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## The Undercurrents of Gangs

by Cheryl Asmus, Ph.D., Coordinator,  
Family and Youth Institute

Resiliency research consistently shows that one of the most powerful factors that help people survive and bounce back from stress, risk and adversity is connectedness. Connectedness has declined in the past decades as the American culture has changed from a rural society to a fast-paced, urban, transient one. Because of these changes, some youth who feel disconnected from society, schools and their families, turn to a gang as the group they identify with and share a connection. Yet, this characteristic of connectedness can increase within our communities, schools and families. Families should ask themselves what they can do in their day-to-day interactions to meet this crucial developmental need and schools should assess what changes they can make so more students feel they can become closer to people at school and an accepted part of the school, outside of a gang.

This issue of the *Briefs* looks at gangs from several perspectives. One perspective comes from a former gang member. In his own words, Sheldon Long describes how he got into the life of a gangster and what that life was like. He tells how he tried unsuccessfully to connect and

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## *b r i e f s*

A Former Gang

Member

Describes His

Experience

*The following interview with Sheldon Long, conducted by Margaret Graham, includes excerpts of exact text from the interview.*

My family had a strong background. And they pretty much had a good bringing up of themselves. But as far as the guidance that was there, and the support that was there, it was more for my parents' relationships and themselves. That's where the problems occurred. I would do things like sneak out the window, go stay at a friend's house, do things like take my mom's car when she left and drive it to school for lunch and stuff like that to show off with the kids.

Instead of correcting it inside the home, I was sent to stay with an uncle. I straightened out my grades and focused more on school and wrestling instead of mischief. I was going to state tournaments, staying eligible to compete, keeping my grades above 2.0.

*Unbeknownst to Sheldon, his uncle was involved in mischief of his own. Sheldon was arrested for possessing a stolen vehicle when he was driving a stolen car that his uncle loaned him.*

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## Young Offenders: The Changing Face of Gang Members in Prison

*by Ronald A. Zenisky, Intelligence Coordinator, Colorado Department of Corrections*

For centuries, prisons have existed as a place to safely house the criminal offender away from free society. While attitudes, method and practice with regard to the rehabilitation and incarceration of convicted felons have changed dramatically over the years, one thing remains fairly constant: gangs still exist behind prison walls.

Be it Jesse James, the Mafioso, Crips or Bloods, prisons are fertile ground for the cultivation of gangs and new gang members. While some prison gangs formed as a means of protection or for some other common cause, others exist for the sole purpose of extortion and preying upon the weaker offender. Drugs, sex, gambling, and even execution behind the walls, all become good sources of income, power and control for the incarcerated gang member.

While older and wiser convicts can still be still found within today's penal system, they are being replaced by a younger and much more violent offender. These youngsters comprise what appears to be the bulk of the identified gang population housed behind prison walls today. They are the street kids evolved into the most hardened of criminals. They age with little or no self-esteem, have loosely strung moral conviction, and often fail to develop any conscience or feelings of remorse. They are raised in an environment of little or nothing, often existing in single-parent homes riddled with substance, physical and/or sexual abuse. They are raised in an increasingly ambivalent society that glorifies the dollar and extols the necessity of instantaneous self-gratification.

Their world can best be described as a kind of "I'll get mine no matter what" existence where rules or responsibility do not exist, a place where anything and everything goes...violence, rape, robbery, kidnapping, drug related homicide, or even hate-crime. All across our nation, from large cities to small rural townships, the violent crime has found its way to court dockets everywhere at an alarming rate, all but replacing non-violent criminal activity!

The older convict usually accepts the fact he has committed a crime and will consequently ask for very little else other than the opportunity to just do his time. On the other hand, the younger inmate will expect or even demand that everything, including respect, be handed to him freely simply because he (or she), has broken the law and has ended up in prison.

The young gang member often wears "an invisible badge of cowardice" that to him becomes a symbol of stature, status and courage. In his eyes, it somehow proves him to be a person of importance and worth in the eyes of others in his criminal world, and he'll often think this aura of arrogance can make him an invincible entity. It is this kind of attitude the young felon carries with him when he disappears behind the walls, and anticipating his life behind bars will be just like it was when he was out on the streets and free.

