

# CHANGING COURSE

## Preventing Gang Membership



### Chapter 10. Race and Ethnicity: What Are Their Roles in Gang Membership?



# Race and Ethnicity: What Are Their Roles in Gang Membership?

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- **The roles of race and ethnicity in gang membership are becoming increasingly complicated, and it is important to understand that the term *gang membership* is not “code” for race or ethnicity; the truth is that more and more gangs include white gang members and are becoming multiracial.**
- **Different risk factors exist — and young people give different reasons — for gang-joining; however, most risk factors cut across racial and ethnic lines, including the negative consequences associated with poverty, immigration, discrimination and social isolation, such as limited educational opportunities, low parental monitoring and drug use.**
- **To prevent gang-joining, resources should be used to revitalize deteriorating, poverty-stricken, racially/ethnically isolated communities.**
- **We can act now on what we know about shared risk factors — such as poverty, immigration, discrimination and social isolation — to implement general prevention strategies and programs that are racially, ethnically and culturally sensitive while continuing to explore whether additional racially and ethnically specific gang-membership prevention programming is needed.**

## In Brief

The connection between race/ethnicity and gang membership has long existed. Early gang members traditionally came from white ethnic immigrant groups such as the Irish and Polish, whereas starting in the 1950s, we have seen gang membership increasingly concentrated among racial minorities such as African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and American Indians.<sup>1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6</sup> Current data indicate that there are a considerable number of white gang members as well.<sup>7, 8, 9</sup> Additionally, emerging gangs have become much more multiracial, impacting the role that race/ethnicity plays, especially with respect to issues such as gang conflict.<sup>10</sup> Although a number of theories and a fair amount of research have examined the connection between race/ethnicity and gang membership, surprisingly little information exists regarding whether racially or ethnically *specific* programming is needed. For example, do we need more targeted programs that focus on specific factors for different racial and ethnic groups? Or is general gang-membership prevention programming — which includes some racially and ethnically *sensitive* elements — sufficient?

Early gang research focused on investigating the development of gangs among newly arrived ethnic groups, emphasizing the connection to immigration, urbanization, poverty and social isolation. In fact, these factors seem to represent the common denominator when considering gang-joining — regardless of racial/ethnic group membership — and they remain at the center of many recent works explaining gang membership among racial/ethnic minorities. Furthermore, general risk factors for gang membership often are more prevalent in racial/ethnic minority populations, which results in higher rates of gang membership for these populations. However, there does seem to be some question regarding which risk factors matter the most in understanding gang membership among the various racial and ethnic groups.<sup>11, 12</sup>

Communities cannot address gang-joining among minority populations without fully understanding the factors that influence risk. There is some recent evidence — including a study by the authors — that racially and ethnically specific gang-membership prevention programming may not be necessary but rather, that general prevention programming, which includes racially and ethnically sensitive elements, may be sufficient.<sup>13</sup> To date, however, most research has focused on gangs in specific locations without fully considering race or ethnicity as a factor. Therefore, to know whether racially or ethnically *specific* programming would be more successful than general gang-membership prevention programming, it is important that current prevention programs be better evaluated to determine whether race or ethnicity has an impact on prevention efforts and outcomes.

The roles of race and ethnicity in gang membership are becoming increasingly complicated. Several factors contribute to this complexity:

- Gang members are not only minorities; whites are involved at higher levels than previously thought.<sup>14</sup>
- Gangs are becoming increasingly racially or ethnically mixed.<sup>10</sup> The changing ethnic composition of gangs may be increasing the likelihood of intra- (rather than inter-) racial/ethnic conflict; instead of conflict between African-Americans and whites, for example, we are seeing more and more conflict between opposing Hispanic groups such as MS-13 and 18th Street.<sup>15</sup> Thus, race/ethnicity may not be the chief reason for gang conflict.
- Gang membership is often portrayed, especially by the media, as a minority issue affecting the barrios and inner cities of the United States.<sup>16</sup> Although a disproportionate share of gang members are in fact minority youth, this image ignores the significant number of white (non-Hispanic Caucasian) individuals involved in gangs, and creates inaccurate representations of the large number of minority youth who do *not* join gangs.<sup>7, 17</sup> Further confusing the issue is that, although racial and ethnic minorities constitute the majority of gang members, according to both official and self-report data, these sources do not agree on the level of involvement of racial/ethnic minorities.<sup>9</sup>

