

**Proceedings of the 2008
College of Liberal Arts
Forum on Faculty-Student
Research**

March 26, 2008

Rochester Institute of Technology

Gang Prevention: The Application of a School-Based Curriculum to Address Risk and Protective Factors

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The Rochester Safe and Sound research project has determined that prevention and intervention are key components to understanding and solving gang problems, not only in Rochester, but nationwide. To begin with, the risk factors for primary and secondary prevention and intervention were identified, followed by theories as to why children join gangs while others do not, capped with approaches that are effective in deterring gang activity.

Primary intervention focuses on children between the ages of six to ten. Programs that target these young children are focused on prevention and deterring children from the early beginnings of gang activities. The risk factors that surround primary intervention are general delinquency, aggression, psychological condition, child maltreatment, a

family history of criminal behavior, having a teenage mother, low academic aspirations, low academic achievement in elementary school, truancy, suspension, associations with delinquent peers, community disorganization, and poor parental supervision (Strategic Planning Tool: Risk Factors, OJJDP). To begin with, a child that expresses general delinquent behavior at an early age is extremely vulnerable to criminal behaviors and attitudes. This is a broad category that encompasses other risk factor such as low academic aspirations, low academic achievement in elementary school, and association with delinquent peers. These risk factors generally all foster negative behaviors and attitudes, and are placed under the category of general delinquency. However, the low academic aspirations and achievement in elementary school and associations with delinquent peers should also be studied independently of one another, for they all offer differing explanations as to why they add to the increased possibility of a child becoming involved in criminal or gang activities. For example, a child who does not aspire to do well in school generally does not do well, for the grades are not important to them. They generally have a bleak outlook in life and turn to gangs instead of focusing their energies and attention on school. Children who exhibit this behavior in elementary school fair worse, as elementary school is the basis of the rest of their education, not only in high school, but in higher education as well. It is inarguable to say that most successes in life begin with a strong foundation of whatever that aspect of life may be. Furthermore, low academic aspirations generally contribute to low achievement in elementary school. This is a direct result of the above mentioned risk

factor, for those who do not care nor try, their efforts will be expressed in grades. Association with delinquent peers is a strong risk factor, as young children and adolescents look to their peers for support, acceptance and guidance. As such, peer pressure is a strong influence upon these children, for the need to be liked far outweighs the need to do well in school, in their eyes. These children usually follow their delinquent peers in their delinquent actions simply to feel accepted.

Children who express aggression are placed at higher risk of becoming involved in gang activity because clearly, gangs are aggressive units. Children who are prone to aggression and express it are more likely to join gangs because it is an accepted behavior. To prevent this, aggression as a risk factor must be addressed early on. Aggression may stem from a variety of factors, ranging from child maltreatment, to family history of problem or criminal behavior, or the child's psychological condition. Parents, guardians and other adults play a large part of these factors, for they are generally the original cause for such aggression. These adults who abuse and mistreat children provide the basis for a dire future for these children. For example, sexual predators or pedophiles that prey on children take away the normalcy of these children's lives, making them feel alone, introverted, and most often times, extremely resentful, distrustful and angry. Additionally, a child who comes from a family with a history of criminal or problem behavior are likely to mature as the same members of society; a great theoretical example of this is the Social Learning Theory presented by Akers, as will be discussed at a later point. There are no such "criminal genes"; however, being raised in an

environment that fosters these behaviors clearly does not distinguish between the good and bad, leaving a lasting negative impression on the children. These children will most likely continue to participate in these behaviors that they've learned, making them more susceptible to gang activity.

