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Gang Prevention Best Practices

Gangs and hybrid gangs present a serious challenge to justice and community safety in the Capital Region. Identifying effective prevention and intervention methods are key to diminishing youth delinquency and gang involvement. Youth are especially susceptible to becoming gang-involved. Therefore, it is of extreme importance to target this age group in preventive measures and programs.

Scope of the Problem

Gangs can have serious negative effects in their local communities. This also extends to hybrid or “starter” gangs. Hybrid gangs are distinct in that they lack formal structures and easily form and disband. Hybrid gangs are unlike other gangs that often exist in larger cities and are more prevalent in smaller sized cities, such as Schenectady. The Schenectady area has faced high rates of juvenile delinquency, gang activity, gun violence, crime, and robberies (DCJS 2015). This is unsurprising when considering the levels of gang activity in Schenectady. Gang members tend to be disproportionately involved in the justice system. Gangs members are more than twice as likely commit serious and violent crimes than non-gang members (Howell 1998). Therefore, gang activity precipitates higher levels of crime. It is critical that local communities invest in youth gang prevention initiatives in order to diminish levels of crime and delinquency.

The major risk factor domains that influence youth behaviors include: family, school, peer group, individual characteristics, and community. Issues related to these five factors may increase the likelihood of a youth’s gang involvement and delinquent behavior. Experts suggest that “Gang membership is not a product of several specific risk factors, but the result of the accumulation of many varied kinds of risk factors” (Howell 2010). Therefore, youth that have problems

pertaining to more risk factor are at an increased risk of becoming gang-involved.

Gang prevention may take various forms due to the multitude of risk factors that influence gang involvement. Programs that instill stronger family values, greater academic work ethic, reasoning skills, temperament control, and prosocial behaviors are effective in combatting youth gang involvement because they address the risk factor domains that influence youth behavior and may increase the risk of youth becoming gang-involved.

It is critical to employ preventative measures for at-risk young men and women. Preventative programs that target at-risk youth are especially important because they comprise the largest potential gang member population. In Schenectady County, there are limited financial resources for implementing extensive gang prevention programs. However, an overwhelming amount of scholarly sources claim that evidence-based gang prevention programs “will greatly reduce crime and save much more than they cost when compared to the avoided law enforcement and social welfare expenditures” (Lipsey et al. 2010). Evidence-based programs are programs that have been rigorously tested under scientific scrutiny and have been proven to be both effective and replicable. Although a healthy skepticism of evidence-based programs exists, these programs are the most effective, not only regarding positive results, but also when considering cost-effectiveness.

Model Programs

In order to prevent youth delinquency, gang-involvement, and violence it is imperative to provide youth with the tools to regulate their anger, peacefully resolve conflicts, develop refusal skills, among other behavioral skills. These model programs are all evidence based and focus largely on parent/family-based strategies, school-based strategies, social-cognitive strategies, mentoring strategies, and community-based strategies. The following programs differ in levels of design, strategies, results, timeframe, and costs. The chart below analyzes model programs in the previously listed criteria.

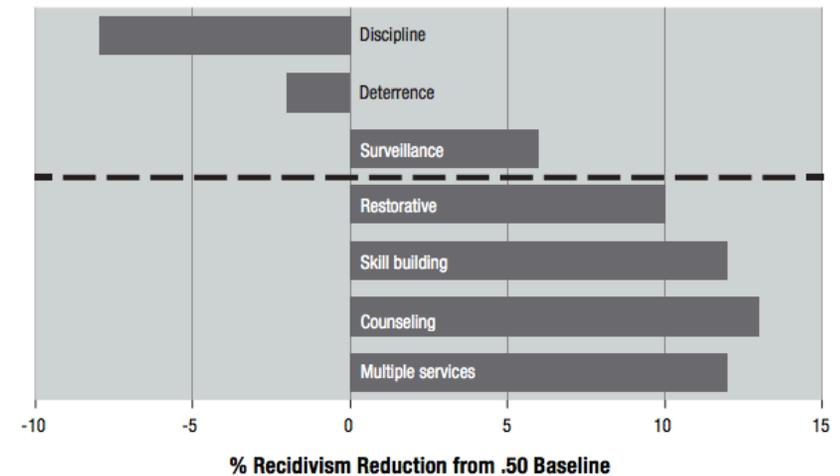
Program	Strategy	Design	Timeframe	Costs/ Funding	Results
Peaceful Alternatives to Tough Situations (PATTS) -Proven to be effective in Glens Falls, NY	School-based	This is a school-based aggression management program aimed at teaching youth cognitive skills, peer refusal skills, appropriate conflict resolution skills, identification and verbalization of emotions, recognition of anger cues, calming techniques, and forgiveness to aggressive youth (Williams, Johnson, Bott 2008).	9 weekly, 1 hour sessions	-\$1200 for all of the programmatic materials -Federal funding available	-Decreased physical assaults and psychological aggression -Increased willingness to forgive -Reduction in offenses (school suspensions, new criminal offenses)
Families & Schools Together (FAST) -Proven to be effective in Philadelphia, PA	Parent/family-based & school-based	FAST is a prevention and early intervention program that helps children succeed by empowering parents, connecting families, improving the school climate and strengthening community engagement (FAST).	Middle school students meet for 10 weeks (8 weeks for high schoolers) followed by 2 years of monthly FAST meetings	-Funding through state, federal (Title I grants), and municipal channels available	-Decreased school dropout rates -Family relationships strengthened -Decreased rates of youth delinquency -Children engage in more prosocial behaviors -Fewer emotional symptoms and better conduct
Reasoning and Rehabilitation (R&R) -Internationally recognized and accredited -Successful in Canada and the U.K.	Social-Cognitive	The R&R program incorporates cognitive and social teachings that help participants develop improved prosocial skills. This is of among one of the most studied programs aimed at offenders and has been proved efficacious when program fidelity is sufficient (CCC).	-35 lessons -2 hours sessions, administered twice or once a week (preferably twice)	-\$469.64 in Canadian dollar equivalent funds per kit -“Cost per participant is low, about \$300... coupled with the low cost of the program, produce attractive... economic bottom lines of about \$2,400 in net taxpayer-only benefits per participant” (CCC)	-Reduced rates of recidivism -Decreased rates of drug use/abuse -Greater success in school -Less risky sexual behavior -Promotes more positive thinking and behaviors
Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) -Chapter in the Capital Region	Community-based & Mentoring	BBBS is a mentoring and community-based program that targets 6-18 year olds. BBBS develops positive relationships that have a direct and lasting effect on the lives of young people (BBSCR).	Over the course of a few years, child dependent	-Funding available through public donations to BBBS -No direct programmatic costs (volunteer based)	-Greater academic confidence -Strengthened family relationships -Less likely to use drugs -Less likely to be truant -Less likely to resort to physical violence

