

# Youth Gangs:

## Members, Activities, and Measures to Decrease Violence Associated with Gangs

The purpose of this paper and the accompanying sidebars is to educate the public and youth-serving agencies about youth gangs—a phenomenon spreading around the world that negatively impacts youth and the communities where they live. This paper discusses why youth join gangs, provides some demographics of contemporary gangs, describes societal factors that influence violent gang activity in the United States and abroad, and describes several community-based gang intervention programs. A case study on gang activity in El Salvador is included.

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**August 2001**

# US Gangs: Their Changing History and Contemporary Solutions

by  
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## Introduction

The good news is that overall U.S. juvenile crime rates are down from the late 1980s and early 1990s. Also, the number of youth gang members and the total number of gangs are down. But the bad news is that gang members commit a disproportionately high number of the offenses committed by juveniles, including violent offenses. Given these findings, gang prevention and intervention programs remain vitally important for at-risk youth and their communities.

The existence of youth gangs in the United States is not new. Youth gangs have been present since the end of the American Revolution.<sup>1</sup> Public interest in youth gangs has risen and fallen several times throughout the country's history, but during

the 1990s concern resurged as a result of increased gun violence and the rise in gang-related homicides from the late 1980s and into the early 1990s.<sup>2</sup> Social anxiety about youth gangs increased when law enforcement officials reported that gangs were expanding from the inner cities and were appearing in suburban and rural areas.

In response to these concerns, the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC) was founded in 1995 by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and the Institute for Intergovernmental Research to collect data. In the 1997 National Youth Gang Survey, the center's most recent survey, law enforcement agencies across the country were surveyed. NYGC estimated that there were 30,500 youth gangs and 815,896 gang members in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Although these numbers may seem high, they reflect a modest decrease from the previous year. There was a 0.9 percent decrease in the estimated number of gangs and a 3.6 percent decrease in the estimated number of gang members from the 1996 National Youth Gang Survey.

### **What is a Youth Gang?**

OJJDP defines youth gangs as follows.

*A youth gang (as a segment of a street gang) should be defined as a group ranging in age from 12 to 24, of variable size and organization, engaged in violent behavior, and characterized by communal or symbolic and often economic considerations, such as drug trafficking, burglary, robbery, and auto theft.*<sup>4</sup>

### **Types of Offenses**

Most illegal activities undertaken by gang members are minor offenses. However, according to OJJDP, several studies have shown that gang members are committing a disproportionately high number of serious offenses. In one study, gang members were reported to have committed 86 percent of the reported serious offenses even though gang members constituted only 30 percent of the youth surveyed in the study. Most violent offenses com-

mitted by juveniles are committed by youth in gangs.<sup>5</sup>

In an OJJDP self-report survey conducted in Seattle, gang members, who constituted 15 percent of the sample, reported committing approximately half of all minor assaults, felony thefts, minor thefts, drug trafficking offenses, and property offenses in the entire sample. Seattle youth gang members also self-reported committing more than five times as many violent offenses as non-gang youth.<sup>6</sup> In a study funded by OJJDP in Denver, gang members made up 14 percent of the sample and self-reported committing 43 percent of drug sales and 55 percent of all street offenses. It also was found that the surveyed youth gang members reported committing serious and violent offenses approximately three times as often as non-gang youth.<sup>7</sup>

Although gang-related crimes have been decreasing for the last few years, the availability of guns has helped gang members commit crimes more effectively and efficiently. A study conducted by A.J. Lizotte found that juvenile males who own guns for protection rather than for a hobby or sport are six times more likely to carry a gun with them, eight times more likely to commit a crime with a gun, four times more likely to sell drugs, five times more likely to be in a gang, and three times more likely to commit serious and violent crimes.<sup>8</sup>

According to the 1997 National Youth Gang Survey, there were an estimated 3,341 youth gang-related homicides in the United States that year. The survey distinguished between member-based and motive-based homicides. A member-based homicide is a crime where the gang member is either the perpetrator or the victim, regardless of the motive. A motive-based homicide is a crime committed by a gang member(s) in which the underlying reason is to further the interests and activities of the gang.

Of the gang-related homicides, 1,880 or 56 percent were motive-based. The survey also found that 64 percent of the total estimated number of member-based homicides and 72 percent of the motive-based homicides occurred in large cities. The national total

for homicide in 1997, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, was 18,210. This means that youth gangs were involved in 18 percent of homicides committed by both adults and juveniles in 1997.<sup>9</sup>

### Why Youth Join Gangs

*I've seen drive-by shootings, stabbings, people getting jumped, everything happening in a split-second. The young people out there doing those things believe that the gang life is the only way they have to be independent and to get some power.<sup>10</sup>*

So said William Colbert, a young man who grew up in a gang-infested neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio. Colbert avoided joining a gang, but said that many youth in his neighborhood joined because the gang lifestyle was appealing and few youth thought about the long-term consequences of their actions. Despite negative influences, Colbert became successfully employed full time.