The risk factors that are directed towards secondary prevention and intervention are generally the same as those that are directed towards primary prevention, albeit these risk factors are geared toward children ages 10 to 17. Regardless of the age similarities between the primary and secondary prevention risk factors, there are still some noticeable differences simply based on the different stages in life that these children are at. However, the “intervention” aspect of the program implies that there is already significant amounts of gang related or direct gang activity for these youths. Therefore, because the time for prevention has clearly passed, this program intends to step in and intervene with the gang related activity of these older youths. Clearly, a risk factor for a seventeen year old is not going to be the same as a risk factor of a six year old. A risk factor that is shared between all age groups is that of aggression. Because this was discussed earlier, the mere mentioning of it will suffice for this age group. Low bonding or commitment to school is a risk factor that share different characteristics with older children than of younger children. Youths who feel little connection to the school will begin to connect with other groups, and in this case, gangs. Moreover, socializing with these poor associations due to a lack of bonding otherwise that express negative behaviors will begin to show the same features. This

may be easily explained and understood through the “birds of a feather flock together” analogy. These antisocial peers also express antisocial and delinquent beliefs. Failing to conform to social standards, some youths feel that they stand out. In order to feel accepted, they join gangs, for they supposedly offer the inclusion that some feel that they cannot get from other places. The antisocial beliefs and peers that a child may have will also be amplified if that particular child has poor refusal skills. This idea deals with peer pressure, and those who cannot refuse drugs, alcohol or pressure to join gangs will fall prey to those forces.

Additionally, the poor parental supervision, a family history of criminal behavior, and academic failure are all basically the same as the aforementioned risk factors for primary prevention. One large distinction between primary and secondary prevention is the use of alcohol or other drugs. Clearly, those who are involved with drugs and alcohol will most likely associate with other people who participate in those same activities. It is not merely the children’s use of alcohol or drugs that put them at a higher risk of joining gangs-it is the parents or other role models’ use of alcohol or drugs as well. A child who grows up around drugs and alcohol will most likely use them as well. Youths who participate in such vices set themselves up for poor association and an increased risk of joining gangs. Also, youths who are suspended or drop out of school fill their time with gang related activities and negative behaviors, rather than spend their time in school.

To understand the psyche of youths that join gangs, one must look at the supposed benefits of joining gangs. Also, gangs offer children

a sense of identity, attention, status, protection, a feeling of belonging, excitement, and financial benefits. Children need to feel a sense of belonging, whether at home, school or otherwise. In this case, it is the otherwise. Joining a gang and adopting a certain set of values, morals, and beliefs makes up for the lack of identity that the children felt they had prior to being part of a gang. Gangs also offer children attention that they may not find in the home, where it most likely should be found. By joining gangs, children may be offered attention by other gang members or even the community, probably in a negative light, that they are missing from home. Status is another supposed benefit of becoming part of a gang for it allows children to be a member and have a status, making them feel perceived as important to an aspect of their lives.

Equally important, gangs offer a sense of protection, similar to the inmate code found in prisons. Gang members often state that they “have each other’s backs” and will be there for another gang member when they are needed. This feeling of belonging, attention and protection gives the feeling of a “family” that may or may not be found at home. The child becomes loyal to gang values, rather than those that are issued at home. However, some children may simply join gangs because they are intimidated by the gang, or may want to feel that they themselves are intimidating others. Children may become part of a gang because they may be forced to or peer pressured into it. This is not necessarily something positive that gangs have to offer, unless one is considering the idea that the child may join to feel that he wants to intimidate other children. This idea expresses the thought that gangs offer excitement.

The general feeling of belonging may bring excitement. Furthermore, the feeling of rebellion may bring levels of excitement because the child knows what he is doing is generally frowned upon. Lastly, one of the most important reasons why children join gangs is the supposed financial benefit. Some youths may gain financial benefits by performing certain acts, perhaps during the initiation or other times, as a gang member. This would clearly be an incentive for a child to join a gang.

