

Where Have all the Heroes Gone? Solving the Puzzle of Gang Violence in Our Communities and Schools

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a perspective on the pervasive problem of gang violence that continues to disrupt our communities throughout the United States. Gang violence robs families of safe neighborhoods and it exacerbates the school drop-out problem. The authors provide a perspective from both community and academic perspectives, providing the reader with essential vocabulary and vignettes to enrich understanding. Finally the authors propose a systems approach that engages individual community members from various constituencies to connect in ways that leverage their efforts to attack the root causes of gang violence. The authors characterized this boundary-spanning role as “connectors” and “heroes.”

Introduction

In 2008 along Blaine St. on the East side of San Antonio, a 15 year-old boy was gunned down in the middle of the street. One week later, gang members came back to shoot the boy's cousin. At the funeral home police had to be posted on street corners as others cruised in patrol cars. They noticed that some people were dressed in red; and many grieving faces had known gang ties. This scenario is current but not any different than scenarios that we have seen in our community during the past ten years. The following lecture is to show that not only is gang violence not new, it is growing and is pervasive within our communities, and we can combat it only when we connect with each other in courageous, heroic ways.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to make you more keenly aware of the on-going and worsening problem of violence in our communities and schools and to challenge the reader to become engaged as proactive “connectors” or “heroes” who can limit the viability of gangs, addressing the fundamental causes of decisions to join gangs. This article represents a collection of addresses written and presented to teachers, parents, administrators, and students over a period of years. The resounding call is for greater efforts by all parts of the community to connect with each other in new and unprecedented ways with a sense of urgency and caring – to demonstrate courage. The authors see this kind of creative and unreserved connecting at all levels, across all groups, as nothing less than heroic. These lectures are dedicated to the hero in each of us that reaches out a helping hand to address the fundamental causes of gang violence in our neighborhoods and schools.

The Problem

Being frightened, scared, and unwilling to look at the problem is how many community members react to gangs. The truth is they fear retaliation. Gangs are responsible for terrorizing our community; however, we often look the other way. Meanwhile, we hear daily accounts from news reporters who recount senseless acts of violence about drive-by-shootings. These acts result in ‘gunning down’ innocent people within the household or at the wrong house altogether.

Gangs are a serious problem to society, and we are all members of the society for which we live. Just take a look at the demographics. Where are the gangs living today? Many of them are living in our communities; in all parts of the city. Gangs are no longer an inner city problem, or an urban problem, or a rural problem. Gangs are everyone’s problem and they are everywhere. We, as members of our community, must take a stand and say, “Enough is enough!”

Graffiti is a major problem that is brought about by gang activity. Graffiti is used as a way for gangs to communicate and mark their territory or “turf”. Graffiti is very visible and can be seen everywhere; on fences, mailboxes, overpasses, storefronts, and on abandoned houses. Graffiti is usually the first sign that there is going to be a gang problem or violence in the area. What are we, as community members, doing about it?

After talking with many “gang bangers,” it becomes obvious that they are trying to rule their communities by setting up their territory and letting other “gang bangers” know that this is their territory and that they need to stay out. When asking a “gang banger” for the definition of a gang, they explain it as, a group of people who “bang,” by fighting or killing others, for different “colors” and they explain that they “have each others’ backs” regardless of what the case or situation may be. They tend to “hang” together reinforcing what they believe their views of life should be. As generations pass, the street gangs are becoming younger, more violent, and totally committed to the gang and gang lifestyle by participating in assault, manslaughter, drug-related crimes, arson, and drive-by shootings. Again, what are we, as community members, doing about it?

Another group of individuals are called “taggers” or “tagging crews.” These individuals go around crossing out graffiti in order to gain notoriety. This group may or may not be associated with a gang, but they choose slogans, names, and graphics in an attempt to create an

identity in the area. Many “gang bangers” dislike and do not associate with “taggers” because they feel that “taggers” are a nuisance. Most “tagger” crimes would be considered vandalism. Their targets are often highly visible benches, walls, freeways, and public transportation areas. Again, what are we, as community members, doing about it? Although law enforcement is doing their part, we as a community MUST step up and do our part.

