

## Gang Affiliation: Personal Academic and Mental Health Impact

by Renata Figueroa

About this resource: Our Center benefits from the energy and talents of many UCLA students.\* The following is an abridged and edited version of a paper written by Undergraduate Renata Figueroa. She was inspired by the story of Victor Rios and delved into the literature of gangs to add to the Center's resources on the topic.

Victor Rios was born in Mexico and raised by his mother. Due to their impoverished living conditions, his mother moved Victor and his brother to Oakland, California to better their lives. However, in Oakland, Victor was recruited into a gang. As he says in his 2011 book:

*Here I was, age thirteen and the gang life, "la vida loca," had come knocking at my door.*

By age sixteen, he had dropped out of school and been incarcerated several times. Fortunately, a caring teacher eventually helped steer him in a better direction. Victor's story inspired me to explore what the literature indicates about the personal impact of youth gangs.

### What is a Gang?

According to the National Institute of Justice, a youth gang involves a minimum of three people between the ages of 12 and 24, who share a common identity, such as having a group name with accompanying hand signs and symbols, are considered by others and themselves a gang, have remained a group for an extended period of time, have a set organized system, and are involved in criminal activities. It is the criminal activities and shared identity of the group that sets youth gangs apart from other typical school-related groups (e.g., skaters, nerds, punks).

There are many indicators that a youngster is affiliating with a gang. Gang members acquire a distinct mode of dress, using colors to differentiate their gang from others. A common gang dress code is to have oversized t-shirts along with oversized, sagging pants. When it comes to shirts they are usually one solid color or are plaid and worn tucked or not tucked. Certain types of brands may also be common among gang members (e.g., Nike Cortez shoes, Ben Davis pants) along with certain accessories including bandanas, team jerseys, and caps. As Victor Rios recounts:

*We were all about the same age, fourteen to seventeen years old, and all dressed the same: baggy, creased up, Ben Davis or Dickies brand work pants, with tucked-in, white t-shirts or baggy sports jerseys. The only difference was that we wore different colors to represent our gang affiliations.*

In addition, identifying with a gang includes using a unique hand sign that symbolizes the group and showcases membership to others, particularly other gang members. Members acquire a nickname that officially integrates them into the gang culture after a harrowing initiation that puts the new member, and often others, at risk.

In terms of behavior, gang members tend to defy authority whether at home, school, or in the streets. It is not unusual for them to have physical or verbal confrontations with others as a way to add to their reputation and gain "respect."

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Gangs establish spaces at school and in the neighborhood which they define as their exclusive "territory." They graffiti or "tag" the gang's name and related symbols (e.g., on folders, backpacks, school desks, books, walls). Along with nicknames, they often have gang-related tattoos. Victor relates how he got his nickname and what it meant for him:

*"Chale homies, he hunches over like a puppet, let's call him El Puppet!" another one yelled. Maniac responded, "Lil Puppet, that's your placaso [nickname]." I had arrived to the kick-it-spot empty handed, a no-name with nothing but a scrape on my forehead. I left that night with the power of the gang in my hands. I felt important.*

The police indicate that gang members regularly are involved in criminal behavior, such as assault or being in possession of drugs and weapons. And, in pursuing such activity, gang members generally do not focus on long-term concerns or outcomes.

### **What Gangs Offer Recruits**

Available data indicate that in 2008 two out of every five gang members in the United States were under the age of eighteen. To reduce these numbers, it is important to understand why kids join.

*What my mom did not realize was that the older gang members were a major influence in my life. I wanted to be like them because they had power, money, girls, and protection.... these guys offered me protection that no other group of people had ever offered me, not my teachers, not my mother, not the police.*

In terms of proactive motivation, those who study gangs suggest that the socio-emotional network of adolescents is particularly sensitive to emotional stimuli and rewards, while their cognitive control network is still not fully developed to regulate risky behavior. As identity formation is taking place, teens are concerned about "fitting in" with peers even if it means putting themselves at risk. They may seek gang membership in search of companionship and to increase their sense of belonging. They may join to gain social status, and the thrill and excitement of gang related activities also can be an intriguing lure.

In addition, various external factors have been cited for youth gang membership (e.g., pressure to join from friends or family members who are in gangs; gang membership in a neighborhood is perceived as the norm; the incentive of access to drugs and quick money schemes). Where gangs prevail, some join reactively as a form of protection from street dangers.

From a psychosocial theoretical perspective, when an individual has a low sense of self-control, they are more likely to conform to the ideals imposed by others. In the case of individuals conforming to gang member expectations, they are driven to delinquent acts more so if they feel disconnected from societal institutions. Given that their schools, family, and community are not giving these at-risk teens the support they need at the socio-emotional level, they look toward other delinquents for support. When society punishes their deviant behavior, the gang members further disconnect from "the system," leading to more deviant behavior and resulting in a never ending cycle of noncompliance (Dukes, Martinez, & Stein, 1997; O'Brien, Daffern, Chu, & Thomas, 2013; Steinberg, 2007).

