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# CHANGING COURSE

## Preventing Gang Membership



### Chapter 4. What Is the Role of Police in Preventing Gang Membership?



# What Is the Role of Police in Preventing Gang Membership?

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- **Based on their knowledge of youth in their communities — who is in trouble, and who is on the brink of trouble — the police are in a unique position to make an early identification of youth who are at risk of joining a gang.**
- **Because they are active in neighborhoods at times when (and in places where) other adults are not, the police can play a vital role in efforts to prevent gang-joining, including referrals to services.**
- **SARA — Scanning, Analysis, Response and Assessment, the primary problem-solving model used by law enforcement — and the public health prevention model share complementary data-driven components, which can be used in building initiatives and partnerships that prevent youth from joining gangs.**
- **Police legitimacy can be increased through partnerships with community groups and agencies that are trying to reduce the attraction of gangs; when police play a more active, visible role in gang-prevention activities, it builds trust and improves community efficacy.**
- **Law enforcement leaders should place more emphasis on recognizing gang-prevention work of patrol officers and making that work more visible to the public.**

## In Brief

The role of law enforcement in addressing the nation’s gang problem must move beyond a “hook ‘em and book ‘em” mentality. To do this, practitioners and policymakers should look beyond the traditional role of police officers as “crime fighters” through suppression of criminal activities. Suppression alone is only a Band-Aid; it has no lasting effect on gang membership and, over the long run, it costs too much to sustain.

The police have a vital role in *preventing* youth from joining gangs in the first place. In fact, they have a true mandate with respect to efforts to prevent gang-joining: It is, quite simply, a part of their job to serve and protect.

Controlling gang membership is key to serving and protecting, based on clear evidence that gangs and their members:

- Disrupt the important socializing power of institutions — schools, families and communities — that help young people learn and abide by the appropriate rules of a society.
- Commit crimes, victimizing innocents and each other.
- Detract from the quality of life in neighborhoods and cities.

- Divert important resources — money, personnel and programs — from other initiatives that could help create healthier, more productive communities.

The police literally are — or should be — on the front line of gang-membership prevention. They are highly visible in the community. They are active in neighborhoods at times and in places that other adults who engage in activities to keep youth out of gangs are not. Police know the trouble spots. They have extensive knowledge of individuals in a neighborhood, including youth who are in trouble or — most important in efforts to prevent gang-joining — are on the brink of trouble.

Therefore, the police can help identify kids who are at risk for joining a gang. They can collaborate with community, school, public health, and other public- and private-sector partners to work on primary, front-end prevention strategies. Police officers can work directly in programs that provide alternatives to gangs. They can help develop support systems for young people and thereby increase the accountability of youth to social institutions such as their families, schools and communities.

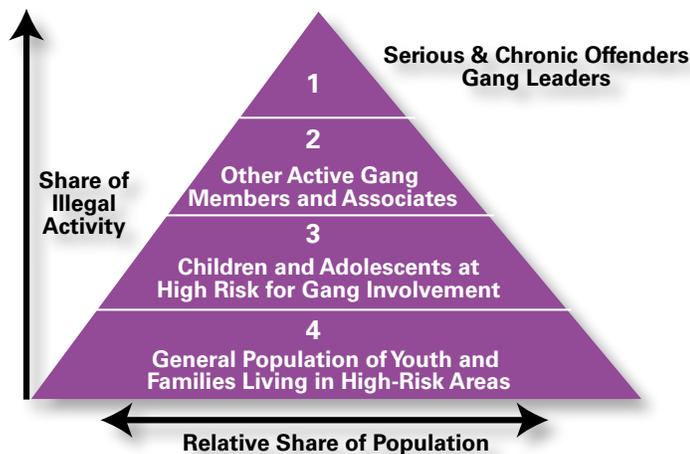
Although the police already engage in a considerable number of prevention activities, their role in gang-membership prevention should be enhanced. These measures include targeting at-risk youth with the appropriate response, avoiding suppression-only tactics, and understanding the following:

- Gang-joining is part of the gang problem.
- How the SARA and public health prevention models complement each other.