Therapeutic Philosophies Vs. Control Treatment Philosophies

All of the programs modeled are encompassed by therapeutic philosophies regarding juvenile justice. Therapeutic philosophies focus on encouraging positive individual behaviors and personal development. Examples of therapeutic programmatic approaches would extend to restorative (mediation), skill building (social-cognitive), counseling (mentoring), and multiple services approach (case management) (Lipsey 2010). Control treatment philosophies in contrast focus on suppressing delinquent behavior through discipline, deterrence, and surveillance. Evidence suggests therapeutic methods are significantly more successful in reducing recidivism than controlling methods. Currently, the Center for Juvenile Justice in Schenectady employs both programmatic philosophies. However, in light of this evidence, in order to optimize programmatic success to combat recidivism, it would be more beneficial to implement therapeutic programs and as opposed to controlling or punitive programs.

Therapeutic Programs More Successful

Figure 1. Mean recidivism effects for the program categories representing control and therapeutic philosophies



Recommendations

Evidence-Based Programs

Many organizations involved in juvenile justice are apprehensive to embrace evidence based programs. There is a fear that adopting evidence based programs will siphon their financial resources from other presumably effective and untested programs. Another source of skepticism is that organizations may perceive evidence based programs to be tailored to the specific and unique population that they are serving (Lipsey et al. 2010). However, as most research asserts, evidence based programs are both cost effective and yields the most

Reducing Reliance on Incarceration

It is evident that incarceration and punitive programs have little efficacy and positive results with juvenile youth (Lipsey et al. 2010). Not only is incarceration egregiously costly, they also have extreme negative effects on youth. Instead of relying on overly punitive methods to address juvenile justice, it would be more rehabilitative to pursue programs that aim to encourage more positive behaviors and thinking. Investing in rehabilitation instead of incarceration would not only be more cost effective but more effective in deterring delinquency.

Build Stronger Coalitions with Community Partners

Building strong collaborative networks with other community partners that are involved in the juvenile justice system would increase better practices. Forming these relationships would allow for cross collaboration to determine the most effective programs. A coalition of partners would also deepen understanding of the specific and unique obstacles facing at-risk youth in the shared communities.

Glossary of Terms

Hybrid Gangs: Gangs that may form and disband easily but lack definitive hierarchies and structures.

Social-Cognitive: Social-cognitive programs focus on building prosocial behaviors.

Risk Factor Domains:

Family: Little parental supervision, weak family bonds, child abuse, neglect, home/ family transitions, family structure (single parent household)

School: Low levels of academic achievement, “school climate”, commitment and involvement in school, poor student-teacher relations, larger student-teacher ratios, high rates of school sanctions, poor academic quality, truancy, feeling unsafe in school environment

Peer Group: Delinquent/antisocial/aggressive peers, rejected by peers

Individual Characteristics: Antisocial behavior, alcohol and drug use, mental health problems, victimization, negative life events

Community: Higher levels of criminal activity, number of youth involved in criminal behavior, availability of drugs and firearms, levels of neighborhood attachment (or sense of belonging), economic conditions of neighborhoods

Evidence-Based Programs: Programs that have been rigorously tested under scientific scrutiny and have been proven to be both effective and replicable.

Key Organizations

- **Boys and Girls Club:**

The Boys and Girls Club is a non-profit that has sites nationwide. Their mission as an organization is to help young boys and girls reach their full potential. The Boys and Girls Club work closely with juvenile justice systems to implement programs to deter youth delinquency and negative behaviors. The after-school programs run at the Boys and Girls Club provide a much needed outlet for many boys and girls to excel in a safe and positive environment.

- **Department of Social Services:**

The Department of Social Services is a main source of funding for the implementation of prevention programs for juvenile justice service providers.

- **Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention:**

“OJJDP provides national leadership, coordination, and resources to prevent and respond to juvenile delinquency and victimization. OJJDP supports states and communities in their efforts to develop and implement effective and coordinated prevention and intervention programs and to improve the juvenile justice system so that it protects public safety, holds justice-involved youth appropriately accountable, and provides treatment and rehabilitative services tailored to the needs of juveniles and their families” (OJJDP).

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Community Policy Institute

The Community Policy Institute builds capacity surrounding policy within the Capital Region. We provide researched-based policy information to our community partners who use the information to modify best practices and advocate for policies that will further the development and effectiveness of direct community engagement.

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