Gangs In Schools: An Introduction to the Problem and Interventions

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Accreditation Approval

The American Psychotherapy Association provides this continuing education credit for Diplomates after October 2001 required to obtain 15 credits per year to maintain their Diplomate status.

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Abstract

This article addresses the problems of gang activity in secondary schools. Descriptions of major gangs are included, as well as interventions that are currently being used to combat this growing problem. Many members enter gangs even before secondary school, but by this time in their academic careers they are old enough to be active and aggressive members of large gangs and leaders of small gangs particular to one school. The problem reaches well beyond the school to the community and has ramifications nationally and internationally.

Introduction

The problem of gangs in schools has a long history, and there have been excellent studies on modern gangs since Thrasher (1927). School gangs became epidemic in the 1980's and 1990's and continue to be a concern in schools throughout the United States. Small gangs, unattached to larger organizations, have proven to be a deadly problem as evidenced by school shootings and violence levels unheard of a generation ago. Larger, more organized gangs may become violent threats as well, but also may be behind much of the illegal drugs, thefts, intimidation, extortion and increases in armament in schools today. The purpose of this article is to give readers an introduction to the problem and offer some intervention possibilities. It will be of interest to therapists, social service

workers, school officials, law enforcement agencies and community members who need assistance in understanding and intervening in gang situations.

Gangs are prevalent in many public schools. Youth gangs today are found in almost all 50 states (Spergel, 1995). Gangs increasingly exist in medium-sized and small towns and in suburban communities, but usually do not exhibit the same degree of organization, criminality and violence as those gangs in some larger cities. The terms “emerging,” “chronic” and “re-emerging” can be used to describe the presence and changing nature of gang activity in a variety of cities and jurisdictions (Spergel, 1995).

Indicators

Criminologists and sociologists have struggled with a definition of gangs for many years. For this work, we have utilized the description created by Goldstein and Kudluboy (1998), “a gang is a visible group of youths who engage at least some of the time in behaviors that are troublesome to the community of which they are a part and sometimes are illegal” (Goldstein and Kodluboy, 1998). Indications of gang activity, such as graffiti or sporadic indications of individual members in the school, do not address adequately the depth of the problem, the numbers involved or the activities in which members are engaging (Spergel, 1995). Many factors determine size and activity, including the population of the area, policing, existence of rival gangs, membership prospects, the possibilities of profitable illegal activity, need for violence and other factors. There are even problems defining what constitutes a gang because of the tremendous variety of membership, structural, leadership and behavioral characteristics, as well as the numerous terms used to describe certain differences among the groups (Goldstein and Kodluboy, 1998). Most gangs today, however, have many behaviors in common. Some of these behaviors are now well known to the general population. Several of these indicators are discussed below.

Often graffiti is the first indication of gang activity. Members use graffiti to mark their territory and to communicate with other gangs. Gangs use graffiti for many purposes:

1. To affirm gang identity.

2. To affirm member identity.

3. To mark territorial ownership rights.

4. To issue a challenge.

5. To memorialize a deceased member.

6. To disrespect a rival gang’s deceased member.

7. To celebrate violent acts.

8. To list intended victims.

9. To intimidate rival gangs.

“Functionally, graffiti ‘plants the flag’ which is a part of the widespread practice of publicly posting one’s privately owned land. The writer is saying, ‘We own this.’” (Goldstein and Kodluboy, 1998).

Beyond graffiti, gang membership and communication is done in several unique ways. Hand signs are employed and are used to communicate membership (Kinnear, 1996) or to issue a challenge to a rival gang. Small gangs or small cells within gangs may have particular words or phrases to identify themselves. Gang language serves to communicate many activities and ideas to other members.

