ABSTRACT

With gang initiation starting as early as the primary school grades, the challenge to educators and administrators is to identify and suppress gang activities within the confines of school grounds. Taking into consideration the impotence of school systems to control the neighborhood and family environments, understanding the important role of schools to keep students engaged in scholarship to prevent gang membership cannot be stressed enough. Taking an applied approach, this chapter identifies what educators, administrators, and staff can do to identify behavior that might be on the surface mere imitation of gang membership (e.g. throwing gang signs), but could be symptomatic of close contact with known gang members and possibly exposure to the violence associated with gangs. The more school personnel can be cognizant of behavior that is indicative of exposure to gangs, curriculum planning and after school programs can be designed more efficiently to counter delinquent influences within the community, beyond “just say no” strategies.

INTRODUCTION

It’s a typical Friday evening in fall, in Holyoke, Massachusetts. The air is crisp, the promise of cold nights to come and most are tucked in for the night, in their residences. Filing out of Morgan Elementary School around 8 p.m. are cheery family groups, chatting with the uniformed police officers and saying goodnight to the South Holyoke Safe Neighborhood Initiative volunteers. Standing out from these families leaving the school is a group of young teen boys, wearing what appears to be local gang colors. No adults accompany them as they leave the “Family Fun Night” event and they walk down the poorly lit streets in search of who knows what. Can we assume them to be gang members, or on the cusp of initiation?

Whether teaching in an inner city school district or in a rural community, few newly minted teachers, fresh from university with credential in hand, are equipped for the realities of the presence of gangs. Save
in sociology or criminal justice courses, there is little attention to the challenges of teaching students whose daily reality includes negotiating gang territories. In the case of some children, they have been born into gang life, whether due to an older sibling who is involved, or parents who are active members, as in the example of the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation (ALKQN).

For more seasoned veterans in teaching, school policies may not include strategies to address the issues that can arise in the classroom that are a direct effect of the exposures their students have to gang violence. Bullying has gained greater attention in recent years and addressing bullying behavior should include being cognizant of intimidation in ritualized gang recruitment. In fact, for some individuals, joining gangs is perceived to be a means by which to be protected from bullying (Forber-Pratt et al., 2014).

Beyond bullying, youth gangs, including those in schools, have gained attention as well from media and academic researchers (Esbensen et al., 2013). In California alone, billions of dollars (USD) have been spent towards gang suppression on the streets and in schools since the 1990s (Friedrichs, 1999; Steinhart, 2008). However, few programs have demonstrated to be successful, in spite of the vast amounts of financial resources that have been thrown at the problem.

For those of us in the trenches of applied social science, preventing juveniles from joining gangs is the Achilles’ heel of violence prevention policy. Even with the best intentions, families living in gang-infested communities are challenged to find solutions to limit the exposure their children have to violence within their neighborhood. As witnessed in Moreno Valley, California, a bedroom community about 60 miles east of Los Angeles, families who move to other cities believed to be “gang-free” will find that gang membership and criminality will be imported to the new neighborhood, particularly if ease of transportation is available, including easy access highways and mass transit.

Key to finding solutions lies in the joint efforts of parents, schools and law enforcement, many times a teetering 3-legged stool with little stability when these three entities do not effectively, formally collaborate to bring about changes in communities. This chapter explores the macro (community-level) and micro (family-level) exogenous variables that contribute to the risk of youth gang recruitment, including active recruitment in schools. Recommendations include taking “baby steps” to educate parents, teachers, and administrators on the risks of gang violence in schools, as well as looking at evidence-based programs to address it.

This chapter also introduces as case study the valiant grassroots efforts of one community to combat gang violence and recruitment, particularly in school-age juveniles. Since 2011, South Holyoke Safe Neighborhood Initiative (SHSNI) in South Holyoke, Massachusetts, has taken a “weed and seed” approach adopted from the Massachusetts State Police C3 model, outlined later in this chapter. Through a grassroots campaign, SHSNI has worked with the community, including Morgan School Elementary School, to provide afterschool and family programs to offer positive alternatives to gang life.

**URBAN VIOLENCE**

In a recent National Public Radio (NPR) story, Los Angeles, California reportedly is experiencing the lowest homicide rate in four decades, this in spite of a particularly bloody holiday season in 2010 (del Barco, Jan. 6, 2011). Homicide has been cited as the number one cause of death in America among young African American males, many of which live in urban settings (Robinson et al., 2009; Sweatt et al., 2002; Center for Disease Control, United States).
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