There are many contributing reasons why youth join gangs. Many youth who join gangs feel the need to do so for physical protection from other youth in their neighborhood, at school or in another frequented neighborhood. Youth also join gangs for economic reasons or to continue a family tradition of gang membership.

### *A Place to Belong*

Many youth who join gangs do so with the hope of developing an identity, finding empathy or a sense of belonging that they have not achieved at home or through other social or familial networks.<sup>11</sup>

“Youth who don't have families, who are stuck in 'survival units' where people don't take responsibility for the children, go out looking for new families that can offer them safety, security and some sense of control over their environment,” said Dr. Michael Ward, director of the Ohio Youth Advocate Program's Juvenile Justice Program in Columbus, Ohio.<sup>12</sup> “A gang may seem like it of-

# Youth Gangs Around the World

by Margot Lowenstein

Youth gangs exist in the United States, but what about the rest of the world? The scant information on this topic indicates that youth gangs exist in most other countries also, but research has not kept pace with the globalization of issues such as youth gang activity. There are many reasons for this scarcity of information. From country to country, definitions of what constitutes a youth gang differs. In many countries criminal acts carried out by youth are prosecuted in the adult system, and statistics on the criminal activities of youth in particular are not collected. In addition, international organizations and academic institutions have not emphasized and funded this research from a global framework.

A study completed in 1992 cited the existence of youth gangs on every continent.<sup>1</sup> Specific gang-related incidents were reported in Canada, the United States, Australia, South and Central America, the Caribbean, Great Britain, France, Spain, Germany, Russia, India, China, Taiwan, Japan and regions of Africa. In some instances, such as the reported gang activity in El Salvador, the organization of gangs and recruitment is occurring across national borders. The degree to which youth gangs are being globally exported and imported remains to be determined. While available information on gang activity outside the United States does not include data on the

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number of youth involved or the number of crimes committed, there is reliable information obtained from current and former gang members. This information verifies the existence of gang activity and helps in the understanding of causal factors and required community responses.

It appears that youth join gangs in other countries for the same reasons as youth in the United States.

● **Gangs are present in areas of high racial or ethnic tension.** Youth from minority populations may be persuaded to join a gang in order to express pride in their racial or ethnic identity as well as to provide a means of defense against perceived threats to their identity in areas of social tension. An Asian youth gang member in South London explained the influence of racial tension on gang formation by saying, "...the blacks try to overcome...they think they can dominate the school, but we're not giving them the chance to do that. Because the rest of the Bengali boys just let them push them around, and we don't want to take that from them; we stand up for ourselves."<sup>2</sup>

● **Gangs offer personal protection for youth who are harassed and threatened by other youth.** A former gang member, who recently made the decision to leave a South African gang and re-enroll in school, indicated that his primary reason for joining a gang was his desire to be protected from gang violence. According to this young man, "I had no reason for living, had no one to love and one of my friends was raped by a gang. I was often robbed and harassed by the same gang."<sup>3</sup>

● **Economic factors also influence youth participation in gangs.** In many countries

fers them those benefits. It's easy for gangs to hook needy youth."

As part of the maturation process, youth need to separate their individual identities from their families' identities and associate with other youth. Often youth perceive that a gang can provide them with these important friendships and initiation into adulthood. In fact, one study found that delinquent peers were more likely to receive more intrinsic rewards from their peers than were non-delinquents. Their friendships were described as being more open and intimate than the non-delinquents' friendships.<sup>13</sup>

Although many of these features of gangs offer positive benefits to youth, the subsequent participation in violent gang activities is not beneficial to youth in any way. Communities are challenged to consider how youths' needs can be satisfied through social alternatives to gangs.

### **Whose Youth are at Risk of Joining Gangs?**

#### *Age of Entry*

There are gang members as young as age 8, but OJJDP notes that the average age of youth gang members is between 17 and 18. The Tariq Khamisa Foundation<sup>14</sup> in California has conducted numerous gang prevention programs and reports that efforts to recruit new gang members are aimed particularly at 12 and 13 year olds.

#### *Community Factors Contributing to Gang Activity*

Scholars within the criminal justice system and juvenile justice literature have theorized for many years that inner-city neighborhoods provide a variety of risk factors that may influence delinquent behavior. These risk factors primarily have been linked to communities affected by joblessness, which increases poverty rates and tends to put more stress on the families and the neighborhoods where youth live. The data suggest that when neighborhoods experience social organization these risk factors can be controlled and dealt with collectively and successfully by the members within the com-

munity. However, neighborhoods characterized by social disorganization are more likely to have higher juvenile crime rates as well as other social ills that destroy communities.

