

# **The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

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## **Why Children Join Gangs**

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**An Administrative Research Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Examining why children join gangs is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because groups of juvenile males and females call themselves a gang and are involved in criminal activity. These groups typically have an identifiable name, a certain geographic location, and an identifying symbol. There is not one major city in the United States that has not been affected by gang violence. Rising gang crimes, such as drive by shootings, assaults, and deaths of innocent citizens continue to cause problems for law enforcement. Gang activity is looked at as a way to get out of the hood and get respect. Communities find themselves unable to deal with the gang problem since it involves dealing with juveniles. The purpose of this research is to find out what influences are the precursors to children joining gangs. The lack of self-esteem, the need to belong, the need for protection, poverty, and the neighborhood could be responsible for children becoming gang members.

The method of inquiry used by the researcher included a review of articles, internet sites, periodicals, journals, personal interviews, and a survey. The survey will be used to measure the researcher's findings regarding gangs. It was distributed to 20 agencies across the state of Texas. The researcher discovered that the factors contributing to the probability of a youth becoming a gang member could be identified. They lack a cohesive family, and they find the loyalty, love, and bonds typically found in a family in a gang. They lack opportunities both in education and in the job market, and these are contributors to youth joining gangs as well as the neighborhood and peer pressure.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest tragedies that has occurred in America is the proliferation of youth gangs. Gangs have been around hundreds of years; however, no gangs have ever had the impact on America as youth gangs have. McCuen (1995) stated, "Youth gangs have spread across America from the North to the South and from the East to the West. Gangs have virtually invaded every major city in America" (p. 80). Youth gangs have brought violence and fear onto the American scene. From homicides and assaults to drugs and thefts, gangs have destroyed neighborhoods. In some neighborhoods, gangs are a way of life. Selling drugs is commonplace, and some gangs use drugs as a means to make money. Identifying precursors of why children join gangs can curb the proliferation of youth gangs. In order to understand them joining, it is necessary to identify what a gang is and why they join.

The problem to be examined considers the influences for children joining gangs. Children joining gangs is relevant to law enforcement because they must address why children join in order to develop strategies that will help stop the growth of juvenile gangs as well as assist communities and protect children, citizens, and law enforcement officers. The purpose of this research is to examine what factors are present that can be identified and may be responsible for children becoming gang members. The neighborhood, peer pressure, and the educational community can be contributing factors for children joining gangs. The research question to be examined focuses on whether or not the precursors can be identified and used as predictors for stopping the proliferation of youth gangs.

The intended method of inquiry includes a review of articles, internet sites, periodicals, journals, and personal interviews. Also included is a survey that was sent to 30 law enforcement officers. They responded to questions about factors that may influence a child into joining a gang. The anticipated findings of the research are that the factors can be identified and used in prevention and educational strategies to curb youth gang membership. A lack of educational opportunities, peer pressure, a socio-economically deprived neighborhood, and a lack of social services may be contributing factors. The field of law enforcement will benefit from the research because law enforcement will better understand the causes of why children join gangs and be able to assist communities and youth in dealing with the issue in a positive manner. Law enforcement will be able to open communication with the problem neighborhoods and youth and assist the community in having a role in the future growth of the neighborhood.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

A gang “is a group of three or more individuals who have an identifiable name or symbol, a specific area or location and engage in criminal activities” (as cited in Flannery, Huff, & Manos, 1998, p. 176). According to the California Penal Code, Section 186.22, they define criminal street gangs as a group having a known leader with rank and file officers. The California Attorney General’s Office, Crime Prevention Center (2003) found that children join gangs for numerous reasons. A lack of parental support and a lack of educational opportunities as well as possible financial opportunities can lead children into joining a gang. Peer pressure, facing the pressure of going to school, and interacting with delinquent youth on a daily basis can be factors

that lead youths to gang involvement. Also, a lack of self-esteem and a lack of bonding, love, and a strong family unit can lead a child to find acceptance in a gang family

Thornberry (1998) found that there were several variables or risk factors that contribute to a child becoming a gang member. One risk factor that influences a child joining a gang is if there is less social integration or low attachment with the community. Other influences include poverty, the biological parents being absent, the child showing little attachment to the parents, and there being a lack of supervision of the child. All of these issues increase the probability of gang membership. School variables are also considered very significant. One factor is a child's low expectation for success in school by both the parents and teachers. Peer pressure also has a strong influence on gang membership as well as associating with delinquent juveniles. Finally, unsupervised activities can have a strong impact on the child and their probability of joining a gang (as cited in Hill, Lui, & Hawkings, 2001)

