CHANGING COURSE

Preventing Gang Membership

Chapter 2. The Attraction of Gangs: How Can We Reduce It?

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The Attraction of Gangs: How Can We Reduce It?

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- **Because youth join gangs for various reasons — for money, a sense of support and belonging, status, a perceived sense of protection, or to exhibit an outlaw mentality — multiple strategies are needed to lessen the attractions.**

- **Youth, including those at risk for gang-joining, possess developmental assets that can be strengthened when aligned with positive community resources to help prevent gang-joining.**

- **Community partnerships are crucial to reducing the attraction of gangs; these should include youth, their families, law enforcement, public health, schools, faith-based organizations, and groups that offer recreational programs, employment and job-training skills.**

- **Deliberate effort is needed to counter the attractions of gangs that are often perpetuated among youth, in families, in neighborhoods and in the media; communities must provide prosocial alternatives to gang life that are attractive to youth.**

In Brief

For many young people who are at risk for joining a gang, the perceived benefits of being in a gang seem to outweigh the potentially life-altering consequences that we know can be associated with gang life. Attractions for youth include economics, relationship to friends or family who are already in the gang, a sense of support and belonging, a perception that the gang will provide protection, and the status of being an "outlaw."

It is important that practitioners and policymakers understand what the evidence shows about why kids join gangs. Increasing our understanding of the attractions of gangs can also help families, schools and community groups who work with young people to better understand the motivations for gang-joining and to plan prevention strategies that provide alternative options for youth so that they do not become involved with gangs. With the right level of motivation and a commitment to evidence-based strategies, we can do many things to help prevent kids from joining a gang. Chief among these is providing youth with other options and opportunities. Ideally, prevention strategies should offer a "brand" for at-risk children that reflects youth culture and can rival the allure of gang glory.

In this chapter, we draw widely from research across geographical locations, racial and ethnic groups, and methodological approaches to discuss the attractions of gang-joining in the United States.

Why do youth join gangs? The first issue to consider is why youth are particularly *vulnerable* to the influence of gangs. Ages 11-14 are a transitional period for youth — a time when they are moving from childhood to adolescence. During this period, children begin spending less time with family and more time with friends.[1] They also start to become acutely aware of what others are thinking and the consequences for their actions.[1] Additionally, teens begin to form their identity by experimenting with clothes, hairstyles, friends, music and hobbies. They also begin to assert their independence by pressing the limits that adults put on them. (For more on the developmental factors that are pertinent to gang-joining, see chapter 5.)

During the teen years, it is common for youth to engage in some form of risk-taking behavior. For youth in an environment with healthy, prosocial alternatives, such risk-taking might seem tame. However, youth lacking such alternatives are more likely to take extreme risks such as drug use, shoplifting, fighting and gang-joining. Further, if gang-joining seems a "viable" alternative and the perceived attractions of gangs are reinforced — in families, by peers and neighborhood norms, and by the popular media — youth will be more likely to join a gang.

An important goal for prevention is to recognize the multiple perceived attractions that gangs offer youth and to develop alternative messages and options in urban, suburban and rural environments and across race, economic class and gender. The factors that we discuss in this chapter exist to varying degrees across communities, and the order in which we discuss them is not intended to reflect any kind of "ranking." Also, a youth's decision to join a gang cannot be summed up by a single factor. The decision often includes many reasons, reflecting the multiple influences faced by youth.[2] These include:

- Economics.
- Relationships with family and friends.
- Protection.
- Support and belonging.
- Status.
- An "outlaw" mentality.