- The role of police in assessing the nature and magnitude of an actual or potential gang problem.
- The role of police in identifying at-risk youth.
- The role of police in partnerships.

To understand the roles that police can play in gang-membership prevention, it is useful to consider the Gang Response and Involvement Pyramid below.

### Gang Response and Involvement Pyramid



SOURCE: Phelan Wyrick, Ph.D., Gang prevention: How to make the “front end” of your anti-gang effort work, *U.S Attorneys’ Bull.* 2006; 4(3):52–60.<sup>1</sup>

Here, we see that the widest part of the pyramid — 4, at the bottom — represents members of the general public who live in high-risk neighborhoods. Going up the pyramid, 3 represents a smaller portion of the population — youth who are at risk of joining a gang. Both of these groups are appropriate for targeting gang-membership prevention efforts. (*Note:* The top two tiers — active gang members, and serious and chronic offenders — represent those who are already gang members and, therefore, are not the focus of this book, which is *preventing* youth from joining gangs.)

As policymakers and law enforcement leaders consider the roles that police can play in preventing kids from joining a gang, the overarching issue of accountability is paramount. Getting out in front of the problem — preventing it from developing in the first place — is an important aspect of public agency accountability.

## How the SARA and the Public Health Prevention Models Complement Each Other

Preventing youth from joining a gang is about much more than *crime* prevention — it is also about public health. Being in a gang exposes an individual to violence that can result in death and injuries, not only of the gang member and other members of the gang but also the general public.

Because keeping kids from joining a gang has criminal justice *and* public health ramifications, it is important to look at the problem-solving models used by professionals in both of these fields.

### The Public Health Model

There are four basic steps in the public health model for prevention:

1. Using surveillance to better understand the scope, characteristics and consequences of the issue.
2. Identifying the risk and protective factors.
3. Designing and evaluating prevention strategies.
4. Disseminating and implementing the best strategies.

For more information on public health's role in preventing youth-gang membership, see chapter 3.

### The SARA Model

In law enforcement, the primary problem-solving model is called SARA: **S**canning, **A**nalysis, **R**esponse and **A**ssessment. SARA grew out of problem-oriented policing, which focuses on *preventing* crime and, in fact, has been used in response to gang activity.<sup>2</sup> The four steps of SARA are:

1. Scanning the environment to identify the problem.
2. Analyzing the problem, using multiple sources of information.
3. Developing a response consistent with the information gathered.
4. Assessing the effectiveness of the response.

For more on the SARA model, see <http://www.popcenter.org/about/?p=sara>.

### Similar Principles and Goals

Both the public health and the SARA models focus on the systematic collection of data to inform action. In addition to sharing similar problem-solving steps, they share some underlying assumptions. For example, with respect to violence prevention, both SARA and the public health model are based on the premise that the problem (violence) is not rare and that it occurs far more often than comes to the attention of official data sources (for example, emergency room records and police records).

This same principle could be applied to gang-joining: With nearly 1 in 12 youth saying that they belonged to a gang at some point during their teens, the problem is not a rare phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> Because of similarities in some key principles and the shared goal of reducing gang activity, police and public health professionals should find much in common. The similarities between the two approaches provide optimism about the potential for increasing collaboration between law enforcement and public health regarding gang-membership prevention.

## Violence Prevention Is Possible

Another underlying principle of the public health approach to violence prevention — which also should inform principles of gang-membership prevention — is that the problem is not inevitable: There *are* ways to prevent it. This principle is entirely consistent with law enforcement’s use of SARA to gather better knowledge of where gang problems exist (surveillance) and who is vulnerable to gang-joining (risk factors).

## Differences in Data and Responses

Although there are parallels between law enforcement’s SARA model and the public health model, there are important differences in the data used and the nature of the responses. The public health model generally draws on more data resources — such as community- or school-based youth surveys — than law enforcement typically does when using SARA. The goal when applying the public health model to violence prevention is to understand the individual-, family-, school- and community-level risk and protective factors that influence violence to inform prevention programs and policies that can change behavior. On the other hand, SARA emphasizes the use of data about the timing, location and nature of activity to inform a response to reduce that activity.