The Cycle of Violence in Our Community

Every 28 minutes a violent crime is committed in our community. It is almost incomprehensible to believe that also every 28 minutes, approximately 51 times each day, someone is threatened, assaulted, injured or murdered! Unfortunately, we often give ourselves excuses as to why these violent crimes take place. We make excuses about why it’s happening, and then look the other way. Why do we look the other way? We look the other way out of FEAR!

Because we live in a multicultural society, we are faced with working together to understand why the increase in violence, substance abuse, gangs, graffiti, vandalism and other crimes are happening. It is because we, the people of the community, are not taking a stand to combat the problem.

As violence becomes more associated with particular communities, the businesses located in that area begin to move out of the area which ultimately reduces the property values of the homes. As for the surrounding areas, the gangs claim the territory that encompasses the abandoned storefronts and office buildings. It is because they claim these areas that other gangs are no longer allowed to cross this path, which creates violence and gang activity. It is out of fear that the parents of these youth are afraid to complain to the authorities. They fear that if they snitch, something will happen to innocent people in their community, as well as to them.

Meet Jack. He is 20 years old, and he is living below the poverty level on the northeast side of the city with his pregnant girlfriend and her two toddlers. The majority of their neighborhood consists of apartment buildings along with some single-family houses. Unfortunately, many who live in this neighborhood are on income support payments, or are working in low-paying jobs that people work just long enough for a quick fix. But there is no excuse for the violence!

Families in the community have been in fear for decades, but it is imperative that we stop the fear. We need to empower the people in the community to take action at the local, state and federal levels. They must be more accountable to the people. We, as parents, must talk to our city councilman and put more emphasis and attention on the needs for jobs for our youth and productive activities that would serve to curb crime down in the community.

We, as parents, must reach out to all young people to begin to understand the cause of their anger and how we can help them to effectively deal with conflicts that transpire in such violent rage. We must work together in a collaborative spirit, and work with faith-based institutions, community leaders, clergyman, law enforcement, and the city council to gain a better understanding and perspective on how together we can develop a comprehensive program in throughout their respective community.

A community mobilization effort is needed to raise awareness of the problem because these problems mostly exist in those from a lower socioeconomic status, however, not always.

The urban areas tend to bear a disproportionate high burden of violence. Many of these children have been exposed to violence from their childhood, so they grow up with anger, fear, and depression. Additionally, they may have negative parental exposure to people they have come in contact with.

Let's take a look at developing some effective community programs, and try to look at other key factors that can ultimately prevent the cycle of violence in our community.

- First we must identify the problem
- It is essential to have a community mobilization effort to raise awareness
- Provide training for all community people both volunteers and professional
- Empower the community to take active leadership and responsibility
- Implement activities that are targeted at high risk groups in different settings
- Work with school administrators to provide effective after school programs.
- Work closely with your local community centers to provide sports programs
- Have a program set up in the community for those who are most at risk
- Ensure that parents are actively involved in these programs
- Set up and schedule community meetings with law enforcement and area government officials
- Support and involve churches throughout the target community
- Schedule and provide in-service training for all teachers and staff involved

Let's Look at Gang Behavior

In a recent conversation with behavioral health professionals, concerns were expressed in regard to what is happening among our youth and gang activity. The following is what I learned. First and foremost what they revealed was a lack of parental guidance and involvement. Many of today's youth have very little to no home supervision. Through no fault of their own, many of the youths come from low socio-economic areas where large numbers of children suffer from low self-esteem compounded by educational difficulties.

Health professionals talk about the lack of emotional support these youth seem to have, as well as the lack of positive role models available to them. These youth often come from single-parent households where discipline rarely is enforced. The child visualizes themselves as adults, therefore, they refuse to listen to their parent or guardian.