Economics

Gangs often claim to offer economic benefits to their members.[3] Money is one of the perceived benefits that attract youth to gangs.[4, 5, 6, 7] Many gangs engage in various aspects of an "informal economy" to generate cash flow among their members.[4, 5] This can include stealing and reselling property[4, 8, 9] or involvement in the potentially more lucrative work of distributing drugs.[3]

The economic attraction of gangs also applies to females. Many young Detroit women whom I (Carl Taylor) interviewed, as a part of my research in the late 1980s, said that they had joined a gang to make money.[6] In fact, the economic opportunities that gangs are thought to provide can be regarded as acceptable alternatives to a low-wage job in the legitimate employment arena by many young men and women who feel disconnected from the "American Dream."[4, 10, 11]

Low-level "jobs" in gangs are generally much more readily available than a minimum-wage job in many areas of the U.S. — and they can give kids the sense that they are at least doing something to make some money. However, we know that most gang members do not get rich in the gang and, for older gang members, there is no real economic advancement.[12] And we know that young people who quit school rarely advance beyond a low-wage legitimate job.[3, 4, 6]

In a forthcoming book on the Michigan Gang Research Project (MGRP), I (Carl Taylor) describe how a gang economy can become part of a larger social and economic network of criminal enterprises directly connected to the mainstream culture. Members of this "underworld" do not abide by mainstream society's rules, orders or policies in their daily lives; their rules supersede those of the larger society. For youth who do not see viable alternatives — and whose families are struggling financially or are part of the underworld economy themselves — the financial opportunities in the underworld can be attractive, making gang-joining an easy transition.

Relationships With Family and Friends

Some youth find gangs appealing because of close relationships with family members and friends who are already involved in gang life.[7, 13] In fact, for young adolescents, close familial and peer relationships with gang members can be a significant attraction for gang-joining.[2, 14, 15] In a study published in 2002, researchers found that hanging out with friends "on the corner" was a highly significant activity among both male and female gang members — 50 percent of male and 52 percent of female gang members said they did this, compared with only 7 percent of males and 13 percent of females who were not in a gang.[16] Not surprisingly, gang members spent more time hanging out with their friends than with their families.[2]

Protection

Some youth join a gang for a feeling of protection that they believe the gang can provide against potentially violent attackers in their neighborhoods and schools.[2, 16, 17] In a longitudinal assessment of the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program, youth consistently reported protection as a reason for joining a gang.[13] Violence is a regular occurrence in many of the environments where gangs exist, so, to avoid victimization, youth seek out gang membership for protection from rival gangs.

As Yusef Shakur, a former "Zone 8" gang member, said:

> The first corner we claimed to stick our Zone 8 "flag" on was [the streets of … and …], on the side of [a candy store]. During the school year at [a middle school], there was never a day that you didn't see one of us representing on that corner. We strategically placed ourselves at this spot because of its vantage point: the students going to [and] returning from school couldn't miss us. If we weren't there, it was merely because we were being detained [or] hunted down by law enforcement. While on the block where [the candy store] stood, we would also take turns catching guys from across the Boulevard and put classic ass whippings on them

as they also went to/returned from school. As for retribution, they could only retaliate by jumping us in the school. They were in our 'hood, so they were fair game. [An original Zone 8 gang member's] attitude was that if he couldn't catch one of *them,* he was gonna kick their sisters', brothers', cousins' or even girlfriends' asses. This strategy left the guys across the Boulevard with no choice but to join one of the gangs in their 'hood.[18]

Yusef Shakur's words illustrate a process of *protection through intimidation* that is common to many gangs. They show how the actions of one gang can motivate youth to join a rival gang for protection and also, in this instance, how the Zone 8 gang protected their neighborhood, which, in turn, kept bigger situations from erupting in which the police would be called.

Gang affiliation and the process of protecting territory can also foster a sense of identity and pride rooted in the connection to the community.[2, 4, 5] Researchers have found that many Chicano gang members in Chicago and Los Angeles viewed their membership as a commitment to protect their communities from outsiders and gang members from nearby communities.[4, 5] As one gang member from St. Louis stated, "You need someone to protect the people from coming in the neighborhood."[2]

The willingness to protect the community can also take on a practical function among gangs involved in drug distribution, for example. In this context, protecting the turf could also mean minimizing conflict and violence that would attract police to the community rather than the active public intimidation of potential rivals.[4]

Problems and conflict with family members in the home also lead some youth to seek protection within the gang.[17] We also know that gangs offer some girls the opportunity to learn fighting skills to protect themselves. Many of the girls involved in gangs in two Midwestern cities viewed gangs as a refuge from drug addiction and sexual abuse in their home environments.[19] (For more on the involvement of girls in gangs, see chapter 9.)

