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CHANGING COURSE

Preventing Gang Membership



Chapter 7. What Can Schools Do to Help Prevent Gang-Joining?



What Can Schools Do to Help Prevent Gang-Joining?

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- **Providing a safe environment so that students are not fearful may be the single most important thing schools can do to prevent gang involvement; we need to test this proposition rigorously.**
- **Many principals in schools with gang problems do not recognize or admit a problem: In a large sample of secondary schools with gang problems (defined as more than 15 percent of students reporting that they belonged to a gang), only one-fifth of principals said their school had a problem.**
- **Data show that youths at the greatest risk of gang participation are not reached by traditional, school-based prevention programs; youths who have left school require alternative learning environments to engage them in learning and prevention programs.**
- **School activities intended to prevent gang involvement are likely to be ineffective if they fail to incorporate elements of demonstrated efficacy or are poorly implemented; therefore, educational leaders should carefully consider whether programs (1) make efficient use of educational time, (2) use state-of-the-art methods, (3) have been shown to be effective in preventing problem behavior or gang involvement, and (4) are implemented as designed.**
- **Assessments of gang risks, as well as the reach and usefulness of current prevention activities, are necessary to guide future action. Systematic self-report gang-involvement and victimization surveys should be used to supplement existing, inadequate mechanisms — such as school- or principal-reported incident or suspension rates — which do a poor job of surfacing emerging problems, including school safety problems.**

In Brief

Schools that provide safe and rewarding educational environments capable of engaging youths in learning, attracting high student attendance, and producing high levels of student achievement are an important part of the infrastructure of well-functioning communities. Schools are not only charged with the socialization of young people but they also drive the economic and social development of the communities in which they are located.

If a community's schools are weak — characterized by low achievement, poor attendance, high dropout rates, disruptive classroom behavior and a climate of incivility — the community becomes an undesirable place to live. In contrast, schools that engage students in learning so that they produce expected levels of achievement contribute to the community's capacity to regulate the behavior of youths and to make it a desirable place to live. Put simply, safe schools may prevent the establishment of gangs in communities.

Research on schools, delinquency and gangs has found that (a) administrators often overlook or minimize problems; (b) unsafe schools and gang problems go hand-in-hand; (c) evidence-based prevention

strategies can be put in place in schools, implying that (d) schools continually assess themselves for potential gang or safety problems to identify specific needs for improvement; and (e) educators should carefully monitor the implementation strength of their gang-membership prevention activities and attend to whether the prevention programs reach those young people who are at highest risk of gang involvement.

Gang problems are more likely in schools that serve areas of concentrated poverty and disorganization. This means that schools in communities with relatively many people receiving public assistance income, many children living in female-headed families, high unemployment rates, and most residents occupying dwellings they do not own are more likely to experience gang problems. In essence, fear is likely both a product of and a cause of gang problems in schools and communities.

Despite the large number of prevention programs in schools, school-based gang-membership prevention programs are seldom based on a careful consideration of specific needs. Universal prevention programs can be helpful generally, but strategies that are more directly focused on gang participation and school safety are also indicated in some schools. Yet, school administrators usually fail to recognize gang problems, even in schools where large numbers of students are involved in gangs.

Communities must prevent gang problems and provide safe school environments not only to protect students and improve their educational outcomes but also to forestall a cycle in which school disorder and community disorganization perpetuate each other.

Communities with concentrations of disadvantaged populations tend to have difficult-to-manage schools, making both education and prevention programs hard to conduct and leading to a continuing cycle of disadvantage and high rates of delinquent behavior in school and the community. Therefore, policymakers must understand that gang prevention may be most needed where it is most difficult to implement.

Unfortunately, many school principals are peculiarly unaware of — or unwilling to admit to — gang problems in their schools. In a large national sample of secondary schools, student self-reports of gang participation were used to classify schools as having a gang problem if more than about 15 percent of students reported being gang participants. These self-reports revealed that about 10 percent of all schools had a gang problem. However, only one-fifth of the principals of these problem schools indicated that their schools had a gang problem.¹

Just as effective supervision and control by families are important in regulating the behavior

of youths,^{2,3,4,5} effective supervision and control of behavior in schools are required to provide safety. Supervision and control require identifying problem behaviors — including risks for gang-joining — when they occur, signaling desired and undesired behavior, tracking behavior and responding to it.