Prison is a place where the youthful gang member will invariably resort to either violence or litigation in an attempt to prove himself. He will vehemently challenge anything from being told "no" by those in authority, to something as simple as broken cookies on his dinner tray!

As today's society becomes more accepting of rips and tears in the moral fiber of what's right and wrong, I believe we become more callous and indifferent to the violent nature and frustration of the youthful gang offender. We must take the time to guide our youth, and to show them greed and hate will not enhance nor secure self worth. There is no constitutionally guaranteed right to respect in our society, it must be earned. The profile of gang members in prison is changing. We should become more pro-active in an attempt to aggressively combat the issues raised by the younger and more violent offender. If we choose not to become more positive and constructive in our approach, the youthful felon will continue to challenge and rebel against a system he feels has already let him down.

**The Undercurrents of Gangs** *continued from page 1*  
be part of his family on several occasions and ended up only connecting with fellow gang members. The next article by Ronald Zenisky, a long-time corrections administrator, describes how youth that end up in prison for gang crime come from families that may not have provided the values or sense of belonging that youth need. Elizabeth Garcia, a new teacher at a small urban school, remarks on how students in gangs are not connected to school and often drop out or are kicked out. She wonders if there is something the school could do to change this. Elizabeth Garner's statistical article uses crime data to illustrate that the type of crime committed by gangs today is different than those of yester-year. The gangs that started years ago, many of which still exist, tended to be involved in violent crime whereas gangs that start up now tend to be involved in non-violent crime. The rise in one type of crime and decrease in another is a social indication that our youth continue to feel disconnected from their families, schools, neighbors, communities and society.

Gangs can be defined as "a peer group of persons who participate in activities that are either harmful to themselves and/or others in society" (Howell 1997). Five criteria are commonly used to define gangs: formed organizational structure, identifiable leadership, identified with a territory, recurrent interaction, and engaging in serious or violent behavior (Howell 1997).

There are several basic human needs that are met through gang membership and are especially pertinent to the conflict and conflict resolution that exist around the gang issue: the needs for recognition, development, security, identity, bonding, and a target to project hate. Conflict resolution is a peaceful and mutually satisfactory way to end or significantly de-escalate a conflict. You can temporarily de-intensify a conflict through violence, war, by destroying your opponent, by surrender, or by deceiving your opponent. Yet, none of these are conflict resolution and none of these resolve the conflict.

The Realistic Group Conflict Theory was first formulated by Muzafer Sherif (1966 & Sherif et. al., 1988), a pioneer in the study of intergroup relations. The theory suggests that hostility between two groups results from real or perceived conflicting goals that generate intergroup competition. One of his most important findings around group conflict (gangs) is detailed in The Robbers Cave Experiment in 1966. The experiment describes intergroup conflict resulting from a battle over scarce resources, mediated by negative prejudices, stereotypes and dominance hierarchies.

Two groups of eleven year-old boys were sent to a remote summer camp in Robbers Cave State Park (Oklahoma). Once aware of their fragile co-existence, the two groups formed tribalistic bonds, and competed for

medals and attention. Verbal prejudice became apparent and spiraled downward to aggressive territorial violence. The groups had to be separated.

To solve this warfare, Sherif forced the groups to work together toward a goal that could only be achieved through the cooperation of both groups. The two groups' (gangs) intergroup hostility was replaced by intergroup friendship.

This theory of conflict resolution (Social Judgment Theory) was crucial to ending South Africa's brutal apartheid regime and its involvement in Angola's murderous civil war. Sherif's student, Don Beck, was a key behind-the-scenes player in this process and in advocating Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance model of geo-political regeneration. Law enforcement personnel have grasped that Sherif's insights are the hidden key to improving race relations, inner city crowding, and reforming violent gangs and prison gangs.