For youth living in violent families or neighborhoods, the ability to be proficient at violence is reinforced and becomes a part of one's identity.[20] The ability of youth to engage in an act of

violence and be successful in that violence can create a form of internal validation of an identity of toughness. It is important to note that this identity may be validated not only by gangs themselves but also by the prevalence of gangs in many mainstream movies, video games, music and music videos. When it is validated, fighting — or engaging in other illicit or delinquent acts — can become part of a youth's identity.

Based on a sense of security provided by gang affiliation, gang members may feel that they are less likely to be victimized by members of the community.[8, 13] Youth may overlook the potential for violent encounters within and across gangs because of the *perception* that gang affiliation can provide protection from violence. Research indicates that the risk of being victimized is greater for gang members.[21] For example, we know that some gangs have violent rituals for joining, leaving or breaking the rules; being "beat in" is a ritual for joining some gangs. We also know that gang members can encounter a greater risk of violence, compared with nongang members, when they sell drugs and possess weapons.[22]

Support and Belonging

Many youth join a gang to build relationships with other people in their age group.[2] Some researchers believe that youth join gangs to address the needs associated with adolescent identity development and that they are looking for a sense of belonging.[5, 7, 8] Other researchers note that youth who join gangs are marginalized, rejected or ignored in other areas of their lives — family, school or church, for example — and therefore identify with a gang to fill a need for support.[7]

Gangs can allow youth to expand their social networks and make new friends.[2, 5] Youth can regard a gang as offering a support system that addresses their social needs, and this attraction can even reduce a gang's need to actively recruit new members.[5, 14]

The attractions of joining a gang can apply even when actual membership in a gang is short-lived. Findings from a Seattle study suggest that belonging to a gang is a generally short phase: 69 percent of youth in the study belonged to the gang for one year, and less than 1 percent had been gang members for the entire five-year

duration of the study.[15] These findings were comparable to longitudinal studies in cities with similar demographics, such as Denver, CO,[23] and Rochester, NY.[24]

Status

Like most people, gang members desire the status associated with the "good life" in American society. Imagery of this type of success — clothes, cars, jewelry — is constantly reinforced through the media. However, many youth at the greatest risk for gang-joining are unable to access legitimate ladders of success. They often live in communities that have overlapping barriers to success, including high crime rates, dysfunctional households, underprivileged school systems, and lack of access to meaningful work. For some youth, it seems that one can "make it" only through illegitimate means.

Another reason youth join gangs is to enhance their status among their peers.[2] As one 15-year-old from Detroit said in an interview with researcher William Brown, the boost to his status and self-importance was directly tied to his gang membership: "I'm somebody now … Now I got respect."[10] The boy also reported that his membership in a gang had raised his status in school. Other research has shown that some youth believe joining a gang will impress interested young women.[2, 5]

Outlaw Mentality

Some young men join a gang for the excitement of street life,[2] whereas some girls join to build a reputation as being tough.[16] Of course, many kids — not only those at risk for gang membership — rebel against traditional "middle-class" values and ethics. And, when all else in society fails, gangs provide youth with a seeming "escape clause." Gangs can be seen as taking a stand against society, empowering their followers with a sense of independence.

This roguish attitude and image of the "outlaw culture" — running with an organization of gangsters, hoodlums, thugs or "banditos" — is crucial to understanding the allure of gangs for impressionable youth during this stage of social and cognitive development. And this is exacerbated

by an entertainment industry that focuses, in marketing and programming, on the allure of the outlaw. Fast cars, fancy clothing, and sexy images of both female and male outlaws making their own way are pervasive in U.S. culture.