Also, law enforcement does not typically use efficacy trials, in the way that public health research does, to determine the success of a strategy. However, the importance of evaluation is gaining credibility in the law enforcement culture. Public health professionals also use the public health model to guide prevention work at the local, county, state and national levels. Police, on the other hand, generally use the SARA model locally.

## Complementary Strategies

Overall, the SARA and the public health problem-solving models are complementary, and there are various ways they can be applied to strategies for gang-membership prevention.

With respect to the first step in each model — *surveillance* or *information-gathering* — a comprehensive strategy to keep kids from joining a gang would use law enforcement data, emergency room and other medical records, and surveys of

the community, for example. Communities would use this information to plan comprehensive prevention strategies that reduce the attractions to gangs, provide alternatives to gang-joining, and provide youth with the competencies needed to avoid gangs (including, for example, communication, problem-solving and study skills). Law enforcement officers would contribute by helping to inform these strategies, advocating for their support and implementation, and referring appropriate youth and families to programs.

The bottom line is this: When it comes to creating sound strategies and programs to help prevent youth from joining gangs, it is important to understand the *complementary* aspects of the law enforcement (SARA) and public health models. Yes, there can be tensions between the two problem-solving approaches, based on deeply rooted philosophical traditions and social mandates of each professional group. However, any initiative for gang-membership prevention will only be enriched by moving beyond a single perspective to solving a social problem as complex as why kids join gangs.

To quote Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith, who broke new ground in her efforts to define youth violence as a public health — not just a criminal justice — issue:

When a kid enters the emergency room with a gunshot wound to his thigh after having been shot in a dispute over a jacket, I want him to be as well treated for the “disease” of violence as he is for the traumatic injury he has sustained. When that young man is blanketed in therapeutic intervention that involves his parents, his pregnant girlfriend, the probation officer assigned to him on a previous case, the kid who shot him with whom perhaps he has had a long-standing feud, his school, which is about to expel him, and perhaps even his younger brother who has just started to act out violently — that’s when we will start to make a difference.<sup>4</sup>

Increasing the role and visibility of police in initiatives to prevent gang membership — from assessment of the problem, to identification of at-risk youth, to development and implementation of programs — is consistent with public health’s goal of implementing a comprehensive

(addressing individual-, family-, school-, and community-level risk and protective factors), multisectoral (law enforcement, health, education and social services) plan to prevent the violence and the negative health outcomes associated with gang-joining.

## The Role of Police in Assessment

The police should play a key role in providing a sober, realistic assessment of any gang problem — or *potential* gang problem — in a community. Such an assessment includes the nature (characteristics) and magnitude of the problem.

In fact, policymakers and practitioners should understand that sometimes school and elected officials engage in *denial* at the early stages of a gang problem.<sup>5</sup> This only allows things to get worse, increasing the potential that more kids will be recruited into a gang. On the other hand, officials may engage in *overidentification* of a gang problem, believing that there are more gang members than there really are. This can create public panic and a knee-jerk response that emphasizes suppression to the exclusion of other responses. Such an approach can also make things worse, criminalizing individuals at the fringe of gang membership and diverting resources from prevention activities.

One way to help avoid overcriminalizing youth is to have a validated, consistent definition (with specific criteria) of what constitutes gang membership. Consistent definitions that are uniformly applied across agencies and settings will prevent the use of misleading and sensationalized assessments of the size or extent of a gang problem. The use of a consistent approach will also lead to cooperation across law enforcement and public health agencies. (For more information about definitions of gang membership, see Introduction. For more information about the need for definitions in conducting effective surveillance, see chapter 3.)