As members of families, schools, neighborhoods and communities, we need to be aware of the human need to belong or connect, and help make sure that our youth have a positive connection. We also need to be aware that helping youth work cooperatively toward a joint goal can not only defuse a conflict between groups, it may also result in friendship.

Reference: Howell, J.C. (1997, December). Youth Gangs, *Fact Sheet #12*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

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### **Former Gang Member** *continued from page 1*

Anyway, I end up in the gillium [*jail*]. Everyone around me was from different sets of gangsters at the jail. I was 16. My older brother had already been through the system, so I was known from him.

My duration in the gillium is when I actually ended up being quoted [*brought into a gang*] on East Side Tre Tre Gangsters. And that's a Denver gang that I ran with for 12 years, eventually earning my stripes to become an OG Rolln 30 gangster crip. I had this close friend named Dice. He was pretty much the one pushing me to get put on my set [*join up with this particular gang*]. One day he called me to the bathroom and that's pretty much where they initiated me. He made a joke that there was something on the mirror about me, come look at it. When I walked into the bathroom the lights went out and I was jumped on the set.

And then from that point on, whenever I had problems with the Inca Boys and the NSM and stuff like that, it was like if you mess with me, then this person's coming, this person's coming, it was an automatic bond that was established from me to them. And I did it initially because I didn't know how long I was going to be in there. My uncle hadn't come clean with me yet.

I got back out on the street, and my first thing was to get back home. My mother and my stepdad wouldn't let me come home. That friend I was telling you about that urged me to get quoted, Dice, him and I went to his mom's house.

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# Teaching on the Front Lines

by Elizabeth Garcia, Colorado Public School Teacher\*

When I started my first teaching job at the beginning of this school year, gangs were barely on my radar screen. I was amazed when Gangs 101 comprised a major portion of my on-site orientation at my new school. Amid the obvious topics (welcome, tour of the school, expectations, schedules, and more) lurked tips on how to spot gang activity and how to handle it. The warnings to report *anything* suspicious were hard to absorb – I was so shocked to hear the descriptions of gang activity in this little town that I had identified as one of the ideal sites for beginning my teaching career.

Some of the information that I learned that day included gang colors (baby blue and bright red), hand gestures of the claimed gang, gang whistles, gang language, gang symbols that are generated by either “tagging” or tattoos, and gang behavior.

Evidence of gangs greeted me on my first day of teaching, and it drove home a point that I have observed over and over since that day: gang members are more aligned with one another than they are with the school. In fact, I think one of the few reasons they attend school is to see fellow gang members.

When students reported to school on that first day, they piled into the gym for an assembly. The freshmen had just walked in for their welcome from the sophomores through seniors and a fight broke out at the top of the bleachers. As the offenders were escorted out, students boo-ed in disgust. Although this fight wasn’t gang-related, the two students who fought did claim gang membership. Rumors flew around the school, labeling it the first gang fight of the year.

On that very same day, I quickly began to recognize the colors that the different gangs wore. They stood out in the crowd, as they sat with their “homeboys,” and I could see a group of red (the Northsiders; aka. Nortenos) and a group of light blue (the Southsiders; aka. Surenos). The students wearing their colors did not stand or clap when their school class was recognized, nor did they cheer. I watched as all of the other students cheered, and in a way, I felt sad for the gang members as they shared no emotion or excitement that the other students expressed.

As the year progressed, I experienced a mix of emotions. Initially, I was intimidated by the gang members – especially those who wore light blue. In the beginning, I was also disgusted that anyone would want to be involved in a gang. I could not understand the rationale behind this behavior. I thought it was stupid and that students were only getting involved to have some sort of status. Wow – how my thinking changed during the semester! I began to realize that the students who

were involved in gangs were involved for reasons much bigger than I could ever understand. I really couldn’t make an assessment across-the-board on the types of homes they came from because it seemed as if many of my students (gang members and non-gang members alike) came from broken homes or lived with people other than their parents. The one thing that I did notice was that they looked at each other as family and that they call each other “homey,” “homeboy,” “foo,” and “my dog.” They told me that they take care of each other like family because they grew up together and they need to protect one another. The gang members also enjoy talking about who has been “jumped in” and “jumped out” of the gang and the different confrontations they have had with members of the opposition.