Excluding weapons from the school, being vigilant for signs of harassment or intimidation and responding to stop them whenever they occur, and providing a social environment where all students feel they can count on teachers and administrators for safety and for emotional and social support may help regulate youth behavior in schools. For instance, schools that create schoolwide practices for managing discipline that incorporate behavioral principles, have clear expectations for conduct, and enforce rules firmly and fairly have repeatedly been found to experience less disorder.^{6,7} One salient feature of an efficacious anti-bullying program involves clarifying proscribed behavior to adults and students who watch for that behavior where it is likely to occur.⁸

Research on the steps that schools can take to reduce problem behavior provides guidance by identifying efficacious programs and arrangements.^{9, 10} For example, if weapons *could* be excluded from schools, schools would obviously be safer. Ways of achieving this have not been well-studied, however. Many schools employ metal detectors, but even casual observation indicates that this equipment is not at all consistently well-implemented in many schools. Some evidence suggests that metal detectors *could* be helpful,¹¹ but more and better research on this is required.¹²

Risk Factors for Gang-Joining

The predictors of individual adolescent participation in gangs are, in most respects, similar to the predictors of serious or violent delinquency.¹ We know, of course, that delinquent behavior increases when individuals are affiliated with a gang.^{13, 14, 15, 16} Other risk factors for gang participation are the presence of gangs in the school or community and fear for one's safety.

Gang problems disproportionately occur in schools that serve areas of concentrated poverty and social disorganization, where many families experience economic hardship, the unemployment rate is high, and many children live in families headed by a single woman.¹

Fear for One's Safety

A nationwide sampling of schools found that, even after controlling for other predictors of delinquent behavior, students who felt that the school was safe were much less likely to participate in a gang.¹ This does not necessarily imply that fear causes gang involvement, because the presence of gangs no doubt also produces fear. But the findings of this study are consistent with evidence suggesting that youths join gangs, in part, because of a perceived threat from rivals — and that being part of a gang may reduce anxiety about the threat of victimization.^{17, 18}

Indeed, student perceptions about their personal safety are powerful predictors of gang-participation rates, even when community characteristics such as concentrated poverty and community social disorganization are taken into account.

Schools in which students do not feel safe are much more likely to have many students involved with gangs, even when these other community features are adjusted statistically.¹

Gang-participation rates are higher in schools in communities characterized by concentrated disadvantage, concentrations of immigrants and residential crowding, and urbanicity. Beyond this, the most impressive *school* correlate of gang-participation rates is school climate: Gang participation is much greater in schools perceived by students to be unsafe.

No rigorous research has tested whether programs that enhance feelings of safety or make schools safer have an effect on youth gang participation. This plausible theory should be tested.

Gangs as “Social Malignancy”

Gang involvement can be viewed as a social process involving contagion, akin to the transmission or spread of a disease. One of the mechanisms through which contagion operates may involve an erroneous perception by adolescents that joining a gang will protect them from harm by others. We know that some youths join a gang as a way of coping with the threat of harm in unsafe environments, despite clear evidence that the victimization rate of individuals affiliated with a gang is much higher than that of unaffiliated individuals.^{1, 18, 19}

Gang problems vary by *place* (tending to be greater in urban areas of concentrated poverty and social disorganization) and *time* (an area that would seem, on the basis of community characteristics, to be at risk of gang problems may not initially have a problem but may develop one later). The development of gang problems may involve a cyclical process of “social malignancy” in which real or perceived threat, intimidation, social contagion and retaliation feed on each other to exacerbate a gang problem.

Because gang participation is greater in unsafe schools, educational leaders should be vigilant for the emergence of problems. They should focus attention on specific identifiable problems to provide safe schools and intervene when the escalation of a problem appears likely.

Prevention Principles for School-Based Strategies

Because individual, family, school and community risk factors for gang participation are, in most respects, similar to those for delinquency, violent offending and problem behavior in general, there is reason to believe that prevention initiatives directed at general problem behaviors — such as impulse control, lack of attachment to school, and rejection of conventional rules — may be universally helpful.^{1, 2, 14, 20, 21, 22} Such prevention programs include school experiences that foster expectations of rewards for engagement and that develop skills in resisting negative peer influence.

Indeed, systematic reviews of multiple studies conclude that school-based prevention programs generally reduce problem behavior, including aggression and other delinquency.^{23, 24, 25} Generally, these reviews show that more intensive prevention strategies directed at selected groups of higher risk students have larger effects than universal strategies directed at the population more diffusely. In short, targeting youths at high risk of gang involvement is likely to have larger effects on this group, even though universal interventions may provide modest benefits for the entire population of students.

Prevention programs or strategies that are implemented well (or are implemented by the research teams evaluating them) also generally have larger effects. Nevertheless, prevention activities implemented as part of routine practice in schools (without researcher involvement in implementation) have also been found to have modest beneficial effects.²⁴ Unfortunately, the efficacy of these practices is not fully understood because credible evaluations of routine prevention practices in schools are rare. (For more information on the importance of evaluations, see chapter 11.)