The National Gang Center,<sup>9</sup> for example, reports law enforcement data that indicate 84 percent of gang members are racial or ethnic minorities: 49 percent Hispanic, 35 percent African-American,

4.6 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1.4 American Indian or Alaska Native. Additionally, findings from ethnographic studies — most of which tend to focus on African-American or Latino gangs — further contribute to the perception that gang membership is only a problem among racial or ethnic minority youth.<sup>2, 4, 5, 6</sup> On the other hand, self-report studies — such as the one conducted to evaluate the G.R.E.A.T. (Gang Resistance Education and Training) program — indicate that about 25 percent of gang members are white.<sup>7</sup> Other self-report studies that describe the percentage of youth who report gang membership by race or ethnicity suggest approximately equal percentages of gang members among white (7 percent), African-American (8 percent) and Hispanic (9 percent) youth; multiracial individuals are involved in gangs at higher rates than those identifying as one race or ethnicity (13 percent).<sup>18</sup>

Some of the discrepancy in estimates of gang involvement of racial or ethnic minorities could be due to the fact that the racial/ethnic makeup of a gang tends to reflect the racial/ethnic composition of the community; that is, gang members tend to be white in areas with large concentrations of white residents, tend to be primarily Latino in predominantly Latino areas, and predominantly African-American in areas with a large African-American population.<sup>19</sup> For example, although the National Gang Center reports that, overall, 9 percent of gang members are white, this percentage increases to 17 percent in rural counties and 14 percent in smaller cities where populations, as a whole, tend to consist of larger percentages of whites.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, African-American and Hispanic gang members are the most prevalent in larger cities.<sup>9</sup> Thus, because most of the information on gang membership is often generated from large

urban areas, these are the populations represented, once again fueling the impression that gang membership is solely a minority issue.

There is also a tendency, based on the available data, to separate gangs into groups, such as African-American gangs, Hispanic gangs, Asian gangs and American Indian gangs. However, doing so ignores the dynamics within groups (such as the differences between Chinese and Vietnamese gangs) as well as the fact that, increasingly, gangs are taking on the characteristics of hybrid gangs, which include being multiracial/multiethnic.<sup>10</sup> By 1998, it was estimated that as many as one-third of gangs were racially/ethnically mixed.<sup>10</sup> This mixed nature remains more prominent in jurisdictions that experienced a later onset of gang formation. For example, agencies that reported gang onset as recently as 1991-1992 indicated that 55 percent of gangs consisted of racially and ethnically mixed membership — compared with 38 percent for those with the onset of gang problems in 1981-1985, and 18 percent for those with the onset of gang problems before 1981.<sup>20</sup>

Multiracial gangs have created a new dynamic, especially in terms of conflict between gangs. Historically, many gangs developed in response to the threat from other racial/ethnic groups, thus creating conflict.<sup>21</sup> Movies such as “West Side Story” and “Gangs of New York” presented the image of racial/ethnic groups fighting with each other, often with deadly consequences. Evidence does exist, for example, that African-American gangs in New York developed in response to threats from white gangs.<sup>21</sup> However, intraethnic conflict also appears to have played a role in the development of gangs such as MS-13 (a Salvadoran gang) as they tried to protect themselves from other Hispanic gangs such as the 18th Street gang.<sup>15</sup> Thus, as gang membership becomes more diverse in terms of race/ethnicity, it can potentially impact the group conflict dynamic as gangs might be less likely to conflict with each other based primarily on race/ethnicity.

## Targeting Concentrated Disadvantage

Community and environmental factors play a critical role in the creation of youth gangs. In

current American society, members of racial/ethnic minority groups are much more likely than whites to live in disadvantaged communities with characteristics that exacerbate risk for gang-joining, including the following:<sup>2, 22, 23, 24, 25</sup>

- Concentrated poverty.
- Social and geographic isolation.
- Resource-deprived social institutions, such as schools and hospitals.
- Fewer meaningful employment opportunities because of industrial and manufacturing jobs moving out of the cities during the 1970s and 1980s, coupled with a deteriorating public education system that struggles to prepare students for new high-technology jobs.
- Rundown and decaying housing.
- Relatively high rates of crime and violence.
- A criminal justice system that removes a disproportionate share of residents — particularly young men — from the area.

Although there is no doubt that the community in which an individual develops has important implications for youth’s likelihood of joining gangs, the reality is that few programs have the means to change these larger societal factors. Consequently, most evidence-based practices have focused on individual-level characteristics that are assumed to be more easily addressed. To truly reduce racial/ethnic disparities in youth gang-joining and violence, however, we must address the conditions that create the types of communities where gangs thrive.

