U.S. Department of Justice
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Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
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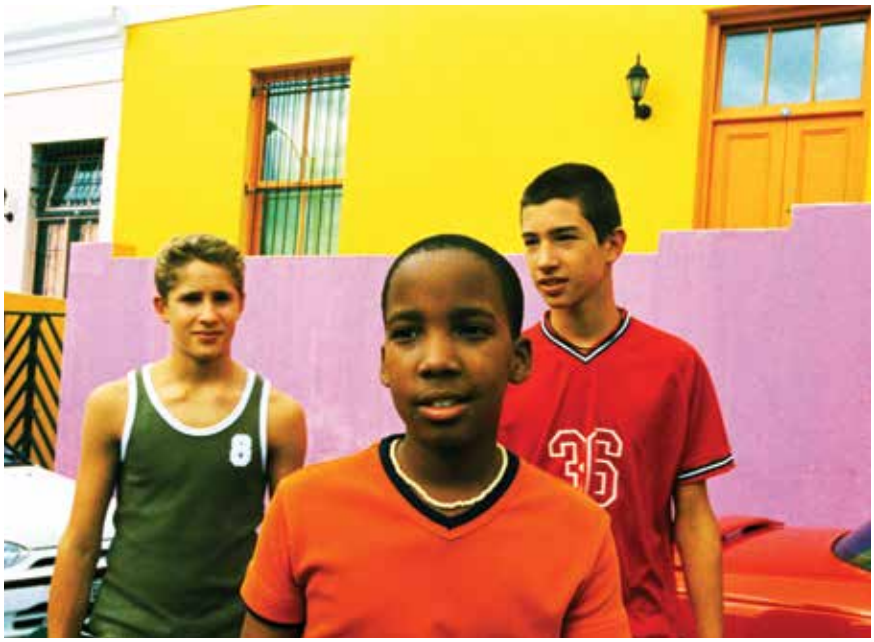
CHANGING COURSE

Preventing Gang Membership



Conclusion. An Invitation to Contribute to Gang-Joining Prevention

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The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) intend this book to serve as a foundation for the development and implementation of coordinated strategies, programs and policies that prevent youth from joining gangs. We call this concluding chapter an "invitation" because — by providing key definitions, conceptual models, core principles, implications for policy, and examples of programs — we invite action.

As Dr. Buddy Howell (chapter 1) and many of the authors of the chapters in this book describe, the U.S. faces a persistent and serious problem with youth gangs. The consequences of the problem are clear. The risks for delinquency and violence (as both perpetrator and victim) dramatically increase after a young person joins a gang. Young gang members are also at higher risk for substance abuse, high-risk sexual behavior, dropping out of school, criminal behavior, and numerous other negative consequences.

However, there is reason for optimism: By preventing youth from joining gangs in the first place, we significantly improve their chances for a safe and productive life. That's why we call this book *CHANGING COURSE: Preventing Gang Membership.*

Although there has been little scientific study of gang-joining in particular, research regarding youth delinquency and youth violence offers substantial insights for preventing youth from joining gangs. Like delinquency and violence, gang-joining can be prevented. This has the potential for enormous savings for communities in terms of medical, law enforcement, incarceration, and lost productivity costs — not to mention reductions in personal tragedy and fear, increases in school security, enhancements of property values, and greater community cohesion.

Although decision-makers and practitioners should work together to reduce the risks for gang-joining, we must go beyond simply reducing risk. We must understand and enhance the "protective factors" within youth, families, schools and communities that reduce the likelihood of gang-joining. By building on existing strengths, rather than focusing solely on risk reduction, prevention strategies will be more helpful to youth and more welcomed within communities.

As Dr. Carl Taylor and Ms. Pamela Smith describe in chapter 2, youth can be attracted to gangs because their needs are not being met — needs for safety, positive relationships, and fun and excitement — and because they do not see educational and job opportunities that can help them become healthy, productive adults. These needs cannot be filled by working on a single aspect of a child's life. The success of strategies that enhance youth's skills, ease the struggle of families, improve connections between families and schools, enhance positive social activities in communities, and train youth for jobs are all limited if these activities occur in isolation.

Law enforcement and public health have important roles to play in preventing gang-joining. Dr. Tamara Haegerich and her co-authors (chapter 3) and Dr. Scott Decker (chapter 4) highlight the complementary aspects of the public health and law enforcement approaches to prevention. Law enforcement officers have an important perspective on the nature of the gang problem and the particular consequences within their communities; they know where activities are occurring and which youth are at risk. They offer valuable insights about prevention needs and opportunities, and they can provide youth and their families with referrals to preventive services. But it is clear that gang membership is not just a criminal justice problem. It is also a public health problem — and public health professionals have experience in building, evaluating and disseminating strategies that help prevent health problems before they start. Therefore, public health has a role to play in ensuring that gang-joining prevention strategies are comprehensive,

are based on the best available evidence, and include the necessary partners. Indeed, preventing gang-joining demands the collaboration of multiple sectors of our society — and comprehensive programs and policies must move beyond the law enforcement and public health sectors to include education, social services, labor, urban planning, the business community, and other groups that are concerned with the health and well-being of youth.