In addition to the importance of careful program implementation, we know that behavioral and social-cognitive programs are more effective than noncognitive or nonbehavioral counseling interventions.²⁵ Behavioral programs support desired behavior by arranging the cues in the social environment and by managing the reward properties of environments so that desired rather than undesired behaviors are reinforced. Cognitive-behavioral approaches — based on the theory

that thoughts are related to feelings and behavior — assist young people in managing their thoughts and feelings in ways that reduce the likelihood of problem behavior.

Social-cognitive strategies or programs are based on the way people learn, in part by observing what others do and what happens, and how this kind of learning affects how people think, feel and believe about the consequences of their actions. In general, prevention strategies and programs based on cognitive-behavioral principles are more efficacious than counseling or instructional programs that are not based on them.

Universal and Selective Programs

One example of a promising *universal* prevention program is the classroom-based social skills instructional program that uses the **Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies** (PATHS) curriculum.²⁶ PATHS develops the social competencies of students and addresses the classroom management practices of teachers. A study of PATHS as part of a multicomponent program found that it resulted in less problem behavior in elementary school, with some evidence of effects — such as lower rates of diagnosed conduct disorder and fewer juvenile arrests, according to court records — that persisted to the end of high school.^{27, 28}

These outcomes of a universal prevention program are important because general problem behavior and delinquency are signs of elevated risk for gang involvement. PATHS is an example of a well-documented prevention program with clear guidance available for those who wish to implement it in schools.²⁹

The evidence about the efficacy of such school-based programs is stronger for general problem behavior than it is specifically for gang involvement. With the exception of the G.R.E.A.T. program (which is discussed at greater length in chapter 11), research has rarely focused specifically on gang involvement; rather, it has focused on other outcomes, such as delinquent behavior, that are known to be risk factors for gang involvement. For example, universal programs in kindergarten through secondary school, which are directed at providing a predictable, engaging and rewarding educational environment (so that students will have something to lose by engaging in delinquent behavior), and improving students' social competencies (helpful for avoiding problem

behavior) can, if well-implemented, be beneficial in a variety of ways, including the prevention of violent behavior.²⁷ For instance, the PATHS program has been shown, in one long-term follow-up of a school-randomized trial, to lower rates of use of health and mental health services.³⁰ (See the sidebar, “Reaching Youths Who Are Not in School.”)

Selective prevention programs are aimed at individuals who are at elevated risk. An example of a useful selective strategy is home-based backup reinforcement (HBR) for school behavior or attendance.^{31, 32, 33} HBR involves collaboration between one or more educators in the school and a parent in the home. HBR may be appropriate when problem behavior is unresponsive to reinforcers available in the school, because parents usually have access to a broader range of reinforcers and can reinforce behavior in multiple settings. Specific problem behaviors in the school setting are targeted and monitored. Through a daily report card, for example, information about performance with

respect to these behavioral targets is communicated to the home, and specified consequences are applied in the home for the in-school behavior. When desired behavior changes are achieved, the reinforcement for the target behavior is “faded,” and a new behavior may be targeted. Although HBR-type strategies have repeatedly been shown to reduce problem behavior in school, the consequences for delinquent behavior and gang involvement have generally not been studied.

One extension of in-school behavior monitoring and home notification, which has been used in combination with other in-school interventions, is a Behavioral Monitoring and Reinforcement Program, which was the subject of a randomized trial involving junior high school youths. Those who were involved in the program showed less problem behavior, absenteeism and poor school performance; more employment at a one-year follow-up; and fewer court records at a five-year follow-up.^{37, 38} This example is worthy of further application and more randomized trials that

Reaching Youths Who Are Not in School

Despite their value in reducing the general risk for problem behavior, school-based programs and strategies are unlikely to reach youths who may be at greatest risk of joining a gang: those who have dropped out of school.