Programs that focus on changing the structure of communities — by reducing prodelinquent opportunities and promoting prosocial opportunities — will most likely provide the greatest return on investment in terms of effectively addressing the root causes of gang membership and violence. This is no small order, as it would require policymakers to make a concerted effort to address factors such as the concentrations of high unemployment, the increase in households where the father is absent, the disruption these areas experience as a result of higher levels of mental and physical illness and other disabling conditions, and the overburdened health care system and community services.<sup>26</sup>

Concentrated disadvantage, exacerbated by demographic and economic flight from the cities since the 1960s, has resulted in increasingly racially/ethnically segregated communities.<sup>22, 24, 27</sup> Furthermore, this flight and its consequences impact communities and transcend racial/ethnic lines.<sup>2, 24</sup> As a result, gangs provide a setting in which nonconforming norms, values and behaviors are developed, shared, sustained and become deeply engrained.<sup>28, 29, 30</sup> In communities with the greatest isolation and disruption, risks — including those for gang-joining — developed. This occurred:

- In settings that are socially isolated from “mainstream” society.
- In response to an absence of legitimate opportunities to achieve “the American Dream.”
- As a mechanism of social support among marginalized members of society.
- As a way to defend against groups with competing values.

For example, particularly for African-Americans, the accumulating concentrated-disadvantage processes of the 1970s and 1980s may have ushered in a “new era” of gangs.<sup>2, 24</sup> During the 1980s and 1990s, blue-collar jobs, which have traditionally increased social mobility, became scarce. As these jobs required more skills and became less available, minority individuals living in disadvantaged urban areas had a harder time finding employment. When jobs and educational preparation are limited, young males especially have fewer legitimate opportunities as they become young adults. Historically, as meaningful employment became unavailable, many minority youth stayed in gangs longer, further embedding gangs in the community. In fact, research indicates that many young men would choose the opportunity for legitimate employment over illegitimate activities such as drug dealing for several reasons, including that most do not make a substantial amount of money through illicit activities.<sup>2, 31</sup> In the presence of limited opportunities for employment, gangs provide an alternative way to “make it” in inner-city environments.<sup>2, 24</sup> However, although the gang may fulfill the immediate need for financial resources, gang involvement alienates youth from society and decreases their ability to interact with conventional society in the long run.<sup>32, 33</sup> As a result, gang members are often

not prepared to enter mainstream society and are not able to prepare their children to enter it either, creating a cycle of violence and gang involvement in these disadvantaged neighborhoods.<sup>32</sup>

Additionally, when considering gang expansion and activities, it is important to consider the different historical experiences of racial/ethnic groups.<sup>6</sup> For example, the experiences of African-Americans in the crack cocaine trade during the late 1980s through mid-1990s have been documented as one element fostering violence and gang activities in inner-city neighborhoods during that era.<sup>34</sup> However, self-reporting by gang members indicates no significant differences between racial/ethnic groups when it comes to selling illegal drugs — and a greater percentage of white gang members actually report more individual participation in drug selling.<sup>8</sup> Thus, although it is important to consider the historical context and any residual effect of race or ethnicity when trying to understand gang-membership prevention, there is generally insufficient or conflicting information for a thorough comparison of the activities of white, African-American and Hispanic gangs. Additionally, recent evidence — that gangs may be becoming more multiracial — renders some of the traditional typologies less relevant than they were in the past.

The isolation created by concentrated disadvantage often results in the spread of violence. Citizens in these environments can feel left behind and forgotten, including by local law enforcement. Feeling under attack by members of their own communities, coupled with a lack of trust in the formal justice system, residents may feel the need to be always ready — and, when necessary, willing — to use violence to solve disputes.<sup>22, 35</sup> When the threat of violence becomes a part of residents’ daily existence, it creates an environment favorable to gangs, which can be further exacerbated by the sense of isolation people feel from mainstream institutions, such as schools and law enforcement, and from legitimate employment opportunities. Of course, participation in violence results in even more isolation from the community and conventional society.<sup>35</sup>

These feelings of isolation may be further increased when the marginalization occurs in multiple contexts, such as due to racism, discrimination, or the unique pressures faced by recent immigrants. The fact that immigration — legal or

illegal — can put individuals in a position to be discriminated against and impact their economic situation ties it to risks for involvement in criminal behavior and gang membership.

