

CHANGING COURSE

Preventing Gang Membership



Introduction



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Youth gang membership is a serious and persistent problem in the United States. One in three local law enforcement agencies report youth gang problems in their jurisdictions.¹ One in four high school freshmen report gangs in their schools.² Limited resources at the national, state, tribal and local levels make it more important than ever that we make full use of the best available evidence and clearly demonstrate the benefit of strategies to prevent gang-joining.

In acknowledgment of these realities, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) formed a partnership to publish this book. It is critical that those who make decisions about resources — as well as those who work directly with youth, like teachers and police officers, community services providers and emergency department physicians — understand what the research evidence shows about how to prevent kids from joining gangs.

The NIJ-CDC partnership drew on each agency's distinctive strengths: NIJ's commitment to enhancing justice and increasing public safety is matched by CDC's dedication to health promotion and prevention of violence, injury and disability. By combining perspectives, lessons and evidence from public safety *and* public health, NIJ and CDC provide new insights into the complex problems of gangs and gang membership.

Public health and public safety workers who respond to gang problems know that after-the-fact efforts are not enough. An emergency department doctor who treats gang-related gunshot wounds or a police officer who must tell a mother that her son has been killed in a drive-by shooting are likely to stress the need for prevention — and the complementary roles that public health and law enforcement must play — in stopping violence before it starts.

Given our shared commitment to informing policy and practice with the best available evidence of what works, CDC and NIJ brought together some of the nation's top public health and criminal justice researchers to present core principles for gang-membership prevention.

Why Are Principles So Important?

It would seem to go without saying that we should try to prevent kids from joining gangs. But why publish an entire book on principles rather than just a straightforward recipe for preventing gang-joining?

There are at least four reasons to focus on principles of prevention:

1. Much of what we know about preventing gang membership is drawn from research in other prevention fields, such as juvenile delinquency and violence prevention.
2. Joining a gang is a complex process that involves both individual volition and social influences; therefore, it is difficult to imagine that a single "recipe" for preventing gang membership would be effective for all at-risk youth across the array of social contexts.
3. Our focus on prevention principles better equips us to confront the specific public health and public safety issues linked to gang membership: interpersonal violence, truancy and school dropout, alcohol and substance abuse, and a host of related crime and health challenges.
4. By emphasizing principles, we seek to move the public discourse beyond an overly simplistic notion of gangs and gang problems — in an effort to cultivate an understanding of the complex array of social patterns and individual behaviors that are encountered under the rubric of "gangs."

The consequences of gangs — and the burden they place on the law enforcement and health systems in our communities — are significant. The simple truth, however, is that gang intervention and suppression activities and strategies for providing medical services to gang members and victims of gang violence, although critical, are not enough. We must implement early prevention strategies to keep youth from joining gangs in the first place. Indeed, we believe that, faced with current economic realities, prevention is the smartest, most economical approach to solving the gang problem and its cascading impact on individuals, families, neighborhoods and society at large.

Consider the impact of violence. In the U.S., homicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescents and young adults: it results in an average of 13 deaths every day among those ages 10-24.³ However, the number of violent deaths tells only part of the story: More than 700,000 young people are treated in U.S. emergency departments for assault-related injuries each year.³ Violence also erodes communities by reducing productivity, decreasing property values and disrupting social services.

Now, consider the impact of gangs on violence and other crime. Youth involved in gangs are far more likely than youth not involved in gangs to be both victims and perpetrators of violence.^{4,5} In many U.S. communities, gang members (including youth and adult members of street, outlaw motorcycle and prison gangs) are responsible for more than half of the violent crimes and, in some jurisdictions, gang members are responsible for 90 percent of violent crimes.⁶

The consequences of youth gang membership extend beyond the risk for crime and violence. Gang-involved youth are more likely to engage in substance abuse and high-risk sexual behavior and to experience a wide range of potentially long-term health and social consequences, including school dropout, teen parenthood, family problems and unstable employment.⁷

Why Prevention?

The goal of this book is to provide practitioners and policymakers with knowledge about why kids become involved in gangs and to offer effective and promising strategies that *prevent* them from doing so. A significant proportion of local, state and federal budgets — in health, criminal justice, law enforcement and community services — is dedicated to dealing with gang-joining and its sequelae *after* it has occurred. We also know that a large majority of youth who join gangs do so very young — between ages 11 and 15 — and the peak ages for gang-joining are between 13 and 15 years old.⁸

Fortunately, we know that many early prevention programs provide taxpayers with significantly more benefits than costs. Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman, for example, has written about the economic benefits of targeting high-risk children before they start kindergarten.⁹ Researchers at the Washington State Institute for Public Policy have done cost-benefit analyses of programs that show significant effects on a range of outcomes, including crime, educational attainment, substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, teen pregnancy and public assistance. One example is the Nurse-Family Partnership, which provides support during pregnancy to low-income women and helps them develop parenting skills during the child's first two years of life. Evaluations of the long-term effects of this program show significant reductions in child neglect and abuse, and sustained effects on the child through age 15, including less likelihood of running away, reduced alcohol consumption, and 56 percent fewer arrests. The Nurse-Family Partnership is estimated to provide \$2.37 return on every dollar invested, resulting in approximately \$13,181 in savings per child.¹⁰

