

# POLICY ESSAY

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## COMMUNITY-DRIVEN VIOLENCE REDUCTION PROGRAMS

# Comprehensive gang and violence reduction programs

## Reinventing the square wheel

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This essay has three components about factors that limit knowledge building for policy purposes. Several of these factors are directly described in the report on the One Vision program (Wilson and Chermak, 2011, this issue). I will comment first on several “lost issues,” that is, issues that often are overlooked in the extensive literature on gang and violence programming. I will then follow with a list of other warnings about factors that limit what is learned (or learnable) from such programming. Finally, I will illustrate some of these concerns in a new, complex, and yet promising program now entering its third year.

### Three Lost Issues

#### *Gap Between Data and Policy*

Wilson and Chermak (2011) note correctly that a considerable gap exists between “promising” strategies and demonstrably successful programs (demonstrable in scientific terms, one should add). Various project reports and—most notably—government summaries overstate promise in the face of mixed and negative results (Howell, 2007; OJJDP, 2010; Spergel, Wa, and Sosa, 2006). The collection of reports in enforcement-oriented programs edited by Decker (2003) and the comprehensive review of almost 60 approaches to gang reduction offered by Klein and Maxson (2006) document not just a gap but also a woeful absence of (a) well-implemented programs and (b) adequately evaluated programs. Indeed, one could infer from the Klein and Maxson summaries that almost everything is “promising” because

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so little has been tested properly. The report by Wilson and Chermak represents a distinct departure from this pattern, although it unfortunately describes a program that actually increased levels of violence. A wise author noted decades ago (I have lost the reference) how remarkable it was that the most carefully evaluated social programs turn out to be the most likely failures.

### *Use of Former Gang Members in Gang Intervention*

A second largely overlooked and seriously underresearched factor is the problem of using former street gang members, or former gang leaders, as instruments of change through outreach to potential and current gang members. Spergel's (2007) data from Chicago indicate that such an outreach can be beneficial, but these data almost stand alone. I want to suggest that there are both advantages and dangers in having former gang members serve as "interventionists" (to use the newest terminology).

The advantages are obvious and often noted by interventionists and their supporters. Gang-experienced outreach workers have "street cred" with almost instant opportunities to establish rapport with current or "wannabe" gang members. They also have access to gang intelligence about member relationships, rivalries, and impending conflicts that can be used to defuse hostilities.

The dangers may be less obvious; yet they can disrupt outreach efforts. The first of these dangers is that, in establishing rapport with targeted gang members, gang outreach workers often use their own prior gang status and exploits as legitimators of their credibility, thereby glorifying the attitudes and activities they are supposed to be discouraging among their gang clients. A second danger is the "walk in my shoes" assumption that only former gang members can be gang interventionists. One often hears this claim from former gang members in outreach programs, but it is nonsense. I have known and worked with effective gang workers who had no prior gang membership. They were social workers, recreation workers, and even probation officers!

A third danger—often cited by the police—is that former gang members in the outreach role can "turn off" agents from other programs, creating suspicion and antagonism that defeat collaborative efforts. Understandably, they are also reluctant to share information ("intelligence") about their gang member clients. The police, in particular, resent this failure (while being equally guilty of the failure to share information).

Finally, there is I believe a legitimate concern that turning ex-gang members or—worse yet—former gang leaders into activists for prosocial and antigang values places an unfair burden on them. They have been socialized by anywhere from 1 to 10 years or more in the gang culture. Now, we ask them to turn around 180° to eschew that culture and, in effect, work against it. How does this new role fit with their former and current gang peers? How does it fit with their habituated gang self-identities? Experienced observers of the gang programming arena can cite case after case of ex-gang members turned gang interventionists who fell off the wagon—committed new crimes or were assaulted, even killed, while in their

new roles. You can take the member out of the gang, but sometimes you cannot take the gang out of the member.

### *Unintended Effects on Gang Cohesion*

I want to emphasize a third lost issue raised in the article by Wilson and Chermak (2011). This is the problem of increasing gang cohesion inadvertently through the various practices involved in gang intervention. Studies as early as the 1970s (Klein, 1971) and as recent as the last decade (e.g., Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, and Tolin, 2003) have demonstrated the enormous effect that gang involvement has on individual illegal behavior among gang members. A strong case can be made, empirically as well as conceptually, from a social-psychological framework, in which programs that emphasize group processes already in place in gangs can (or will) increase gang cohesiveness and, therefore, gang crime (see Klein and Maxson, 2006, Ch. 5). The policy question then becomes, how can one intervene with groups like street gangs without unintentionally doing more harm than good? Whatever the answer suggested to gang interventionists, it is not one that has been welcomed by them.

