

## Gangs in Schools

### Gary Burnett

Gang culture among young people, in itself, is nothing new. Indeed, youth gangs have been a major part of the urban cultural landscape since at least the 1830s, when Charles Dickens described Fagin's pack of young boys roaming the streets of London in *Oliver Twist*.

In the late twentieth century United States, however, gangs have taken on a different character and have moved into areas unimagined by Dickens. Most significantly, they are spreading from inner cities to "edge cities"—cities at the outskirts of large urban centers—and to suburbs; indeed, while gang activity has been stabilizing in urban areas, it has increased significantly elsewhere (Bodinger-deUriarte, 1993). At the same time, gangs have become a growing problem in public schools, which historically have been considered "neutral turf."

### Characteristics of Gangs

Researchers agree that most gangs share certain characteristics. Although there are exceptions, gangs tend to develop along racial and ethnic lines, and are typically 90 percent male (Bodinger-deUriarte, 1993). Gang members often display their membership through distinctive styles of dress—their "colors"—and through specific activities and patterns of behavior. In addition, gangs almost universally show strong loyalty to their neighborhood, often marking out their territory with graffiti (Gaustad, 1991). All of these representations can be visible in the schools.

As Gaustad (1991) points out, however, the specifics of gang style and activity can vary tremendously from gang to gang, and can even change rapidly within individual gangs. For instance, African American gangs tend to confine their activities to their own communities, although the Bloods and the Crips, two gangs originating in Los Angeles, now have

members nationwide. In contrast, Asian gangs often travel hundreds of miles from home in order to conduct their activities (Bodinger-deUriarte, 1993). In addition, African American and Hispanic gangs are much more likely to display their colors than are Asian gangs. Anglo gangs are often made up of white supremacists. Gangs can also vary tremendously in numbers and age ranges of members.

### The Impact of Gangs on Schools

Despite their high profile in the media, relatively few young people join gangs; even in highly impacted areas, the degree of participation has rarely exceeded 10 percent. In addition, it has been reported that less than 2 percent of all juvenile crime is gang-related (Bodinger-deUriarte, 1993).

Such low numbers, however, may camouflage the impact that the presence of gangs has on a school. For one thing, they play a significant role in the widespread increase of violence in the schools; indeed, school violence has steadily increased since a 1978 National Institute of Education study, *Violent Schools—Safe Schools*, found that school-aged children were at a higher risk of suffering from violence in school than anywhere else (cited in Gaustad, 1991).

Because gangs are, by definition, organized groups, and are often actively involved in drug and weapons trafficking, their mere presence in school can increase tensions there. It can also increase the level of violence in schools, even though gang members themselves may not be directly responsible for all of it; both gang members and non-gang members are arming themselves with increased frequency. Students in schools with a gang presence are twice as likely to report that they fear becoming victims of violence than their peers at schools without gangs

(Trump, 1993). Moreover, a 1992 Bureau of Justice Statistics survey reports that schools with gangs are significantly more likely to have drugs available on campus than those without gangs (Bodinger-deUriarte, 1993). In Gaustad's words, gangs create a "tenacious framework" within which school violence can take root and grow (1991, p.24).

Far from remaining neutral turf, schools not only suffer from gang-related violence "spilling over" from the streets, but are themselves rapidly becoming centers of gang activities, functioning particularly as sites for recruitment and socializing (Bodinger-deUriarte, 1993; Arthur & Erickson, 1992). An interview-based study by Boyle (1992) suggests that gang members see school as a necessary evil at best, and at worst as a form of incarceration. Although many gang members acknowledge the importance of the educational objectives of school, school is much more important to them as a place for gathering with fellow gang members for socializing and other more violent activities. Significantly, Boyle also found that even those gang members who had been suspended or had dropped out of school could be found on campus with their associates, effectively using the school as a gang hangout rather than as an educational institution.

Finally, gangs can spread unexpectedly from school to school as students transfer from gang-impacted schools to gang-free schools, causing an unintentional spillover of gang activity in the new school.

## Why Gangs Develop and Why Students Join Them

Gangs take root in schools for many reasons, but the primary attraction of gangs is their ability to respond to student needs that are not otherwise being met; they often provide youth with a sense of family and acceptance otherwise lacking in their lives. In addition, gangs may form among groups of recent immigrants as a way of maintaining a strong ethnic identity. Understanding how gangs meet these student needs prepares schools to better respond to them. Four factors are primary in the formation of juvenile gangs (William Gladden Foundation, 1992):

- First, youth experience a sense of alienation and powerlessness because of a lack of traditional support structures, such as family and school. This can lead to feelings of frustration and anger, and a desire to obtain support outside of traditional institutions.
- Second, gang membership gives youth a sense of belonging and becomes a major source of identity for its members. In turn, gang membership affords youth a sense of power and control, and gang activities become an outlet for their anger.
- Third, the control of turf is essential to the well-being of the gang, which often will use force to control both its territory and members.
- Finally, recruitment of new members and expansion of territory are essential if a gang is to remain strong and powerful. Both "willing" and "unwilling" members are drawn into gangs to feed the need for more resources and gang members.

Taken together these four factors interact to produce gangs that become more powerful and ruthless as they work to maintain and expand their sway over territory and youth.

## Gangs and School Response

Still, despite the significant influence that gangs have upon violence and crime in schools, it would be a great disservice to portray them as so potent that schools are powerless to respond. Indeed, the perception of gangs as omnipotent frequently leads schools either to react harshly with overly punitive and restrictive actions or to be so intimidated that they refrain from taking any action at all.

What is needed instead is a strategy that mobilizes school and community resources to offer viable alternatives to youth gang membership. To be successful, however, a school's strategy must be built upon the above-described sociopsychological reasons for why gangs develop and attract youths; in

particular, schools must find ways to address students' feelings of powerlessness and low self-esteem. A strategy that embodies an understanding of "gang psychology" increases the probability that gangs will be less able to attract new members and retain old members.

## **Effective Interactions for Combating School Gangs**

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The following eight interventions have each been shown to be effective on their own, but can also be the basis of a comprehensive schoolwide strategy:

- Target students vulnerable to gang recruitment for special assistance, particularly through the use of peer counselors and support groups. Mentoring, conflict resolution programs, and tutoring can be particularly effective.
- Establish moral and ethical education, values clarification, and conflict resolution as important components of the school curriculum.
- Create an inviting school climate where every student feels valued.
- Educate all school staff, including support staff, about how gangs develop and how to respond to them.
- Offer special programs for parents on gangs and how to deal with them as a parent. Present information in a culturally sensitive way, and in a variety of languages, to reflect the diversity of the community.
- Monitor youths who are not enrolled in school but "hang out" on or near school property. This can help school officials assess the existence of gangs in the neighborhood, and anticipate and prevent their formation in the school.
- Offer educational programs for students about gangs, their destructiveness, and how to avoid being drawn into them, preferably in small groups where they can express their feelings comfortably.
- Provide regular opportunities for students individually and/or in small groups to discuss

their experiences in school and make future plans that offer hope and personal rewards.

Though the above steps offer no magical solution for eliminating gangs, they offer valuable interventions that may make gangs appear less attractive and prepare individual students to more effectively resist gang pressure to join with them.

## **References**

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