The media creates pop-culture images in print, film, art, radio and television that are often influenced by street culture. These images can be found everywhere: in music videos, popular television shows, video games, magazines, language, movies and cars. This pervasiveness impacts the social fabric and can affect the daily choices youth make. For example, the popularity of outlaw behavior may be reinforced by popular video games, including some that specifically replicate an urban community plagued with poverty, gangs, drugs and corrupt police officers.[25]

Reducing the Attractions of Gangs

To reduce the attractions of gangs, we must increase the attractiveness of other organizations. Our goal should be to offer youth access to organizations with a solid image and a strong brand or identity that matches or counters the popularity of the neighborhood gangs. Here are four key principles that practitioners and policymakers should keep in mind when developing evidence-based strategies and programs to help prevent gang-joining:

- Promote positive opportunities.
- Train and educate for meaningful employment.
- Ensure an active role for law enforcement.
- Make comprehensive strategies community-wide.

Promote Positive Opportunities

We know that healthy adolescent development is fostered when communities are able to provide what Peter Benson and his colleagues at Search Institute call "developmental assets." These include strong connections to schools, the presence of adult mentors, positive connections to family members, parental involvement in the lives of youth, neighborhood safety, and positive connections to schools and to other community organizations and institutions, such as youth development programs like 4-H Clubs, Boys and Girls Clubs, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and the YMCA.

In Detroit, I (Carl Taylor) studied Overcoming the Odds (OTO), a project based on the premises that:

- All young people have strengths.
- All communities have some kind of developmental assets for young people.
- When the strengths of young people and the assets of communities are aligned, positive, healthy development will result.

In the study, we compared a group of African-American male adolescent gang members from inner-city Detroit with a sample of African-American males who lived in the same neighborhoods but who were involved in community-based organizations (CBOs) aimed at promoting positive youth development, such as church groups, urban 4-H groups, and Boys and Girls Clubs.

Results from this longitudinal study show, in general, that adolescents in the comparison group (CBO youth) possess more developmental assets and exhibit more positive developmental changes than the gang-involved youth.[26, 27, 28, 29] However, gang-involved youth also possess some developmental assets — and, when these assets approach the levels of the CBO youth, outcomes begin to converge. More positive development and lower levels of problem behaviors — such as violence and substance use and abuse — are found among gang-involved youth who possess developmental assets at levels that overlap with those seen among the CBO youth.

We believe the findings of the OTO study can be used to inform community actions that decrease youth gang-related behavior and that improve the lives of kids who are at risk of joining a gang. As OTO has shown, it is important that programs are not separate from the community but, rather, are built into the community. Unfortunately, many prevention programs are built and implemented separately from the community; this can lead to youth still having to negotiate the streets and avoid the attractions of gangs within their own community.

▶ *INTERVIEWS WITH ANTHONY HOLT, VIRGIL TAYLOR, TISHA JOHNSON, YUSUF SHAKUR AND MICHAEL WILLIAMS*

Detroit has been hit hard in recent years. The 2010 U.S. Census showed it to be the poorest big city in the nation. To take an in-depth look at how some of the city's boots-on-the-ground practitioners are working to help keep Detroit kids from joining a gang, we interviewed five people:

• Anthony Holt, Chief of Police and Assistant Vice President for Community Affairs at Wayne State University.

• Virgil Taylor, Executive Director of The Peace Project, a partnership of youth, universities, community organizations, law enforcement agencies, businesses and youth development agencies.

• Tisha Johnson with the Street-Side Development Academy.

• Yusuf Shakur, Director of the Urban Youth Leadership Group, and a community activist, entrepreneur and former gang leader.

• Michael Williams, President of Orchards Children's Services.

All five of our interviewees said that gang involvement and criminal behavior can be significantly reduced when young people have options and opportunities. They agreed that the most important ways to combat young people's attraction to gangs are to:

• Create a brand that will be considered "cool" and compelling to youth and that rivals the allure of gang and thug glory.