MS-13, a Salvadoran gang receiving considerable publicity recently, provides one example of the relationship between immigration and gangs. Many individuals left El Salvador in the 1980s to escape a civil war. They settled in the United States, and some youth formed a violent gang as a way to protect themselves from other groups. Policy efforts, such as deportation, resulted in the establishment of this gang within post-civil war El Salvador and created a pipeline through which many either enter or return illegally, representing a continual problem for many of the communities where these gangs exist.<sup>36</sup> (See the sidebar “One Child’s Journey.”)

Despite the risks associated with concentrated disadvantage, even in the most disadvantaged communities, involvement of youth (white and minority) in gangs is the exception.<sup>37</sup> Thus, we must examine other risk and protective factors to gain a more complete understanding of who joins gangs.

### **Are Risk and Protective Factors for Gang-Joining “Race/Ethnic-Specific”?**

The risk and protective factors approach has become more popular in terms of looking at the predictors of gang membership. However, there is limited information on the differences and similarities of risk and protective factors for gang-joining across different racial/ethnic groups. The evidence that we do have, however, shows that although some differences exist across groups, many risk factors often impact youth regardless of race and ethnicity.

In fact, the reason that more minority youth are involved in gangs might not be because the risk and protective factors are different but, rather, because they are exposed to greater risk levels based on the communities in which they typically live. That said, reliable data is scarce. We need more research on whether different risk and protective factors predict differences in gang membership between the racial/ethnic groups and whether this warrants racially and ethnically specific programming.

Some of the more promising research that examines the relationship between racial/ethnic membership and gang involvement includes investigating the various risk and protective factors for gang membership. This perspective, developed from the public health model (see chapter 3), identifies factors that put an individual more at risk for (or protect against) a number of outcomes, including gang membership.<sup>38, 39, 40</sup> Although the literature on risk factors for gang membership has become more extensive over the last decade, it is important to note the scarcity of literature that explores the similarities and differences in risk and protective factors for the various racial/ethnic groups.<sup>11, 12, 13, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43</sup> Research that examines group-specific factors that predict gang membership for whites, African-Americans, Hispanics and other groups remains relatively rare.<sup>8, 11, 12, 13, 14</sup>

Much of the research on risk factors for youth violence more generally, and gang membership specifically, indicates that most risk factors for gang-joining operate similarly across groups. Most of what we know about risk factors for gang-joining generally applies for white, African-American, American Indian and Asian youth. Additionally, research examining risk factors for gang membership among middle-school-aged youth has found that the effects of risk factors in the individual (for example, lack of self-control, low levels of guilt for negative behavior), family (such as poor parental monitoring), school (such as perceived vulnerability to violence), and peer (for example, commitment to delinquent peers, unstructured time spent where adults were not present, and time spent where drugs or alcohol are available) domains operate similarly for youth of different racial/ethnic backgrounds.<sup>13</sup> Also, regardless of racial/ethnic background, youth who experienced a greater accumulation of risk factors and those who reported risk factors from multiple domains were more likely than other youth to report being gang members.

Although studies show that many key risk factors influencing gang membership are similar across races and ethnicities, evidence also indicates that some gang-joining risk factors may influence certain groups more than others. For example, when compared with Hispanics, more African-American gang members are influenced by social variables such as having family members in a gang, gang members in their classes, and friends who

## One Child's Journey

Imagine this scenario: A family consisting of a mother, father and preadolescent son move from a distant land to the United States. The family settles into a community with immigrants of similar heritage. As new arrivals, they face a number of hardships. First, the father needs to find a way to support the family, but his employment opportunities are limited because of the lack of meaningful jobs in the area, few social connections to rely on for assistance, language barriers, and the existence of stereotypes that his "kind" is uneducated, undermotivated, and possibly here on fake registration papers.

In the home country, women are expected to focus on family rearing; however, it quickly becomes clear that the mother will need to get a job if the family is to pay its bills. Both the husband and the wife take on new jobs in the secondary labor market — father works seasonal labor, mother works at a fast-food establishment. The family is constantly bombarded by messages encouraging materialism and financial success. Both parents work as many hours as possible, but their financial means do not allow for the lifestyle they desire. In fact, a recent change in the public transportation route has compromised the mother's means of getting to work, and the father, on his way home from work, was recently robbed of his paycheck, which was entirely in cash because of his distrust of social institutions like banks. He does not report the crime because he knows the man who stole his money is a neighbor, although not a good one.