Members dress alike, often adopting a particular color as their gang color. Symbols of affiliation may include the garment itself (at one time Kansas City Chiefs jackets became popular in several areas of the country. It was believed that the K.C. stood for “Kill Crips” and the red colors indicated Blood membership). The manner in which the garment is worn (as discussed later) gives important clues as do particular items of clothing such as bandanas and rags, which may be used to cover the face of members perpetrating crimes (Sach, 1997). Footwear indicators include British Knight tennis shoes (the B.K. thought to represent “Blood Killer”), tennis shoes with lights on the heels and combat boots. Gold jewelry, multiple rings on fingers and gold dental caps may also be indicators of affiliation. The list of clothing items expands to include baggy pants, ripped jeans, tank tops, underwear worn as outer wear, elastic ankle gathers, as well as short skirts or shorts (Goldstein and Kodluboy, 1998). The difficulty with clothing that may signify gang membership is that non-members also wear these items. Furthermore, many of these items have become fashionable at different times for adolescents with no gang involvement.

Other indicators may include hairstyle, peculiarly decorated fingernails, tattoos of gang logos, assumption of certain postures and the conspicuous flashing of money, weapons, drugs or stolen goods (Goldstein and Kodulboy, 1998).

Gang Characteristics

and Statistics

Recent studies reveal that some things about gangs and their membership have changed while others have remained constant. The majority of gang members are still adolescents, but more and more of today’s members come from a younger population of children and from men who are no longer in their teenage years. Fewer males are maturing out of gangs, as was the case of gangs in the

1960s. More and more members are choosing to remain active rather than assume more conventional and mature adult roles (Kinnear, 1996). Researchers (beginning with Thrasher in 1927 and continuing to contemporary times (Cummings and Monti, 1993) find that the patriarchal aspect of gang life that was once reinforced by segregated membership is diminishing. Many researchers believe that female involvement in criminal activity is on the rise, and there is conclusive evidence that females are joining gangs in increasing numbers (Kinnear, 1996).

Many types of gangs have appeared and been recognized on the urban scene since the 1980's. Miller (1982) found that 44 percent of all gang members were Hispanic; 43 percent, black; nine percent, white; and four percent, Asian. Contemporary studies are needed. Currently, membership is comprised of individuals from many nationalities, including Central Americans, Caribbean Islanders, Asians and immigrants from Eastern Europe (Spergel, 1995). Studies tend to focus on gang activity among minorities and lower socio-economic groups. However, many school shootings and other gang activities occur in middle-class schools. The data on gangs in middle-class schools are sparse, and data gathered may be skewed in many ways. Factors that may contribute to problems with data include denial within the community, leniency in courts through better legal representation and lack of a need for illegal financial gain. Today, smaller cities and towns are becoming home turf for gangs and victims of gang activity (Sachs, 1997). Youth gangs or street gangs have become an increasingly complex and changing social phenomena (Spergel, 1995).

In the 1970s, approximately 2,300 gangs with 98,000 members existed, most of them thought to be located in the largest cities, primarily Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, San Diego, San Antonio, Phoenix, San Francisco and Boston. Gang members generally ranged in age from 10-21 years, and they accounted for approximately 42 percent of arrests for serious and violent crimes in these areas (Miller, 1982). The numbers have increased rapidly. Curry, Fox, Bale, and Stone (1992) conducted a National Assessment Survey of Law Enforcement agencies in the 79 largest U.S. cities and 43 smaller cities. Survey results suggest that 4,881 gangs with 249,324 members existed in 1991. Between 1988 and 1992, the percentages of cities reporting gang crime increased. In all cities, gang-related crime statistics rose dramatically. In 1988, 75 percent of the cities reported gang problems. By 1992 the percentage had risen to 89 percent (Curry, Fox Bale, and Stone, 1992). Between 1988 and 1992 the percentage of small cities reporting gang problems increased from 70 to 86 (Kinnear, 1996).

In 1989, a school-crime supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey was conducted. A nationally representative sample of students between the ages of 12 and 19 were interviewed. At inner city sites, 25 percent of all students reported gangs in their schools, while eight percent of students in non-

metropolitan areas reported gangs in their schools (Bastian and Taylor, 1991). During the 1990s, gang activity also increased in suburban and rural areas.