There are a number of resources to help a community assess a gang problem or a potential gang problem. In many cases, the police use these tools already, and it is a matter of applying a problem-solving tool like the SARA model to gangs. Such tools are particularly important in helping to

understand the gang problem better in ways that lead to effective strategies. For example:

- The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) published *Strategies to Address Gang Crime: A Guidebook for Local Law Enforcement*: <http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/files/RIC/Publications/e060810142Gang-book-web.pdf>.
- The National Youth Gang Center has a number of analytic tools: <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov>.
- The principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) are familiar to law enforcement officials and can be used to develop strategies for gang-membership prevention. CPTED involves the assessment of physical structure and characteristics of a neighborhood as the first step in removing criminogenic elements, including, for example, targeting unlit alleys and other places with a low level of public surveillance, and increasing opportunities for prosocial interactions. Diane Zahm's excellent 2007 guide, *Using Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design in Problem Solving*, documents the utility of the CPTED model in a number of settings that apply to gangs, including responding to graffiti and repeat victimizations. (For more information, see <http://www.popcenter.org/tools/cpted/>.)

Of course, the best assessment of the nature and magnitude of a gang problem will use multiple sources of information and put that information in an appropriate analytic framework. Practitioners and policymakers would be well-advised to remember that — although calls for service, arrests, and other forms of gang documentation are certainly useful in assessing a gang problem — these data should be augmented by information from schools and other community organizations to develop the most comprehensive picture of a gang problem, particularly if it is to be used in developing strategies for gang-membership prevention.

## The Role of Police in Identifying At-Risk Youth

There is evidence of effectiveness for a range of violence-prevention strategies (see model and promising programs at the Center for the Study

and Prevention of Violence, <http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints>), including “universal” programs provided to an entire group of youth regardless of risk; many school-based programs are an example of this.<sup>6</sup>

There are also strategies directed specifically (“targeted”) at the youth at highest risk for violence. Although targeting youth who are at the highest risk for joining a gang seems, on its face, to be a wise approach, we have little empirical evidence of the success of targeted (as opposed to general youth population) programs and strategies specifically for preventing gang-joining. This, unfortunately, is because rigorous evaluations have not been conducted or evaluations have failed to show significant effects. (For more on the importance of evaluations, see chapter 11.)

That said, it is likely that both types of approaches — universal and targeted — would influence risk for gang-joining. However, given scarce time, funds and other resources, as well as their unique expertise, it makes sense for law enforcement to include a specific focus on youth who we know are particularly at risk for joining a gang.

The differences in offending and victimization between gang members and nongang members make a compelling case for gang-prevention efforts.<sup>7</sup> And police officers may be in a unique position — arguably distinct from parents, school officials and neighbors — to engage in the early identification of youth who are at risk of becoming gang members.

### Police Contact With Youth

Consider all of the ways that police come into contact with youth. Police officers are active in neighborhoods at times and in places that other adults who might engage in activities for gang-membership prevention are not. They know the trouble spots and have extensive knowledge of individuals in a neighborhood, including youth who are in trouble or — most important for efforts to prevent gang-joining — who are on the brink of trouble.

Much of this knowledge, which is crucial to a community’s efforts to get in front of an emerging problem, comes from patrol. Using patrol as a strategy for gang-membership prevention costs

no additional money because officers are already engaged in patrol.

But, as Joe Mollner observed in my interview of him (see the sidebar “In the Spotlight: The Boys and Girls Clubs of America”), it is important that when patrol officers encounter groups of young people on the streets, they stop and talk to them, not harass or search them. This builds relationships that can provide a heads-up about at-risk individuals and gang problems that may be emerging.

The police also have contact with youth through enforcement of curfew and truancy laws, which may lead to filing of a Field Interrogation (FI) card, where information about a youth is recorded for possible future reference.

The police also have contact with youth through “custody and release,” in which the juvenile is taken into custody, held and released.

Police officers also come into contact with juveniles through school-based programs such as G.R.E.A.T. (Gang Resistance Education and Training) and the School Resource Officer (SRO) program.

Finally, the police interact with juveniles through gang units. In fact, many gang units are primarily information-gathering, not enforcement-oriented, entities.<sup>8</sup> During the process of gathering intelligence on gang members, these special units also gain a good deal of information about individuals on the fringe of full gang membership. This information can be used for gang-prevention efforts, particularly when police in gang units work in partnership with schools, families, nongovernmental organizations and social service agencies.