There is not much research available that links gang crime and neighborhood organization directly because interest in the issue is fairly recent. Previous research suggests that the social organization of neighborhoods is directly related to juvenile crime rates.<sup>15</sup> This paper proposes that gang-related activities can be inferred to have the same relationship to neighborhood organization as general juvenile crime.

### *Poverty and Modeling Behaviors*

Emphasizing the impact of joblessness in his book, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*, sociologist William Julius Wilson argued that the disappearance of work has had devastating consequences, particularly for African-Americans within the inner cities. Wilson particularly focused on the role of social organization within these neighborhoods. He defined social organization as the extent to which residents of a neighborhood are able to maintain effective social control and realize their common goals. He found that neighborhoods with high levels of joblessness experience low levels of social organization. Due to this low level of social organization, communities with high rates of joblessness also experience other problems such as juvenile crime, gang violence, drug trafficking, and family difficulties.

Wilson pointed out that this is due also to role modeling or cultural transmission, which affects youth, in particular within socially disorganized neighborhoods. When youth are exposed to certain types of deviant behaviors, they are more likely to assume that these behaviors are normal ones and to assimilate and behave in the same manner.

Wilson argued,

*There is also the phenomenon of accidental or nonconscious cultural transmission—also*

youth gangs are involved in selling and transporting drugs and other contraband, a risky but financially rewarding occupation. In a report about gangs in Australia, youth gang members were unanimous in their views that drug dealing and property crimes were key sources for alternative income.<sup>4</sup> Some youth gang members use the money to address fundamental needs for shelter and food. Others reportedly use the money generated by gang activity to live “well-off” or to purchase goods that increase their social status.

A Russian government official explained the economic factors contributing to youth crime: “...the most common reason why juveniles commit crimes is the high cost of the simplest goods and the impossibility of earning money for them legally.... Enterprises are reluctant to hire youngsters, even for the most menial jobs.”<sup>5</sup> A Colombian gang member described his peers’ motivation to join gangs by saying, “they are all kids who see things as they are; they know they won’t get anywhere by working or studying, but if they join us they’ll have ready money. They join because they want to, not because we force them.... Not all of them are really poor, some do it for their families, others because they want to live in style.”<sup>6</sup>

In the paper “U.S. Gangs: Their Changing History and Contemporary Solutions,” author Carissa Pappas describes a variety of community-based approaches to decreasing the criminal activities of gangs and reintegrating former gang members. Although these examples are from the United States, aspects of these programs may prove applicable in other parts of the world. The organization Homies Unidos<sup>7</sup> (see the case study “Youth Gangs in  
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El Salvador”), which operates both in El Salvador and the United States, provides an example of how former gang members can become contributing members of society when the cultural, social and political tensions impacting youth behavior are successfully addressed. Homies Unidos demonstrates that youth may be their own best advocates and the best prepared to communicate messages of peace, reconciliation and change to their peers.

Although the global aspects of youth gang activity has only begun to be explored, a number of things are clear. Around the world many youth are involved with gangs, and they carry out organized criminal activities. Not nearly enough is known about youth gangs or the long-term consequences for members. Research on the international gang phenomenon should be better supported in order to help communities understand the negative consequences and potential solutions. ♦

### Endnotes

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2. Clare E. Alexander, *The Asian Gang: Ethnicity, Identity, Masculinity*, (Oxford: Berg, 2000) 104.
3. Lynnette Johns, “Ex-Gangster’s New Turf is the Classroom,” *allAfrica.com*, 15 May 2001; available from <http://allafrica.com/stories/200105150088.html>; Internet; accessed 9 August 2001.
4. Rob White, Santana Perrone, Carmel Guerra, Rosario Lampugnani, “Ethnic Youth Gangs in Australia - Overview Report,” 1999, Australian Multicultural Foundation; available from <http://www.vicnet.net.au/issues/amf/>; Internet; accessed 5 July 2001.
5. A. Vetrov, “The Ministry of Internal Affairs Requests Assistance in Combating Teenage Crime,” *The Current Digest of the Post Soviet Press* 47, 1995, (34): 5.
6. Alonzo Salazar, translated by Nick Caistor, *Born to Die in Medellin*, (London: Latin America Bureau, 1990). 14.
7. To learn more about Homies Unidos and its work with youth in both El Salvador and the United States, please visit their website at <http://www.homiesunidos.org>.