Spanning the chapters in this book, the following six themes offer broad, strategic actions that can help reduce gang-joining, and the violence and crime that often result:

1. Build partnerships.
2. Use data.
3. Frame the issue.
4. Create a plan.
5. Implement the plan.
6. Evaluate the effectiveness.

Build Partnerships

The complex problem of gang-joining has multiple contributing factors. Therefore, *preventing* gang-joining requires more than simple, individual solutions. It requires that diverse sectors work together. As evidenced by the partnership between NIJ and CDC that produced this book, we believe that collaborations must be forged and actions must be coordinated to plan and implement a comprehensive approach.

To do this, groups or individuals interested in gang-joining prevention should:

- Join an existing partnership that is addressing gang-joining or youth-violence prevention, or form a new partnership if one does not exist.
- Ensure that partners include key sectors, such as law enforcement, public health, education, the business community, social service agencies, parents and other adults, as well as young people who are concerned about gang-joining and interested in promoting healthy youth and communities.
- Address the ambiguity about what constitutes a "gang" and "gang-joining" by developing a shared understanding of what these terms mean for your group. Consider using a straightforward definition such as the one offered in the Introduction. In some communities, for example, it might be more productive to focus on preventing youth involvement with negative peer groups and avoiding a "gang/nongang" determination altogether. Given the strong influence of peers on youth behaviors, community partnerships aimed at stopping the development and growth of negative peer groups more broadly could be critical to addressing the underlying risks for gang-joining and other health risks or criminal behaviors.
- Affirm a shared commitment to gang-joining *prevention* to complement gang and violence intervention and suppression strategies.

Use Data

A true understanding of the nature of a gang problem and opportunities for prevention demands that data from multiple sources are used. As Gary Gottfredson discusses in the chapter on schools (chapter 7), it is also important to consider issues that can affect the accuracy and completeness of data; for example, school administrators may be unable or unwilling to fully describe the gang challenges they face. Indeed, when feasible, systematic data collection from youth themselves can provide the most useful source of

information, not just about their own gang affiliation but also about local gang activities, the attractions to gangs, opportunities for prevention and emerging problems.

Gang-joining prevention partnerships should use data:

- From multiple sources — hospitals, law enforcement agencies, schools, local surveys, and interviews with youth and parents — rather than a single source.
- To develop a common understanding of the problem, including rates of gang activity and the hot spots, as well as contributing factors and variations across social context such as gender, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic class.
- To promote knowledge and action within the community along with the development and implementation of prevention activities.

Frame the Issue

The framing of any issue — including gang-membership prevention — is crucial. How a message is framed impacts how it is understood and addressed. It can be helpful for practitioners and policymakers to frame gang-joining as part of the *larger* constellation of youth problems, including violence, substance abuse and criminal behavior. Framing prevention strategies and programs in this way can increase buy-in from the community. It also can help decision-makers prioritize prevention programming, policies and resources aimed at reducing risks or enhancing protective influences that impact multiple problem behaviors.

In framing strategies and programs that address gang-joining, practitioners and policymakers should emphasize that *prevention* is key to raising healthy, productive youth. Because the most common age for gang-joining is 13-15 years old, early prevention is crucial. In fact, early prevention is often highly cost-effective, resulting in significant savings to the health and criminal justice systems — and, ultimately, to taxpayers.

It is important to use your data to guide the framing process and work with partners to:

- Describe the local problem — and proposed solutions — in ways that compel key stakeholders to engage in the discussion.
- Consider how the benefits of gang-joining prevention can be communicated to motivate action within the community and across specific target audiences.
- Anticipate concerns and barriers to prevention and address them proactively. For example, some groups might resist sharing responsibility for prevention because they do not see the consequences of gang-joining for their groups or do not understand their role in prevention. Practitioners and policymakers must be prepared to explain the connections and how specific stakeholder groups are impacted.

Create a Plan

Once the collaboration has the right partners who are committed to working together with a shared understanding of goals and the use of data, the next step is to develop a strategic plan. The principles in this book should be considered when planning prevention strategies. We encourage readers to look across all the "levels of influence" to consider what can be done for the individual youth and within families, schools and communities to prevent gang-joining. The chapters by Drs. Nancy Guerra, Deborah Gorman-Smith, Gary Gottfredson, Jorja Leap, and their co-authors (chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8) discuss each of these levels of influence in more depth.