Indeed, through every type of contact with youth, police gather information that allows them to identify those who are at risk for gang membership and to make referrals. In the St. Louis Consent to Search program, for example, officers referred at-risk youth to clergy and social services (see <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/191332.pdf>).

The ability of police officers to do this well, however, depends on their ability to recognize at-risk families and youth and on their awareness of services and programs for referral. When they

do recognize at-risk youth, police are an important conduit for directing adolescents to a variety of governmental and nongovernmental agencies, including school and after-school programs, social service programs, job training, recreational activities and mentoring programs (such as Big Brothers and Sisters of America). The information that police glean about youth at risk for gang membership also benefits the prevention-focused activities of outreach workers and other youth-serving groups.

## Understanding the Risk Factors

For the police to engage in effective gang-membership prevention, they must understand the risk factors — the “pushes and pulls” — that make gangs attractive to some youth. “Pushes” are the negative factors that push youth into gangs; they are found in characteristics or conditions of neighborhoods, families, schools, peer groups and individuals. “Pulls” draw or attract youth to gangs; these include being part of a group and the perceived benefits of a gang lifestyle, such as excitement, the chance to make money, and the perception of protection.

What do we know about gangs and gang members that informs prevention efforts? First, membership in a gang usually lasts for a relatively short period of time, generally less than two years.<sup>9</sup> Second, the age of joining frequently coincides with early adolescence.<sup>9</sup>

Specific risk factors (which are discussed at length in other chapters of this book) include:

- Poor parental supervision.
- Early childhood aggression.
- Believing that it is acceptable to engage in delinquency.
- Significant negative life events, such as death of a parent.
- Peers who are gang members.

Because they are aware of the identity of gang members in their community, the police can play a role in keeping nongang members away from active gang members. Here are four specific

measures that police agencies can take to help prevent youth from joining a gang:

1. Use the SARA model to assess gang problems and potential gang problems.
2. Work with other partners inside and outside the criminal justice system, including school resource officers (SROs), or through other school- and community-based programs that address the key risk and protective factors for gang-joining, such as drug abuse, mentoring and employment opportunities, delinquency and violence.
3. Target the appropriate youth with the appropriate response — and avoid suppression-only approaches; the “Gang Response and Involvement Pyramid” helps in understanding target populations.
4. Don’t assume that gang membership or gang activities are the same in every jurisdiction; gangs vary across communities and require prevention activities that are tailored to the local population.

## The Role of Police in Partnerships

Police partnerships with other community groups are crucial in preventing kids from joining gangs. Police can partner with schools, public health and community agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and youth service agencies in a wide range of gang-membership prevention activities. In fact, such partnerships can increase police legitimacy and credibility, particularly in at-risk communities and among at-risk youth.

The police can play a variety of roles in such partnerships. It is important for practitioners and policymakers to understand, however, that law enforcement might not take the lead in many prevention efforts. This could require a cultural shift for an organization that is used to leading suppression efforts, such as making arrests, serving search warrants, conducting investigations and engaging in directed patrols.

Regardless of the role that police play in trying to keep youth from joining gangs, it is important that the organizational culture of local law

**IN THE SPOTLIGHT: THE BOYS AND GIRLS CLUBS OF AMERICA****▶ INTERVIEW WITH JOE MOLLNER**

*"We cannot arrest our way out of the gang problem. Over the years, I have seen that this [gangs] is a community-wide problem that needs a community-wide initiative to have any effect on it."*

— Joe Mollner, veteran of 27 years at the St. Paul (MN) Police Department

As Senior Director of Delinquency and Gang Initiatives for the Boys and Girls Clubs of America (BGCA), Joe Mollner oversees gang and delinquency prevention as well as intervention and re-entry efforts across the country. Mollner began his career as a patrol officer in the St. Paul, MN, police department and left the force as a commander. In 1992, as a sergeant, he began working with BGCA on a gang-membership prevention initiative in the Twin Cities. Mollner has served as President of the Minnesota Midwest Gang Investigators Association and as Chairman of the Ten State Midwest Gang Investigators Association. He was a founding member of the Minnesota-Wisconsin Asian Gang Investigators Association and has served on the board of the National Gang Investigators Association.

