

CAUSES AND CORRELATES OF GANG MEMBERSHIP, GANG PREVENTION PROGRAMS, AND REENTRY PROGRAMS

Dr. Eric L. Jensen, Dr. Melanie Neuilly and Amy Nivette, University of Idaho
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Researchers at the University of Idaho conducted an in-depth examination of the current literature to identify:

1. social and family dynamics that lend themselves to gang behavior;
2. evidence-based programs that positively affect these dynamics and prevent gang behavior; and
3. successful reentry practices for youth gang members after criminal justice intervention.

Correlates of Gang Membership

A recent review of factors associated with joining a youth gang using a meta-analysis of 20 academically rigorous studies identified a handful of risk factors that received consistent support across studies including externalizing behaviors (i.e. aggression, delinquency and hyperactivity), rejection of conventional beliefs, negative life events, low parental supervision with poor monitoring of their activities, and friends who engage in deviant behavior (Klein and Maxson 2006). Other factors such as early dating and drinking, absence of one parent, low achievement in school, and severe poverty and resource deprivation were also identified as a risk in one or more individual studies but not in the meta-analysis (Table 1). All studies that examine cumulative risk factors concluded that the risk of joining a gang increases as risk factors cumulate.

Prevention Programs

No programs that specifically targeted gang behavior were effective at reducing gang violence or membership including *Gang Resistance Education and Training* (G.R.E.A.T.). However, the Child Social Skills Management Practices Training program did reduce the likelihood of joining a gang. Given the social and family dynamics that put youth at risk for gang membership, programs that are effective in reducing delinquent behavior are appropriate choices for preventing gang behavior (Table 1).

Reentry Programs

Relatively few empirical evaluations of reentry programs were found in the research literature and none specifically targeted gang behavior. However, a few programs were effective at reducing recidivism in general and may indirectly reduce future gang behavior in youth including serious and violent offender reentry initiatives (North Dakota), therapeutic communities with aftercare, vocational and work programs, and halfway house programs.

Risk Factors Specific to Hispanic/Latino Youth

- Educational frustration
- Low educational achievement of parents
- Relying on peers more than school for self-esteem
- Poor maternal linguistic acculturation
- Lower level of family well-being

Gang members report that their primary reason for joining a gang is to achieve a sense of territory and belonging, protection, money, respect or friends.

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Table 1. Social and family dynamics common to youth who enter a gang lifestyle and evidence-based prevention programs.

Correlates of Gang Membership	Type of Factor				
	Individual	Family	Peers	School	Community
<i>With Considerable Research Support^a</i>	Aggressiveness, reactivity, impulsivity Delinquent beliefs Negative life events	Low parental supervision Poor monitoring of youth activities	Friends who engage in deviant behavior	None	None
<i>With Lesser Research Support^b</i>	Having tried marijuana Self-reported violence Poor refusal skills Early dating and drinking Depressive symptoms Hyperactivity	Parental attitudes favorable toward violence Sibling antisocial behavior Record of abuse Absence of one parent Lower educational level of parent Income below poverty level Poor family management skills Low parental attachment to son	Early dating and sexual activity	Low attachment or commitment to school and teachers Labeled as bad or disturbed by teachers Learning disabled Low achievement in school Low expectations from parents and self	Severe poverty and resource deprivation Deteriorated physical environments Low attachment to neighborhood Lack of trust among neighbors Drug use (accessibility or perception) Many youth in the neighborhood in trouble
Evidence-Based Delinquency Prevention Programs	Preschool intellectual enrichment (Head Start) Child social skills and parent management practices training	Home visiting parental education Functional Family Therapy Multisystemic Therapy	None	Seattle Social Development Project Behavior modification and cognitive skills training	None

^a Considerable Research Support - Factors that have received consistent support from multiple research studies and are identified as statistically significant in Klein and Maxson's 2006 meta-analysis.

^b Lesser Research Support - Factors noted by one or more studies but not identified as statistically significant in Klein and Maxson's 2006 meta-analysis.