The link between delinquent behavior and poor school performance and school dropout has long been established.^{34, 35, 36} Accordingly, delinquency-prone youths — including those prone to joining a gang — are less likely to be exposed to school-based preventive programs or gang interventions. Survey data on exposure to prevention programs are in line with this expectation, showing that gang members are less frequently exposed to a wide variety of school-based prevention activities.¹

Among some populations in some locations, the school dropout rate is so high that it is unrealistic to expect gang-intervention programs to reach youths at risk for gang-joining with school-based programs. It is even unrealistic to expect “universal” prevention programs in high schools to reach those most at-risk. Urban, central-city dropout

rates are staggering in many metropolitan areas, for example:³⁹

Baltimore City	41 percent
Philadelphia	61 percent
Albuquerque	49 percent

Much of the dropout occurs in the ninth grade, which means that youths at risk of dropout — who are typically poor school attendees while they remain enrolled — have little chance of exposure to programs in high school.⁴⁰

Because these high-risk youths are less likely to regularly attend school, in-school and after-school programs are less likely to reach them. Therefore, strategies must be designed to appeal to them and meet their needs. Alternatives such as evening programs or other alternatives may help reach a fraction of this population that is willing to engage in education. Unfortunately, however, rigorous research on the efficacy of such approaches remains lacking.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: THE ASSOCIATES FOR RENEWAL IN EDUCATION

▶ INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS GORE

The Associates for Renewal in Education (ARE) Public Charter School was one of the first charter schools authorized by the Public Charter School Board (CSB) when it began to operate in 1997 in the District of Columbia. It aimed to get youth who had been involved with the juvenile justice system back into a school. I interviewed the ARE president and executive director, Thomas W. Gore, M.S.W.

Why was the school created?

ARE and several other not-for-profit organizations began operating group homes for youth involved in the juvenile justice system in the early 1980s. These homes served adolescents who were coming out of detention in the Oak Hill Youth Center, youths who hadn't been in a regular school for two or three years. The Charter school was started because of the difficulty of getting these youths enrolled in regular schools.

Tell me about the school.

We used an approach based on William Glasser's *choice theory*. We wanted the students to realize that their behavior — their choices — have consequences. Our initial enrollment was 27 youths. The classes were

small (no more than 8 to 10 students), each about 90 minutes long.

Can you describe a typical student?

The typical student had little involvement in education; some were parents, some had criminal charges, some were homeless, and others had little supervision in the home — which meant that they had probation officers and social workers. The students were not accustomed to regular school attendance. Students would miss school because they had to care for a younger sibling or child, see a lawyer, or had been arrested. Some youth were afraid to venture out to school because someone might hurt them. For example, a young man might get into a misunderstanding with someone on the weekend and then be afraid to come to school. Youths who often got into pickles with other people were our typical population. But the students *wanted* to be in the safe environment that the school afforded. What prevented violence *in the school* was that it was small. There was a caring atmosphere. The youths knew that if they became homeless, the school staff would find them a place to stay. If they came to school hungry, the school would have food.

What were some components of the program?

The students were assessed academically, and an educator developed individual learning packages. Each student worked at an individual pace. What helped get these youths back into school was the presence of experienced educators, behavioral counselors and the availability of child care. Although we had a standard curriculum in reading, math and history, we also had job-readiness education. A lot of the education was done outside of the walls of the school. Out-of-classroom instruction engaged youth in the school. In the job-readiness component, we focused on finding evening jobs. Some of the students were literally on their own.

Is there any downside to youths' employment when they are in school?

We saw it as meeting a need. If a young person doesn't have a regular place to live and doesn't have resources, providing that youth with part-time employment allows him or her to avoid getting into stealing or selling drugs. It cuts down the youth's need to be dependent on others, for example, a drug dealer. Employment is not for everyone. One

examine delinquent behavior and gang participation as outcomes.

Implementation Challenges

Although gang-prevention activities in schools are common, these programs are generally far from optimal and are therefore often unlikely to be efficacious. This section describes challenges related to implementation and leadership deficits in recognizing and acting on gang problems. It also describes a vicious cycle leading to a downward spiral of social control in some communities and schools. It also addresses one of the major challenges in implementing a successful gang-membership prevention program: the complex nature of multiple, interdependent processes that underlie delinquency and gangs in social areas. This section concludes

that multiple, parallel efforts — rather than a single program — will be required to prevent gang problems in schools and communities and that development of alternatives to traditional schooling may be one helpful part of the mix of approaches to prevention.

Weaknesses of Existing Prevention Activity

School-based gang-prevention programs often fail to use best practices. According to the findings of a study that assessed the prevention activities of a large national sample of schools, these weaknesses included adopting programs without doing careful planning to match needs, poorly implementing programs with little supervision, and failing to engage youths who are at highest risk of gang involvement.¹

of the objectives of the job-readiness activity was to get a good measure of whom we were dealing with.

Nearly half of the residents of the ARE group homes had histories of substance abuse at intake, and 29 percent had been convicted of possession with intent to distribute. Some of these youths may have been coming out of Oak Hill owing money to drug dealers. That must have created problems in getting these youths reintegrated with schooling.