The couple's son, who immigrated with the family at age 5, has now become a teenager. He observes all of this and experiences strains of his own. He attends a school with outdated resources and a leaky ceiling. To and from school each day,

he passes groups of young men and women making quick (if meager) money by selling drugs. Over time, more and more of his friends are dropping out of school, selling and using drugs, and hanging out with the older kids who show them how. As he has aged, the desire for more material wealth has been ingrained in his psyche, and now that he is a teenager, it is more important than ever to fit in and impress his friends. Several of his friends encourage him to just hang out with them for a while and "give the game a try." He rarely sees his parents because they work so much, but he realizes that they do not seem to be successfully moving up the social ladder. Based on his poor school experience, with its resource-depleted environment failing to provide useful education or job training, the difficulty of learning in English while primarily speaking in his native tongue at home, and the physical and social disorder he faces just traveling to school and back, the teenager decides to give it a try. Keeping it secret from his parents, of course, the teen quickly begins to enjoy the camaraderie, networking, partying, and money associated with the group affiliation. The appearance of solidarity and the illusion of protection the gang offers also provide peace of mind that he will not be robbed like his father or, if he is, he will have a group to back him up when he retaliates.

Can you tell the race of the person in this example? Can you tell what country that he emigrated from? No. This is why it is important to understand that the issue of preventing kids from joining gangs is so much broader than race. It's not that race/ethnicity does not matter. It's just very important to understand the larger social context in which race — and ethnicity and immigration — are but factors.

use drugs.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, risk factors for Hispanic gang members tend to be more related to educational frustration and lower school self-esteem.<sup>11</sup> For white gang members, risk factors included having parents with lower educational levels and increased levels of social isolation. African-Americans and Hispanics, on the other

hand, were more likely to join gangs when they were less committed to school, had poor opinions of or interactions with the police, and were socialized on the street.<sup>12</sup>

These group differences in the relative influence of some risk factors suggest the potential benefit

of some tailoring of prevention strategies that address cross-cutting risks to be sensitive to the motivations and concerns of specific groups.

Other research highlights the *differential exposure* to risk factors for members of different racial/ethnic groups. The results from these studies have led researchers to propose that the reason we see more minority youth involvement in gangs is not because of differences in the types of risk factors. Rather, they argue, gang-joining is related to the fact that minority youth are often more exposed to risk factors based on the environments in which they live. So, for example, living in a deteriorating community without jobs and quality schools and with high crime rates represent risk factors for gang membership — and youth from *any* racial/ethnic group exposed to this type of environment would be more likely to join a gang. The difference is that minority youth are more likely than whites to grow up in communities with these characteristics, thus increasing their chances of gang involvement. So, the risk factors are not necessarily different for minority individuals, but the rate at which they are exposed to risk factors does differ.

As with all aspects of youth violence, important racial and ethnic differences in the social contexts in which youth develop can be neither ignored nor overstated when examining gang-joining (see chapter 5). Thus, prevention strategies focused on youth and families in racial and ethnic minority communities with high degrees of concentrated disadvantage should be considered. Ideally, integrative, macro-level strategies aimed at reducing concentrated disadvantage and the problems that result should be implemented. Although comprehensive programs are expensive, take time to develop, and can be difficult to implement and assess, these realities should not deter us.

As discussed throughout this book, very few “gang-specific” prevention programs exist, and even fewer have been found to be effective. We have found no established evidence-based programs that are directly focused on addressing racial/ethnic differences in risk factors for gang membership. Unfortunately, research on gang-joining and related programming has not evolved as quickly as other areas of youth-violence prevention.<sup>44</sup> However, there is some evidence that general prevention programming is equally

effective for whites and minorities. For example, looking at numerous programs, researchers found that mainstream delinquency-prevention programs do, in fact, work equally well for minority and white youth.<sup>45</sup> These findings mirror those found in evaluations of other culturally specific juvenile justice programs.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the Community Guide review of universal, school-based violence-prevention programs found significant preventive effects on violent behavior, regardless of the predominant race/ethnicity of students.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, some general prevention programs — such as the school-based G.R.E.A.T. program — have been found to reduce gang membership among racially/ethnically diverse groups of youth<sup>48</sup> (see chapter 11).