**How did you get started working with gangs?**

I was a lieutenant. A young girl was wounded in a drive-by shooting on a street corner while waiting for the school bus. She was not the

intended victim. The community was up in arms, and pressure was put on the mayor and the police chief. A 13-officer task force was asked to address the problem. The task force worked for eight weeks, doing home searches, serving warrants, car stops and surveillance work on known gang members. In short, they did heavy suppression work.

**Did that approach work?**

Gang members responded by moving guns out of the city and lying low ... for a few weeks. Then the guns came back. This illustrates that suppression alone is a Band-Aid that won't have a lasting effect. The costs of suppression are too great to keep it up for very long and, when suppression ends, you are back to where you started. By itself, suppression does nothing.

**Why is it important for the police to work in gang-membership prevention efforts?**

It is part of the job. When an officer joins the department, it is to serve and protect. Controlling gang membership and working to get gangs out of the community is a big part of serving and protecting. Routine patrol officers should start to build a network on the street that builds relationships with individuals and community agencies. Officers need to look at what is available on the resource side and get to know people in the community. This applies to individuals as well as the business community who will build community support.

The SARA model is excellent for developing partnerships as well because it provides information that the police can act on in developing strategies and responses to gangs and other problems.

**What advice would you have about assessing potential gang problems — and how does that factor into actually preventing kids from joining a gang?**

Denial is a big-time problem with many police departments. We need to be realistic in our assessment of how big a gang problem is — and is not. In many cities, the extent of the gang problem is overestimated, and lots of kids are stigmatized who shouldn't be. Sometimes, departments go overboard in developing lists of gang members. Developing lists in itself is not useful to law enforcement. Developing lists misses the point about most gang members, who have families and children or siblings who may or may not be gang-involved but are at high risk of becoming gang involved. The police may be able to identify those individuals at high risk of joining a gang and keep them out of gang activity. They are a tremendous source of knowledge and resources.

**What can the police do to support gang-prevention activities?**

First, patrol can play an important role in prevention. It doesn't cost any additional money, because the police already do patrol, but

enforcement agencies values prevention activities, which:

- Provide attractive alternatives to joining a gang.
- Develop support systems for young people.
- Increase the accountability of youth to social institutions, including family, schools and communities.

Of course, many police departments are already involved in gang-membership prevention efforts, including after-school programs, SRO programs, preventive patrols, and problem-solving or

community-oriented policing. Expanding these efforts to include parents, teachers and neighborhood groups will be important to their success.

For example, the police can sponsor an athletic league or a team in an athletic league. They can provide safety for after-school activity centers, safe havens and athletic contests that offer alternatives to gang-joining. In many communities, the police participate in career days, help younger children learn to read or do math, or make referrals for youth who are at high risk for gang-joining. Some jurisdictions are thinking outside the box, using police officers as mentors who

they need to consider the role of prevention activities during patrol. To do this, officers must know what the goals are and how they are to be accomplished. Prevention needs to be emphasized, reinforced and rewarded. When patrol officers see groups of young people on the streets, they need to stop and talk to them — not to harass or search — but to stop and talk and see what is going on, have a conversation. This builds relationships that can provide a heads-up about problems that may be emerging. Another important step that can be taken is to include community policing, particularly community meetings and community forums.

### **What about school-based prevention efforts?**

School-based prevention activities are important. For example, a School Resource Officer (SRO) gets to know kids on a first-name basis. They can do gang awareness training in schools, which can build trust between juveniles and the police. They also can gather a large amount of information and intelligence when kids provide information about things before they take place. This information can be useful to others within and outside the school who are planning or implementing prevention strategies.

