

The National Association of Social Workers

750 First Street NE
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20002-4241
SocialWorkers.org



Sharon Issurdatt,
LCSW, ACSW, DCSW
Senior Practice Associate
Sissurdatt@naswdc.org

Gangs: A Growing Problem in Schools

The presence of gangs in schools compromises the safety, well-being and academic progress of students. Gangs disrupt peace and safety in communities and schools, leaving many families torn apart. The most notorious gangs are those from impoverished sections of major cities like Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago (National Center for Victims of Crime, 2011). However, gangs can be found throughout the United States - in rural communities, suburbs, as well as inner cities. Gang members cross all socio-economic backgrounds and boundaries regardless of age, gender, race, economic status, and academic achievement (National School Safety and Security Services, 2011).

Consensus regarding a standard definition for the term "gang" has not been achieved. Definitions vary, but typically include aspects such as a distinct group of people; engagement in criminal activity; and the collective use of signs or symbols. The United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance (1997) defined a gang as:

- three or more individuals who associate periodically as an ongoing criminal

group or organization, whether loosely or tightly structured

- a group having identifiable leaders, although the leader for one type of criminal activity may be different than the leader for another
- a group having a name or identifying symbol
- an organization whose members, individually or collectively, currently engage in, or have engaged in, violent or other criminal activity
- a group that frequently identifies itself with, or claims, control over specific territory (turf) in the community, wears distinctive dress and colors, and communicates through graffiti and hand signs among other means.

Gangs in Schools

Over the past 25 years, gangs have expanded rapidly both in size and in their areas of operation. Today, gangs are more violent, their activities are more widespread and pervasive, and they are more entrenched within communities (Cahill and Hayeslip, 2010). Much of gang activity takes place in schools. According to a survey released in 2010, more than a quarter of public middle and high school students say both gangs and

Statistics

- The National Gang Center estimates that 32.4% of all cities, suburban areas, towns and rural counties experienced gang problems in 2008.
- This represents a 15% increase from the 2002 figure.
- Approximately 774,000 gang members and 27,900 gangs are estimated to have been active in the United States in 2008.
- The number of gangs increased by 28%, and the number of gang members increased by 6% from 2002 to 2008. (Egley, Howell & Moore, 2010).



drugs are present at their campuses (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University). The survey found that 35 percent of middle-school students and 45 percent of high school students say that there are gangs or students who consider themselves to be part of a gang in their schools. Generally, gang activity has a higher occurrence in public schools than in private schools. While 46 percent of students in public schools reported the presence of gangs and gang members at school, only two percent of private school students did (NCASA at Columbia University, 2010).

Despite statistics reported directly from student populations, school administrators may deny the occurrence of gang activity on campus. Often, educators believe the problem exists in the community, but not on the campus (Findling, 2009). Although only a very small percentage of principals (5%) reported the presence of gangs in their schools, more than one-third (36%) reported the presence of gangs in the immediate community (Arciaga, Sakamoto & Jones, 2010).

According to the National Gang Center Bulletin, there are many reasons that school personnel may not acknowledge the existence of gangs.

- School staff and administrators may not recognize gang activity when they see it.
- Public admission that the school has a population of gang members may appear as a failure to properly control the school climate.
- School-choice laws that have been passed

in many areas make it possible for parents to remove their children from a particular school. Schools with a reputation for having a gang problem may suffer student attrition.

- Schools may be reluctant to share information on gang activity in and around the school for fear of violating confidentiality laws. (Arciaga, Sakamoto & Jones, 2010).

Why Do Young People Join Gangs?

Young people of diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds become involved in gangs and gang criminal activity. The specific reasons why a young person joins a gang vary, but often include social and economic elements. Power, status, security, friendship, family substitute, economic profit, substance use influences, and numerous other factors influence kids to join gangs (National School Safety and Security Services, 2011).

Although the risks and sacrifices are great, gangs also provide many benefits to their members (NCVC, 2011). Young people who feel isolated, disengaged, misunderstood by loved ones, socially excluded by peers, unsafe from harassment or violence from peers may turn to the protection and companionship that being a member of a gang can provide. Also, young people involved with substance use and economic hardship can often connect with resources through gangs more readily than on their own. When the benefits of gang life outweigh the risks, gang populations will grow (NCVC, 2011).

The Rise of "Girl Gangs"

In recent years, it has been reported that female involvement in gangs has increased dramatically. According to experts, girl gangs are on the rise in Washington, Chicago, Boston, New York (Horta Moriconi, 2006). Girls join gangs for many of the same reasons as their male counterparts and engage in similar violent behaviors. Girl gangs are violent, commit crimes and their members may carry guns (Horta Moriconi, 2006).