Sometimes, a youth came out of Oak Hill owing someone money. Or you may learn that a youth is being used by a dealer as a “runner.” Staff may have to utilize informal community contacts to negotiate with the dealer not to utilize this particular youth in this way. Being able to do this requires knowing the people in the community and having a sense of how to reach them.

What were the biggest challenges for the Charter School?

Our new school was part of a new charter school *system* that was trying to prove its

value. With the aim of reconnecting youths who had not been in school, we weren’t able to produce high enough test scores to meet the CSB’s expectations. We had to spend time educating the youths about the behavior expected in a school and about handling the stressors they faced in their lives. These outcomes are not measured by standardized achievement tests.

High attendance and test scores are not bad things; what was bad for us was being compared to schools serving traditional students. If it is a success to get a disconnected youth to go to school at all, a school should get credit for doing that. The initial focus of the CSB was to establish a viable alternative to the traditional public schools. Serving students who had a history of difficulties in education is not likely to provide the kind of quick wins that are needed in this situation. The school closed after five years because (a) our students were not meeting the CSB’s academic achievement expectations, and (b) we couldn’t increase enrollment enough to generate the revenue required to run the school. Funding is based on capitation.

What is your advice to someone who is contemplating starting a school to serve youth who have become disconnected from school?

Six things:

- Those who control funding must understand that the initial achievement and attendance of re-entry students will not compare well with students in regular schools.
- Keep the school small: no larger than about 50 students, no more than eight youth to one instructor.
- Have clear expectations for behavior, and clear policies and procedures with consequences built in.
- Be nontraditional in the way you conduct instruction.
- Have supportive services to help youth cope with having to see probation agents, deal with homelessness, being hungry and being arrested.
- Individualize learning strategies.

In this study, principals and program coordinators in schools were asked to describe the nature and extent of activities to prevent or reduce gang involvement, delinquency, drug use or other problem behavior and to promote a safe and orderly school environment. The researchers defined a gang-membership prevention activity as one that aims to reduce or prevent gang involvement, and they defined a gang-intervention activity as a program in which component activities are directed at youths who are gang members.

The researchers estimated that there were 781,800 gang-membership prevention activities and 159,700 gang-intervention activities under way in the nation’s schools at the time of the survey.¹ It is important to note that most of the activities did not focus exclusively on gang-membership prevention but also targeted other forms of problem behavior, such as drug use.

The most common *prevention* activities — about 15 percent — were curriculum, instruction or training. About 11 percent of school-based gang-membership prevention programs involved efforts to create or maintain a distinctive school culture or climate for interpersonal exchanges, and about 8 percent involved recreation, enrichment or leisure activities.

Other types of prevention activities were less common. For example, fewer than 3 percent of gang-membership prevention programs provided a role for youths in regulating or responding to student conduct through conflict resolution, mediation or youth courts, for example.

The most common *gang-intervention* activities in schools — constituting 20 percent — were counseling, social work, and psychological or therapeutic intervention. About 10 percent of

gang-intervention activities involved activities to improve intergroup relations, including activities to improve relations or resolve conflict and to promote school-community relations, including with the police or court, as well as multicultural activities.

But what about the quality of these gang-membership prevention programs? See the sidebar “Judging the Quality of a Gang-Membership Prevention Program.” Also, for more information on program and outcome evaluation, see chapter 11.

Two recent reviews that summarize what is known about effective prevention programs in schools can provide some guidance in selecting best practices in schools.^{9, 10} For example, programs that employ cognitive-behavioral principles have been shown to be effective in preventing problem behavior, according to a variety of measures; such programs usually involve instruction

and rehearsal of skills that help youths identify signs of impending problem situations, learn to stop before engaging in impulsive behavior, and improve competencies for redirecting or refusing peer pressure to engage in problem behavior.

Other strategies are designed to improve the school environment. Schoolwide strategies to promote a safe climate via clear and consistently enforced rules show promise.^{7, 41, 42} Such programs clarify expectations for student behavior and disciplinary action, and they communicate rules and consequences. Monitoring the consistency of the application of disciplinary responses (which is a component of some programs) may be essential because it is otherwise difficult for teachers and administrators to know how consistent disciplinary action actually is. Planning teams involving teachers and administrators can be used to assess needs and to devise and monitor schoolwide activities in such programs.

Judging the Quality of a Gang-Membership Prevention Program

In some areas of human endeavor, “quality” is a concept that is reasonably well-understood. For instance, refrigerators are rated by *Consumer Reports* on features such as temperature control, energy efficiency, noise and capacity; and most people regard appliances that regulate temperature, use relatively little electricity, are quiet, and hold a lot of food as higher quality than those that let the ice cream melt, drive up the electricity bill, are noisy, and don’t have room for a half-gallon carton of milk.