• Provide skills that translate into employment and growth potential.

• Establish a safe place for youth to find refuge and be able to interact in a healthy, positive fashion, and where the admissions and membership policies demand nonviolent, harmonious behavior and attitudes.

• Combat the normalization of ignorance and violence with an uncompromising, multifaceted community approach.

Here are excerpts from the interviews:

Chief Anthony Holt: Our greatest challenge today is unemployment, not just for youth but also for their families in many instances. Many young men are responsible for providing for their families and thus, without jobs or opportunity, they subscribe to street-culture values. When a young person accepts that street code is acceptable, that means that engaging in criminal activity is acceptable … . [N]aturally, this means that the police are the enemy. We are taking steps to engage youth before the streets grab them. If we can direct them towards constructive mechanisms, we can steer them away from the street game. I work closely with Virgil [Taylor] and The Peace Project to be part of the rescue effort. The youth we engage learn that the job of the police is to protect and serve, not just Mr. and Mrs. Citizen but them as well. Through engagement, education, training and caring, I strive to have young people see me as an adult that cares about them, not just the firm hand of the law.

Effective programs ideally marry the prevention strategy or program to improvements in the community. For example, a program might organize community service projects that include cleaning local parks and planning community events for families and youth. A 4-H event could include maintaining a community garden to provide vegetables to a local school or to low-income individuals. For youth working on these types of projects, a prosocial identity can be formed within — and reinforced by — the community itself.

Train and Educate for Meaningful Employment

For some time now, the U.S. has been transitioning from a manufacturing-based to a service-based economy. Most of the jobs that are emerging in today's economy — in the computer, medical, biological sciences and engineering fields, for example — require a degree or vocational experience.[30] Even many manufacturing jobs require specialized training, and this has led to an increase in the proportion of jobs for youth that are low-paying and offer no opportunities for advancement. One study found that jobs that do not offer living wages or opportunities for upward mobility are not sufficient to keep youth out of gang activity.[31]

Young people may find it necessary to supplement their income through the informal economy (babysitting, cleaning houses, fixing cars) or through the illicit economy (selling stolen goods or drugs) to maintain a livelihood.[3] Because gangs provide a social network that can allow people to participate in an informal or illicit economy, joining a gang can seem like a positive move for some young people.

Virgil ("Al") Taylor: Our objective is to reduce the attraction to gangs in our communities. Gang members are part of our communities. Working to understand the needs of at-risk youth — youth involved in gangs and undesirable behavior — we strive to make them stakeholders. It is imperative that affected youth also understand their community and their history. Through engagement and involvement, we seek to make them part of the solution — reclaiming their environment and being community partners. Chief Holt and his department have been instrumental in helping to engage these young people. Efforts include providing connection between youth and members of the community who are providing jobs, training for jobs and educational opportunities — for example, Focus Hope, The Peace Project, YouthVille and Mayor's Time. Chief Holt demonstrates that authority figures participating in this project are not individuals for youth to dread or fear … they are not the enemy.

Tisha Johnson: The best prevention is to have something for youth. Our city is hurting; we have a major problem since these kids have nothing constructive to do. I work with young girls, young women, some of them living in poverty with no one helping them with anything. They've been in failing schools; most of the time, they've made poor choices because they haven't known any better … and then there are the gangsters. For a lot of young women, a gangsta' or gang life is the only possible answer. To make matters worse, a lot of these so-called programs have unrealistic expectations for kids … . [K]ids see their friends participate in programs that fail them; it makes them feel hopeless and they stop believing. I think the failure of some key programs is one of the reasons we got lots of youth not in school; they don't believe it means anything for them … they've given up hope.