Identified risk factors that predict gang involvement are found in the youth's community, family, and peer group. These findings suggest that children join gangs because they are unable to become a part of the successful middle class. As a result, they develop a distrust of established institutions. A youth's inability to succeed in getting a good education and performing below an accepted standard indicate and identify the at risk youth. The listed identifiers assist in identifying youth who are at risk and those who are not at risk. The more risk factors the youth is faced with, the more likely that youth will join a gang (Gangs a Community Response, 2003)

Cloward and Ohlin (1960) presented "an in-depth analysis of the lack of fit between American success goals and the means of achieving these goals, available to

lower socio-economically deprived groups and American Society” (as cited in Yablonsky, 2000, p. 211). Middle class youth are afforded greater opportunities to acquire an education and to succeed than socio-economically deprived youth. Middle class society and families have a greater expectation for success from their children. Low socio-economically deprived youth who live in a low-income neighborhood with a single parent have obstacles such as gangs and drugs. They also lack role models that can help them achieve a degree of success. Cohen (1955) viewed the gang as “a different subculture with a value system different from the dominant ones found in the inclusive American culture. Working class children used the delinquent subculture (gang) as a mode of reaction and adjustment to dominant middle-class” (as cited in Yablonsky, 2000, p. 206).

In some neighborhoods, male and females are coerced into joining gangs. It appears that the youth may have no choice but to get involved. Also, in some neighborhoods, children are born in to gangs as a result of the neighborhood being recognized as a “gang affiliated neighborhood” and their parent’s former involvement with and continued involvement in a criminal activity (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1998, p. 1). Therefore, the listed factors are critical in a child’s judgment for joining a gang.

Patterson, Dishion, & Chamberlain (1993), Flannery, et al. (1998), Yablonsky (2000), and Montoya and Levine (2002) noted that poor parenting skills are a factor that can lead to failure in school and being rejected by family and peers. It was also found that if a child had a family member who was a gang member, the child was likely to become a gang member. The gang provided a familiar identity to the child before and

after he became a gang member. In addition, the neighborhood and anti-social factors influence and are precursors to a child joining a gang. There are many other factors that contribute to a child joining a gang. Montoya and Levine (2002) discussed why children join gangs with youth who are gang members. In a conversation with Montoya, they stated that being a gang was cool—"I am so with it that no one can mess with me"; offered protection—"I take care of my gang brother's and sister's and they take care of me"; offered acceptance—"I am somebody my gang listens to me they love me for who I am"; and offered power—"I ain't afraid of no one, I can walk in my hood and people are afraid of me" (Montoya & Levine, 2002, p. 34).

Montoya and Levine (2002) found that "the stated and perceived rational often is outdated by personal improvements. No longer alienated or demoralized and feeling much better about themselves, they have found the perfect cause célèbre" (p. 34). The youths have raised their level of self-esteem and worth and accepted for who they are. Children join gangs because it makes them feel better about themselves, it elevates their self-esteem, and they feel like they have a voice within the gang. They can hang around with their gang brothers and sisters and feel needed. They share the financial gain of criminal activity and the humiliation of being arrested. They become someone who has power within the neighborhood and in the gang family and, most importantly, they have respect.

Montoya and Levine (2002) stated that young individuals join any kind of intense cohesive group because it makes them feel better about themselves. To explain this, they created the terminology of "The four B's." These include being, belonging, believing, and benevolence. Being is a personal sense of being grounded, of knowing



and liking who one is and one's identity. It is an appreciation of one's own strengths and capacities, a sense of confidence in one's abilities, a heightened personal motivation, and a sense of fulfillment. Belonging is the social sense of being an integral part of a community, accepted and liked by others, with a shared set of values, goals, means, and experiences, as well as a mutual dependence. One's overriding need for affiliation and connectedness is answered. Believing is an ideological factor. One has a perceived commitment to a cause célèbre, something more important than mundane life, with a set of values beyond issues of subsistence, money, and competitiveness. Benevolence is the sense that one is fulfilling the human need to help others, to be generous and caring even if it is only to the homeboys. It solidifies the bond within the gang.