### **What role can police play in partnerships?**

Partnerships are very important, and the police can contribute to or help form community partnerships — like a gang prevention task force — with police, schools, neighborhood organizations, and faith-based and other groups. In this way, the police can come together, not as a suppression tactic but as part of a good cross section of the community. The task force can identify the nature of the problem with a good community gang assessment and then identify what is available as far as services and interventions. The police need to be one of many members in such a group. That includes thinking outside the box. In this context, it may be necessary to look outside of city or county resources for support. When I was an officer, this led to partnerships with juvenile probation that added special caseloads with gang members and violent offenders. This approach led to increased accountability of gang members to their probation officers. On their own initiative, officers took youth from public housing to a variety of activities, such as rock climbing, picnics, and demonstrations of canine and horse patrol units. The key to this was that police officers worked with the community to show that there are other things the police do than arrest. In this context, the police can work with Parks and Recreation. They can build relationships with youth in supportive roles. Building trust is an important part of

these activities and makes prevention more successful.

### **Can you expand a bit on the importance of building trust?**

Routine patrol officers can build their own network on the street — with individuals and community agencies. The element of building trust is critical, and how officers conduct themselves on the street can go a long way toward doing that. Officers need to look at what is available on the resource side and get to know people in the community. This applies to individuals as well as the business community. By using the SARA model, problems can be solved in the community, and officers won't just respond to calls for service. The biggest thing is for officers to learn to be community-minded.

### **When did you make the transition from law enforcement to the Boys and Girls Clubs of America?**

I joined the Boys and Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) in 2002 as Director of Delinquency Prevention. BGCA began in 1906, and received a Congressional Charter in 1956. Today, BGCA serves more than 4 million boys and girls in over 4,000 club locations. There are more than 50,000 trained staff who provide services in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

engage youth who live in public housing in a variety of activities.

The Danes have an interesting collaboration between the police and the parents of children who are suspected of being involved — or about to become involved — in gang or other criminal activity. In what are called “worrying conversations,” police officers talk with parents who often are unaware of (or unwilling to confront) the activities of their children and who may not know what resources are available, such as tutoring or free after-school supervised activities.<sup>10</sup> The police can include social service and nongovernmental organization

(NGO) representatives on their visits for the “conversations.” Referrals to services or activities often result from such conversations and can create an alliance between parents, police and others in prevention efforts.

Through partnerships with other agencies and groups, law enforcement can help increase youth accountability, an important principle in gang prevention. In a number of communities throughout the U.S., the Juvenile Accountability Incentive Block Grant program (JAIBG) works to increase the accountability of young people to their schools and families.

In St. Louis, MO, for example, juvenile police officers partnered with juvenile probation officers to conduct more than 10,000 home visits per year.<sup>11</sup> These home visits not only increased youth accountability to their conditions of probation; they also offered probation and police officers new insights into family conditions. In some cases, the police became aware of potential abuse or neglect and took appropriate action. In other cases, the police learned of siblings who would benefit from prevention services and made referrals to social service and school agencies.

Another collaborative role for police in preventing gang-joining is disseminating information through presentations about gangs to schools, businesses and community groups. These opportunities raise the level of knowledge and awareness of gang problems among a variety of groups. Such presentations can also help to identify and enlist additional partners who may contribute their services or support gang-membership prevention efforts.

Finally, it is important that practitioners and policymakers understand that when the police collaborate with other agencies and community groups in preventing gang-joining, they can become more successful in increasing public safety.

A relatively straightforward focus for collaboration is data sharing. Cardiff (Wales) and Oakland (CA) have innovative programs that create partnerships between law enforcement and emergency room departments to share information on better policing efforts and to develop novel strategies to prevent violence-related injuries.<sup>12,13</sup> Such partnerships are an example of how law enforcement and public health groups can work together.