Although such cost-benefit data provide decision-makers with the fiscal rationale for implementing early prevention programs, it is also important to consider the ethical responsibility that communities have to help children avoid gang membership. That said, no one who reads this book will be surprised to learn that there is no quick fix. Reducing gang activity and violence requires a combination of strategies, including prevention, enforcement and reentry services for those returning from confinement. Preventing gang membership in the first place holds promise for long-term success in reducing both violence and crime *and* the “downstream” societal problems that stem from gang activities.

What You Will Learn

Little scientific evidence specifically addresses gang-membership prevention; however, the body of research on youth delinquency and youth violence offers substantial insights. Where research specific to gang-joining exists, the experts who worked on this book discuss it, but we also asked them to consider research on youth violence, delinquency, developmental ecology and substance use to explore promising principles for gang-membership prevention.

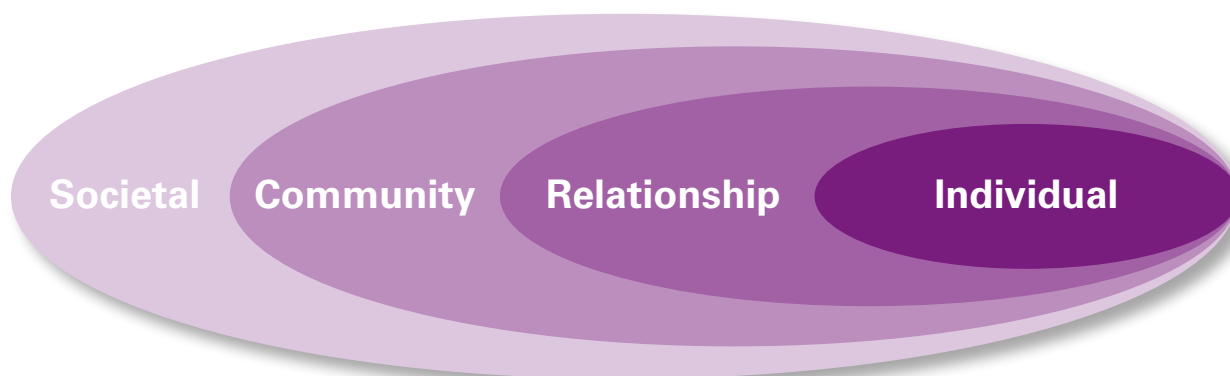
We begin with a chapter by a pioneer in the field of youth gangs, James (“Buddy”) Howell. Examining why preventing gang-joining is so important, Dr. Howell discusses the latest information about the magnitude and seriousness of the gang problem in the U.S. In chapter 2, Dr. Carl Taylor and Ms. Pamela Smith discuss aspects of gang life that are attractive to some youth. This chapter considers the perceptions that an adolescent may have about the personal, economic and social motives for joining a gang.

In chapter 3, Dr. Tamara Haegerich, Dr. James Mercy and Ms. Billie Weiss explore the public health impact of gang membership, and they encourage readers to consider the complementary roles of public health and law enforcement in helping to prevent kids from joining a gang. In chapter 4, Dr. Scott Decker describes the role that law enforcement can play in preventing youth from joining a gang and recommends an emphasis on prevention rather than suppression-only tactics. Together, these two chapters highlight the importance of collaboration and coordination across sectors, including health, law enforcement, education and business.

The next four chapters are structured according to the social ecological model for designing prevention strategies.

The social ecological model posits multiple levels at which risk factors can be reduced and protective factors can be enhanced — moving from within individuals and relationships to an entire community or society at large (see graphic, “Levels of Social Influence on Youth Violence: The Social Ecological Model”). First, in chapter 5, Dr. Nancy Guerra and colleagues describe the individual and family factors in early childhood (ages 0-5) and the elementary school years (ages 6-12) that increase the risk for gang-joining. They also explore opportunities for prevention when at-risk youth are identified and provided with age-appropriate prevention strategies that help them avoid a cascade of problems, including gang-joining, delinquency and violence. In chapter 6, Dr. Deborah Gorman-Smith and colleagues focus on how early prevention strategies increase the protective role of families by enhancing consistent and appropriate

Levels of Social Influence on Youth Violence: The Social Ecological Model



SOURCE: Dahlberg LL, Krug EG. Violence — A global public health problem. In: Krug EG, Dahlberg LL, Mercy JA, Zwi AB, Lozano R, eds., *World Report on Violence and Health*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization, 2002.

discipline, monitoring, communication and warmth. In chapter 7, Dr. Gary Gottfredson describes the need for strategies to enhance the willingness — and ability — of schools to assess gang problems accurately, implement prevention strategies, and address the fear in schools that contributes to the risk for gang-joining. In chapter 8, Dr. Jorja Leap emphasizes the opportunity to build on existing strengths within communities. She describes the need for community-based, multifaceted prevention efforts that work across the life span and are grounded in collaboration among the various stakeholders.