*called transmission by precept—whereby a person’s exposure to certain attitudes and actions is so frequent that they become part of his or her own outlook and therefore do not, in many cases, involve selective application to a given situation.*<sup>16</sup>

Professionals who work directly with youth gang members have commented on the difficulties of removing youth from gangs due to the impact of negative role models youth are exposed to. “You may be working in a neighborhood where teenagers make up the second or third generation of gang members,” said Ed Farmer, director of the Illinois Youth Advocate Program in Chicago, Illinois. “How do you remove a youth from gang influences if it involves his entire family?”<sup>17</sup>

### *Race and Youth Gangs*

Gangs have had a changing ethnic and racial composition throughout U.S. history. A century ago, the majority of gang members were Irish, Italian or Jewish. Today, law enforcement officials report that the majority of members are Hispanic and African American, even though the number of white youth gang members is increasing.<sup>18</sup> Gangs tend to be racially exclusive rather than multicultural, but the impetus to join a gang appears to be related to class and economics rather than race or ethnicity. Youth belonging to a racial or ethnic minority that suffers discrimination at the hands of the majority community have additional self-protective motivations to belong to a gang.

### **Contemporary U.S. Youth Gangs**

Gangs today vary by race and ethnicity, location, activity, and style. Youth-serving agencies and communities must consider this diversity when designing programs to prevent gangs or combat gang violence.

### *Forms of Communication*

One of the most important things a youth-serving agency or community can do to learn about gang

activity is to pay attention to the forms of communication that are displayed by gang members. Gangs have various ways of communicating with members and rival gangs that can range from graffiti, specific speech patterns, hand signs, clothing, and tattoos.

Most youth gangs have distinctive graffiti that can be identified by either the style or signatures that include names of the gang and its members. Today's African-American youth gangs often use graffiti including dollar signs or guns and statements regarding power or profanity. Hispanic youth gangs have typically emphasized colorful, three-dimensional designs and proclamations of power and pride in their gang and culture.

Tattooing also is popular within most gangs. Gang members may have a specific symbol or the initials or name of their gang tattooed on their hands, arms or even their faces. Gang tattoos are usually not done professionally.

Clothing is another sign of gang membership. Many members use specific colors to represent their gang. For years the Los Angeles Crips wore or carried blue or black rags to show gang affiliation while the Los Angeles Bloods used red. Hispanic gangs also were known for wearing folded bandannas across their foreheads, tank tops and open Pendleton shirts. Although some gangs continue to dress in particular clothing, many have eliminated the practice because distinctive clothing makes it easy for the police and rival gang members to identify them.

Finally, most youth gangs have specific speech patterns and hand signs that are shared among their members. This helps members to identify other members in unfamiliar territory. Due to the secretiveness of gangs, most speech patterns and hand signs have not been publicly identified or documented.

### *Location*

Gang activity varied by both area and region according to the 1997 National Youth Gang Survey. Not surprisingly, gang activity was most prevalent in large cities across the country. Of the various areas surveyed by NYGC, 72 percent of large

cities reported gang activity, 33 percent of small cities reported gang activity, and 56 percent of suburban counties and 24 percent of rural counties reported gang activity. Overall, between the 1996 and 1997 surveys, all of these areas reporting gang activity experienced small decreases in the percentage reported, and large cities reported the largest decrease of gang activity—down by 2 percent.<sup>19</sup>

Gang activity also was reported by law enforcement agencies in the 1997 National Youth Gang Survey according to region. Fifty-two percent of Midwestern law enforcement agencies reported youth gang activity, 31 percent of the northeast reported activity, 49 percent of the south, and 74 percent of the west reported active youth gangs. The largest decrease between 1996 and 1997, 4 percent, was felt regionally in the northeast.<sup>20</sup>

The survey also found that a large percentage of youth gangs and members were concentrated in Chicago, Illinois, and Los Angeles city and county, California. The survey stressed that these areas have had a long history of gang problems. Taken together, they accounted for 4 percent of all U.S. youth gangs and 24 percent of all U.S. youth gang members estimated to be active in 1997.<sup>21</sup>

While reported gang activity has spread to suburban and rural areas, gangs are still predominantly a phenomena associated with the lower economic class in urban areas. Most violent juvenile crime is committed within the confines of the inner cities. In 1997, more than 1 in 4 identified juvenile murderers lived in 8 of the nation's more than 3,000 counties. The major cities in these counties are Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston, New York, Baltimore, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Dallas. Although these counties only contain 12 percent of the U.S. population, violent crime and homicides committed by juveniles are concentrated in this small portion of the country.<sup>22</sup>

### *Race and Ethnicity*

OJJDP's 1999 National Report on Offenders and Victims reported the following racial compo-

sition according to a 1995 survey by law enforcement agencies. Those agencies reported that Hispanics made up 44 percent of youth gang members, African-Americans made up 35 percent, whites were 14 percent, Asians 5 percent, and 2 percent of youth gang members were of other racial/ethnic compositions.<sup>23</sup> The numbers from law enforcement primarily reflect the race and ethnicity of victims and offenders. A recent self-survey administered in 1997 to eighth graders in 11 cities indicated that the racial/ethnic composition of gang members was 31 percent African-American, 25 percent Hispanic, 25 percent white, 5 percent Asian, and 15 percent were of other racial or ethnic backgrounds.<sup>24</sup> Accounts of white youth gangs do not include the estimated membership of white youth hate groups that have formed in the United States. Hate groups usually have not been counted among youth gangs in the United States because of the groups' ideological motivations.

