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Herbert G. Lingren

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

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Gangs: The New Family

This NebGuide discusses the history and present status of gangs in the United States, the implications of their effects upon family life today and offers suggestions for intervention and prevention.

Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Scientist

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There has been an explosion of awareness and concern about gang membership and gang activity in the United States since 1990. Parents, schools, city and state government and law enforcement officials have attempted to confront this phenomenon, often with limited success. Street gangs have existed in the U.S. since the late nineteenth century, and sociologists have studied them since the 1920s. But the current interest in gangs has been fueled by their rapid growth, by the spread of violence in the schools, child-to-child attacks, drive-by shootings, drug trafficking, and murder. A recent study released by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates that from 1985 to 1991, the annual rates at which young men aged 15- to 19-years-old were killed jumped 154 percent. Virtually the entire increase was attributed to the use of guns, mostly in gang situations.

Historically, gangs have been found in inner-city areas that are economically depressed and lack resources. Gang activity sometimes is passed down through family generations, and experts believe it arises for many reasons, including several **social**, **psychological** and **family** factors. Some of the **social** factors that have facilitated gang development include: poverty, divorce, abuse of alcohol and other drugs, unemployment and antisocial behaviors (Lawson and Lawson, 1994). The following data suggest the possible relationship between these factors and the participation in gangs.

Socio-Economic Factors

1. **Poverty.** About half of the children who are poor in any given year live in poverty over an extended period of time. Nearly one-third of all children in the U.S. are poor at least once before age 18. Family poverty is associated with poorer health, lower cognitive development, less completed schooling, less labor market success as an adult, and increased behavior problems. Fewer children residing in poor families receive any kind of welfare today than during previous decades.
2. **Divorce, and other transitions.** Almost 50 percent of all children are expected to experience the divorce of their parents and to spend about five years in a single-parent household. And, 40 percent of adults currently in first marriages will become members of stepfamilies before their youngest child reaches 18 years of age. Of young adolescents in stepfamilies, 28 percent will experience the end of that family within five years due to divorce. While studies indicate that adolescents experiencing parental divorce have lower well-being than those not experiencing the divorce of their parents, the well-being of adolescents who experience multiple parental divorces is most compromised (Kurdick, 1994).
3. **Alcohol and drug abuse** have been linked to numerous health and developmental problems in adolescents—including family conflict, low self-esteem, depression, academic problems, automobile accidents, delinquency, and crimes of violence. Alcohol and cigarettes are "gateways" to the abuse of other illicit drugs. Thus, substance abuse unfolds in predictable sequence: from alcohol and/or cigarettes, to marijuana, and then to hard drugs, such as cocaine and heroin. While the statistics vary, between 40 and 60 percent of adolescents in grades 7 - 12 have reported drinking alcohol during the previous year, and between 15 - 25 percent reported using illicit drugs. Thus, children may search for acceptance and nurturance in a gang when it is not available at home (Farrell & Barnes, 1994).
4. **Violence and antisocial behavior.** Acquaintance homicide increased by 65 percent in the past 20 years, with the largest increase (88%) among 10-14 year-olds. Recent data show that 14 percent of murders, 16 percent of forcible rapes, and 14 percent of aggravated assaults were committed by youth. Homicide ranks as the second leading cause of death among adolescents. The homicide rate among African-American youth is eight times higher than for Caucasian youth. Firearms are used in 60 percent of homicides. Forty five percent of car thefts, 47 percent of arson crimes and 45 percent of vandalism are committed by adolescents (Gullotta, 1994). They also are likely to be victims of acts of family violence. Forty-seven percent of victims of all maltreatment were between the ages of 12 to 17.

Other **social, economic and cultural** factors include: (1) *a family history of gang involvement*, (some experts suggest that 50% of present gang members had at least one family member who is or was involved in a gang); (2) *living in a community where gang involvement is a community norm* -- everyone does it, (it is part of the culture and social fabric of the community and adults and older teens become role models for younger children); (3) *being part of a family with a limited view of the world* and a lack of awareness of opportunities outside the neighborhood (because of ethnic or social isolation, attachment to family rules, beliefs, and expectations); (4) *cultural barriers and prejudices* (that often produce an "us against them" mentality, and may keep a person from attempting to join the workplace); (5) *lack of employment possibilities and education*, (because of low reading or writing or other workplace skills); (6) *media glorification of gangs* (as seen in movies, on TV, in magazines, and heard on music videos, compact discs and tapes); and (7) *safety and protection from other gangs* (in many inner cities, barrios, neighborhoods, and schools, violence, or the threat of violence, is a real fact of life).