I can remember being scared during the first weeks of school because I had never been exposed to gangs and gang behavior before – it was fear of the unknown. Now I have a different kind of fear. I know I can have a positive professional relationship with these students, but I still worry about my safety and any confrontations I may run into in the future. Although school administrators assure me that our gang population and activity are under control, I still worry. If I upset somebody too much, the student (and maybe his homeboys) may retaliate against me or my family. When the colors started to fade as gang members began to withdraw by request or drop out during the school year, I actually felt relieved.

Now I wonder how the school might have made a difference for those students. As a first-year teacher, I sometimes struggled just to get through the day, let alone other duties such as state-mandated assessments, parent-teacher conferences, and crises such as the time there was a threat of a drive-by shooting in front of the school.

While I would like to be part of the solution for the gang members in my school, I can only suggest a starting point. If schools are able to make a real-life connection with these students and show them that life has SO much to offer if you expose yourself to other people, groups, cultures, and organizations, perhaps these students can make a connection and would redirect their energy into something much more productive.

I’ve had the chance to talk to some of the gang members about their involvement. Many of them have told me that being in a gang is dumb, but they can’t seem to get away from the activity. They tell me it is like an addiction and that if you stay in, you will be okay, but if you choose to leave, there is retaliation. It is extremely hard to get out. I don’t know how gang members fare when they leave school but my thoughts and prayers go with them.

*\*The names of the school district and school are intentionally omitted.*

# Changes in the Profile of Gang Members\*

by Elizabeth Garner, Coordinator, County Information Services, Cooperative Extension, Colorado State University

In the past, most youth gangs have been associated with inner-city neighborhoods in large cities. According to a 2002 bulletin published by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the more recent escalation of gangs in smaller cities, towns, suburbs and rural communities has brought with it a changing demographic in gangs. These differences have important implications for responding to the challenges that gangs pose to our nation.

Using data from the 1996 and 1998 National Youth Gang Surveys, OJJDP found that there were significant differences between the characteristics of youth gangs depending on when gang problems started. In general, youth gangs develop in large cities before they develop in small cities. Nearly 75 percent of cities with population of 250,000 or more reported the beginning of gang problems prior to 1991 where 64 percent of the smallest jurisdictions (less than 10,000) reported gang problems developed during 1993-1996.

## **Age, gender and race/ethnicity**

Compared with gangs formed before 1991, those formed in later years tend to have younger members, a slightly larger proportion of females and a larger proportion of Caucasians and African American members. It will be interesting to see if these tendencies, especially age, still hold true when the gangs that started later have had a chance to age. In addition, more recently-formed gangs tend to be more ethnically and racially diverse. According to respondents, only 18 percent of the gangs in jurisdictions with formation prior to 1981 had a significant ethnic/racial mixture in contrast with 55 percent with formation during 91-92, 48 percent with 1993-94 onset, and 47 percent with 1995-96 formation.

## **Criminal Involvement**

In the OJJDP survey, agencies were asked to estimate how often firearms were used in assault crimes. Use of firearms by gang members in assault crimes was much less common (52 percent difference) in jurisdictions where gangs started later than in early onset jurisdictions. Later onset jurisdictions also had a smaller percent of gang member involvement in drug sales and distribution than early onset jurisdictions and were less involved with drug distribution than in drug sales. Gang members in earliest onset localities were likely to be involved in violent crimes (homicide, aggravated assault, robbery, and use of firearms as well as property crimes). In contrast, gang members of gangs that developed later were most likely to be involved in property crimes, except for motor vehicle theft.

What this bulletin, as well as other research, shows is that recently-formed gangs may not fit the stereotype of traditional gangs in big cities. They also may not follow the same traditional rules or methods of operation as their predecessors. Jurisdictions with relatively recent beginnings of gang activity need to assess their gang problem carefully and realize that they are not dealing with the same type of gang member or necessarily the same type of gang culture. Additionally, it will be important to assess how these characteristics change as the "new gangs" age. One of the most significant variables in analyzing crime is the age of the perpetrator. To access the full bulletin, use this website.