Some of these reasons have been articulated into theories that are held true by many criminologists. The first theory addressed is the Social Learning Theory by Akers. Prior to Akers' adjustment to the social learning theory of crime, Edwin Sutherland proposed the basic principles of the theory, in his Differential Association Theory. Akers modified this to fit into this theory of social learning, and included the idea of reinforcement. Akers' theory stresses the idea that criminal behavior is acquired, repeated and changed by the same process as conforming behavior. Akers' original idea encompassed the idea of differential association: it is that "one commits criminal acts because his accepted definitions of law as something to violate are in 'excess' of his accepted definitions of the law as something that can, must, or should be obeyed" (Akers, 1985). As mentioned above, this theory also asserts the idea of differential reinforcement, where voluntary actions of the individual are shaped by rewards or punishments. Certain acts that are received with rewards are going to be repeated, while those that are met with punishment are clearly not going to be repeated. Akers states, "The probability of engaging in criminal and deviant behavior is increased and

the probability of conforming to the norm is decreased when one differentially associates with others who commit criminal behavior and espouse definitions favorable to it, are relatively more exposed in person or symbolically to salient criminal/deviant models, define it as desirable or justified, and have received or expect to receive greater rewards than punishments” (Akers, 1985). This generally asserts that the group one belongs to or associates with provides the major social contexts in which social learning operates. These groups set the definitions for behaviors, whether good or bad. The more one’s attitudes approve of a behavior, the greater the chances are that one will do it.

This directly relates to the intended program, for these youths at risk have learned negative behavior which in turn, has been reinforced. The negative behaviors, perhaps from the parents or other peers, have been learned by the child and continually reinforced. Because these behaviors are not shunned in this particular environment, Akers’ theory proves true. The attitude that these children have approve of such negative behaviors, thus greatly increasing the chances that they will participate in those behaviors. In the case of gangs and gang activity, the major influences come from other gang members. The social bond between gang members is undoubtedly strong and the opinions and values shared by members are often times, shared by all. Furthermore, because gangs usually focus on negative and criminal behaviors, these ideas are encouraged and supported by the other members. Because these behaviors are held by all and are encouraged, it is likely that the behavior will continue, for no one holds a differing opinion on the morality of

them. These behaviors have been learned, encouraged, and will most likely continue, based on Akers' Social Learning theory.

The next important theory that deserves a thorough analysis is Sampson and Wilson's theory of race, crime and urban inequality. It stresses that crime is not an individual problem, and that focusing on culture alone ignores the harsh living conditions of the inner city. To begin with, Sampson and Wilson (1998) assert that people must be studied in their natural habitat, in this case, the urban areas. Sampson and Wilson found that delinquency rates remained high for a certain region of the city, regardless of who lived there; this suggests that delinquency must be correlated with a particular ecological environment in which it occurs, and that it is not biological (Sampson & Wilson, 1998). This directly relates to Shaw and McKay's explanation in their social disorganization theory (see below). Youth in the inner cities are cut off from the main stream societal actions and values and the routines that children of affluent neighborhoods are part of. They may feel hopeless, for the American Dream is not a dream for inner city youth. These children may feel hopeless to the point that they join gangs because they feel they should not even attempt to do well, for they feel they will never amount to anything anyways. This may relate to the idea that gangs offer a sense of identity and importance. These children feel that because society refuses to accept them and does not hold them to be important members of it, joining a gang is a sufficient alternative. The explanation of this theory is no exception in Rochester,

Additionally, Shaw and McKay offer a theory concerned with juvenile delinquency, arguing that delinquency is mainly the consequence of a collapse of institutional community-based controls. The criminologists assert that social disorganization is the decline of influence on existing social rules of behaviors on individuals and groups; the traditional institutions that held control over individuals disintegrates, resulting in the breakdown of effective social control. The people who live in these situations are not personally disoriented; rather, they are viewed as responding naturally to disorganized environmental conditions. Socially disorganized areas lead to the development of criminal values and traditions that replace conventional ones and that are self-perpetuating. There are four main assumptions to social disorganization as an explanation of delinquency: delinquency is the consequence of a collapse of institutional, community based controls, the disorganization of community-based institution is a result of industrialization, urbanization and immigration that usually occur within urban areas, the effectiveness of social institution correspond to natural, ecological principles that are influences by the concepts of competition, and socially disorganized areas lead to the development of criminal values and traditions that are self-perpetuating (Wong, 2001).