Family Factors

Family problems and parenting difficulties can increase the risk of kids joining gangs. Many kids who join gangs come from middle-class families with two biological parents at home. However, many of these youth come from homes that are deeply troubled. They seek from the gang what they are not

getting (or will not accept) from their families. They are looking for acceptance, love, companionship, leadership, encouragement, recognition, respect, role models, rules, security, self-esteem, structure and a sense of belonging. When children's emotional needs are met in families, the results are positive; otherwise they may look to gangs, and the outcome is usually negative. Consider the following parent-adolescent data related to potential gang participation:

1. ***Parent-adolescent distancing can lead to conflict.*** This separation, while considered normal adolescent development, decreases emotional closeness and warmth, increases parent-adolescent conflict and disagreement and increases time adolescents spend with their peers. Rigid or ineffective parenting styles also contribute to a parent's loss of control of adolescents. If the parent overcompensate with harsh discipline, physical abuse may occur. Data from the National Family Violence Survey revealed that 54 percent of preteen and early teenage children (10 -14 years of age) were struck by a parent, while 33 percent of teens (15 - 17 years) were also hit during a one-year period (Gelles, 1994) (Montemayor, 1994).
2. ***In 10 percent to 20 percent of families,*** parents and adolescents are in highly distressed relationships characterized by emotional coldness and frequent outbursts of anger and conflict. If the marriage is conflicting and dissatisfying and the home environment cold and uncaring, it affects the developing adolescent. Youth in these families are at high risk for a variety of psychological and behavioral problems (Montemayor, 1994).
3. ***From 50 to 85 percent of gang members come either from a single-parent home, or one in which no parent resides.*** If the parent is not available to provide structure, supervision, support, and caring during this crucial time of adolescent development, teens may turn to gang participation to fulfill their needs.
4. ***Increase in family strains (economic pressures, divorce, violence)*** have prompted teenagers to depend more on peers for emotional support. By the high school years, most teens report feeling closer to friends than parents. Job layoffs, parental violence, separation, divorce, or absence of one parent in the lives of youth, create strain and hardship for the adolescent as well as the parent. Although divorce *per se* does not lead to gang involvement, complications of divorce such as decreased financial resources may create child-care crises, leaving children unattended.

Psychological Factors

Many parents, teachers and other adults today have a difficult time in understanding the attraction of today's youth to a gang. If the family or community is to be successful in combating gangs, they need to understand several **psychological** factors regarding adolescent development (Lawson &, 1994):

- ***The need for affiliation.*** Adolescents are in a stage of development in which fashioning a personal identity is a primary goal. This has been a problem for immigrant families whose children are caught between two cultures with opposing value systems and incompatible behavior standards. Often these adolescents seek an identity by joining gangs with similar backgrounds to their own. A gang member may appear to have more loyalty to the gang than with his or her family. This was not the case, however, for the 194 gang members recently interviewed in a three-year research project. Gang members were asked, "If you had to choose between family and gang, who would you choose?" Ninety-seven percent said they would choose their family. Ninety-six percent cited as the reason, "My family raised me." Moreover, 95 percent of these young men responded that they would not want their sons to join gangs (Lale, 1992).
- ***The need for achievement*** in an environment that offers no prospects to achieve it. The American Dream has included the idea that achievement is the way out of the ghetto. Parents in these circumstances however, may be unable to be role models and help their children be successful in school. Many gang members were not successful in school due to learning disabilities or special education needs that were not diagnosed. Once children have failed in school and dropped out,

their chances to be successful, productive citizens are small. At this point, the gang can offer a social network of friends, income, and a chance for them to "make it" that the larger culture does not.