As the editors of this book, we felt strongly that — in addition to describing principles for gang-membership prevention at the individual, family, school and community levels — it was incumbent on us to consider head-on the need to reduce gang-joining among girls and the issues of race and ethnicity. In chapter 9, Dr. Meda Chesney-Lind explores how we can prevent girls from joining gangs. Her discussion includes the risks of child sexual abuse, poor family functioning, neighborhood safety, substance abuse and dating violence. In chapter 10, Drs. Adrienne Freng and T.J. Taylor look at the complex role that race and ethnicity can play in gang membership. Although there is no doubt that more research is needed in this area, they argue that, at this point, common underlying risk factors — such as poverty, challenges for immigrants, discrimination and social isolation — should be our focus.

In chapter 11, Drs. Finn Esbensen and Kristy Matsuda examine a subject that is critical to those responsible for making decisions about how limited resources for gang-membership prevention are allocated. Everyone — from federal and state policymakers to local school board members, and from health departments to police departments — is eager to answer the question: “How do we *know* if we are preventing gang membership?” Anecdotal success stories do not justify creating a new program or continuing the investment in an ongoing one. Decisions should be made on the best available evidence. We believe that it is crucial for decision-makers to understand the key principles of process, outcome and cost-effectiveness evaluations offered in this chapter.

Finally, in our Conclusion, we extend an invitation to policymakers and practitioners to engage in a new way of thinking about the intersection of public health and public safety strategies and leveraging public health and public safety resources. As a collaboration of international experts recently noted, “It may not be an easy invitation to accept.”¹¹ We are accustomed to attacking problems such as gang-joining through “silos.” These silos can exist in all levels of government and can be fairly entrenched. So, in addition to facing our nation’s economic challenges, we must start breaking down silos — silos of thinking, silos of action. With this goal in mind, the Conclusion offers suggestions for strategic actions that can help prevent kids from joining a gang.

Making Research Useful to Practitioners and Policymakers

The chapters in this book have these common features to help readers determine what information may be most important to them, see the most critical information up front, and begin to connect research with real-world applications:

- The titles are framed as questions.
- Key principles are presented in bulleted form.
- An “In Brief” summary pulls together key findings and ideas.
- A Q&A interview with a practitioner offers a personalized illustration of the principles discussed.
- Implementation and policy challenges are explored.

The need to move beyond silos is one of the reasons we brought together diverse perspectives: public health and law enforcement, researchers and practitioners. Criminal justice and public health can collaborate at multiple levels to raise awareness about the importance of early prevention in helping to keep youth from joining gangs and to ensure that the best available evidence of what works is identified and fully used.

This book provides a foundation for that collaboration by describing the principles and promising practices for preventing gang-joining that practitioners and policymakers can use to guide decisions and long-term planning for reducing gang activity. NIJ and CDC are dedicated to this mission, and we hope that this collaboration will serve as an example of the way forward.

Vocabulary: Some Basic Definitions

Vocabulary can be a stumbling block for collaboration across sectors. To help avoid confusion and to facilitate consistency across chapters, we established a few basic operational definitions. In the same way that this book attempts to help break down silos between criminal justice and public health, we tried to remove some of the jargon that might get in the way of policymakers and practitioners understanding and embracing the principles in this book. Here, then, is some general guidance about what we mean when we use these terms:

Youth gang: Although there is no standard definition of what constitutes a gang, one of our authors, James C. (“Buddy”) Howell, has offered a practical definition, which incorporates several widely accepted criteria for classifying a group as a youth gang:¹²

- Five or more members.
- Members share an identity, often linked to a name and other symbols.
- Members view themselves as a gang and are recognized by others as a gang.
- The group has some permanence and a degree of organization.
- The group is involved in an elevated level of delinquent or criminal activity.

Gang-joining: We use an operational perspective to define this as when a youth self-identifies as a member of a gang.

Gang-membership/Gang-joining prevention: This is the implementation of a strategy, program or policy that has the direct or indirect effect of reducing youth’s risk of joining a gang. We use the term *primary prevention* to refer to preventing youth from joining a gang in the first place. We include strategies that either reduce known risk factors or enhance protective factors that reduce the likelihood of gang-joining.

Evidence: Principles or assertions made by the authors of the chapters in this book are based on systematic research. We have endeavored to ensure that an evaluation exists to support statements of effectiveness and that the rigor of an evaluation qualifies the strength of statements about a program’s or principle’s effectiveness. We have tried to ensure that the authors avoided (1) statements of opinion or observation that are not based on systematic research, (2) assessments or discussions of a strategy’s effectiveness that are not based on an evaluation, and (3) overstatement of confidence in the results of evaluation.

Endnotes

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