In contrast, it is interesting to note why children avoid gangs. These reasons are basically polar opposites of the risk factors that would involve children in gangs. Youths that have positive role models, exposure to a greater number of positive behaviors than negative, development of self esteem and self-efficacy, supportive relationships, a

sense of hope about the future, belief in oneself, strong social skills, good peer relationships, a close, trusting bond with a nurturing adult outside the family, great empathy and support from a mother or mother figure, the ability to find refuge and a sense of self esteem in hobbies and creative pursuits, and a sense of control in one's life are very unlikely to join gangs.

It is interesting to note that the Social Control Theory of Delinquency does not focus on why children commit deviant acts, but why they do not. The basic assumption of this theory is that delinquent acts result when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken. Durkheim stresses, "We are moral beings to the extent that we are social beings" (Williams and McShane, 1993 p247). This implies that the concept of commitment and belief, for we are committed to others in our beliefs and morals. "The concept of commitment assumes that the organization of society is such that the interests of most persons would be endangered if they were to engage in criminal behavior" (Williams and McShane, 1993, p. 249). This suggests that the bond to society and morals are clearly important, for if they are broke, then the interests of other people would be endangered. Furthermore, this theory insists that a person may simply be too busy to engage in criminal acts. There is simply not enough time in the day to engage in criminal behavior when a person is preoccupied with other conventional acts. Moreover, referring to the morals concept, the theory assumes the "...existence of a common value system within the society or group whose norms are being violated" (Williams and McShane, 1993). The more that the individual believes in the rules, the more likely he is to follow them. This theory is clearly

helpful to the understanding of why people do not commit deviant acts. If one was to reverse these concepts, then the reasons as to why people, specifically children, commit crimes/join gangs and what could be done to prevent this becomes clear. Undoubtedly, the majority of these ideas will be stressed in the program that RSS has chosen to implement in the selected Rochester City Public Schools.

A positive role model in a child's life, such as parents, teachers, and other responsible adults give necessary support to the child; these role models prove to be a positive influence on the child's life overall and a necessary component to help keep children away from and out of gangs. An exposure to a greater number of positive behaviors than negative behaviors helps increase the rate of success of that particular child in school and other social situations throughout life. The more positive behaviors, such as kindness, compassion, and responsibility, that the child is exposed to, the better the child will turn out. In contrast, if it is the other way around and the child is exposed to more negative behaviors than positive, the child will have a severely less of a chance to succeed. Development of self esteem and self efficacy are crucial to a child will avoid gangs, for it is an important component to building confidence in life, which is an ingredient to success.

Furthermore, supportive relationships, including those with teachers and friends help support that child in participating in positive behaviors and function as a positive force directing the child away from criminal behaviors and attitudes. Also, when a child has a sense of hope for a bright and prosperous future, the child will gravitate towards that

sense and away from criminal activities. This sense of hope will give the child a goal and something to look forward to and work for. Equally important to a child's success is having strong social skills. The more that the child interacts with other children and adults in positive ways, the lower the likelihood will be that the child will be involved in gangs. Having strong social skills will not only help the child develop as a person, but will offer a refuge of some kind, knowing that he or she will be able to confide in and trust someone, whether a peer or an adult. This avoids making the child feel alone and isolated. Additionally, this idea also parallels the ability to find refuge and a sense of self esteem in hobbies and creative pursuits, useful work and assigned chores. Being busy, whether with friends (due to the strong social skills) or with other assigned personal tasks, will help keep children preoccupied with positive habits instead of negative, criminal activities. Lastly, a sense of control over one's life is a comforting feeling that children and young adults need to have, for they know that they will be able to handle the curveballs that life throws at them, without resorting to criminal activities to deal with and handle those types of situations.

These positive factors upon a child's life clearly direct the child away from criminal and deviant behaviors and instead push them toward a positive and successful life. It has been studied and generally accepted, that in general, children who grow up surrounded by and encouraged to participate in these positive behaviors most likely will shy away from gangs and gang activity, not only in grade school, but post high-school graduation as well.