One of the surprising aspects of gang life in the City of Houston is that young gang members have an attachment to the neighborhood they live in. Houston is divided into wards, going from 1<sup>st</sup> Ward through 6<sup>th</sup> Ward. Along with wards, there are the neighborhoods with names like Central Park, Denver Harbor, Manchester, Magnolia, Settegast Park, and Ingrand Park. The attachment to the neighborhood became evident during interviews. Most of the gang members claimed the hood, stating, "I'm down with "Lil Red," which is a neighborhood known as Denver Harbor. In Houston, Texas, young gang members wear T-shirts with the name of the ward or the neighborhood displayed on the shirt, or they wear a hat embroidered with the number of the ward or the name of the hood (A. Garcia, personal communication, May 3, 1997).

Communities can assist law enforcement in creating strategies to combat the proliferation of youth gangs. Prevention, intervention, and suppression are important

tools used by police officers, with prevention being the key component. The risk factors surrounding children in low socially economically deprived neighborhoods keep children from creating an effective dialogue with the law enforcement community. Police officers do not visit socio-economically deprived gang neighborhoods unless they are responding to a call. The education community needs to develop programs that develop communication skills, self-esteem, and community relations in order to help keep children from joining gangs. Communities need to assist by informing the parents, schools, and law enforcement of their efforts to curtail gang activity by creating programs that will keep the children supervised. There are several crime prevention initiatives currently being used in several cities in the United States.

One program that has shown success is Gang Resistance Education Awareness Training (GREAT). Originally, it was administered by the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms; however, when they were transferred to the United States Department of Justice, the program became administered by the Office of Justice Programs of the Bureau of Justice Assistance. This program provides a police officer instruction program through classroom instruction. Using law enforcement officers has several advantages. The officers have the experience of recognizing behaviors and children who are contemplating becoming gang members. Campus based school police officers understand the neighborhoods and problems that can be readily identified. The instruction of basic life skills is the focus of the program. This instruction helps students avoid criminal and anti-social behaviors.

The Weed and Seed Program is administered by the United States Department of Justice. This program was specifically designed for law enforcement and local

communities to develop partnerships with residents, local businesses, and local organizations that will benefit the community. It allows the community to have a voice in the way their community grows and develops. The Weed and Seed Program weeds out the undesirable elements like gangs, drug use, trafficking, and violent crime (Executive Office for Weed and Seed, 2001).

Community oriented policing is a program that was designed to create partnerships between communities and law enforcement. The program assists in recognizing crime hotspots in neighborhoods and prevents the establishment of criminal activities that are associated with deteriorating communities. In the community oriented policing program, police officers are able to spend time with the citizens and gather citizen cooperation to solve crimes. They can help the community recognize the importance of their relationship with the law enforcement community. With this established communication, officers can use and exchange information with the public. Officers working a particular beat or neighborhood can know the concerns of the citizens and can assist them by providing information on service providers or other agencies that can assist the community.

The community, police, schools, and children are stakeholders in the prevention of juvenile crime. The community, law enforcement, and the educational community need to let youth know that they are interested in them not as a criminal but as a person. The community will respect youth, and they may be able to assist by helping they youth achieve legitimate goals. Law enforcement and the educational community need to instill a sense of purpose, responsibility, and community pride that will carry on into adulthood.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research question to be examined considers whether or not factors can be identified that contribute to a child becoming a gang member. This researcher will examine the family structure (unit) to see if a lack of parenting skills can lead a child into joining a gang. Parents who do not involve themselves in their child's education or lack the knowledge of involving themselves in their children's lives may be a contributing factor in a child joining a gang. The members of a child's immediate family who are involved in gangs may also be identified as a factor. If the child grows up in a family where gang life is a norm, the child may have no choice but to involve him/herself in what is considered a normal family unit.

This researcher will also answer the question of the neighborhood is a contributing factor to a child joining a gang. A child may be born into a historically gang infested neighborhood and may face tremendous pressure for joining a gang. Peer pressure and associations may also be instrumental in a child becoming a gang member. The child may see and interact with gang associated peers on a daily basis, which may contribute in the child being able to identify with them. In examining the educational system, this researcher will attempt to see if education institutions are providing the needed educational opportunities to assist a child in making the proper choices in their educational needs and social interaction skills.

The researcher hypothesizes that family and external factors, such as the neighborhood, family, peer association, and education community, can influence a child in a negative manner and have a tremendous influence in what direction the child grows. The method of inquiry will include a review of articles and journals, periodicals

and personal interviews, as well as a survey. The instrument that will be used to measure the researcher's findings regarding the subject of why children join gangs will include a survey. The size of the survey will consist of 10 questions, distributed to 30 survey participants across the state of Texas. The response rate to the survey instrument resulted in 20 of 30 responses. The information obtained from the survey will be analyzed and used to supplement the researcher's findings.