When planning a prevention strategy, it is important to consider:

- The risks that the plan is being designed and implemented to prevent (such as hypervigilance to threat, cognitive impairments, insecure attachment, negative peer relationships, delinquent behavior, a highly visible presence of gangs in the school and community, or high concentrations of poverty or social disorganization); and the protective factors that the plan is being designed to enhance (such as academic success and connectedness to school, and appropriate, consistent parental discipline, monitoring and attachment).
- What is already being done to reduce risks and enhance protection, what evidence exists to support those strategies, and what else is needed. Your plan should incorporate the best available evidence about strategies that have been evaluated and shown to impact the factors you want to address. Although most existing strategies have not been evaluated to determine their specific effects on gang-joining, consider successes in changing related behaviors (substance use, delinquency, family functioning and school success, for example) rather than starting from scratch.
- Strategies that enhance what Dr. Leap (chapter 8) refers to as "core activities" such as tutoring, mentoring, life-skills training, case management, parental involvement, connection with schools, supervised recreational activities, and community mobilization; improvements in these areas are likely to result in a range of benefits for youth that, in turn, should reduce the risk for gang-joining.
- Whether prevention strategies adequately address the needs of specific subgroups of youth. For example, as Dr. Meda Chesney-Lind points out in chapter 9, living in an abusive family is an important risk factor for girls. With respect to race and ethnicity, Drs. Adrienne Freng and T.J. Taylor (chapter 10) argue that — even when information is lacking about possible differences in risk and protective factors among specific subgroups — it is important to act on the basis of the best available evidence. They conclude, for example, that prevention efforts that address risks such as low parental monitoring or limited educational opportunities are likely to be beneficial regardless of race or ethnicity.

Implement the Plan

Partners must work together to secure or align the resources necessary to implement new prevention activities or, if activities are already in place, to ensure that they are sustained over time. This may require working as a group to move resources from an ineffective or less directly relevant activity to one that has more evidence of effectiveness in preventing gang-joining. Implementation might also require working with partners to obtain new resources, such as grants from foundations or businesses.

When considering implementation, it is important to remember that:

- There is often a tendency to focus only on the most urgent needs and strategies for addressing youth who are at immediate risk for gang-joining. However, it is important to balance this goal with the need to start working with children at a young age. Dr. Guerra and her co-authors emphasize how gang-joining should be understood as part of a life course that begins from the time a child is born (chapter 5).
- The reach of programs and strategies must be broad. Because resources are limited, prevention efforts often start with a small segment of the population. As Dr. Gorman-Smith and her co-authors describe (chapter 6), it is important that communities work toward scaling up prevention efforts so that everyone who can benefit is eventually given the opportunity to participate. This approach is consistent with the public health focus on population-level reductions in risk.
- Look for immediate and lasting ways to make youth feel safer in their communities and at school. Dr. Taylor and Ms. Smith (chapter 2) highlight the importance of perceived safety as a reason for gang-joining, and Dr. Gottfredson (chapter 7) emphasizes that the ability to provide a safe environment within schools is vital to reducing gang-joining.

Evaluate the Effectiveness

Careful evaluation is critical to ensuring that gang-joining prevention activities are being implemented as intended and are having the expected effects. Drs. Finn-Age Esbensen and Kristy Matsuda describe types of evaluations and their key design elements (chapter 11). Data based on a solid evaluation can be used to secure new partners and resources or to sustain or expand prevention activities. Evaluation data are also important in refining prevention plans and implementation strategies.

A rigorous evaluation is an investment that can pay off substantially over the long run. To maximize the impact of an evaluation, it is important to:

- Incorporate evaluation planning in the overall prevention plan. Consider the best data sources and ways to compare what is happening after the prevention program or strategy to what happened before to individuals or groups that did and did not participate in the prevention activity. Gathering baseline data (before implementation of a prevention program) is a crucial part of evaluation planning.
- Use as rigorous a design as possible. If your collaboration includes or has access to a researcher, engage her or him in planning the evaluation. If not, seek assistance from a local university that could have a research team looking for new projects.
- Conduct multiple types of evaluation to determine how well a program was implemented (process evaluation), what outcomes were found relative to what would have been expected without the strategy or program (outcome evaluation) and, ideally, how much money was saved (cost-effectiveness or cost-benefit evaluation).
- Remember that even negative results are important. Learning that something is not working gives you the opportunity to refine it or to invest resources elsewhere. It is important that the evaluation is done well, however, because negative results from a poorly designed evaluation do not tell you if the results are because the program or strategy did not work or because the data are limited.
- Disseminate what you are learning. This is important not only to further local prevention efforts but also to assist other communities that are struggling with the same issues.

We hope that this book — with its emphasis on prevention — is a first step in broadening the thinking on how to deal with gang crime and violence. By bringing together the criminal justice and public health perspectives and by drawing lessons from what is known about other youth problem behaviors, we offer principles that practitioners and policymakers can use in gang-membership prevention.

Finally, we hope that this book inspires readers to embrace NIJ's and CDC's shared commitment to the principles that will help prevent our nation's young people from joining gangs. The impacts of gang membership — and the burden it places on our health, law enforcement, corrections and educational systems — are significant. We believe that, faced with the current economic realities, prevention is the best way to halt the cascading impact of gangs on our kids, families, neighborhoods and society at large. If we work together to focus on the prevention of gang membership — rather than solely caring for victims of gang violence and arresting gang-involved youth — we can **change the course** of the future for our young people. We hope you accept our invitation to use these prevention principles in your work.