Popular magazine ratings of energy consumption and other features of refrigerators compare a particular model to other appliances on the market, and reviewers offer sensible advice on the suitability of the product for household use. But, in education — and particularly in the areas of delinquency and gang-membership prevention — information regarding program quality is not so clear. For instance, some schools adopt programs that are offered by vendors or technical assistance providers without careful consideration of

whether they make efficient use of educational time, use state-of-the-art methods, or are suited to the task of preventing gang involvement. A typical gang-membership prevention program involving curriculum or instruction in schools involves about 28 sessions or lessons over a 25-week period, with slightly less than half of the students participating approximately weekly. But there are also prevention programs in schools that involve five or fewer lessons — or that may be over in a week — or that involve very few students.

There also are programs that use methods or content that is unlikely to prevent gang involvement at all. For instance, recreational activities are sometimes employed with the stated purpose of preventing gang participation. Yet, we lack convincing evidence that school-based recreational programs reduce any form of problem behavior, and youth involvement in extracurricular activities is not strongly associated with the prevention of violence or gang membership.^{14, 43}

To improve the usefulness of a school-based prevention program, program planners should:

- Select strategies based on recent scientific reviews, and other sources about prevention strategies and programs, that have been found to be efficacious when well-implemented.^{9, 10, 44}
- Eschew programs (except when conducting rigorous efficacy research) that may seem appealing or to be good ideas but have not shown evidence of efficacy.⁴⁵
- Attend carefully to measuring the extent and quality of implementation as the program is put in place.

The Importance of a Needs Assessment

Prevention activities in schools should be based on an assessment of the specific nature of the problems that gangs present in the school and the locality. A universal prevention program may be appropriate in a wide variety of schools. But, in a location where gangs are already active, more targeted and responsive intervention will be required to promote feelings of safety and to reduce conflict and further gang-joining.⁴⁶ Furthermore, there is evidence that existing programs are often weakly implemented and fail to engage the highest risk individuals. Therefore, the school assessment should go beyond looking at existing gang activity and indicators of risk for problem behavior to determine whether existing activities and programs have evidence of effectiveness, are being well-implemented, and are reaching those most at risk of gang involvement.

In a nationwide survey of more than 16,000 students in secondary schools, my colleagues and I found that significantly smaller percentages of current students who reported involvement with gangs during the past year were exposed to gang-membership prevention activities in the current school year than were nongang students.¹ In retrospect, this is unsurprising because among the risk factors for delinquency and gang involvement are poor attendance and low commitment to school, and because youths who display problem behavior are generally more difficult to engage in school activities.

This survey also showed that:

- Fewer gang-involved (vs. non-gang-involved) boys received instruction about ways to avoid getting involved in fighting, drug use and/or risky behavior.
- The percentage of youths participating in activities outside school was much lower for those involved in a gang than not involved in a gang.
- A much smaller percentage of gang-involved (vs. non-gang-involved) youths were in classrooms characterized by clear rules, good use of time, and other sound classroom management practices.
- Youths in gangs were much less likely to be involved in school activities with people or groups from the community.

Such findings in schools where prevention and intervention programs were being implemented imply that needs assessments should consider the strength and fidelity of *existing* prevention and intervention programs. In addition, the findings imply that a needs assessment should focus particularly on the extent to which prevention and intervention activities reach those youths who are involved in delinquent behavior and are at elevated risk for delinquency and gang involvement.

The same study also assessed the quality of school programs directed at gang problems. We found that prevention or intervention programs that were developed *after* a needs assessment:

- Were of higher quality.
- Were of longer duration.
- Made more use of best practices.
- Involved a larger proportion of students.
- Engaged more school personnel.

School Leader Recognition of Gang Problems

The degree to which school principals deny the presence of gang problems in their schools is astonishing. Although 36 percent of school principals report gang problems in their *communities*, only about 5 percent report problems in their *schools*.⁴⁷

In about 1 in 10 schools, 15 percent or more of the students self-reported that they were involved in a gang; but only 20 percent of the principals in these same schools said that there was a gang problem in their school. Evidently, principals' reports are of questionable validity in assessing the extent of gang problems in schools.

Principals' failure to recognize gang problems may often be an obstacle to the development of effective prevention and intervention programs. In all likelihood, it will be necessary to develop plans to cope with the reluctance of many school administrators to recognize gang problems. For instance, educational systems might *require* schools to conduct periodic surveys to measure student and teacher perceptions of safety and student involvement in problem behavior and gangs.

