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**Center for Research on School Safety, School Climate
and Classroom Management**

Georgia State University

The Gang Problem

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In the last 25 years there has been a growth of youth gang violence and a proliferation of youth gangs into smaller cities and rural areas. During this time, the number of gang members has increased 7 times and the number of youth gangs has increased 10 times. The latest National Gang Youth Survey indicates that there are currently 800,000 gang members active in over 3,000 gangs. Every police department and most other agencies have someone who is involved in gang prevention or control.

What is a Gang?

Miller (1992) defines a “**youth gang**” as a self-formed association with peers with identifiable leadership and internal organization, who may have a common identifying sign, symbol, or name, and who individually or collectively in engage illegal activity which creates an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. The typical age of gang members ranges from 14 to 26 years of age; however gang members have been seen as young as 8 years of age and as old as 40 or 50. Adolescents join gangs for a variety of reasons, including excitement, a sense of belonging, need for attention or status, companionship, intimidation, peer pressure, financial gain, protection and a failure to understand what being in a gang really means.

What are the risk factors for gang involvement?

Some of the risk factors associated with gang involvement include: living in an area with a high level of gang activity, lack of a positive support system at home, lack of alternative

activities such as community youth programs, moving from one place to another several times in a short period of time, and low self-esteem and/or a sense of hopelessness about the future.

Prevention and Intervention Programs

Prevention programs typically focus on preventing youths from joining gangs and on interrupting gang formation. Intervention programs focus on reducing the criminal activity of gangs by coaxing adolescents away from gang membership. Most often, programs incorporate both prevention and intervention components and may include school-based programs, community-based programs, and clubs or after-school programs. Some of the strategies utilized in these programs include prevention curriculum and instruction, behavior modification interventions, counseling or therapeutic interventions,

mentoring, referral to outside agencies, services and education to families, intervention to classroom and school environment.

Prevention and intervention programs have proven effective in reducing delinquent behavior, reducing drug abuse, and minimizing gang affiliation. In addition, some effects on adolescents' attitudes and gang resistance have been reported. Comprehensive and coordinated approaches that combine several program elements such as prevention, intervention, and community involvement may be more effective in dealing with the youth gang problem than a one-dimensional approach.

References

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