#### *Female Gang Members*

Estimates of female gang members are usually around 10 percent of the total membership.<sup>25</sup> Several studies within the last decade, however, suggest that female membership rates are on the rise and more female-only gangs may be evolving. This would not be surprising when we look at the role of females in national juvenile crime trends in general. Between 1987 and 1994, while the country became alarmed by the two-thirds increase in the male juvenile violent crime arrest rate, the female juvenile violent crime arrest rate more than doubled.<sup>26</sup> Since 1994, while juvenile crime overall has been decreasing, the occurrence of crimes committed by female juveniles has continued to increase.

Female youth join gangs for many of the same reasons as their male counterparts; however, their gang experiences can be vastly different. For example, initiation rituals for males may include committing a crime or being beaten by fellow gang members, but females joining an auxiliary gang may be required to submit to sexual abuse by one or more

of the members of the gang.<sup>27</sup> How these experiences impact female members has not been researched.

#### *Activities*

According to OJJDP, gangs vary according to their primary activities or, more directly, the types of offenses they engage in.<sup>28</sup> Some gangs are regularly involved in the sale and distribution of drugs while others are typically involved in property crimes or turf-related incidents. There are no limits to the types of activities gangs can become involved in, however. Youth gangs have been involved in auto theft, dealing in guns and the sex trade businesses.

#### **Addressing the Gang Problem through Community-Based Programming**

One approach to decreasing gang activity has been to implement stiffer criminal penalties and incarcerate more young offenders. Unfortunately, advocates for youth note that placing youth in these facilities may not have curbed gang behavior as much as reinforced it.

“Youth in prisons need more protection than ever,” said Ed Farmer of Illinois Youth Advocate Program. “They use their gang affiliations for survival and continue to be dependent on the same group of peers. Incarceration also serves to introduce them to the adults who have had longer careers in crime.”<sup>29</sup>

As an alternative to incarceration, state and federal experts in juvenile justice have begun to increase research and funds for community-based programs, which has included community policing, school-based programs designed to reduce school violence and community-based programs for youth who are considered to be at high risk for delinquent behavior. This shift suggests that the public is interested in finding local solutions to deal with the problems that destroy their communities. It also suggests that, as a society, we have realized that the structure and organization of a community is important and may be the key to resolving such problems.



Community-based programming makes sense when we realize that individual communities and agencies are almost powerless in changing the current national structure of class and economics within the United States. Therefore, communities and agencies must bind together and design programs that deal directly with the context and scope of their own locations. In order to do this effectively, though, communities must educate themselves about gangs and learn how to deal with them.

#### *Past and Current Programs*

In this section four programs that sought to deal with youth gang problems will be discussed. These

particular programs are not selected because they necessarily represent the best programs available. Rather, they represent a variety of historical and current attempts by communities to intervene and take control of their gang problems. They also are representative of programs in geographically diverse areas of the country.

#### *A lack of local leadership*

The Midcity Project<sup>30</sup> was an experiment that was conducted in an impoverished area of Boston between 1954-1957. The main goal was to reduce juvenile crime committed by a specific group of adolescents and to introduce strategies within three

## Case Study Youth Gangs in El Salvador

by Nicole Poland

In El Salvador, the youth gang situation is escalating rapidly and violently. Although they had been present in the country for decades, the nature of youth gangs has changed drastically in the last decade. Initially, their activities were much more small-scale; their primary weapons were knives and machetes.<sup>1</sup> However, the cessation of El Salvador's civil war in 1992 marked the beginning of an alarming change in the nature and frequency of gang activity.

Presently, it is estimated that there are more than 20,000 gang members in El Salvador.<sup>2</sup> Around 80 percent of the gang members are males. The average age of gang members is 18, but they range from as young as 11 up to age 26. If they are still alive in their mid-twenties, some go on to become members of the country's organized adult gangs. Others try to get a job or

start a family, but it is very difficult for former gang members to find work because of fear and discrimination.<sup>3</sup>

During the 1980s, over 20 percent of El Salvador's population was forced to seek shelter in resettlement centers or flee the country, so many families and children fled to the United States.<sup>4</sup> Once there, many Salvadoran youth saw gang membership as an attractive and rewarding way to gain a sense of belonging in a foreign place. When the civil war ended in 1992, Salvadorans in the United States were no longer considered political refugees. Simultaneously, U.S. anti-immigrant sentiments were very high, and U.S. justice organizations were facing strong pressure to address the growing youth gang problem. Many Salvadorans who were convicted of crimes were offered the choice of either "voluntary departure" or many years in prison.