Getting Programs to Reach Those Who Need Them Most

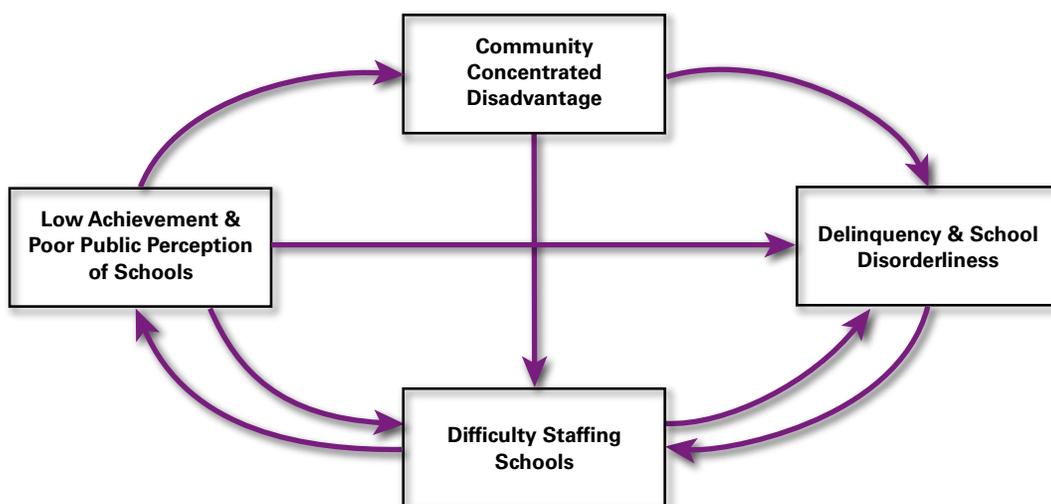
Earlier in this chapter, I discussed some of the challenges of reaching youths who have dropped out of school with any kind of gang-membership prevention strategies or programs (see the sidebar, "Reaching Youths Who Are Not in School").

Another challenge is that the greatest need may be in areas of concentrated poverty with large numbers of language-minority immigrants.^{1, 48} In these areas, schools serve large numbers of youths who are vulnerable to dropping out or becoming involved in delinquent behavior and gangs. A destructive cycle may operate in such schools and school districts, where the schools have difficulty recruiting and retaining quality staff. In addition, weaknesses in school administration contribute to disorderly schools and weak social control, which lead to perceptions of the unattractiveness of the schools and neighborhoods, which in turn perpetuate a cycle of concentrated disadvantage in the area.⁴⁹ The figure below depicts the cycle of concentrated disadvantage.

Policy Implications

Achieving the successful implementation of effective interventions specifically aimed at gang problems (as well as those directed at delinquent behavior generally) will require simultaneous attention to all of the issues described in this chapter: assessment of needs, open recognition of problems, selection of strategies that have been shown to be effective, assessment of and

Mutual and Cyclical Influences of Community, Delinquency, School Staffing and Outcomes



SOURCE: Adapted from Gottfredson GD, Schools and delinquency. In: Feld BC, Bishop DM, eds., *Handbook of Juvenile Crime and Juvenile Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press. Copyright © 2011 Oxford University Press, 2011: Figure 5.

resolution of obstacles to program implementation, and breaking the cycle of community disadvantage and school ineffectiveness.

This is a tall order. Multiple, parallel efforts — rather than single programs — are required to prevent gang problems in schools and communities. A broad multifaceted approach is necessary not only to cope with delinquency and gang problems but also to address other problems of systematic inequity in education and society.

Because resolution of all of these problems is unlikely in the short run, and because so many gang-prone or gang-involved youths will be school dropouts, the development of effective alternative education programs suitable for youths who have not succeeded in school will likely also be required. Despite interest for many years in such alternative education programs for youths who do not engage successfully in traditional schools, there is little trustworthy evidence from evaluations of the efficacy of such programs. Small alternative programs suitable for dropouts who may have experienced difficulties and few rewards in traditional educational settings — and which allow dropouts simultaneously to cope with employment and child care — should be developed and carefully evaluated.

Here are some principles that should guide gang-membership prevention efforts in schools:

Target Efforts Where Needed

Gang problems are greater in some places than in others, and problems may emerge in locations where few problems existed in the past. Therefore, efforts should be directed where and when they are most needed to cope with evident or emerging gang problems. In some respects, the presence of gangs in a community or a school seems like the presence of an infectious agent: The problem tends to spread, involving more people than those initially “infected.” When youths become involved with a gang, their levels of delinquent behavior accelerate beyond the levels that would otherwise be expected based on their other personal characteristics. Gangs appear to generate and feed on fear, and they are stimulated by and generate the higher levels of delinquent behavior in places where they are present. Therefore, gang problems should be openly recognized when they occur, and they should be confronted directly.

