Youth Gangs

The State Gang Work Group, which was formed at the direction of 2007 State legislation, HB 5987,requested that the GJJAC to research "best practice for prevention and intervention of youth gang membership." The GJJAC developed a position paper based on research, and presented this information to the State Gang Work Group. The position paper and recommended action was endorsed, and included in the Gang Work Group Report, found at: http://www.leg.wa.gov/documents/joint/grc/FinalReport.pdf.

The Position Paper was refined, and was published as the first GJJAC "Policy Brief". This policy brief, in its entirety, is included in this Annual Report, in the "Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee" Section.

The Policy Brief includes background information on risk and protective factors of juvenile delinquency prevention, national and state data on gangs and juvenile violence, description of successful prevention and intervention strategies, and recommended community response. Excerpts from the Policy Brief follow:

Risk factors for youth gang membership

Recent research spells out the specific risks for gang membership. Those at risk include youth who grow up in disorganized neighborhoods, come from very low-income, distressed families, don't do well academically and have low attachment to school, spend time with delinquent peers, and engage in problem behaviors such as smoking marijuana. [9]

The risk factors for gang membership span many domains: individual, peer, family, school, and community. The accumulation of risk factors that can be used to predict youth gang involvement also includes:

- Marginal neighborhoods. Youth who live in neighborhoods where acquaintances were in trouble were 3 times more likely to join gangs. Those living in neighborhoods where marijuana is easily available were 3.6 times more likely to join.
- Family. Juveniles in single-parent families were 2.4 times more likely to join a gang than those in two-parent households. Parental attitudes towards violence, poor family management, and low parental attachment also correlated with gang membership.
- Academic problems. Youth with learning disabilities were 3.6 times more likely to join gangs. Those with low academic achievement were 3.1 times more likely to join.[10]
- Peer groups. Youth who associated with delinquent friends were 2.0 times more likely to join gangs.
- Drugs and violence. Juveniles who used marijuana were 3.7 times more likely to join gangs. Youth who engaged in violent behavior at younger ages than their peers were 3.1 times more likely to join.[11]

[9] *Excerpt from OJJDP Gang Prevention, Model Program Guide; "Membership in Youth Gangs and Involvement in Serious and Violent Offending."* Thornberry, 1998; p. 157, Sage Publications.
[10] *Early Precursors of Gang Membership: A Study of Seattle Youth*; Hill, Lui, and Hawkins

Youth Gangs (continued)

Related research describes developmental pathways to serious delinquency. This research shows that serious delinquent behavior often starts with authority conflict behavior around age 7, moderately serious behavior at age 9.5, and serious delinquency at age 12. The average first contact with juvenile court is at age 14.5. This pathway information accentuates the need to prevent or intervene at an early age in order to avoid serious and violent offending.[11]

Risk and protective factors

These risk factors are part of a larger web of "risk and protective factors" that research has shown to influence the course of children's lives.[12] Children and young people generally succeed when "protective" factors such as stable homes, supportive neighbors and communities, and good schools outweigh "risk" factors, such as poverty, mobility, and the availability of drugs and firearms.

Washington has long based its approach to community prevention services on these research-based youth risk and protective factors. Community-based drug abuse prevention activities, state-funded Community Mobilization efforts, and many Community Public Health and Safety Networks also use this risk and protective factor research as a basis for prevention and intervention programs.

Research-based prevention and intervention: doing what works

Research-based (also called "evidence-based") intervention for juvenile offenders – that is, interventions based on programs that have been rigorously evaluated and proven to produce positive results – has been the norm for several years in Washington. Juvenile offenders receive evidence-based programs such as Aggression Replacement Training, Functional Family Therapy, and Multi-systemic Therapy. These programs are provided based on an individual risk assessment to pinpoint what young people need.

Washington's approach also recognizes the need for intervening in different ways at different times. Before gang activity arises, "primary" prevention strategies seek to bolster protective factors and reduce risk factors for children. When the prospect of gang activity first appears, "secondary" prevention strategies are immediately deployed to counter it. When gang activity is clearly a problem, "tertiary" programs are deployed to mitigate the problem.

[11] *The Causes and Correlates Studies: Findings and Policy Implications*; Thornberry, T.P., Huizinga, D., and Loeber, R.; Journal of the OJJDP, Volume IX, Number 1; September 2004.

[12] *Risk Factors for Health and Behavior Problems, 1995,* Hawkins-Catalano; *Forty Developmental Assets*, 1997, Search Institute

Youth Gangs (continued)

Youth gang membership

There is no consensus on the definition of a youth gang. However, research describes a set of broad characteristics in identifying gangs:

- Formal or semi-formal organizational structure,
- Clearly identified leadership,
- A specific territory,
- Patterns of interaction, and
- Engagement of a group in serious or violent behavior.[13]

Gang membership may often be less of a long-term commitment than is commonly believed. Studies in Denver and Rochester[14] report that half of the male youth gang members belonged to a gang for less than one year. The studies also found that gang members are responsible for a disproportionate amount of crime.

Many researchers have found that youth gangs have low levels of organizational sophistication and are typically loose in structure.

Child Abuse

In 2008, 72,423 children were referred to Child Protective Services (CPS) in Washington State. This reflects a decrease of 1,932 from the number of children referred in 2007 (74,355). Throughout the past ten years, referrals to CPS have varied from a low of 74,979 in 1999 to a high of 78,336 in 2004. The average number of CPS referrals per year (1997-2006) is 76,623.

According to the National Youth Law Center, in homes where domestic violence occurs there is a 30 to 60 percent likelihood that child abuse also is happening.

According to Washington's Children's Administration, approximately 40 percent of the referrals for child abuse and neglect are screened out "because there is not sufficient information to locate the child, the alleged perpetrator is not a caretaker, the risk factor does not exist, or the allegation does not meet the legal and/or WAC definition." Thus, the number of confirmed cases of child abuse and neglect in Washington State in 2007 is estimated to be approximately 45,213.

According to staff in Washington's Division of Children and Family Services, at least 50 percent of the families of victims of child abuse contained an adult with a substance abuse problem. In addition, research continues to document a link between domestic violence and substance abuse, and domestic violence and child abuse. According to the National Youth Law Center, in homes where domestic violence occurs there is a 30 to 60 percent likelihood that child abuse also is happening.

[13] *Youth Gang Membership Risk Factors Amenable to Change, from "Strategic Response to Youth Gangs,"* Wyrick and Howell, OJJDP, September 2004.

[14] Thornberry et al