Yusuf Shakur: I was in the gang. What lured me was … there was guys who made me feel like I was something special. They were my brothers; they looked out for me. If you want change [lowering the risk of gang-joining], you have to compete with that fact. I was the leader; I know how to get folks to join. You can't do anything if you don't understand how they live, what they do. That is why so many organizations, especially the church, can't connect. Unless you have somebody who talks the gang talk, somebody who has suffered the streets, comes from the same experience, got street creds … otherwise it don't work.

Michael Williams: Many of our children have suffered extreme neglect and/or abuse. Children that are taken from their biological parents often struggle with emotional health issues that are overlooked by the system. We have scores of well-intentioned adults working to help our kids, but the numbers are exasperating. The street understands how to engage kids, how to make them feel that they belong, how to utilize their abilities. A child that feels they are failing in school — who is hurt and angry — can often find acceptance on the street, where they only find scorn in school and with the rest of society … we need to learn what the street knows.

It is critical that practitioners and policymakers understand that today's economy renders many low-wage jobs insufficient for meeting basic needs. Today, even employed youth who are engaged in a positive development activity are finding gang membership attractive. Even being employed does not exempt a young person from the lure of gang life.[32]

Therefore, a comprehensive program to help prevent gang-joining might include providing alternative identities to 11- to 14-year-olds by teaching them skills and exposing them to vocational environments. Youth who are interested in getting into the medical field, for example, might begin by being taught basic CPR and first aid, or they might be encouraged to volunteer in local hospitals or senior citizen homes.

Ensure an Active Role for Law Enforcement

Law enforcement must take an active role in working with young people to counter the lure of gang membership. When young people's interactions with law enforcement contradict a perception that police officers are a punitive authority, it is possible to establish a relationship of respect and trust. This strategy of officers serving as positive role models is not a new paradigm, but it must be reinforced. When Chief Holt, of the Wayne State University Public Safety Department, interacts with youth, he is effectively showing them an example of how they can also be successful. "I have made myself the example for our law enforcement team and the young men who are marginally enticed to join gangs," he said. "I show them that the police do not consider them the enemy. We fight criminals.

[Young people's] choice is not to become part of any negative activity in our communities. We help them see a better choice."

Make Comprehensive Strategies Communitywide

In its Comprehensive Gang Model, the Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention promotes five strategies:

- Community involvement.
- Education and training programs.
- Social outreach.
- Supervision of gang-involved youth.
- Development of policies and procedures.

Several states have used the Comprehensive Gang Model to develop anti-gang strategies and programs. In Richmond, VA, activities focus on the general population of youth who are at risk for gang-joining and on their families. A number of prevention activities — the "Class Action" summer camp, sports and life-skills activities and training, a theater group that showcases issues faced by gang-involved youth, and after-school programs for elementary and middle-school youth — have the potential to connect youth with prosocial friends and enhance their sense of belonging while providing safe places to have fun and learn.

Such strategies can be complemented by programs aimed at reducing the economic attraction of gangs. For example, programs that teach English as a second language to Hispanic residents and that provide mentoring or tutoring can help at-risk youth see other options to gang-joining.

Programs that keep kids off the streets are also important. School athletics help make young people feel that they are part of a team or family, and going to practices and games gives them a safe environment. Groups like the Boys and Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) offer after-school activities. In fact, BGCA is known for its gang-prevention strategies that strive to decrease the attraction to gangs.

As the handbook, *Targeted Outreach: Boys and Girls Clubs of America's Approach to Gang Prevention and Intervention,* states:[33]

> [M]any Clubs are located in areas identified with high rates of gang activity. As such, they are in a prime spot to reach out to those youth and offer easily accessible services, which is crucial because transportation issues can often be a major impediment.

A 2002 study of BGCA found that most youth who had participated in BGCA programs for one year said they felt safer in the Club than they did in school. In turn, they frequented the Club often and participated in programs that fostered healthy youth developmental practices. Additionally, the research found that some youth showed an indication "of positive changes in gang, delinquent, school and relationship behaviors, and attitudes."[33]

Establishing alternatives to gang membership that direct and influence the behavior of at-risk youth should involve youth, parents, law enforcement, schools, churches, policymakers and researchers. To counter the attraction of gangs, it is important to create a "brand" in the community. This can be done by ensuring that activities are not only highly visible and easily accessible but also in touch with youth culture, language, norms, values and symbols.

