

Youth gangs in school systems



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Youth gangs pose an increasing challenge in school safety and prevention of violence. Years ago, this problem was a reserve of the largest inner cities. However, over the years, the youth gang plague has spread out to cities as well as the suburban communities in the country and, as it expands, finding its way into schools. In fact, according to a report by the U. S. Education department in conjunction with the Department of Justice, 37% of all the students surveyed (in 1995) led to indications that there were gangs present in their schools. This was double the rate reported in 1989 (Chapman, chandler, Rand & Taylor, 1998).

Gangs have well- organized structures and are predatory in nature. Usually, older youth or even adults outside the school direct the activities of these. They expand their power and wealth through illegal undertakings, recruitment and intimidation. According to Del Stover, (1986), youth get involved in gangs for status, self-esteem and acceptance that have not been accorded elsewhere. Gang membership has also been attributed to family and community structures breakdown, which makes kids more vulnerable to gang recruitment. Youth gangs form in both poor and affluent communities.

There is an array of indicators that enable one recognize a gang or its members. Typically, most people see bandannas and graffiti as the major indicators of the presence of a gang. However, the cues by which a gang can be identified are as diverse as the gangs themselves. With increasing awareness among school administrators, law enforcers, parents and society at large, gangs have resorted to identifiers that are quite subtle in nature so as not to attract much attention. Depending on the gang's activities in a given school/community, these identifiers may include: graffiti, colors,

tattoos, “ lit” (gang literature), initiations, hand signs, behavior, and many others. A student manifesting one or several of these indicators may have a gang affiliation. As much as these identifiers help in the identification of gang membership, however, a focus on one’s behavior is of much importance to all the involved parties.

Gang identifiers keep changing in nature. Therefore, Parents, educators, law enforcement and youth service providers ought to undergo regular training and access the latest updates on gang identifiers trends. Of much concern are the patterns of behavior in the schools and communities. Gang identifiers are ever evolving, and there is an increasing trend of gang members adopting a ‘ low profile’ to avoid identification by authorities. Consequently, in my opinion, I believe only local law enforcement agencies and other gang specialists should be the ones offering this training. This opinion borrows from the fact that only they are familiar with the latest local behavior patterns among the youth.

The presence of gangs in schools strongly increases the probability of violence, drugs and guns on campus. The article cites the unfortunate case of the 15-yr-old girl who got gang raped and beaten until she lost consciousness. This is but one of the numerous cases of violence and victimization the presence of gangs in schools cause. A recent study shows that cases of victimization doubled for gang-infested schools as compared to those without (8% versus 3%) (Chandler et al. 1998). As opposed to other students, those with gang membership have a higher likelihood of involving themselves in crimes, perform poorly in academics, drop out of school, get suspended, expelled or be arrested. They then become victims of violence.

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There are various factors that can be used to differentiate gang and non-gang activity. Typically, gang violence involves a group of individuals. For instance, the article is categorical that, about 20 people took part in the raping of the young girl in California (CNN Justice, 2009). Secondly, gang-related violence tends to be retaliatory and accelerates at a much higher speed than no-gang violence. In the article, McDevitt, a specialist in hate crime research, suggests that the male witnesses present during the attack could have kept quiet for fear of retaliation. Thirdly, gang activity is, more often than not, violent in nature. In the case of the California gang rape, criminologists believed that it was too violent. The Illinois murder of an honor student was also extremely violent.

In a country that is famous around the world for its relentless fight against organized crimes and gangs in general, one might fail to understand how fighting gangs in the school system has been such an uphill task. Most gangs thrive on several factors: anonymity, lack of awareness by school administration and denial. A gang member whose current cases go unaddressed may get involved in assaults, initiation and sale of drugs in school, in the future. Denial takes the first position as the strongest contributing factor to the thriving of gangs in schools. Public officials lay much concern on image instead of dealing with the actual problem. In my opinion, what they fail to see is that the longer they stay in denial, the deeper ingrained the problem grows and eventually, the worse their image gets. Moreover, even when they acknowledge the problem, it is downplayed. They acknowledge the problem when it can no longer be denied and, even then, they tend to underestimate its extent. Eventually, the problem of gang

activity gets bigger and bigger, thereby tarnishing the image of the learning institution.

As put down earlier, gang activities involve a large number of individuals acting for a common cause. Their activities are usually violent. In schools, these gangs will mostly be seen doing different activities together (Chandler et al., 1998). For instance, the article details several cases in which different gangs assault or rape their victims as a group. Several studies have shown that most youth subscribe to various gangs to gain recognition and raise their self-esteem. Therefore, to achieve these, they carry out their activities in public- where there are witnesses. The article describes the two violent scenes committed by gangs in public places (that of California girl and the Illinois case). However, the people present during a gang's violent activity often do not interfere. Psychologists and criminologists may at times field differing reasons as to why witnesses react in this way. However, they point to a social phenomena referred to as 'The bystander effect'. This is a theory that has been evident in numerous cases of lynching, white-collar crimes and college riots. It states that the amount of work done reduces with a corresponding rise in the number of people present. For instance, when in a crowd and one notices that everybody is doing nothing, then doing nothing becomes the norm. The article categorically puts the number of those present during the California rape case at hundreds of students, and none decided to help. The bystander effect, therefore, exalts the gang member involved in a criminal activity at the expense of the victim. Witnesses may also fail to help due to the fear of retaliation by the gang members.

From the foregoing, the presence of gangs in schools is highly detrimental to teachers and students alike. This calls for strict measures and strategies for fighting gang evolution, growth and development in schools. Schools should be established on neutral grounds and; therefore, gang affiliation ought to be banned. To this end, clear and consistent moral codes for all students must be communicated by school administrators. The strategies and structures for enforcing them must also be put in place. Graffiti is a strong indicator that a gang is present in a school. Once noticed, it should be painted over immediately. This sends this signal that the school is not a property of the gang and discourages rival not to respond by drawing more graffiti, or worse, interfering with the rival's symbols, an act that can deteriorate to violence and retaliation (Stover, 1986). There are schools that have a policy of searching students' lockers should it be deemed necessary. In extreme cases, expulsion and referral to a juvenile court is the solution. For example, students found in possession of weapons can be subjected to the highest form of disciplinary actions.

School gangs are a large monster that continues to get bigger, despite all the strategies and structures established to combat the menace. Research has shown that students get affiliated to gangs mostly for recognition, self esteem and material benefits, including money and drugs (Arthur, 1989). In schools and elsewhere, gangs' activities are to a larger extent thrive on the bystander effect because most gangs carry out their activities, which are usually violent, in the full glare of the public. There are, however, various proposed and applied methods of dealing with gangs in school systems. Just like I oppose terrorism and intimidation, I oppose the presence of gangs in

schools. In addition, schools should not let gangs thrive on denial for fear of soiling their image in the short run and suffering an extensive image problem in the long run.