- ***Lack of self-responsibility and an openness to outside influences.*** At many levels, adolescents question adult authority and the emotional dependence they have on their parents, who they regard as controlling and lacking in understanding. During this turbulent and rapidly changing period of their life, many adolescents are unable or unwilling to turn to their parents for help. It is not surprising that their peers become important during this period.
- ***Learned helplessness.*** When adolescents fail in school and fail at getting a job, it creates a sense of helplessness. Teens develop a "Why bother?" attitude that drains them of self-confidence, fosters depression, robs them of resourcefulness and blinds them to opportunities. A gang may seem to be the only hope.
- ***Risk-taking behavior.*** Adolescents tend to believe they are invincible and that nothing can harm them. These beliefs make risks seem non-threatening and, worse, a necessary part of their lives. Children raised in deprived environments are at risk for seeking high levels of stimulation. Seeking stimulation often involves breaking the law and incurring risks that may even be life-threatening.
- ***Low self-esteem.*** Adolescents whose self-esteem has been damaged by peer rejection, school failures, discrimination, or physical development that is too fast or too slow, may find a new identity and sense of self-worth in a gang. When an adolescent has no activities which provide a sense of accomplishment or competence, gangs can provide acceptance, affiliation, a substitute family, a way to succeed, money, drugs and power.
- ***Lack of positive role models.*** Power and fame are major factors in motivating kids to become gang members. Often, gang members believe that money and weapons can give them power and fame they believe they deserve in a society that discriminates against them. They may view their struggling parents as powerless people unable to show their children how to achieve the good life, while they view a veteran gang member, who drives a flashy car, carries a beeper, and wears expensive clothes as a role model for success.
- ***Boredom:*** In many neighborhoods where gangs exist, there are no recreational activities to meet teenagers' needs. Churches, schools and private facilities are not open to youth because of fear of violence and destruction of property. School dropouts who are unemployed or young people with nothing to do after school are good candidates for chronic boredom. As soon as boredom sets in, hanging out with the neighborhood gang becomes an attractive alternative which adds some excitement to life.

Prevention and Intervention: What Should We Do?

For educators, legislators, religious leaders, law enforcement personnel and parents, the problems of gangs, drugs and violence may seem overwhelming. Yet all can play a useful role in prevention and early intervention with adolescents and their families who are at high risk, but are not yet hard-core gang members.

Social and Economic Conditions

Parent-adolescent relations are adversely affected by social conditions such as poverty, unemployment, crime, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy. Federal, state and local government should consider the following:

1. Policies designed to improved general social and economic conditions, in general, have a positive effect on parent-adolescent relations, especially for at-risk families.

2. A "safety net" designed to: (1) assist families in deep poverty, (2) provide interventions and support, job and parenting skills for teen mothers and health care, are necessary in times of crisis.
3. Job training and re-training, and reading and writing skills along with youth employment opportunities for all seeking work may lessen the attraction of gangs.
4. Television, the media, the music industry and the Internet can be encouraged to reduce explicit violence and glamorous portrayal of gang activities.

Family Support

Parent-adolescent relations are adversely affected by internal family dynamics, such as lack of love and support, excessive criticism and blaming, high conflict, poor communication, excessive, inconsistent or too lenient family rules, and lack of positive outlets for adolescent energies and skills. Here are some recommendations for improving family dynamics:

1. Regular family meetings at home which are designed to meet needs, solve problems, set rules, support each individual's efforts and reward achievements -- all necessary to healthy family living.
2. Adults must model appropriate behaviors and not say one thing and do another. They must teach youth the skills to become competent, mature adults. They must treat adolescents with respect while asking them to be respectful themselves.
3. Parent(s) can supervise their youth's friends and provide activities and experiences for them to meet other young people whose behavior and beliefs are acceptable to their own. These youth groups, whether school, church, private or community-based should provide the adolescent with opportunities to be successful and feel rewarded for his/her efforts.
4. In two-parent families, a loving and supportive relationship between parents provides an atmosphere which facilitates positive adolescent growth and development environment. If marital relationships are unsatisfying, adults have little time and energy to give to their kids.
5. Community and educational programs to prevent and treat parent-adolescent relationship distress should be designed which teach specific skills. Teaching parents and adolescents how to negotiate and resolve relationship differences reduces the frequency and intensity of interpersonal conflict.

Parent-adolescent relations are affected by divorce and other transitions. Some divorce-related family transitions might be prevented if spouses are prepared for normative changes that occur in marriage and have the skills to meet conflict constructively.