## **FINDINGS**

The survey was sent out to 30 participants, and 20 responded to the survey. The responses to the questions were set up utilizing the following formula: one is least influential, two is slightly influential, three is moderately influential, four is significantly influential, and five is highly influential. They could also choose not applicable.

Participants were comprised mostly from three law enforcement entities: municipal police departments, sheriff's departments, and constable's offices. Municipal police departments accounted for 80% of the participants followed by sheriff's departments, which accounted for 15%, and the constable's office accounted for 5% of the participants.

Participants were asked about the type and size of their agency. Police departments with 101 to 500 officers accounted for 65% of the survey respondents. Police departments with 51 to 100 officers accounted for 5% of the respondents, and police departments with 21 to 50 officers accounted for 10% of the respondents. For sheriff's departments, 10% of the respondents were from agencies with 51 to 100 officers, and 5% were from agencies with 21 to 50 officers. For the constable's office, 5% of the respondents were from departments with 20 officers.

Participants were asked how likely it is that a youth's neighborhood is a contributing factor in a child becoming a gang member. Of those surveyed, 15% thought it was slightly influential, 10% thought it was moderately influential, 50% thought it was significantly influential, and 25% thought it was highly influential. Participants were also asked how likely it is that peer pressure is a factor in youth joining a gang. Five percent thought it was slightly influential. Five percent stated that it is moderately influential. Thirty percent thought it is significantly influential, and 60% stated that it is highly influential.

Participants were asked how likely is it that a child coming from a single parent home influences a youth in joining a gang. Ten percent thought it is least influential. Fifteen percent thought it is slightly influential, and 40% thought it is moderately influential. Twenty percent thought that it is significantly influential, and 15% thought that it is highly influential.

Participants were asked whether having access to acquiring money plays a significant part in a child joining a gang. Five percent thought it is least influential. Twenty percent thought it is slightly influential. Thirty-five percent thought that it is moderately influential, and 20% thought that it is significantly influential. Ten percent thought that it is highly influential, and 10% thought that it is not applicable. Participants were also asked how likely it is that money derived from selling drugs influences youth into joining a gang. Five percent thought it is least influential, and 25% thought it is moderately influential. Forty-five percent thought it is significantly influential, and 25% thought that it is highly influential.

Participants were asked how likely it is that race is a contributing factor in a youth joining a gang. Twenty percent stated that it is slightly influential, and 30% thought that it is moderately influential. Twenty-five percent thought it is significantly influential, and 15% thought that it is highly influential. Ten percent thought that it is not applicable. Participants were asked how likely it is that a parent being a gang member influences a youth in joining a gang. Five percent thought it is slightly influential, and 30% thought it is significantly influential. Sixty-five percent thought it is highly influential.

Participants were asked how likely it is that a lack of a cohesive family unit showing love and affection influences youth in joining a gang. Ten percent thought it is moderately influential, and 40% thought it is significantly influential. Fifty percent thought it is highly influential.

## **DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS**

The problem or issue examined by the researcher considered whether or not the precursors of children joining gangs could be identified. This researcher found that there were factors in a child's environment that contributed to the child joining a gang. The neighborhood contributes to gang membership if a child is raised in a neighborhood that has historically been gang infested, and the at risk youth encounters this on a daily basis. Also, family and lack of support or the family's involvement in crime can be a factor if the youth considers this a normal part of his life. Peer pressure from a youth's associations is influential and can contribute to a youth looking for acceptance, love, bonding, and recognition. The gang offers at risk youth a sense of being, belonging, believing and benevolence. At risk youth are often not successful in pursuing an education, and they do not receive the attention needed to overcome gang ideology.

The education system focuses on the child's education and does little in educating at risk youth on the consequences of crime. Once an at risk youth is lost to a gang, it is hard to get out. Other contributing factors that influence the child joining a gang were companionship, excitement, respect, and to develop a higher sense of self-esteem. The purpose of this research was to examine and identify the factors and precursors that lead children into gang behaviors. This researcher examined the research and found indicators that lead youth to become involved with gangs. The research question that was examined focused on the family, neighborhood, peers, and the education system, as well as the individual.