These youth are often made to believe, that they are responsible for providing support to the family. This leads to anger, resentment and bitterness. Other times these youth witness their parent or parents struggling to make ends meet. They realize that there isn't enough money, food, love or resources to go around. They feel helpless and the anger, as resentment, bitterness, and despair continue to grow.

Due to a breakdown in the family structure, coupled with poverty, these youth look to gang involvement for security and protection, which provides them with a sense of belonging. The gang becomes a "family" to them. They provide them with money, love, and attention – the very things they are lacking at home. This makes them feel good about themselves because they are getting their needs met.

However, after a period of time, the gang begins to make “small” requests or favors from them, which leads to hostile and antisocial behavior. Most often, the first signs are initiated within the community, where dysfunction already exists. Eventually the behavior is then carried over into the elementary and middle schools where children begin to mimic their older siblings. The younger children begin to dress in the identified gang attire to be more like their older sibling. Eventually they begin writing graffiti on their books and becoming extremely resentful towards authority.

At a very young age these elementary and middle school children form groups, just like gangs do, and they take on names. They eventually pressure other children at school to become a part of their group. In other words, they become bullies to the other children.

Several of these youth have older siblings who are first or second generation gang members. Getting involved with the gang becomes a natural progression to them, because they are familiar with the gang members and their activities. Many have witnessed shootings and killings. In many instances, they have seen their own family members murdered by drive-by shootings and street fights.

The following are key indicators that youth may be headed toward gang membership:

- Poor progress in school
- Truancy from school
- Too much leisure time and a lack of organized activities
- Behavior problems at home
- Dressing down in gang attire and jewelry
- Use of a nickname
- Puts tattoos or brands self
- Frequent and negative contact with police
- Signs of tobacco, alcohol, or drug use

What you can do

If you are aware of the beginnings of gang behavior in your children, you can make a difference. As a parent, be involved in the lives of your children. Take an interest in their school. Be aware of their surroundings and who their friends are. Connect with Student Advocates within the school. Connect with school counselors and social workers. Talk to your children’s teachers about their school work and their behavior. Discuss your concerns with your clergy. Community center advocates who know your children should also be consulted. Interact with police officers who are knowledgeable about your area. Talk to your children about the positive things in their lives. Listen to them without judgment. Build a relationship that will make them feel comfortable talking with you about anything – positive or negative.

As a school official, whether teachers, counselors, or administrators, initiate conversation with parents about things that you observe or suspect might indicate gang involvement. Break the isolation and reach out to the parents in a concerned but non-judgmental way. Listen to students as they talk about their lives and the issues they face. Encourage them seek help and support from other adults. Model the kind of behavior that will cause to trust you and to trust

adults. Make yourself more and more aware of the subtle indications that a student is drifting into or displaying signs of gang involvement. Teachers need to become more involved in the community where the children live. Become a part of it. Visit the neighborhoods and homes of your students.

Clergy, business and community leaders must mobilize resources and be pro-active in raising community awareness about the violence in the community. They must take stand – they must step up and take the community back. Meetings with law enforcement officials, neighborhood watch groups, and parents will go a long way toward resolving the issue of community violence. Parents must be receptive and cooperative in accepting help from these entities so that they can save their children.

Never in history has the raising of children been more troublesome than in today's stressful and pragmatic society. The increase in parents working multiple jobs outside the home to make ends meet, unfulfilled marriages ending in divorce, unemployment leading to poverty and homelessness, all play a role in taking children into an endless cycle of quick fixes that include violence, stealing, alcohol, and drugs. Only when parents, school officials, and community leaders take courageous steps forward to end the isolation and reach out to each other and to the children will this cycle of violence come to an end. When we connect with each other in a bold and intentional way to save our children, in a very real sense, we all become heroes.