\*Source

Excerpted from "Modern-Day Youth Gangs", Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, June 2002.

<http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/ojjdp/191524.pdf>

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## **Former Gang Member** *continued from page 3*

Dice's mom, you know, she drank, and there was a lot of in and out in her home. There really wasn't any room for us, so we took to the street. We went to the older homeboys, and were fronted some drugs, and we would make our money by selling the drugs. We stayed in hotel rooms for weeks at a time, getting rid of a quarter of dope here and there.

At night we would make our money on the street. We pretty much raised ourselves, in that aspect, but none of that was teaching us how to be men. We were really teaching ourselves how to survive on the street.

We were able to make at least \$1000 a day. Then one day Dice was playing with a gun in our house, and he shot himself in the head and killed himself. He was 17 years old at that time, and I was 18, I believe.

Getting involved in these things, it's not just you being on that gang and you walk away by yourself. You actually have to function, communicate, and report to do things within these gangs, to remain a part of it. If you don't, there's things that they call "violations." That's when you're put in a circle and they kick the crap out of you until you get it right. Hopefully, you fix whatever you were being corrected for. Whether it be some work you were told to put in, whether it be you showing your face around the hood, whether it be you being a bawler to the hood and not getting back to what you're supposed to.

I'm never going say that you don't end up loving your gang members. You end up generating a strong bond, so you end up feeling like that's where you belong. Watching their pain everyday, you get close to them. You and this person are waking up at a drug house with gang activity, trying to watch each other's backs. You end up developing a love. But what happens is, you get older.

Through the years I have 35 homeboys that I can get you names and birthdates that died during the time I was put on through the time I stepped off. And now as you

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**Former Gang Member** *continued from page 5*

grow up and you get further away from it, you see these people's kids are here. A homie's son is nine or ten years old and they're doing life in the penitentiary and this kid is almost a gang member himself now. Stuff like that helps you to change.

What actually helped me to step off was controversy that I didn't stand for, a murder had taken place, and a close friend of mine was accused of the murder. He ended up being convicted and doing life plus 20 years for it. We all pretty much broke up because of it. The betrayal and backstabbing that went on during this case made me realize that the ties I had with the gang were false.

What I did was find myself a job and kept myself there. Every shift that was there, I worked it. And pretty soon I removed myself from temptation. That was the first step. The second step was to find myself something to do to keep me from going back to that, and a way to support myself without the street hustle. You have to teach yourself to wait every two weeks for a paycheck. You have to teach yourself to get up and go to work and do the things you've got to do, you know – the work etiquette.

When you ask how gangs can be prevented, it's almost like you have to take the aspirin before the headache. I mean that this problem, especially when it has to do with gangs and it has to do with a child, it's hard to address it and control it once the beginning stages have passed.

I'm in the process of trying to do just that. My thing would be a youth-league sports training and development camp. Everything that has to do with being in a gang in Denver, I've been there, done that. My past consists of a police background that's almost 20 pages long, and that's in small print. And that's what my past is, but from that I would like to be able to give back. I want to be able to make a difference. The things I can fix by my testimony.

I am now 30 years old, and I still suffer repercussions from my past. However, I've stayed consistent and changed my life. My two sons are a big part of that. I've built a career in the collections field that I've held for nine years to support them. I maintain a strong, loving household in correction of my own upbringing. I coach both my sons' Little League football teams, and I've done so for the past four years. I also serve as a board member for our club.

Not many people really understand where I've come from or what I've been through. I've survived a lot. I've literally been spared. I've been shot three times. I've been stabbed. It's such a thin line between being alive and making it and staying out of the penitentiary and making it. The thing is to reach out and grab these kids and entice them in a different way.

*Sheldon Long is currently networking to develop a youth camp. He welcomes ideas at 303-537-7592. He is also available as a speaker to share his story with young people.*