There have been several attempted approaches to the prevention and intervention of children and youths joining gangs and committing deviant acts. The method that the Rochester Safe and Sound project is supporting is a school-based social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum. Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) focuses on building emotional awareness and regulating skills while integrating these skills in self-control and social problem skills. This approach also promotes nonviolent problem-solving skills by using different strategies to demonstrate to children this idea of nonviolent problem-solving skills (Kam, Greenberg, & Kusche, 2004). In this instance, there will be intervention specialists at each school targeted among 300 students within ten to twelve classrooms. Because all of the students in the classrooms will participate in this element of the program, it will be a universal program. This is beneficial not only to the students involved, but may serve as a model to the schools after this project has concluded to succeed. The intervention specialists will provide at least one hour of support time each week per classroom through the first year of implementation, totaling at a range from ten to twelve hours per week. The intervention specialists will then communicate with the teachers involved in the PATHS program and may conduct individual case review for such circumstances that require it. There are several aspects to the PATHS curriculum. A few of the units that will be utilized are the Self Control Unit, the Feelings Unit, the Problem Solving Unit, Teacher Training, and includes the Affective-Behavioral-Cognitive-Dynamic Model. This places importance on developmental integration of affect

(emotional and language), behavior, and cognitive understanding as they relate to social and emotional competence. There are four basic assumptions in this model: the child's ability to understand and discuss emotions is related to communicative development and the ability to inhibit behavior and self control, the child's ability to manage, understand and discuss emotions operates under developmental constraints and is affected by socialization practices, the child's ability to understand their own and other's emotions, and the school environment is a fundamental ecology and one that can be a central locus of change (Kam, Greenberg, & Kusche, 2004).

The PATHS program will primarily be evaluated by in-class teacher assessments using the Teacher-Child Rating Scale (T-CRS). The T-CRS assesses both positive pro-social behaviors as well as anti-social behaviors. The intervention specialists will then review these scales and determine that 100 students that are most at risk of becoming gang-involved, in addition to their families and will receive more intensive services. This will include two parent-based curricula (Effective Black Parenting and Los Ninos Bien Educados). Furthermore, if the families are willing to participate, the intervention specialists will conduct at least one visit to each of the 300 students involved during the summer months. This is clearly beneficial, for instead of stopping the PATHS curriculum during the summer months, it will be continuous and therefore hopefully continue the prevention and intervention that is needed to keep these children out of gangs and gang activities.

The selection of PATHS was considered over programs such as the Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) program. GREAT is a program that is school-based, law enforcement officer-instructed classroom curriculum and is similar to Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE). With prevention as its primary objective, the program is intended as an immunization against delinquency, youth violence, and gang membership. Furthermore, this program has developed partnerships with nationally recognized organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club of America, and encourages positive relationships among the community, parents, schools and law enforcement officers. Moreover, this program consists of four components: a 13 session middle school curriculum, an elementary school curriculum, a summer program, and families training. One of the main contentions in selecting PATHS over GREAT is the idea that PATHS focuses not just on middle and elementary children, but has an integrated aspect concerning the older youths, up to the age of 17. This is especially helpful because at that age, the youths are still impressionable enough to perhaps persuade them out of the hardcore gang activities and violence that usually occurs in older age groups.

The GREAT program can be likened to the DARE, Drug Abuse Resistance Education, program over a broad spectrum of aspects incorporated into both programs. To begin with, DARE and GREAT are not put into practice and implemented into schools for time periods long enough to be successful and have a significant impact on children. The two may also be only introduced to youths for one session per grade

school involvement, rather than several sessions over several years. This would ensure that the program is continued long enough and frequently enough that its influence on youths would be the desired outcome. In the case of PATHS, it will be introduced to 300 at risk children at the selected schools, then continued to a select 100 students. These 100 students are the most at risk for joining gangs or participating in deviant behavior. These 100 youths will also then receive in-home visitations from the intervention specialists once a month over a period of three years. This program clearly has a higher frequency of implementation than GREAT or DARE and continues over a long enough period of time for a significant impact to be made. In these regards, the PATHS program has potential for great success.

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