

Acknowledgments to the OVC Research Board Grant

ADDRESSING YOUTH GANG INVOLVEMENT THROUGH RECREATION PROGRAMS

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GANGS IN THE U.S.

Gang activity has increased sharply in the United States (Chesney-Lind, 2013).

Youth gang membership has been a persistent problem (Simon et al., 2013).

2002–2010: the number of gangs has grown—an increase of 35% (Howell, 2013).

In many jurisdictions gangs account for more than half of violent crimes (Simon et al., 2013).

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CRIME AND GANGS IN CHICAGO

Sharp increase in homicides in 2016
4,331 shooting victims with 762 murders in 2016
An average of 3 people were killed each day in 2016
More homicides than LA and NY combined
Violent crime largely being committed by repeat gang offenders with illegal guns

(Chicago Police Department, 2016).

'Chi-Raq' the movie doesn't live up to real life in 'Chiraq'; message aimed directly at gangbangers

(Chicago Tribune, 2015).

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YOUTH IN GANGS

The most common age for youth to join a gang is between 13-15.
 Youth in gangs are more likely to:

- Abuse drugs and alcohol
- Engage in violent and high-risk sexual behaviors
- Experience long-term health and social consequences

Early prevention efforts show promising results. These efforts should be informed by understanding both risk and protective factors

(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016).

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PREVENTION & INTERVENTION

Traditional approach – emphasis on policing;
 New initiatives – collaborations between schools, communities, and public health departments

(National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention, 2015).

Recreation programs:

- Absent from the discourse on gang prevention.
- Provide safe spaces and positive activities.
- Serve as a counterbalance to crime and deviance.
- Evaluations of their benefits and management guidelines are still lacking.

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RESEARCH PURPOSE

To examine the roles of recreation programs in addressing youth's gang involvement.

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THIS STUDY

Data Collection: 39 in-depth, semi-structured interviews; 33 face-to-face and 6 phone interviews lasting 1-1.5 hours.

Participants: Former gang members, recreation practitioners; out of 28 practitioners, 20 former gang members.

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PARTICIPANTS

| | Former gang members | Practitioners |
|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------|
| Gender | | |
| Men | 18 | 24 |
| Women | 12 | 4 |
| Race/Ethnicity | | |
| African American | 8 | 7 |
| Latin American | 20 | 16 |
| White | 1 | 1 |
| Unidentified | 1 | 4 |
| Age | | |
| 20s | 9 | 5 |
| 30s | 9 | 6 |
| 40s | 9 | 10 |
| 50s and over | 2 | 3 |
| Unidentified | 1 | 4 |

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RECRUITMENT

| Agency | Location |
|---|-----------------|
| Cure Violence (CeaseFire) | Chicago, IL |
| Center for Women in Transition | Champaign, IL |
| The City of Evanston Youth & Young Adult | Evanston, IL |
| New Life Community Church | Chicago, IL |
| Chicago Dream Center | Chicago, IL |
| Boys & Girls Club of America | Atlanta, GA |
| Team HOYAS Community Center | Durant, MS |
| Gang Prevention and Enforcement Unit, Police Department | Tempe, AZ |
| Youth Empowerment Support Services (YESS) Institute | Denver, CO |
| Stop the Violence Increase the Peace Foundation | Los Angeles, CA |
| Two Tenths Speed & Agility | Pittsburgh, PA |

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OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

1. Inadequate recreation resources as risk factors for joining gangs
2. Roles of recreation programs in reducing gang membership and violence
3. "Best practices" for recreation programs targeting gang-affiliated youth

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1. INADEQUATE RECREATION RESOURCES AS RISK FACTORS FOR JOINING GANGS

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INADEQUATE RECREATION RESOURCES AS RISK FACTORS

Parks as "combat zones"
 Unfortunately, where we grew up, we didn't have a real park. All the other parks are in other [gang] territories or turfs. ... People started getting killed there at the park and shootings started happening there. (Miguel)

Unaffordable recreation programs
 As we were really short on money, [my parents] couldn't put us in any summer camps ... I went to the park just to meet with the friends that were already on the wrong path instead of playing sports or whatever. (Fernando)

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INADEQUATE RECREATION RESOURCES AS RISK FACTORS

Bias against at-risk/troubled youth
In a lot of places, they don't want [troubled] youth in their facilities. ... [T]he youth are known to steal, to tag on the walls. ... So there is not too many opportunities for them ... doors are closed for them. (Peter)

Lack of resources for low-income at-risk youth
What can we do? Honestly, without places, associations or funding for kids, they have nothing. The only thing they have is what they learn on the street. ... [W]hen they go home you don't even know if they have food at home. (Fernando)