### **Additional Issues in Gang Programming**

This section of the essay expands the number of concerns raised by gang and violence reduction programs. I have chosen six of these to illustrate the potential for failing to mount demonstrable program successes.

The first of these is well known to scholars and almost totally ignored by public officials and program administrators: the regression effect. Gang and violence reduction programs are usually mounted as problems are increasing or have reached a tipping point of intolerance for violence levels. A quiet period does not generate much intervention activity. Peaks are followed by valleys. Programs initiated at peak times will normally play out after peaks are reached. The appearance of success may be nothing more than a demonstration of expected normal decrease. For example, the claimed success of Spergel's (2007) Little Village Project took place among the oldest gang members (who are more likely to desist from gang activity) and those with the higher levels of criminal activity (which are known to decrease over time). No such program "success" was demonstrated among the younger gang members. This regression problem could of course be obviated by the use of control designs—comparable areas, gangs, and gang members—but intervention programs almost never implement controlled research designs.

A second but related problem is that, in many instances, gang and violence reduction programs are initiated in locations that do not yield readily to broader generalizations. The One Vision program, for instance, took place in Pittsburgh, a city that was among the last major urban areas to develop a gang problem, and one in which the gang problem grew out of a drug distribution development rather than out of the usual obverse pattern. Gang problems in Los Angeles and Chicago take place in settings simply not typical of the

several *thousand* jurisdictions with gang problems. These two cities are populated heavily by “traditional” street gangs (Klein and Maxson, 2006, Ch. 5), which are unlike the street gangs in most jurisdictions. Case studies in special circumstances do not lead readily to valid generalizations (see Spergel, 2006, for mixed results when six jurisdictions are involved).

A third problem is that of separating gang violence, specifically, from other sources of violence. They are not the same, although obviously some overlap occurs. From my viewpoint, the greatest concern here is that confusing the two obfuscates the special *group* nature of gang violence in favor of simpler efforts to understand and reduce individually based violent acts. If exaggerated group processes in gangs are overlooked—group norms, cohesiveness, structural variations, oppositional culture, and violence as a rallying cry for gang members—then the special impediments that groups present to much violence reduction programming will prevent much success.

A fourth, almost self-defeating character of many gang and violence reduction programs is their attempt to be comprehensive. From an evaluation viewpoint, this means that such programs will be multicomponent efforts. This sounds good and conceptually appropriate, but it raises the difficulty of disaggregating the program components to determine which are more and less successful, in what settings, with what types of program clients, and in what combination. The most assertive attempt at such component disaggregation is provided by Spergel’s 2006 analysis of data from six comprehensive-model sites, an exercise in frustration at the very least.

A fifth problem of any program inserted into or imposed on a community is that of accounting for confounding effects of other program efforts. Police engage in special deterrent activities; social activists launch community-based responses to violence and gang suppression; ongoing welfare and youth agency programs not incorporated into the new comprehensive program renew or alter their character to maintain their positions; and political and philanthropic initiatives call out for attention and support. Essentially, this is the disaggregation problem once again, but this time with the task of separating out the effects of other efforts not under the control of the new program, and with little or no data collection to assess the confounds inherent in ongoing extra program activities.

Finally, in this discouraging list of problems, is that equivocal or negative results of large-scale intervention programs seldom lead to altered future programming. Such results more commonly lead to withdrawal of financial support, discouragement and apathy, and a search for “better ways” to spend our money and expend our energy. However, I can cite two prominent and contrasting exceptions to this pattern. The first is the effort of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) in the U.S. Department of Justice to follow prematurely on the “Spergel Model” to develop variations in comprehensive gang programming. Here, the determination of OJJDP to forge ahead despite equivocal outcomes (including poor implementation as well as mixed results) has led to comprehensive programming as more of a social movement than a demonstrated successful initiative (Decker and Curry, 2003; Fearn, Decker, and Curry, 2006; OJJDP, 2010).

The other, far more encouraging exception is provided by the Gang Resistance, Education, and Training Project (G.R.E.A.T.). As described by Esbensen, Osgood, Taylor, Peterson, and Freng (2001), this gang prevention program, over 4 years of assessment, yielded slightly positive effects on intermediate outcomes but no effects on gang and criminal outcomes. However, as noted elsewhere (Klein and Maxson, 2006, Ch. 3), the result was that the outcome data were fed back to the program managers. These managers in turn produced a modified program that was in turn introduced into a large number of communities to test the effectiveness of the data-based new approach. Only tentative, first-year results have been reported, but the willingness of the research evaluators and the program managers to forge this new effort deserves special attention.