Warning Signs

Young people involved with gangs often begin to shift away from their normal behavior and level of functioning as soon as gang involvement commences. Some of the warning signs of at-risk behavior for gang membership include:

- Experiencing a sudden drop in grades and a lack of interest in school.
- Acquiring new friends who are "questionable" characters in the eyes of parents.
- Being secretive/defensive about activities with friends.
- Disengaging from family.
- Encountering delinquency issues with the police.
- Engaging in out of control behavior such as ignoring curfews, running away, and being defiant.
- Flashing hand signs (hand gestures) to friends or even when alone.
- Changing manner or dress, and adopting gang-style clothing, jewelry, and/or tattoos.
- Having gang graffiti or symbols on personal property.
- Changing a nickname to something more acceptable to a gang.
- Having an unexplained increase in personal monetary income.
- Possessing drugs or other controlled substances.
- Experiencing changes in health that may be due to drug/alcohol abuse.
- Receiving unexplained threats/messages from callers who refuse to identify themselves to parents.

- Refusing to account for time spent away from home. (Findling, 2009).

Many of the warning signs of gang involvement could also signal other concerns typically brought on during adolescence. Other concerns could be mental and/or emotional issues such as depression, suicidal risk, eating disorders, and anxiety. Concerns can also occur due to adjustment issues having to do with adolescence and social issues involving peers. The warning signs listed should be used as a guide in assessing the full situation to adequately determine their nature.

How Social Workers Can Help

Gain knowledge. Understanding the dynamics of why young people join gangs, the warning signs, and gang activity can improve work with students, families and schools. It is important to stay current as some dynamics change as technology advances and shifts.

Provide information and support to parents.

Informing parents about risk factors, warning signs and the seriousness of certain behaviors can help parents better understand their children's behaviors. Parents may not recognize shifts in behavior as warning signs. This is typical through adolescent years when there is a natural tendency for teenagers to withdraw from their parents. This can cause a large gap in communication and understanding. Providing parents with information (e.g. educational pamphlets, workshops, parent groups, etc.) to gain insight about their children's behaviors, the difference between normal changes in their child and warning signs, and what they can do to help can be beneficial.

Implement awareness programs.

Young people often share their feelings and experiences with their peers. Raising awareness among youth in schools and the community can help young people understand the consequences of gang involvement and offer alternatives and support. Providing information and resources can help them make positive decisions in their lives, as well as, encourage them to offer peers healthy advice.

"In the 1970's, less than half the states reported gang problems. By the turn of the 21st century, however, every state and the District of Columbia were facing this challenge."

(Slowikowski, 2010)

Social workers can help inform parents, students, teachers, and administration of the dynamics of gangs, warning signs and risk factors and alternatives to gang involvement. Staying up-to-date with evolving factors influencing these issues can help social workers better serve students, families and schools.

Offer direct help and resources. Social workers, when licensed to do so, can offer direct clinical services to adolescents and their families such as individual, family and group therapy. Social workers should also be aware of resources in the community to offer support to clients. Social workers can help connect families and students to resources they need within their communities. Many times, families are unaware of the available services and community support networks. Social workers can help bridge the gap between needs and provision.

Advocate for policy within school systems.

Social workers can provide information regarding warning signs, risk factors, and gang involvement to school administration, teachers and school personnel. Social workers can also work with school administration to recognize gang activity and develop adequate measures to address such behavior. Social workers can advocate for policies that increase student-school connectedness and adequately meet the needs of the school. Social workers can utilize approaches that have been evidence-based through research.

Collaborate and network with community resources.

Social workers can partner with local gang prevention programs, police departments, community organizations and other resources to expand services to young people and their families. Collaboration and networking can help coordinate funding and advocacy efforts for needed programs and policies.

Conclusion

Gang involvement has increased and become more dangerous over the past decades. Reports show that schools have been reluctant to address community gang issues on campuses. Young people are typically motivated to join a gang due to social and economic factors. Both young males and females are at risk of gang involvement as they become more prevalent and powerful. Young people typically exhibit warning signs when involved with a gang. Social workers can help inform parents, students, teachers, and administration of the dynamics of gangs, warning signs and risk factors and alternatives to

gang involvement. Staying up-to-date with evolving factors influencing these issues can help social workers better serve students, families and schools.

Resources

Help Starts Here is a website where social workers offer tips for parents, teachers and children regarding issues relating to adolescent development, mental health issues, etc.

www.helpstartshere.org

National Gang Crime Research Center is a non-profit independent agency that promotes research, disseminates information, and provides training and consultation services regarding gangs, gang members and gang problems.

www.ngcrc.com

National Crime Intelligence Resource Center is a program of the Bureau of Justice Assistance/U.S. Department of Justice that aims at reducing and preventing crime, violence, and drug abuse and improving the criminal justice system.

www.ncirc.gov

Reamer, F.G. & Siegel, D.H. (2006). *Finding Help for Struggling Teens: A Guide for Parents and the Professionals Who Work with Them*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

References

Arciaga, Sakamoto & Jones (2010, November). Responding to Gangs in the School Setting. BJA/OJJDP National Gang Center Bulletin. Retrieved on July 13, 2011 from www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Content/Documents/Bulletin-5.pdf.