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INADEQUATE RECREATION RESOURCES AS RISK FACTORS

Recreational programs in low-income neighborhoods described as scarce, unaffordable, or unwelcoming to troubled youth

Parks in low income neighborhoods described as unsafe, poorly maintained, and infested with gangs

At-risk youth being left with no safe and constructive recreational opportunities

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2. ROLES OF RECREATION PROGRAMS IN REDUCING GANG MEMBERSHIP AND VIOLENCE

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ROLES OF RECREATION PROGRAMS

Positive role model(s) – mentorship
 “Our staff is caring adults that mentor them and provide inspiration and motivation to these youth.” (Andrew)

Prosocial relationships with peers
 “We brought guys from different gangs to play ball ... No violence ... We’re going to carry ourselves as men and professionals.” (Daniel)

Breaking racial stereotypes
 “When you’re on the field everybody’s the same color ... white, black, whatever it may be. That’s what sports does, it breaks down a lot of racial tension, stereotypes.” (Kevin)

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ROLES OF RECREATION PROGRAMS

Acquiring life skills
 “I’ve learned how to be more friendly and talk to people ... like a people’s skill that I’ve developed through the program.” (Agustina)

Diversion and keeping busy
 “My nephews were on the verge of getting caught up in the gang when my brother pulled them into another direction, sports ... They didn’t have time to gang bang.” (Dylan)

Safety
 “[Our programs] are safe havens for young people in distressed communities.” (Andrew)

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ROLES OF RECREATION PROGRAMS

Broadening horizons
 “I provide recreational opportunities that are stimulating, educational, and motivational alternatives.” (Ben)

Sense of empowerment, purpose, discipline
 “I do mentoring groups in our communities and I always say, ‘I come from the worst and I made it. So you can make it ... you can be anything you want to be.’” (Camila)

Self-transformation through self-expression
 “In group discussions I would express things that I had been through ... that has helped me a lot with coping.” (Agustina)

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3. "BEST PRACTICES" FOR RECREATION PROGRAMS TARGETING GANG-AFFILIATED YOUTH

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"BEST PRACTICES" FOR RECREATION PROGRAMS

Attractiveness
 "I think we need programs that attract youth" (Brandon).
 "Honestly, how I see it nowadays, the way to keep kids away from gangs is to have a lot of fun programs." (Milagros)

Affordability
 "Lots of people would participate, but the thing is lots of families can't afford it." (Regina)

Family involvement
 "We are working very closely with a family ... we are sitting down with the family working on a plan to keep that young kid off of the streets and engaged in our programs." (Andrew)

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"BEST PRACTICES" FOR RECREATION PROGRAMS

Stability and consistency
 "[Youth] have trust issues up to the sky when they come in ... But with love and consistency, talking and listening ... it breaks down their walls. Little by little, one chip at a time." (Daniella)

Supervision
 "We were paying [to use the facility] but the staff kicked our guys out. They said, "You could bring them in if you supervise them." ... So they're cool as long as I'm with them." (Peter)

Targeting
 "We aim to have about 85% to 90% of high risk youth. We have criteria for categorizing youth as medium, high, and low risk." (Santiago)

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Focus on attractive recreation activities that keep youth busy, expose to different things, provide with safe spaces, and divert energy into positive development.

Target the needs of specific communities.

Have free or heavily discounted programs that are welcoming to at-risk youth.

Bring residents of different neighborhoods / members of different gangs to recreate together.

Help youth build positive/prosocial relations with peers and expose them to positive peer role models.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

Combine recreation with individual counseling/mentoring

Help build social and occupational skills

Foster reappraisal, positive self-expression, mourning, empowerment, and informal support

Help break racial stereotypes

Be non-judgmental

Programs should be run by people who share the same background as the kids

Offer hope and consistency

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IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

“Best practices” can serve as a road map.

Cure Violence in Chicago
Former gang members as mentors and violence interrupters. Recreation activities with intervention counseling.

Chicago Dream Center
Curriculum combining educational and recreational strategies. Coping with psychological traumas and reaching reappraisals.

New Life Centers of Chicagoland
Recreation activities to take youth off the streets. Safe spaces and positive developmental tasks.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Recreation programs that possess the identified components are more likely to have positive impacts on targeted youth.

Recreation programs can play a critical role in reducing gang membership and violence, but additional research is needed to validate their impact.

Recreation practitioners need to continue to advocate for their integral involvement in new initiatives and community collaborations to address this critical societal issue.

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THANK YOU! QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS ARE VERY WELCOME

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