The political tension resulted in the mass return of undocumented Salvadorans from the United States, thousands of whom returned to El Salvador to implant gang rule, block by block, throughout every city and town of their home country.<sup>5</sup> Many gang members returned to the communities their families had lived in before they

areas where delinquency is theorized to begin; the community, the family, and the gang. Of these three areas, the most work was conducted within the gang.

The program theorized that juvenile crime committed by gang members was the result of their restricted access to social, educational, and economic opportunities. Therefore, the program sought to increase these opportunities for juveniles. The program actually functioned as more of a neighborhood club and members participated regularly in social activities such as dances, fundraising dinners, and athletic events. Youth worked closely with caseworkers who also counseled them on educational and employment issues.

The Midcity Project was not shown to decrease juvenile crime rates empirically, but it is an important study because one of the factors cited for the project's failure was the socioeconomic status of the caseworkers who worked with the youth. The caseworkers were all white, middle-class adults working with lower-class adolescents. The program demonstrated the need to design a community-based program that would function appropriately within a given community and the importance of having people from within the community serve as caseworkers and organizers. Local staff would have direct experience within the communities and would be more likely to understand their clients' needs.

fled; as a result, U.S. urban gang culture spread into virtually every city and town in El Salvador.<sup>6</sup>

### **Mass deportations and increased violence**

In 2000 it was reported that 50 Salvadoran gang members were deported from California every week.<sup>7</sup> According to Rodrigo Avila, El Salvador's police chief, the gang problem in the country began when the U.S. started deporting gang members; they returned to El Salvador and touched off a wave of violence.<sup>8</sup>

According to San Salvador's police chief, "Maras [gangs] control the entire city. They come with specialized knowledge from the States. They've brought with them new types of crime that didn't exist here before."<sup>9</sup> In San Salvador, one out of every three citizens has been a victim of crime. This capital city of over a million people is ranked as Latin America's most crime-ridden city.<sup>10</sup>

As many people are being killed in "peacetime" as had been killed during the war. In 1998, over 6,000 people were murdered; this rate was equal to the number of deaths per year during the height of the civil war.<sup>11</sup> In a survey of gang members, one-third reported that "death"

was the biggest disadvantage to gang membership.<sup>12</sup>

One factor responsible for the increase in violent gang activities is the presence of two main gangs: MS (Mara Salvatrucha) and 18 (18<sup>th</sup> Street). Seventy percent of young people in El Salvador join one of these gangs, and the war between these gangs that originated in the United States is now full-fledged in El Salvador.<sup>13</sup> As a result, neighborhoods in El Salvador have been carved into gang territories much like the streets of Los Angeles. Turf wars have become standard; Magdaleno Rose Avila, founder of Homies Unidos (a program addressing the youth gang problem), reports that "everybody's clicka has their own little six or eight blocks, and the sad thing is, you can't travel outside of that...there's a lot of parts of town you can't go to, or to get there - it's hard because you have to go through somebody else's territory. That all comes from L. A., which is the sad part about it."<sup>14</sup>

Another reason for the increase in violence is the increased availability of weapons. There is a wealth of weaponry left over from the war, and many arms have fallen into the hands of young gang members. Gangs' arsenals include

### *Intervention was requested by the community*

In another study, a program was established in an impoverished Puerto Rican neighborhood in northwest Chicago to deter gang activity over a 10-month period.<sup>31</sup> Other neighborhoods made up of similar sociodemographics were used as controls or comparison groups. The program's goal was to reduce violence and intervene in situations where gang violence was thought to be present. The staff achieved this objective by patrolling the streets at night, distributing cards to gang members as well as community members, and carrying pagers so that they were always in contact with the community in which they were working. The program also pro-

vided counseling to the gang members, their families, and other residents within the community when community members requested intervention.