Cahill, M. & Hayeslip, D. (2010, December). Findings from the Evaluation of Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Programs Gang Reduction Program. OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin. Retrieved on July 13, 2011 from www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/230106.pdf.



Raising awareness among youth in schools and the community can help young people understand the consequences of gang involvement and offer alternatives and support.

Egley, Howell & Moore (2010, March). Highlights of the 2008 National Youth Gang Survey. OJJDP Fact Sheet. Retrieved on July 13, 2011 from www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/229249.pdf.

Findling, Jay (2009). Gang Prevention 101: A School Approach. Retrieved on July 13, 2011 from www.campussafetymagazine.com/Channel/School-Safety/Articles/2009/01/Gang-Prevention-A-School-Approach.aspx

Horta Moriconi, L. (2006). Girl Gangs on the rise, involved in violence in major cities in the USA. Retrieved on July 13, 2011 from www.comunidadese segura.org/?q=en/node/155.

National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (2010). National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse XV: Teens and Parents August 2010. Retrieved on July 13, 2011 from www.casacolumbia.org/templates/publications_reports.aspx.

National Center for Victims of Crime (2011). Gangs in America. Retrieved on July 13, 2011 from www.ncvc.org/ncvc/main.aspx?dbName=DocumentViewer&DocumentID=32352.

National School Safety and Security Services (2011). Gangs and School Safety. Retrieved on July 13, 2011 from www.schoolsecurity.org/trends/gangs.html.

Slowikowski, J. (2010, December). From the Administrator. OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin. Retrieved on July 13, 2011 from www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/230106.pdf.

United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance. (1997). Urban Street Gang Enforcement. (Monograph No. NCJ 161845). Washington, D.C.

Center for Workforce Studies & Social Work Practice Recent Publications

Occupational Profiles: Available at <http://workforce.socialworkers.org/studies/other.asp>

- *Social Work Salaries by Gender*
- *Social Work Salaries by Race/Ethnicity*
- *Social Workers in Colleges and Universities*
- *Social Workers in Government Agencies*
- *Social Workers in Health Clinics & Outpatient Health Care Settings*
- *Social Workers in Hospice and Palliative Care*
- *Social Workers in Hospitals and Medical Centers*
- *Social Workers in Mental Health Clinics & Outpatient Facilities*
- *Social Workers in Private Practice*
- *Social Workers in Psychiatric Hospitals*
- *Social Workers in Schools*
- *Social Workers in Social Service Agencies*

Social Work Practice Perspectives: Available at www.socialworkers.org/practice/default.asp

- *2011 Medicare Changes for Clinical Social Workers*
- *Adolescent Depression and Suicide Risk: How Social Workers Can Make a Difference*
- *Advocating for Clinical Social Workers: Highlights of 2010*
- *Creativity and Aging*
- *Dangerous Rites of Passage: Trends in College Alcohol Consumption*
- *Domestic Violence and Human Trafficking: Double Jeopardy for Immigrant Women in the United States*
- *Domestic Violence and Women of Color: Complex Dynamics*
- *Engaging Young People in Their Transition Planning*
- *Healthy People 2020: Social Work Values in a Public Health Roadmap*
- *Opting Out of Medicare as a Clinical Social Worker*
- *Results of 2010 Psychotherapy Survey*

- *Support for Family Caregivers: The National Landscape and the Social Work Role*
- *Supporting the Child Welfare Workforce to Reduce Child Maltreatment*
- *The Medical Home Model: What Is It and How Do Social Workers Fit In?*

Leadership Ladders: Steps to a Great Career in Social Work Available at <http://careers.socialworkers.org/professionaldev/default.asp>

- *From the Front Line to the Corner Office*
- *Letting Your Voice be Heard*
- *Managing Stress*
- *Navigating Large Service Systems*
- *Opening a New Private Practice*
- *Outside the Lines: Maximizing the Flexibility of a Social Work Degree*
- *Presenting Your Work to Others*
- *Publishing as a Practitioner*
- *Risk Management in Clinical Practice*
- *Strengthening Your Writing Skills: An Essential Task for Every Social Worker*
- *The Tech-Savvy Social Worker: Prepared for the Challenges of 21st Century Practice*
- *The Value of Dual Degrees*

New Practice Standards

For a complete list of practice standards, visit www.socialworkers.org/practice/default.asp

- *NASW Standards for Social Work Practice with Family Caregivers of Older Adults (2010)*
- *NASW Standards for School Social Work Services (2011)*