

WAYS TO REDUCE THE IMPACT OF GANGS AND YOUTH COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS



An article by Dave Vizard

Youth Communities and gangs are having an increasing impact on the behaviour we face in the classroom. Groups of students now offer challenge to staff. If one student is challenged by a member of staff other students join in to defend that individual and this can make staff feel threatened and intimidated. Often young people join gangs because the traditional support structure of the family is no longer there.

The Prince's Trust carried out a survey of 1754 14-25 year olds for its report on 'The Culture of Youth Communities' (2008) and found that young people were turning to groups and 'youth communities' for support rather than their parents as role models. 58% of young people claimed finding a sense of identity as a key reason for joining a gang. 22% said they were looking for role models in gangs. A common sense of identity and a sense of safety were also quoted as motivations.

South Wales Chief Constable, Barbara Wilding, warned that gangs based on drugs and violence had replaced traditional families. 'There are now clear warning signals from the larger cities in England. In areas of extreme deprivation there are almost feral groups of very angry young people. Many have experienced family breakdown, and in place of parental and family role models the gang culture is now established.'

.....Tribal loyalty has replaced family loyalty and gang culture based on violence and drugs is a way of life.

Younger people are often the target of these gangs with 52% of victims of violent assault being in the 16-24 age group. 13% are of school age. 33% of all assaults involve victims being attacked by gangs of 3 or more and 25% carried out by gangs of 4 or more people. The violence displayed in those attacks is supported by the fact that 350 people are the victims of knife assaults every day in England and Wales and 130000 attacks involved knives last year.

Push and Pull factors also play a part. Pull factors include the fact that the gang is your group of friends and your second family. This is supported by terms used by gang members to describe their group – the term gang is rarely used (Lambeth 2008) – more common are family, bredrin, crews, coz (cousin) and my boys. 'The gang gives you a role, status, security, support and friendship and is able to watch your back.'

Push factors mean that being in a gang you avoid the negatives, loneliness, bullying, victimisation, isolation and boredom. Fear, protection from other gangs and family tradition may also be some of the other causes.

A report on gangs from the Metropolitan Police (2007) said that increasing numbers of young children were facing pressure to join gangs from within their own families. Peer pressure from brothers and sisters is regarded by Police Chiefs as one of the key drivers in gang recruitment, as young children are drawn into criminal activity. In gang structures, younger children are formalised into age groups and are engaged in gang activities. There are tinys, youngers and elders who have to go through symbolic acts of crime as a rite of passage to full gang membership. Sir Ian Blair believes that children in families of gang members should be treated as if they are at risk and should be placed on the Child Protection Register.

There is a real need to intervene early to protect younger children from joining gangs. Sisters and girlfriends of gang members are used as pawns and are used as mind weapons – with use of implied threats. Analysis of gangs in the Metropolitan Police Report reveals that young refugees from war torn countries are increasingly getting involved in teenage violence. Post-Traumatic Syndrome in these youngsters, as a result of witnessing and being involved in significant violent situations prior to arrival in the UK, means often that extreme violence and use of weapons are unexceptional and they have a disproportionate negative impact on their peer group.

Currently there is no provision to help the increasing number of teenagers who want to extricate themselves from the gang culture.

Gang rivalries are spilling into schools with 5% of students in or on the fringe of the gang culture. Turf wars are breaking out in schools. Beverley Hughes, The Children's Minister, said that we need to be 'tough on gangs and tough on the causes of gangs'. She said 'Schools were needed as a first line of response against gangs that cast a long shadow in some communities....Only a tiny minority of young people join gangs....But the impact of this minority is disproportionate and devastating – both to the young people concerned and everyone around them.' She said schools need to have strategies agreed with police and other agencies to help pupils targeted by gangs while they are in school and travelling to and from school. Many young people feel extremely vulnerable travelling to and from school. With the loss of traditional catchment areas and freedom of choice, many students can travel considerable distances to school and college across a variety of gang territories.

A US inspired scheme to curb violence has led to 100 Glasgow gang members meeting on neutral ground. The Violence Reduction Unit runs the scheme and is based on the 'Boston Miracle' which reduced violent crime in the city by 50% during 2 years. Gang members met with police and church leaders. Those that agreed to change were offered job, counselling and other forms of support. Those who refused were offered longer sentences. The scheme invited 5 people from each of the 55 gangs in Glasgow. These gangs have 780 members in total.

Schools which have been successful in managing the gang culture:-

- Know what is going on outside in the streets
- Know the rival gangs
- Act quickly on community intelligence they feel risks safety of school communities
- Can recognise gang members' tags (graffiti signatures)
- Have strict rules on uniform – check it at gates – no street uniform – disarm them of anything that goes with their street culture – hoodies, hats, baggy trousers, or bling. Consequently they behave and look more like children

Warning signs that schools should watch:-

- Overly sexualised behaviour or assault
- Tags (graffiti symbols) of postcodes, neighbourhood street names on school books, clothing or building surfaces, sometimes crossed out
- Pupils wearing standard colours or particular items of jewellery or clothing such as bandanas
- The carrying of weapons, including replicas or items that can be used as weapons
- Pupils wearing clothing for protection against weapons
- Use of hand or other signals
- Use of extremist language or materials
- Secretive behaviour
- Threats of violence

What can be done?

- USA has led the way
- Most involve schools, police, social services and the probation service working together to pool resources
- Psychological support for children at significant risk important
- Emphasis is on prevention

- Children at risk need targeting early

Programmes have been produced to develop skills in young people:-

- Clear communication in difficult situations
- Bullying, identifying when adults need help, anger management and respect to others
- Role play
- How to avoid drugs
- How to set goals and behave responsibly
- Clear communication – verbal and non-verbal
- How to resist peer pressure
- Recognising anger in others and calming them
- Conflict resolution and consequences of fighting

In the UK the following areas/schemes have been developed:-

- Peer Mentoring
- Restorative Justice
- Diversionary activities for gang members such as late night sports activities
 - 8 til Late Project in Manchester
 - Midnight Sports – Sports After Hours – from 4pm onwards, gang activity prevalent
 - For 14-17 year olds Midnight Basketball and Soccer
- Schools Working With Voluntary Community and Faith Sectors
 - Street Pastors
 - Damilola Taylor Trust
 - LEAP – Confronting Conflict.

LEAP (www.leaplinx.com) are a group that address Youth Conflict. They help young people understand how to resolve conflicts and handle situations. They are encouraged to think before they do anything and to focus on the consequences of their actions.

The word gang can conjure up images of fear, many of them unfounded. LEAP suggests that many young people are choosing gang participation as a means of making the transition through adolescence to adulthood. The membership of this youth community offers an important source of support to young people.

Article taken from:

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