The researcher hypothesized that gang membership was influenced by the neighborhood, the family, and other factors. Youth seek love, protection, and being accepted by their peers. If a child does not have bonds that are found in the normal family, an at risk youth will find it in a gang. A lack of money plays a major part in a child joining a gang. Race and the neighborhood also played a part in the child joining a gang. Parental involvement in a gang was also a determining factor in a child joining a gang. The researcher concluded from the findings that factors can be identified and strategies can be created that are aimed at the family unit, the neighborhood, and the individual that will assist in recognizing the gang problem. The findings of the research did support the hypothesis. The reason why the findings did support the hypothesis is probably due to the identified factors that contribute to a child becoming a gang member. Limitations that might have hindered this study resulted due to the survey being sent to only 30 participants, which is a small population of the law enforcement agencies in the state of Texas. This limited the survey results for the rest of nation. Also,



students could not be interviewed, so the findings are only from a law enforcement perspective.

The study of why children join gangs is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because of the impact it will have in the training of law enforcement officers. There are circumstances that can be controlled or identified that will assist law enforcement in helping high risk youths who are in danger of becoming gang members. Law enforcement must utilize current anti-gang intervention and prevention programs that will involve the community, educational community, business community, and high-risk youth.

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## APPENDIX 1

### GANG SURVEY

The purpose of this research is to determine if risk factors can be identified that are precursors to children joining gangs. This research is further intended to provide information to agencies that are searching for answers to questions of children and gangs. Thank you in advance for taking a few minutes to complete this survey and return it to me.

1. What is the type of your agency?

Police Department \_\_\_\_\_ Sheriff's Office \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is the size of your department's sworn personnel?

<20 \_\_\_\_\_ 21-50 \_\_\_\_\_ 51-100 \_\_\_\_\_ 101-500 \_\_\_\_\_ >500 \_\_\_\_\_

The remainder of the survey is numbered from 1 through 5, N/A

1 having the least influence

5 having the greatest influence

N/A means not applicable

3. How likely is the youth's neighborhood a contributing factor in a child becoming a gang member? 1 2 3 4 5 N/A \_\_\_\_\_

4. How likely is peer pressure a factor in youth joining a gang?

1 2 3 4 5 N/A \_\_\_\_\_

5. How likely is it that a child coming from a single parent home influences a youth joining a gang? 1 2 3 4 5 N/A \_\_\_\_\_

6. Does having access to acquiring money play a significant part in a child joining a gang? 1 2 3 4 5 N/A \_\_\_\_\_

7. How likely is money derived from selling drugs influence youth into joining a gang? 1 2 3 4 5 N/A \_\_\_\_\_

8. How likely is race a contributing factor in youth joining a gang?

1 2 3 4 5 N/A \_\_\_\_\_

9. How likely is parent gang membership to influence youth into joining a gang?

1 2 3 4 5 N/A \_\_\_\_\_

10. How likely is the lack of a cohesive family showing love and affection influence a youth into joining a gang?

1 2 3 4 5 N/A \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you again for your time

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## APPENDIX 2

Childhood Predictors of Joining and Remaining in a gang, SSDP Sample.  
 Risk Factor Odds Ratio\*

Risk Factor	Odds Ratio*
<b>Neighborhood</b>	
Availability of marijuana	3.6
Neighborhood youth in trouble	3.0
Low neighborhood attachment	1.5
<b>Family</b>	
Family structure	
One parent only	2.4
One parent plus other adults	3.0
Parental attitudes favoring violence	2.3
Low bonding with parents	ns
Low household income	2.1
Sibling antisocial behavior	1.9
Poor family management	1.7
<b>School</b>	
Learning disabled	3.6
Low academic achievement	3.1
Low school commitment	1.8
Low academic aspirations	1.6
<b>Peer group</b>	
Association with friends who engage in problem behavior	2.0 2.3
<b>Individual</b>	
Low religious service attendance	nst
Early marijuana use	3.7
Early violence§	2.6 3.1
Anti social beliefs	2.0
Early drinking	1.6
Externalizing behaviors§	2.6
Poor refusal skills	1.8

\* Odds of joining a gang between the ages of 13 and 18 for youth who scored in the worst quartile on each factor at ages 10 through 12 (fifth and sixth grades), compared with all other youth in the sample for example the odds ratio for the availability of marijuana is 3.6 this means that youth from neighborhoods where marijuana was most available were 3.6 times more likely to join a gang compared with other youth compared with two parent households.

§ These factors also distinguished sustained gang membership (i.e., for more than 1 year) for transient membership (1 year or less). For each factor, the number in parenthesis indicates the odds of being a sustained gang member (compared with the odds of being a transient member) for youth at risk on that factor.

\* (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice 1998).