In short, there is no consensus on whether programs should be racially or ethnically specific or whether they should be more general — that is, simply addressing underlying risk and protective factors that are likely to be relevant across racial/ethnic subgroups and communities, including risk factors for gang membership that are also related to substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, and aggression and violence.<sup>13</sup> With that in mind, we recommend funding and rigorously evaluating programs that focus on general risk and protective factors for overlapping problems — such as gang membership, delinquency and drug use — while carefully tailoring programs to meet the needs of racial and ethnic groups. This could be done by gathering and acting on feedback regarding examples of culturally appropriate programs. Pending future research results, the current evidence based on the risk factors for violence and victimization (both of which are related to gang involvement) suggests that making existing evidence-based programs racially and ethnically sensitive may be preferred over the development of new racially and ethnically specific programs.<sup>13</sup> For example, the elements of successful evidence-based programs should be administered to diverse groups, but it may be necessary to modify programs so they are relevant to the specific experiences of clients being served.<sup>49</sup> For example, in many minority communities, gang participation may indicate the need for protection and may not necessarily be a consequence of community values that support violence. Understanding these differences is important in terms of programmatic focus.<sup>49</sup>

## IN THE SPOTLIGHT: THE STRENGTHENING FAMILIES PROGRAM

To highlight how race and ethnicity can be taken into account when modifying standardized prevention programs, we focus on an evidence-based drug prevention program: the Strengthening Families Program (SFP). It is important to note that although this program does not focus on reducing gang-joining *per se*, we believe it is relevant to gang-joining prevention because it addresses a number of overlapping risk factors related to youth problem behaviors — such as drug use, aggression and violence — and focuses on entire families (see chapter 6). SFP also addresses factors that are likely to reduce the risk for gang-joining, such as increasing social competency skills, improving attitudes inconsistent with drug use, aggression and delinquency and increasing prosocial peer connections.

In fact, the evolution of SFP also serves as a model for tailoring general evidence-based prevention programs to the culture. Through its expansion, SFP has become adapted to different groups (diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds) and settings (urban and rural), thus providing a roadmap for other prevention programs.

Beginning in 1987, the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) began working with researchers at the University of Utah to assess the state of research on families.<sup>50</sup> The work highlighted that family-skills training is an effective method for improving family functioning and reducing problem behavior. Family-skills training programs are more comprehensive because they address entire family units rather than focusing only on the youth or the parents. Such efforts may be

particularly relevant for African-American families, as research has illustrated a preference among African-Americans for incorporating the entire family unit in prevention programs.<sup>51</sup>

This OJJDP review was unique in focusing on important family-related *protective* and *resiliency* factors associated with a number of youth problem behaviors, including substance abuse, aggression and violence. That is, rather than focusing only on risk factors — those that increase the likelihood that problem behavior will result — it also focused on increasing a young person's resiliency in countering problem behaviors. When protective and resiliency factors are enhanced, they can reduce the likelihood of problem behavior even in the presence of risk factors. The OJJDP review highlighted five major protective factors in the family domain:

- Supportive parent-child relationships.
- Positive disciplining methods.
- Parental monitoring and supervision of youth.
- Family advocacy for their children.
- Parental information and help-seeking.

For more on family-specific risk and protective factors and how they relate to program effectiveness, see chapter 6. The bottom line is that programs teaching these protective and resiliency factors are expected to reduce youth problem behaviors even when risk factors are present.

In addition to being recognized as a program of distinction by OJJDP, the SFP has also been classified as "*promising*" by the Blueprints series, meaning that there was evidence of a preventive effect using a rigorous research design.<sup>52</sup>

### History and Evolution of SFP

SFP was developed by Karol Kumpfer and her colleagues at the University of Utah in the late 1980s. The original program focused on increasing resiliency skills to prevent substance abuse, and targeted families with drug-abusing parents and elementary school-age youth who were racially and ethnically diverse. The program consisted of a highly structured approach, delivered through 14 lessons, each lasting 2½-3 hours, with separate 1-hour sessions for the parents and the children, and the entire family together for the second hour. Additional time was devoted to logistical issues such as meals, rewards or additional family activities.<sup>53</sup>

Children are taught communication skills to:

- Improve peer refusal and recognition of feelings.
- Cope with anger and criticism.
- Increase compliance with parents' demands.
- Increase self-esteem.
- Increase knowledge about alcohol and other drugs.
- Reduce aggression, behavior problems and substance use.