Another example of collaboration is the Boston Gun Project, in which the police, probation officers, prosecutors and the clergy worked together to reduce youth firearm violence over a sustained period of time. Although the goal of the project was not to prevent youth from joining gangs, it is a good example of the role that law enforcement can play in a broad-based partnership. In the Boston Gun Project, police officers conducted home visits, made referrals across agencies, and held

neighborhood meetings to make clear the consequences of involvement in gangs and violence. This collaborative, problem-solving model became the basis for other successful programs that stressed partnerships, including the Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/crime/gun-violence/prevention/sacsi.htm>) and Project Safe Neighborhoods (<http://www.psn.gov>).

The Comprehensive Strategy, advocated by the National Youth Gang Center and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention ([http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/pubs/gun\\_violence/sect08-b.html](http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/pubs/gun_violence/sect08-b.html)), is a good organizing tool for groups working to reduce the formation of gangs and address existing gang problems. This model can be used to place the police in multifaceted roles — including prevention — while partnering with other groups and agencies.

A few final words about partnerships are important here. Some prevention programs require substantial time to ramp up their activities, build momentum within communities, and show effects. For example, programs that are working with elementary school children to teach problem-solving skills and change attitudes about violence will not show effects on gang-joining for several years because youth generally do not join a gang until they are older.

When comprehensive gang-membership prevention responses are implemented, it is easy for the police to grow impatient with the pace of other activities. Patience, timing and partnerships are important but they aren't easy to attain. Strong leaders can commit their organizations (law enforcement, schools, social service agencies, neighborhoods) to courses of action that can overcome hurdles and pay dividends over the long haul. It is important to set near- and long-term goals and to sustain activities that can achieve both.

## Bringing Law Enforcement and Public Health Together

Despite important differences in orientation, there are many benefits in bringing law enforcement

and public health together to develop policies to help prevent kids from joining gangs. Each field derives from a distinct intellectual tradition:

- Law enforcement is part of the classical tradition that conceives of human action as a product of rational and moral choices.
- Public health is rooted in positivist conceptions of human behavior as influenced by internal and external forces that, in principle, are subject to modification.

Despite these differences, both fields depend on an accurate assessment of the problem that is based on solid evidence about the causes and consequences of the problem. Each field uses that assessment to build a response and, ideally, to monitor results of that response over time to see if things are getting better.

For decades, public health and law enforcement officials alike have linked high levels of violence in American society with social conditions such as joblessness, family disruption and educational disadvantage. Based on everything we know about gang-joining, these same risk factors apply to why kids join gangs.

## Conclusion

It is difficult to imagine a successful gang-membership prevention program without police involvement. Police officers have unique knowledge of — and access to — individual citizens, including at-risk youth. Although the police are already engaged in a large number of prevention

activities, they should be looking for opportunities to collaborate with other agencies and groups in the community. Such collaborations can assist the police in developing and expanding community trust and in making their prevention activities more visible in the community.

As police become more active and visible in efforts to prevent gang membership, their legitimacy within a community grows. It is no surprise that law enforcement — particularly in economically poor areas where other institutions, such as schools, also may have broken down — often lacks the confidence of the community.

Building trust has clear benefits: broader cooperation in the community and strengthening ties between citizens and public agencies. This strengthening of ties is part of a concept called *collective efficacy*, which is the tendency of residents to work together for the common good of the neighborhood. The evidence is clear that neighborhoods and communities with high collective efficacy have the ability to regulate and control the behavior of their juveniles. (For more on the role of the community in preventing youth from joining gangs, see chapter 8.)

Finally, it is important for practitioners and policy-makers to take heart: Gangs do *not* overpower all other social institutions — and youth who are at risk, or are on the brink, of joining a gang have ongoing relationships with their families, neighbors, schools and other groups that are not involved in gang activity. Enhancing those relationships is an important part of prevention, and the police have an important role to play in that effort.

## About the Author

### Scott H. Decker

Scott H. Decker has been conducting research on gangs and gang members for more than two decades. He has been a keynote speaker at the national meetings of the Boys and Girls Clubs of America and at a White House conference on gangs. Dr. Decker's specific areas of research include gang organization, desistance from gangs and gang prevention. He received his Ph.D. from Florida State University and currently teaches at Arizona State University.

## Endnotes

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