*At that moment, I began to wonder, "Why is it that it takes a gang to make kids like me feel important? Why can't we feel important at school, or at a community center, or with the police?"*

### **Factors that Work Against Affiliating with a Gang**

Four protective factors against youth gang affiliation are prominently discussed. All play a role in a young person's social-emotional and moral development and general belief system (e.g., Dukes et al., 1997; Moretti & Peled, 2004; Juvonen, 2016; Steinberg, 2001).

*Parent/guardian-child attachment.* A positive and secure attachment during childhood and throughout adolescence is correlated with better mental health, effective coping strategies, less involvement in risky behavior, and promotes a better, less conflicting relationship with the family.

*Authoritative parenting style.* Authoritative parenting involves exercising warm and loving control (e.g., clear and positive expectations); this is associated with positive adolescent well-being (e.g., less anxiety and depression, better academic performance, less delinquent behavior and less drug use). In contrast, parenting that is highly controlling or neglectful and lacking warmth is associated with problematic behavior.

*Personal commitment.* Teens who set goals for themselves and are committed to accomplishing them (e.g., getting an education) tend to avoid activities that may hinder progress towards their goals.

*Involvement in conventional, productive activities.* As with a personal commitment, productive activities (e.g., hobbies, sports, chores) can keep youth occupied and away from gangs.

*I believe that the reason I continued banging ... was because I had yet to find an alternative to the lifestyle, one which could provide me with affirmation, security, and a healthy pastime.*

### **Leaving Gang Life Behind**

Youth gang membership does not imply that the person will remain in a gang for the rest of his or her life. As an individual matures, situations, relationships, and priorities shift. For example, members witness gang violence or become victims of the violence and come to the realization that gang affiliation puts their lives and sometimes the lives of others they care about at risk. Victor, for example, witnessed the murder of his best friend by gang rivals. At this juncture in his life, with the supports of educators and mentors, he made the decision to redirect his life and returned to school.

*I felt that what was left of my childhood was slowly being robbed from me. I knew that I did not want to live a life at-risk, full of trouble and violence. I decided to avoid these guys as much as I could.*

### **A Few Findings about the Impact of Gangs on Mental Health and Academics**

Bonton-Jarrett, Hair, and Zuckerman (2003) found that students affiliated with gangs were more involved in health risk behaviors (e.g., smoking, drinking) possibly as a way to cope with their problems and were also at 45% more at risk of not completing high school.

Corcoran, Washington, and Meyers (2005) conducted a mental health study in a juvenile correction facility with a sample of 73 male youth, 24 of whom were gang members. Results showed that gang members reported significantly more mental health symptoms than non-gang members (e.g., they were more likely to experience hallucinations, suicide attempts; attempt to hurt others; lose touch with reality without it being caused by drugs; sexually act out; have repetitive thoughts and behaviors; be socially withdrawn, exhibit anxiety manifestations).

Mental health of non-gang member students may also be compromised when exposed to gang violence. Boynton-Jarrett, et al. (2013) report that greater exposure was correlated to higher emotional distress and poorer well-being; this, of course, can affect concentration, performance, and motivation to learn in school. These students tend to feel insecure at school. Some go absent out of fear; some disengage from schooling all together.

Based on longitudinal data, Pyrooz (2007) reports that the likelihood of dropping out of school increases when the student's peer network is deviant. Students never involved in gangs were compared to those who reported having ever been in a gang. On average, there was a two year difference between the grade level of each group, with non-gang members completing about 13.6 years in school and group with a gang history completing 11.5 years. Subsequently, a bachelor's degree was obtained, respectively, by 24% and 5% of the groups.

Janosz, Archambault, Pagani, Pascal, Morin, and Bowen (2008) studied the effects of school violence with a sample of 1,104 high school boys. They report that a majority of students were never victims of school violence, but most of them witnessed or had heard about incidents. There was a higher rate of truancy, lower rates of academic achievement, and lower school engagement among students who witnessed school violence in comparison to students that were victims.

*I decided to drop out of school and look for work. While deep inside I knew that to stay in school was the right thing for me to do, I also had lost faith in school*

### **Being Aware of the Extent of Gang Activity**

School and neighborhood awareness of gang activity begins with general observations by school staff (e.g., teachers, student support staff, custodial and cafeteria personnel) and input from students. Each will have a perspective on gang activity and how it affects the school. Law enforcement agencies can provide a range of information about gang activity, as well youth gang prevention and intervention strategies.