Parents learn to increase positive attention and praise by learning to empathize with the child, reduce physical punishments, increase effective discipline, and reduce the use of drugs. As a whole, families learn to reduce family conflict by improving communication among family members, increasing the time parents and children spend together, and increasing family planning and coordination.<sup>54</sup>

Parent-training sessions are focused on group building, teaching parents to use attention and reinforcements to increase the desired behaviors in their children, goal setting, communication, problem solving, and skills related to effective child management strategies. Child-training sessions are focused on social skills associated with problem solving, communication, emotional recognition and control, peer resistance and good behavior. The joint family training provides a setting in which the learned skills are practiced; trainers also provide feedback to the parents and children.<sup>53</sup>

The original SFP received recognition from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) and OJJDP on the basis of early evaluation results. Generally, these programs have been found to reduce a host of youth problem behaviors in both the short and the long term. Research has shown that the program improves family relationships and parenting practices<sup>55</sup> and reduces substance abuse<sup>56, 57, 58, 59, 60</sup> and aggressive behavior.<sup>61</sup>

The current Strengthening Families Program exists in two forms: one focuses on elementary school youth (SFP) and the second focuses on middle school youth (SFP 10-14).<sup>53</sup>

Although there is considerable overlap in program components, SFP 10-14 was developed to prevent misbehavior of middle school youth (rather than elementary school youth). Additionally, the elementary school program consists of 14 lessons, whereas the middle school program consists of seven lessons. A series of boosters is also recommended after the conclusion of each program.

SFP 10-14, which targets the age group at which most youth join a gang, focuses on seven key resiliency factors — optimism, empathy, insight, intellectual competence, self-esteem, direction or purpose in life, and determinism/perseverance — that are associated with seven main coping or life skills — emotional management skills, interpersonal social skills, reflective skills, academic and job skills, the ability to restore self-esteem, planning skills, life skills, and problem-solving ability.<sup>13, 53</sup> Recently, SFP 10-14 has been deemed *promising* by the Blueprints series at the University of Colorado’s Center for the Study of Violence Prevention, indicating that SFP 10-14 has illustrated a significant preventive effect using a strong research design.<sup>52</sup> SFP 10-14 has demonstrated success on a variety of targeted outcomes, including preventing drug use, aggression, and several mediating (risk and protective) factors related to problem behavior.

### **Evolving to Address Diverse Cultures**

Given the success of the original SFP, it has been disseminated to other contexts and has evolved to meet the needs of diverse groups by making several cultural adaptations to the program. These range from minor modifications — such as using more culturally

relevant examples and graphics — to more extensive content revisions. Most of these cultural modifications were “surface level” efforts to improve communication with and retain the racial and ethnic minority families in the program.<sup>62</sup> These modifications were driven by input from community stakeholders<sup>63</sup> and positive results from the program outcome evaluations.<sup>64</sup> Of particular importance are the modifications that tailor the program content to the culture and diversity of the audiences. This blueprint provides a model for developing culturally relevant exercises and examples with each program modification.<sup>55</sup> For example:

- The SFP for African-Americans includes the same substantive content as the original SFP, but the manuals include pictures and wording more relevant to African-American clients. Additionally, the program manuals include more information about African-American families and communities.<sup>65</sup>
- The SFP for Hispanic families includes a Spanish-language version and additional content on respecting family traditions.<sup>55</sup>
- The SFP for Hawaiian families received the most revisions; an additional 10 sessions were added on respect for family values.<sup>55</sup>

Some evidence suggests that the program received more support from African-American participants when it was tailored to reflect African-Americans’ historical experiences and culture.<sup>56</sup> However, more research is needed to determine how tailoring programs to the culture affects program effectiveness.

## Policy Issues

It is important for policymakers to understand the relationship between gang membership and race and ethnicity because what we know — or think we know — can significantly impact resource allocation, policy decisions, and a community's level of fear of crime.<sup>66</sup> The perception that gang membership is a minority issue has long influenced our decisions about policies regarding the gang problem. For example, during the 1990s, one of the consequences of increasing gang problems was a massive influx of resources, primarily to law enforcement agencies, to try to address the problem, especially in those minority communities that were most affected. However, those policies were mainly focused on suppression and apprehension of gang members and concentrated less on specifically addressing those risk factors that result in gang membership among minority youth. For many communities, this meant losing generations of young males, which further contributed to the deterioration of these areas and put the next generation at more risk, continuing the cycle of gang involvement.