Prevalent Gangs

Youth today who claim gang membership generally represent themselves as members or affiliates of one of the four major gang prototypes. The Vice-Lords or People are a Chicago-based gang represented in 35 states. The Disciples or Folks are a second Chicago-based gang created as a means of protection from the Vice-Lords. There are also two Los Angeles-based gangs know as the Bloods and Crips, and they too are rival associations (Goldstein and Kodluboy, 1998: p. 75).

The Vice-Lords are said to have begun in 1952 in the St. Charles Juvenile Correctional Facility by a group of adolescents from the West Side of Chicago. Although there are many branches of the Vice-Lords, all incorporate emblems of a bunny wearing a bow tie, a martini glass, a top hat, cane, gloves, a dollar sign, a five-point star and a crescent moon (Eighth Street Chicago Policing Office Department, 1998). The People all wear their identifiers to the left side. Earrings are worn in the left ear, the left pants leg is rolled up, the strap of a pair of overhauls dangles to the left side or a cap is also tilted to the left. The gang hand sign is thrown to the left and members fold their arms in a manner that will point to the left side. The Disciples and Folks, their rival gangs, wear identifiers to the right (Johnson, 1992: p. 44).

The Crips originated in Los Angeles in the late 1960s. This gang usually aligns with the Folk Nation and is known to be extremely violent. Some identifying factors are the color blue, bandanas and rags that are blue, the use of the letter c in place of a b to disrespect the bloods, calling each other "cuzz", “brother“, “killas” or “BK”.

The Bloods, also known as Pirus, evolved in Los Angeles to protect themselves from the Crips and have since become the Crips traditional rivals. The Bloods often are more ruthless and violent when dealing with other rival gangs than their counterparts (Sachs, 1997: p. 12). These gang members are predominately black; however, they have extended membership to other ethnic groups. To gain acceptance and membership into the Bloods, and now many other gangs, a member must “blood in.” In order to blood in, someone’s blood must be spilled—either that of the prospective member or an unsuspecting victim (Walker, 2001). Presently, there is a truce between Crips and Bloods and the number of shootings and violence between these gangs has diminished.

While these are the most well known gangs, there are many others, spanning virtually all racial and ethnic groups. Strong white street gangs exist as well (e.g., the Aryan Brotherhood). The Latin Kings are a major Latino gang and there are

many Chinese gangs (often called Tongs), such as the United Bamboos. Many immigrant groups have gangs representing a particular ethnicity or nationality.

Interventions

Because gang activity is so prevalent in many of today's schools, it is no longer an issue to be taken lightly. Once a school district determines that school-age gangs exist and are indeed becoming a problem, members of the school community must consider gang intervention, prevention, and suppression programs (Goldstein and Kodluboy, 1998: p. 103).

Parents play a vital role in the prevention of gang activity. The National Crime Prevention Council (1993) suggests four things that parents can do to keep their children out of gangs:

(1) Develop positive alternative activities in which children can participate.

(2) Communicate with other parents.

(3) Work with the police and other community agencies to understand the reason children join gangs.

(4) Organize other parents and local community agencies to help stem the growth of gangs in the neighborhood.

Preventing gang involvement at home assists the schools by controlling gang growth in the school.

Some interventions have proven useful. Stephens (1993) suggests "School-based Strategies." He credits these ideas from the program led by Dr. Lila Lopez, known as "Mission SOAR" (Set Objectives, Achieve Results) in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Topics of concern for this program include:

1. Gang Awareness – Educating faculty/staff/ students about gangs and the consequences of becoming involved.

2. Class Behavioral Expectations – Establishing clear guidelines on what is appropriate behavior and what is prohibited behavior.

3. Dress Code – Establishing dress codes that minimize the possibility of gang-related dress, which communicates gang membership. Some schools prohibit any gang paraphernalia. The goal of the code is both to avoid dress that allows gangs to distinguish themselves, and to avoid retaliation against those innocently wearing what is perceived as gang identifiers.

4. Understanding Graffiti – Developing a graffiti log book and obtaining education in gang graffiti. Each location may have unique graffiti.

5. Processing Graffiti – Stephens suggests the “three R’s” which are reading, recording and removing graffiti.

6. Gang Crimes Report Hotline - An anonymous number established in relation to law enforcement to allow reporting of gang crimes and activities.