In some schools (especially private schools), there may be a reluctance to acknowledge or recognize there is a gang problem. Staff may not know how to identify signs of gang affiliation or they may decide to disregard the problem in order to avoid being tainted with a gang-related image. Studies indicate that only 5% of teachers admit to having gang issues in their schools while 36% of these

teachers report that the problem does exist in the surrounding community. The reality, of course, is that a gang problem exists in many neighborhoods, and it affects schools in many negative ways (Arciaga, 2010; Howell & Lynch, 2000).

### **What Role Can Schools Play in Dealing with Gangs**

Different states have suggested school policies that are meant to alleviate some of the pressures that schools face when dealing with gangs. For example, in California, student dress codes are recommended and schools can access in-service programs on gang intervention methods (National Gang Center, n.d.). In general, the policy focus is on improving gang detection methods, effective disciplinary methods, and general education for school personnel, students, and communities about gang-related concerns. To date, little policy attention has been paid to enhancing school capacity to communicate and connect with gang members and re-engage them in classroom learning.

Programs have been advocated to teach students from an early age about gangs and how to avoid becoming part of one. Three such programs are Gang Resistance Education & Training (G.R.E.A.T), Community Youth Gang Services (C.Y.G.S), and Violence Education Gang Awareness (V.E.G.A).

#### **Research on Gang Resistance Education & Training**

The U.S. Department of Justice lists G.R.E.A.T as an effective primary prevention program that targets all youth to prevent gang affiliation. The program is intended as an immunization against delinquency, youth violence, and gang membership for children in the years immediately before the prime ages for introduction into gangs and delinquent behavior. A 1994 national evaluation by the National Institute of Justice compared those exposed to the program with a no-treatment control group. Significant differences favoring G.R.E.A.T. were reported in five areas: negative attitudes towards gangs, positive attitudes towards police, greater use of refusal skills, resistance to peer pressure, and lower rates of gang membership. Differences were not found for delinquency, empathy, conflict-resolution, and risk seeking.

Because of the limitations of interventions designed to prevent youth from engaging in risky activities, schools are focusing more and more on the context in which dangerous behaviors can occur. Some of the emphasis is on enhancing school climate and structure. This includes more personalized instruction and ensuring effective supports and guidance. Special attention is given to establishing clear rules and responses to deviant behavior that treat all students fairly, with respect, and in ways designed to re-engage them in school learning. School personnel are expected to hold the same academic expectations for all students in order to avoid self-fulfilling prophecies about learning, behavior, and gang involvement.

*She treated all of the students with the same respect. Some teachers at my school gave special treatment to students who received good grades, not Ms. Russ. Whenever anyone of us got out of line, she disciplined us equally. Whenever anyone of us accomplished a task, she rewarded us.*

With specific concern for gang members and wannabes, the challenge is to find and appreciate personal, social, and academic contributions to the school. This is a critical aspect of establishing mutual trust and respect and building a mentor/role model relationship that encourages students to confide if they need guidance. Students, especially those at risk of gang involvement, need positive role-models. Considering that teens spend the majority of their day at school, it is beneficial to have someone to look up to and turn to in that setting. Fortunately, there are school staff who are motivated to mentor, guide, and inspire students to lead better and safer lives.

*Where could I turn for guidance? Who would help me with this life-altering decision? I decided to go to the one person who had told me that she would be there for me when I wanted to turn my life around. I went to my teacher.*

*Ms. Russ understood her students' social situations. She took the time to understand each of our individual worlds by meeting our families, getting to know them, and seeing where we were from. She understood our struggles.*

Beyond the campus, schools can work with the surrounding community to educate and inform community stakeholders about youth gangs. Safe Passage Programs and Parents on Patrol are designed to teach and involve parents in keeping students safe as they walk to and from school and mobilize families to learn how to keep their children out of gangs.

Adolescents often exhibit and experience problematic behaviors in the after school hours. This is another time when schools and communities can work together to ensure there are programs that keep students safe, off the streets, and away from gangs (Arciaga, 2010; Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, Freng, Osgood, Carson, & Matsuda, 2011; Juvonen, 2007; Steinberg, 2007).

Schools have a major role to play related to engaging and re-engaging gang members. As Victor Rios has demonstrated:

*These same young people who have been labeled as bad, criminal, gang banging, or irreparable, can one day return to the stage of life to show off their degrees and successes and they too can receive a standing ovation.*

**Victor Rios earned a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. He is married and has three children and is a professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara where he teaches classes on juvenile justice and youth culture.**

For more on what a school can do to address learning, behavior, and emotional problems, see our *National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>. The initiative highlights a unified, comprehensive, and equitable approach designed to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

## Sample of Resources Used in Developing this Document

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**For more on this topic, see the Centers online clearinghouse Quick Find on:**

**>Gangs – [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p3009\\_01.htm](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p3009_01.htm)**