



Gangs, Risk Factors, and Programs

Finn Esbensen, Ph.D.
Department of Criminology and
Criminal Justice
University of Missouri-St. Louis

Some Interesting Information about Youth Gangs & Gang Membership

- Gangs are found in all kinds of communities
- Gang members mirror youth in their communities
- Girls comprise about 1/3 of gang members
- Youth gangs are not highly organized
- Gang membership is quite transitory
- Very criminally involved while in the gang
- Gang youth commit a variety of offenses – specialization is rare

Jurisdictions Reporting Youth Gang Problems – NYGS (1999-2001)



Gang Typology

- Large-scale survey of law enforcement agencies
- Five categories/typologies:
 - **Traditional** (long-lasting, large, distinct subgroups, territorial, wide age range)
 - **Neo-traditional** (relatively short history, territorial, subgroups, and more than 50 members)
 - **Compressed** (relatively short history, no subgroups, narrow age range, and less than 50 members)
 - **Collective** (resembles compressed but larger and longer history, wider age range, no subgroups)
 - **Specialty** (short history, small, no subgroups, narrow age range, territorial, and narrow criminal focus)

Maxson & Klein, 1995

Risk Factors for Gang Joining

- **Community**
 - Most neighborhood/community level factors receive inconsistent or inconclusive support
 - Even in the most disorganized and disadvantaged neighborhoods, most youths do **NOT** join gangs
- **Individual**
 - Negative life events
 - Non delinquent problem behaviors
 - Delinquent beliefs

Risk Factors for Gang Joining

- **Family**
 - Parental supervision
- **School**
 - Inconclusive
- **Peer**
 - Affective dimensions of peer group
 - Characteristics of peer group

Risk Factors Not Supported

- Most neighborhood level indicators
- Unsafe school environment
- Family structure (e.g., single-parent)
- Parental attachment
- Family poverty
- Self-esteem
- Internalizing behaviors (withdrawal)

Multiple Risk Factors

- The more risk factors and in multiple domains; the greater the risk of gang joining
- No silver bullet – not all youth living in high-risk neighborhoods join gangs – importance of local assessment
- Given the harmful effects of cumulative risk, as well as the fact that there may be multiple paths to gang involvement, programs should be broad-based, addressing numerous risk factors across multiple domains

What is Known About Gang Prevention and Intervention?

- **Very little**
- No shortage of programs but lack of evaluations of existing programs or lack of positive outcomes

Program Implementation Concerns and Program Characteristics

Program Fidelity

- (1) **Dosage** - is the program of sufficient intensity and is enough of the program actually implemented to expect the anticipated effect?
- (2) **Program Adherence and Monitoring** - to what extent are program components actually taught or delivered?
- (3) **Quality of Delivery** - if delivered, what is the quality of the delivery?
- (4) **Training** - is the training sufficiently rigorous to prepare trainees to deliver the program?