7. Victim Support – This includes adequate measures to assure safety for those reporting gang information as well as those victimized by gangs. Counseling and medical support are part of victim support.

8. In-service Training – Educating faculty/staff on recognizing gang activity.

9. Visitor Screening – Includes visitor sign-in, identification and knowledge of visitor’s purpose.

10. Adequate Supervision – May include the community, faculty/staff, law enforcement and parents.

11. Community Networking – The school should become involved with other agencies and groups addressing gang issues.

12. Parent Notification – Notifying parents in writing about student gang involvement.

13. Parenting Classes – Offering programs to educate parents on prevention, detection and control of gang activity among their children.

14. Law Enforcement Cooperation – Law enforcement generally is the most viable source of assistance with gang activity.

15. Extracurricular Programs – A major reason students become involved in gang activity is that they want something to do. Programs outside of school activities allow them to spend time in positive ways.

16. Community Service Programs – Encouraging students to become involved with their communities in positive ways.

A problem with evaluations of existing programs is that they often are evaluated by those conducting them, thereby lacking confirmation of their findings by independent investigators (Goldstein and Hull, 1993). Goldstein and Hull (1993: p. 265) further state, “Although no single program has demonstrated complete success, selected elements of many programs are noteworthy and deserve consideration for systematic replication elsewhere.“

Several other programs appear promising, including the Perry Preschool Project in Ypsilanti, Michigan (Huff, 1990), The Chicago Youth Authority Project (Spergel, 1990), The Dade County Juvenile Gang Intervention Project, The Los Angeles County Interagency Gang Task Force, and Portland's GRIT (Gang Resource and Intervention Team).

Other recommendations are commonly found in the literature. One important consideration is that those creating new programs need to bear in mind that what works in one area may not be useful in other areas. Therefore, Goldstein and Hull (1998) propose that items that appear in the literature to work well should be adapted to the individual school or district involved.

One common recommendation is that it is ill advised to enlist the services of a gang expert or someone who has had previous experience within a gang (Goldstein and Kodluboy, 1998). Those with previous experience may have ulterior motives for becoming involved or may be compromised by others after initiating a program.

In considering practice models in schools, it should be noted that schools have limited resources and many programs seek to do too much. Keeping the intervention specific assists schools in using their resources where they will have the greatest impact. The resources available to schools do not allow school officials to address the underlying social problems that encourage gang participation in the larger community. However, although school officials cannot solve the larger societal problems that contribute to participation in gang activities, they may be able to control a gang member's behavior while he/she is in school.

School gang report sheets may be used first for gathering data on the occurrence of gang activity and later to create effective responses to different types of gang behaviors. The report sheet may be used to develop systematic guidelines for personnel in response to gang activity. Guidelines may include how to document and report graffiti, understand gang sign language and spot potential gang leaders. Teachers and staff can apply these guidelines and share them by asking parents and the community for help and support when necessary (Kinnear, 1996), thus expanding the population for planning and response.

Gang awareness classes may be sponsored by various agencies in an area. Schools and police may assist in education, while community members may assist in gathering data on gang activity in the community that may affect the school. Schools may also work with local law enforcement and social service agencies, making education more accessible to those most affected by gang activities. It is important that staff members in schools be well trained in recognizing gang activity and in reporting it accurately and objectively (Kinnear, 1996). In fact, since many law enforcement agencies and social service agencies have gang units or gang prevention programs, schools should contact these

organizations as soon as a gang problem is identified. Networking with these organizations and others, along with the community, provides a comprehensive and cooperative effort against gangs.

These are some of the suggestions that appear to be generalized in all schools and districts. Until more data are gathered on the effectiveness and outcomes of programs in place, the list of interventions that may be used anywhere remains limited.

Summary

The writers anticipate that researchers and theorists will find material of interest in this article. However, this article is directed mainly to readers who find themselves facing gang problems arising in their own school districts and communities. Through knowledge, awareness and understanding of gang activity, it is hoped that more interventions may be established to remedy the growing problem encountered in schools and communities.

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