Intervene to Make Environments Safer

Fear for one’s safety appears to be a key factor in an individual youth’s decision to join a gang. Therefore, helping vulnerable persons feel safe in their schools and neighborhoods may be useful in stemming gang involvement. This means intervening in school *environments* to make them safer and to make the people in them *feel* safer. Efforts to alter school environments will generally be fundamentally different from working with *individual youth* to decrease their propensity for gang involvement. For example, the school interventions will likely involve interventions that firmly and clearly enforce rules related to safety; target efforts at crime control at locations where and at times when evidence shows that safety problems exist; and reduce the tolerance for threats or threatening symbols in the environment.^{41, 42, 50, 51, 52}

Transforming environments to make them safer is a complex task. Gangs and other crime problems disproportionately occur in areas of concentrated disadvantage, where there is concentrated poverty and a high proportion of speakers of languages other than English. These are locations where schools often do not function well. Schools in these areas may have high dropout rates, high rates of teacher turnover, and difficulty attracting and retaining good teachers. Teacher turnover is high in schools where teachers perceive student incivilities and little commitment to education — and where teachers do not get the administrative support they need. Addressing this issue will require attention to staffing and administration of schools as well as to the nuts and bolts of providing safe, engaging educational environments.⁴⁹

Monitor Schools for Safety

Our nation’s schools should have more explicit and more valid mechanisms for monitoring safety so that interventions can be targeted where they are required. Existing methods (such as those required in the No Child Left Behind Act) are inadequate and should be improved upon.⁵³

Principals are reluctant to recognize safety or gang problems in their schools, and state and local educational agencies also tend to avoid pinpointing schools with gang or safety problems. Indeed, rather than encouraging school principals

and administrators to identify and plan to ameliorate safety problems, system administrators unfortunately may punish principals who bring problems to their attention and seek to address them. This should stop; problem identification and planning should be understood to be and be treated as professional leadership. Because we can expect some persons occupying leadership positions to fear bringing problems out into the open, formal mechanisms such as systematic self-report victimization surveys should be required of schools to supplement the existing inadequate mechanisms, including school- or principal-reported incident or suspension rates.

Pay Attention to Implementation

Achieving full implementation of interventions in the forms intended has always been a problem in education (as in other human services), and policymakers should assume that implementation strength and fidelity will be problematic for gang-membership prevention programs as well. It has become commonplace to say that program evaluation is needed — however, too often this is interpreted to mean that *outcome* evaluations are required. But the first need is for evaluation focused on the extent to which program implementation is being achieved. Programs must be delivered to the populations intended for the planned durations and must include the key features found to be associated with efficacy in research. For more on the importance of program evaluation, see chapter 11.

Conclusion

Maintaining an environment in which young people feel safe may be one of the most important things

to do to prevent youths from joining a gang. Although this proposition has not been subjected to rigorous scientific testing, what we know about risk and preventive factors points to the promise of this approach.

Achieving safe schools and implementing effective prevention programs will be most difficult in the schools and communities most in need of gang-membership prevention but, of course, this is precisely where increased prevention measures are needed. Furthermore, youths who are at greatest risk of gang involvement will be particularly difficult to reach in schools.

The task of increasing the effectiveness of school programs is daunting, in part, because schools are already engaged in so much prevention activity that cannot be expected to be efficacious. Improving gang-membership prevention will have to involve the assessment of the specific needs of specific schools, as well as an assessment of how well current activities are being implemented and whether they can be expected to be efficacious. The creation of formal mechanisms to assess gang problems and the quality of program implementation is likely to be required to provide the impetus for the improvement of gang-membership prevention activity in schools.

Fortunately, there are school-based programs — including those focused on substance abuse, delinquency and violence prevention — that have been shown to be efficacious in addressing some of the risk factors for gang-joining. Schools should select one, or a few, such programs, based on their match to the individual school's specific needs, and take care to implement them fully.

About the Author

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Gary D. Gottfredson has conducted research on school safety and delinquency prevention for more than three decades. His research on the efficacy of school-based prevention programs led to a model for evaluating programs that has guided numerous prevention research projects. An applied psychologist who has published extensively, Dr. Gottfredson was elected a Fellow of the Academy for Experimental Criminology for his research on program efficacy. He earned his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University and now teaches at the University of Maryland, College Park.

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