The evaluators found that for both the experimental and control groups, gang crimes increased from the baseline period (reported gang crimes in the previous year) to the period of intervention. However, the evaluators also found that the increase in serious violent crimes was much more extreme for the control groups rather than for the experimental group. The researchers found that the program did have a positive effect on the decrease of juvenile crime within the specified community.

pistols, shotguns, hand grenades, bombs, and Uzi submachine guns. El Salvador's police chief attributes this astounding combination of weaponry to the blending of two violent cultures: the battle-hardened guerrilla fighters of El Salvador and the crime-hardened gang members of Los Angeles. Police forces reportedly are ill equipped to combat these well-armed youths, but gang members report that police agents sell them heavy weapons that have been confiscated from other gangs.<sup>15</sup> Drug trafficking also has contributed to the increased violence of gang activities.<sup>16</sup>

#### **Difficulties faced by deported gang members**

A survey of 1,000 El Salvadoran gang members reveals that the overwhelming majority of them would like to get out of their present situation: 85 percent said they would like to quit gang life, but they do not see any alternative lifestyle that is available to them.<sup>17</sup> When asked about the advantages of being in a gang, the most common answer was "none" (19 percent). Many aspired to get a job, and answered "work" (32 percent) and "non-discrimination" (24 percent) when asked what gang members need most.<sup>18</sup>

Even returning gang members who want to change their lives have a number of factors working against them. These obstacles include an inability to find a way to start a new lifestyle (due to not knowing the language or having any social support), other gang members, and the many Salvadorans who publicly blame and condemn the U.S.-style gang deportees for the escalating violence in their country. In addition, many of them face the reality that they are in danger because of their former gang status. Gang members' lives are at risk not only because of their own gang activity, but also because of how much they are despised by society. Gangs are seen as the enemy by the government, the police, the medical system, and by underground assassins.

Too often, new arrivals must join one gang simply to protect themselves from another gang who perceives them as an enemy because of their gang affiliations in the United States. Gang membership is a lifetime commitment; many gangs will kill any member who wants to leave if they know too much information about gang activities.

Tattoos are an important part of gang culture;

Another important aspect of this program is that it relied on community members to police their own neighborhoods in a nonthreatening manner. Although many law enforcement agencies have adopted community-policing policies, these policies have not yet proved effective in many inner-city neighborhoods. This is partially due to the fact that ongoing high profile cases of police discrimination and abuse against minorities continue to erode public trust.

*If you provide services, youth will come*

The Neutral Zone<sup>32</sup> was an intervention/diversion program created by a Community Action Resource Team in 1992 as a way of dealing with

adolescents who were considered to be at-risk youth in Mountlake Terrace, Washington, which is located a few miles north of Seattle. The program's hours of operation were from 10:00 p.m. and 2:00 a.m. on Friday and Saturday nights. The Neutral Zone was a place for kids to go and play games, listen to music, watch movies, and eat dinner. They also had access to other services such as individual counseling and job training.

An evaluation of the Neutral Zone was conducted through direct observation, focus group interviews, and official data. Researchers found that the Neutral Zone was a cost-effective and non-punitive way for this community to deal with at-risk

Salvadoran gang members sport tattoos on their foreheads, chins, ears, forearms, necks, and fingers. These marks serve to distinguish members of different gangs; this is especially important because Salvadoran gang members are not typically aligned by ethnic differences.<sup>19</sup> The tattoos that so often come with gang membership further hinder youths' chances of making changes away from their gangster lifestyles once they get to El Salvador. The tattoos are permanent stamps symbolizing gang membership, and tattooed youth are feared and hated by many citizens.

Salvadorans are aware of the escalating violence within their country, and the United States-style gang deportees receive a lot of public condemnation. Former gang members bearing permanent evidence of their histories in the form of tattoos have a difficult time trying to change their lives. Many employers refuse to hire anyone with tattoos.

A former gang member described his situation this way—

*Coming from the States to El Salvador made me feel like a fish out of water and the only people that were around me were my gang member*

*friends who I met through a cousin that was in a gang. When I first came to El Salvador I thought about being away from trouble and getting a job, but when I went looking for a job they always asked me whether I was the person they read about in the paper, a leader of a gang, someone that used to kill people, sell drugs and rape women. And all these things weren't even close.*<sup>20</sup>

Miguel Cruz, a researcher at the Institute of Public Opinion in San Salvador, says that "after the [civil war], we didn't have a bad guy anymore, so the authorities chose youth, and in particular the gangs. The government believes that gang members need to be eliminated because they represent a threat to society."<sup>21</sup>

Gang members (or any youth who look like gang members) are often unable to get adequate health care in El Salvador. A female former gang member reported that "in her gang-banging days, [she] saw several of her friends get shot and then sat with them in hospital waiting rooms for hours while they were systematically out-triaged by more traditionally dressed patients."<sup>22</sup> In May 1999, the director of Homies Unidos died outside a hospital in San Salvador after he was shot in

youth. Based on the number of calls received by the police about juvenile disturbances, it was determined that juvenile crime in the area had decreased during the time that the program was in operation.

Also, even though this program was not located within the inner-city of Seattle, the evaluators found that many of the participating youth had found their way from Seattle and other neighboring communities for the sole purpose of attending the Neutral Zone. The evaluators called upon the surrounding communities to implement their own programs since there was obviously such a demand for them by youth.

