of gang involved youth. Children of incarcerated gang members have been associated with mental health problems, depression, attention disorders, are at high risk of foster care placement, being homeless, having reduced social supports and increased likelihood of dropping out of school (7). These conditions and risk factors associated with joining a gang are then often passed on to children.

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 children at a young age, 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 (8).

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.

Gang members are found throughout Oregon -- not just in Portland or along the I-5 corridor.

Youth report selling drugs as an activity gang members are involved in, and earning money was a top reason given for joining a gang.

Research shows significant drops in youth violence among employed youth. In order for them to be successful, they need soft skills and other workforce readiness training.
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 individual's 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 trainees who completed their involvement with Homeboy Industries stayed out of prison and found gainful employment (13).
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 of 16), where 90% were on free or reduced lunch, with an average grade of a C, missing around 6 weeks of school. 20% had been previously arrested, 20% had been victims of a crime, and lived in neighborhoods with unemployment averages of 19% and high rates of violent crime (14). 350 youth were given 15-hour-a-week jobs and 10 hour social-emotional learning classes. The remaining students served as a control group not participating in the 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.

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 multi-generational gang (15).

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 (16).

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 a 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. 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 and forming collaborative partnerships, a common strategy can be developed to reduce risk factors leading to youth gang involvement.

- Implement evidence-based, research-based and practice-based approaches. By using these approaches, communities can implement programming that has been proven to be successful, producing positive outcomes and the biggest return on investment.

- Develop systems to identify youth at risk of gang involvement no later than the freshman year of high school to effectively help guide them toward a path leading to high school completion and connect 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 moving to job placement training or a job placement program. Ensure they have the necessary skills, abilities, and support to follow through and complete a job training program.

Works Cited

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There is hope for gang youth re-engagement!