Implementation Challenges and Strategies

There is no magic strategy for preventing youth from joining gangs. Young people get involved with gangs for various reasons, and the length of involvement varies from person to person. Therefore, it is important to understand that prevention strategies which focus exclusively on making youth aware of the risks associated with gang-joining may not be sufficient to address the problem.[2, 29] Rather, prevention strategies must identify and provide healthy alternatives to the reasons that youth join a gang.

The following principles can form the foundation of a strong initiative to help prevent gang-joining:

- Create a community-based task force to assess the community's resources, including grass-roots organizations, faith-based organizations, schools, law enforcement, public health, youth, parents and guardians, local businesses, policymakers, funding sources and researchers.

- Select team members for a subcommittee to oversee the development of activities and services for at-risk youth; subcommittee members could include community groups, social agents, government, youth and the church — for example, someone from the juvenile division of the court, schools (teachers, counselors, administrators), church (youth minister) and youth (gang and nongang).

- Determine a facility to house the project; ideally, it should be centrally located in the community and able to satisfy particular requirements with respect to structure, cost, size and hours of operation.

- Seek creative funding sources to support innovative strategies; for example, YouthVille, a community agency in Detroit, offers programs that overlap with The Peace Project and also partners with Michigan State University's Outreach and Engagement component.

- Use innovative strategies to reach youth who are not integrated into traditional community institutions — such as those who do not attend school or church, or are otherwise left out of mainstream society — and ensure that the admissions policies for such programs emphasize nonviolent, harmonious behavior and attitudes.

- Train youth and adults to be gang-prevention representatives; this empowers residents to play an active role in investing in their community. Adults should work together to understand and address the needs of youth — for excitement, protection, support and status, for example — which, when unmet, can increase the attraction of gangs.

- Develop prosocial opportunities for youth to start building the foundation for a fulfilling career.

- Send constructive and positive messages — through social media, local news and radio media — that help to create a balance of information to decrease the attraction of gangs; these messages could be designed to counter the pro-gang messages that kids receive in the popular media and to raise the status of the positive alternatives that exist in the community.

Conclusion

It is very important that local decision-makers who determine which gang-prevention strategies are implemented — and the practitioners who actually implement them — have solid information regarding what gang attractions are at play in their community. A one-size-fits-all approach to tackling the issues of gang attraction and recruitment will not work when constructing local, state or federal policy. The ability to understand exactly what young people are facing — in their respective cities, communities and neighborhoods — is key.

Youth can perceive that gangs offer empowerment — and the attraction of gangs to some youth is enhanced if they feel that gang members recognize and listen to them. Gangs can fill the void left by dysfunctional families and poor education, and some youth see them as providing protection, support, excitement, money and status. When all else in society fails at the time in their lives when they are willing to take risks, young people can regard a gang as providing an alternative to just accepting the socioeconomic challenges in their environment.

To counter the attractions of gang culture, society must be ready to understand that the gang problem — which is a threat to our suburban, rural and urban communities — goes beyond issues of race, class and gender. (For more on this issue, see chapter 10.) To counter the attractiveness of gangs, society must provide alternatives to gangs that youth will value. This can best be done through comprehensive, community-based strategies and programs that provide an alternative to gangs in a young person's life.

About the Authors

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Carl S. Taylor has worked with communities in the areas of youth violence, gangs and youth development for 40 years. Dr. Taylor's focus on urban gangs is rooted in the Michigan Gang Research Project. He has worked with the City of Detroit Mayor's office on youth-violence reduction, and he was a member of the Governor's Committee on Juvenile Justice. He received his Ph.D. from Michigan State University, where he currently teaches.

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