### **Square Wheels and Scholarly Intervention**

Given all the foregoing discussion, it might seem surprising that I describe an effort by an informal consortium of criminologists to frame public policy in yet another large, comprehensive gang control program. I am one of a dozen experienced academic gang scholars and program evaluators recruited by the program's original director to help frame the program model and provide guidance in its evaluation.

Currently entering its third year of an anticipated 5 years, the program is designed to engage literally thousands of gang-prone youth and active street gang members in a three-pronged approach. The first is the prevention of gang activity by youth assessed as most at risk of joining gangs. The second is case management of known gang members aged 14 to 24 years to reduce their gang activity. The third is crisis intervention in gang confrontations, especially those reaching serious levels of violence. The program is run by the city with contracted services from private agencies. Additionally, there is a 5-year, heavily funded evaluation contracted to an independent, nationally respected corporation.

The independent group of scholars has been involved significantly in several of these areas. First they helped to develop the request for proposals (RFPs) for the prevention program, including the development of a gang-joining risk instrument to be used by the agencies to select prevention clients. Second, they helped to frame the RFP for the intervention program, including both case management and crisis intervention. However, although the intervention agencies were funded, it was not until the end of the second program year that the gang scholars were asked to devise a system for selecting case management clients from the huge pool of available gang members. Third, they were asked to frame the evaluation RFP, were involved in selecting the evaluation contract awardee, and have served as research advisors to the evaluation.

After 2 years, where does the program stand? There is now an agreed-on prevention model being applied to the youth most at risk of gang joining as assessed by the gang scholars' risk-assessment tool. Thousands of appropriate clients have been located. By way of contrast,

no case management model is available for actual gang member selection and intervention, although new efforts in this direction are being mounted. The crisis intervention component is being implemented, but it has no input from the group of scholars. Finally, the model for the overall program evaluation has been under intense scrutiny by the group of gang scholars as well as by the city council and city controller. It has been delayed by the slow program development and by serious disputes about its design and data collection commitments. It is a work in progress.

As the reader may surmise, the program has been subject to many of the lost issues and other problems elucidated previously in this essay. The truly unique aspect is its early acceptance of the experience of the group of scholars. The use, indeed the value, of these people, might be in showing what data-based intrusion can accomplish. That, in any case, is what keeps these scholars involved despite the frustrations of policy involvement. I will mention just four issues that have been paramount to them in maintaining their activity. All I ask of the reader is to view these comments as relating to the use of criminologists in public policy, not as to the character of the program emanating from that policy.

Perhaps the most contentious issue raised between the group of scholars on the one hand and the program managers and contracted evaluators on the other was (and is) the development of control or comparison clients, gangs, and/or areas. The program sites were selected as the “worst” in the city, thus reducing the chances of random assignment to comparison and service areas. Program directors emphasized the immorality and political sensitivity of “denial of service” to control youth, gangs, or areas. Evaluators stressed the “impossible costs” of including control or comparison youth, as well as the limitations seemingly imposed by human consent requirements. The group of scholars is still pursuing this issue by offering alternative approaches for a comparative design; the jury is out.

Within the program administration, a series of obstacles (some temporary and some not) has emerged. These obstacles include changes in leadership and conceptual focus for the program models, absence of gang expertise in the administrative staff, reliance on non-gang-related standard operating procedures, and unfamiliarity with the major complexity of comprehensive programming. All this, slowly, is being surmounted as the third program year is approaching.

Third in this list is the built-in resistance to new service models and the requirements of the evaluators. Prevention service providers have slowly but steadily accepted the new necessities; the case management and crisis workers—generally self-labeled as “gang interventionists”—have proven far more resistant at the same time as program management has seemed somewhat cowed by the vehemence of this resistance. At this writing, however, there are signs of positive change and some accommodations. The group of scholars, until recently, has been held at arms’ length from that battle.

Finally, as a corollary of the preceding changes, is the set of decisions about how to select clients for the prevention component and those for the case management or intervention component. Here, the group of scholars has been involved heavily in establishing the criteria

for selecting prevention clients. And after 2 years, the first serious attempt to involve the scholars similarly in case management client selection has been initiated. The outcome and its acceptance by service providers is unclear, but the effort is now underway.

In sum, this new and huge project (up to \$100,000,000 over 5 years) shows many characteristics of past comprehensive approaches of dubious value (keep in mind the increased violence reported for the One Vision Program by Wilson and Chermak, 2011). It could be another square wheel. However, intrusion of the group of scholars has had a considerable positive impact on program models and evaluation design. Has this impact been enough? Probably not, is my guess. Can this be improved? Probably so, is also my guess. But as noted, it is all a work in progress, an interesting and occasionally exciting exercise in criminology and public policy.

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