6. Programs on marriage and family living should be offered to high school students and involve learning skills that may be put into practice.
7. Programs on marriage and family living which especially encourage men to accept responsibility for their children and actively participate in raising them.

Community Responsibility

Communities have the responsibility for providing a safe, supportive environment where youth have a variety of opportunities for successful maturation. They should provide opportunities for competency-building, positive rewards for accomplishment, a climate that stimulates intellectual development, and meets a variety of social, emotional, physical and developmental needs.

1. Religious groups should sponsor a variety of youth activities (e.g., athletic opportunities, such as basketball or soccer, scouting, as well as spiritual and moral development.)
2. Schools should provide a safe, intellectually challenging educational environment in which adolescent growth can be stimulated and developed. "Full-service" schools could be created. They

would become centers for coordinated delivery of activity and service programs. These school-based centers could be administered collaboratively by the school, community agencies and youth-serving organizations. Schools should be open for before and after-school care and provide athletic, musical, computer and other opportunities. School policies must be culturally competent (i.e., attuned to the values and traditions of the community within which the school exists) (Lerner, 1994).

3. Community organizations, farm organizations, labor organizations, business groups could join together to assist in providing the space, building, and adult leadership for a variety of activities and opportunities that are constructive and encourage skill and competency development. Youth need challenging and rewarding activities that require discipline and effort.
4. Families and community members must be more pro-active in involving parents, particularly those in at-risk families, in parenting classes and get them more actively involved in their children's lives. We must know how to help parents set clear rules for their children, with appropriate consequences for breaking them. The workplace, community agencies and organizations, churches and schools must become more "family friendly" to allow parents time to meet the needs of their children without penalty
5. Communities must work with law enforcement, schools, neighborhood associations to provide safe streets, safe schools and safe homes. If a teen wishes to leave a gang, or if the family wishes to live elsewhere, arrangements need to be made so the person or family does not encounter retaliation.

Parents, community leaders, businesses and others must understand the developmental processes and needs of youth. And, the more they understand gang dynamics, the more they will be able to help. Educators, community and religious leaders and parents must be concerned about sharing this understanding with all families, especially high-risk families. Families and communities must become educated about gangs and community resources need to combat their presence.

The EYE Program

One social service agency in Escondido, California, has had surprising success with its Escondido Youth Empowerment Program. EYE is ahead of its five-year vision, which includes a comprehensive, multi-agency approach to gang participation and violence prevention. The project includes: incorporating gang and drug prevention issues in current academic lessons; creating more entry-level jobs for youth; expansion of the Hire a Youth Program; community business involvement; a Jobs for Youth work program; cleaning up community graffiti; better job training programs; an internship program for high school students; youth school peer counseling; a mentorship program; a youth leadership institute for local high school students; neighborhood councils for the empowerment of individuals, groups, neighborhoods, youth and parents; a grassroots multicultural communications plan; a multicultural advisory board for the program; community *fiestas*; quality child care; medical care; adult (home) supervision for all youth; parenting classes and support groups; parent education in schools; a YMCA drug education program, including tutoring, recreation, counseling and gang activity resistance training; English as a second language classes by church volunteers; interagency networking; a network of youth volunteers; hotlines; a gymnasium that is city-owned and operated; an organized boxing for youth; Police Athletic League (PAL) basketball, boxing, volleyball and karate; movie matinees shown when theaters are vacant; and a positive alternative to partying -- tickets to movies, concerts and rallies.

The Escondido-based Youth Empowerment Program has succeeded in empowering adults to take leadership and advocacy roles in community issues, such as violence. By helping adults develop and reach personal goals for safer neighborhoods, parents foster their children's gang-free opportunities for achievement and growth. It has led to the organization of social events that are free from violence and substance abuse. And in a clear victory over the past, there have been no drive-by shootings in

Escondido for two years (Lawson and Lawson, 1994.)

Final Thoughts

Combating gang participation and violence is a never-ending challenge for today's parents, businesses, religious and community leaders. All must assume responsibility for the raising of our children if we expect them to become mature, competent adults. The need is great to develop viable, rewarding alternatives to gang life. All of us have a role in helping children discover their choices in life, and in helping families network with school and law enforcement programs for gang intervention and prevention. ***Safe communities mean stronger families, and stronger families will surely mean safer, stronger communities.***

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