To be effective in preventing gang-joining, we need to understand why it happens. This includes more than just the reasons that youth in specific neighborhoods give for joining; it also includes the broader set of individual, family, school, peer and community factors that influence the risk for gang-joining. (For more on the attraction of gang-joining, see chapter 2.) When considering preventing gang membership among racial and ethnic minorities, the defining question is: Is racially or ethnically *specific* programming needed? The question asks us to consider whether general prevention programming that targets individuals regardless of their racial or ethnic group status is sufficient, or if we need more targeted programs that focus on specific factors related to gang membership for the various racial/ethnic groups.

The answer to this question is not insignificant, as the research regarding *the relationship between race/ethnicity and gang membership* has typically highlighted the importance of larger, socialstructural factors — poverty, immigration, discrimination and social isolation, for example — that differentially impact the lives of individuals of different races and ethnicities. Enhancing existing strategies and developing new programs

that focus on social-structural differences to provide greater equality to all racial and ethnic groups should be a priority. Clearly, however, such programs require a significant restructuring of current efforts. Primarily, they would involve a move from focusing on individual-level risks (such as risk-seeking and hanging out with peers without adults present) to community and societal influences (such as poverty, disorganized communities and poor schools). These influences are infinitely more complex and, as a result, more challenging to address.

Refocusing would also require a reallocation of resources from enforcement and suppression to prevention efforts. Obviously, this represents a huge undertaking that would involve many different stakeholders, agencies and jurisdictions as well as political support — no easy task!

Fortunately, much of the existing research suggests that general prevention programming — with some additional racially or ethnically sensitive elements — provides benefits across groups. Research to date shows that there may be some differences across races and ethnicities regarding factors that influence gang-joining, but most of the risk factors for gang membership are shared by youth of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Thus, programs that address social isolation or school commitment would help prevent gang membership for all youth. For this reason, we suggest that, as a starting point, existing empirically supported general prevention programs should be used for youth of *all* racial and ethnic groups.

That said, efforts should be undertaken to make programs culturally relevant for participants. For example, one domain that is often highlighted as being important — but structurally different based on race or ethnicity — is the family unit. Clearly, different patterns of family composition are seen across racial and ethnic groups in modern American society; these units often face issues related to poverty, immigration, discrimination and social isolation. Additionally, there is evidence that — particularly for African-Americans — there is a desire to have the entire family unit involved in programs aimed at preventing youth problem behaviors.<sup>55</sup> For these reasons, programs that focus on entire family units may be particularly important in reducing youth gang involvement.

What is clear from the Strengthening Families Program (SFP) is that programs can be modified to improve program recruitment, completion and satisfaction of specific audiences. This should be done through a process of “scaling up,”<sup>64</sup> where promising programs are developed and delivered to a diverse group of clients. The programs are evaluated as they are delivered, particularly in terms of how clients view the suitability of the program components; modifications are made on the basis of evidence of program effectiveness, including feedback from the program clients. Drawing from the examples of SFP, it is clear that standardized programs can be effectively used to prevent problem behavior among youth of different racial and ethnic groups, but efforts to tailor programs to the culture should be devised in ways that ensure program fidelity and effectiveness. (For more on the importance of program evaluation, see chapter 11.)

## Conclusion

Although there are a number of theories and a fair amount of research examining the connection between race and ethnicity and gang membership, there is little information regarding how — or if — race and ethnicity affect gang-membership prevention policies, strategies and programs. Even though additional research examining the relationship between race and ethnicity

and gang membership is certainly needed to examine whether racially or ethnically specific gang-membership prevention programming is effective, we do not have to wait. We can act now on what we know about shared risk factors — poverty, immigration, discrimination and social isolation — and their consequences in terms of substance abuse, limited educational and job opportunities, family stress, neighborhood crime and the influence of gangs — by implementing prevention programs that are racially, ethnically and culturally sensitive and are known to reduce relevant risks. The fact that similar risk factors are tied to gang membership regardless of race or ethnicity supports the contention that general prevention programming should work. We should implement prevention strategies that have been shown to be effective at reducing established risks for gang-joining and that are likely to apply across groups while taking advantage of what is known about group differences to tailor our prevention efforts.<sup>8, 11, 12</sup> For example, targeting factors such as having family members in the gang — a factor tied to gang membership for African-Americans — should also have an impact on gang membership for individuals regardless of their racial or ethnic background. Thus, until more is known about how race and ethnicity specifically relate to gang membership, it seems realistic to consider general prevention programming or expand upon existing promising programs to ensure that they are culturally appropriate and relevant.

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