### *Self-motivated youth can shed their gang identities*

The Fairfax Skindeep Tattoo Removal Program<sup>33</sup> is currently available and provides free removal of gang tattoos to youth who volunteer for the program. The program is a voluntary collaboration between Virginia's Fairfax County youth, families and/or care givers, public human service agencies, and community-based organizations that will actively and creatively work to address the needs of at-risk, gang-involved youth and families.

The goals of the program are as follows: to increase positive alternatives to gang involvement through public and private sector collaboration; reduce violent crime which threatens at-risk youth;

the chest, allegedly because health care workers refused to admit him for treatment.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, there are vigilante "death squads" determined to exterminate violence and gang problems. Although these groups operate outside the realm of the law, it has been reported that law-enforcement officers (including the National Police Force) are involved. The death squads are responsible for execution-style murders of gang members. One gang member said, "You live with the fear that la Sombra Negra [death squads; literally, the Black Shadow] can come to get you at any moment. The police put the hoods on and come out to kill."<sup>24</sup>

There is an even more menacing aspect to these death squads; it has been suggested that they are actually operating in order to sustain gang activity. Increasingly, reformed gang members who have been encouraging their gangs to cease using drugs and violence are targets of these executions. In 1999, three members of Homies Unidos, an organization dedicated to reducing youth gang violence, were murdered in El Salvador.<sup>25</sup> Homies Unidos, however, continues to operate in both El Salvador and Los Angeles and has helped hundreds of youth

reintegrate into their communities and develop leadership and vocational skills.◆

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enhance educational opportunity; encourage participation in job training and basic skills; cooperate with other community-based organizations interested in tattoo removal; ensure parsimonious utilization of public funding; provide opportunity for community service; create productive, tax-paying citizens of the Fairfax-Falls Church area.

Youth who participate in the program are self-selected because they choose to meet the program objectives. They must attend all classes that they are enrolled in and pass all with a grade C or better. They must seek employment if the educational requirement is not fulfilled. They must maintain sobriety throughout the program. They also must complete 40 hours of community service prior to the tattoo removal.

The program has had 23 successful graduates so far and won the 1998 Team Excellence Award from Fairfax County. The program provides youth with the opportunity to shed an image that they no longer find favorable. The laser removal of tattoos is a time consuming and very expensive procedure.

Most youth would not otherwise be able to afford such an opportunity on their own.

### *The OJJDP Strategies for Gang Prevention/Intervention/Suppression*

In the last decade several program models have been developed in response to the gang problem within the United States. These models have mainly been put together by official government agencies dedicated to solving youth gang problems. The information that has been collected and researched has been compiled by the OJJDP into a set of five strategies that communities can use to develop their own community-based solutions. Encouraging collaboration between program, community, and official agencies is a common feature of all the OJJDP strategies.

The five OJJDP strategies for communities that deal with youth gangs are:

- (1) mobilizing community leaders and residents to plan, strengthen, or create new op-

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portunities or linkages to existing organizations for gang-involved and at-risk youth;

(2) using outreach workers to engage gang-involved youth;

(3) providing and facilitating access to academic, economic, and social opportunities;

(4) conducting gang suppression activities and holding gang-involved youth accountable; and

(5) facilitating organizational change and development to help community agencies better address gang problems through a problem-solving approach consistent with the philosophy of community oriented policing.

In 1995, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention awarded five communities with grants to test whether each of the OJJDP strategies<sup>34</sup> would work to reduce gang activity. Although the programs have not yet been around long enough to be thoroughly evaluated, all involved are hopeful for positive results. The coordinated approach will allow better information sharing between the collaborators and ultimately provide the youth involved in the programs with better services and more attention.

## Conclusion

Society bears an ongoing responsibility to its youth and that includes finding positive alternatives to gangs, particularly for impoverished youth and youth from minority groups. With the growth of the availability of guns and the dangerous consequences of gang activity, never has that responsibility been more important. Although research topics on various aspects of youth gangs that would bring the American public to a better understanding of the phenomena certainly have not been exhausted, successful means of gang prevention and intervention are being explored. The communities most in need of this information must have access to this information and experience. Communities suffering gang problems need to be supported and allowed to develop local programs tailored to the particular needs of their youth.

A final thought to consider is funding for gang prevention and intervention programs. Many communities are either financially strapped or are unwilling to fund such programs. There are several state, federal, and nonprofit agencies that provide grant funding and assistance to communities in need, but those communities are the least likely to know about or be prepared to use funding sources. It's up to youth-serving agencies to bridge the gap. If community-based programs are utilized and the markers for success are better publicized, perhaps American society's response to youth gangs will center less on criminal behavior and tougher sentencing after the fact, and more on prevention and supporting positive outlets for youths' needs.◆

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Article submitted September 2000