

# FOCUS

From the National Council on Crime and Delinquency

## It's About Time: Prevention and Intervention Services for Gang-Affiliated Girls

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### Introduction

Until the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, 2003) observed a spike in girls' arrests for most types of offences from 1991 to 2000, delinquency and especially gangs were perceived to be male phenomena. As a result of this spike in crime, research on girls' delinquency increased. The research revealed that a substantial number of girls are involved with gangs. A report by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) (Glesmann, Krisberg, & Marchionna, 2009) found that at the national level, girls composed 32% of gang members. In California girls composed 38% of gang membership, with higher concentrations of girls in gangs in certain locations: Girls composed 51% of Oakland's gang members and 42% in West Contra Costa County. Gang membership is a significant risk factor for girls. Girls who self-report as gang members commit considerably more crimes in every offense category than non-gang-involved boys and girls (Esbensen & Winfree, 1998; Fegan, 1990).

Although a substantial number of girls are involved with gangs, gang prevention and intervention services are not designed with girls in mind. As Kevin Grant, a service provider working with girls in gangs, notes, "A lot of the [gang prevention and intervention] programs that are available do not fully support the needs of girls in gangs." Girls in gangs require services that respond to their unique experiences and needs. This NCCD *Focus* highlights the vulnerabilities and consequences of gang involvement for girls, the service needs of girls in gangs and girls at risk of joining gangs, as well as the importance of addressing these service needs as a critical gang violence-prevention strategy. It also provides examples of how various programs are currently addressing the gender-specific service needs of girls involved in gangs.

## Risk Factors and Consequences for Girls

A history of sexual and physical abuse in the home is a gender-specific risk factor that leads girls to join a gang (Bowker, Gross, & Kelin, 1980; Brown, Tracy, & Sheldon, 1996; Hunt & Joe-Laidler, 2001; Moore & Hagerdon, 2001; Wang, 2000). Often, girls look toward gangs for a “safe place.” Girls often express that gang membership provides them with friendship, care, love, and a way out from problems at home. Unfortunately, the same gangs from which girls seek comfort and solace may also sexually abuse and exploit their female members. Girls are sometimes “sexed in,” or forced to have sex with male gang members, in order to be accepted by the gang (Miller, 1998). Gang members may also sexually exploit girls once they are accepted into the gang. The gang, when recruiting new male members, may present sexual access to girl gang members as one of the benefits of gang membership (Giordano, 1978; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Palmer & Tilly, 1995; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Sheldon, Tracy, & Brown, 2001; Tilly 1995; & Wang, 2000).

Once involved with a gang, girls are vulnerable to a series of consequences. Gang involvement, for all genders, can result in intergenerational poverty, dropping out of school, drug dependence, cognitive impairment, injury, and disability or death (Sanders, Lankenau, & Jackson-Bloom, 2007). Girls in gangs, however, are particularly vulnerable to becoming victims of domestic violence, bearing and caring for children at a young age, and marrying a gang-affiliated partner (Moore, 1991, 2001; Sanders, Lankenau, & Jackson-Bloom, 2007;). Moreover, if girls continue gang affiliation into adulthood, they are at a higher risk of becoming incarcerated and reoffending than non-gang-involved women (Scott & Ruddell, 2011). For girls who decide to leave a gang, pregnancy and aging are the few known factors that allow girls to become “inactive”—to reduce or end girls’ gang involvement (Hunt, Joe Laidler, & MacKenzie, 2005). Girls who are unable to age out of the gang or leave it because of pregnancy face brutal consequences: rape, beatings, and death (Wang, 2000).

Children whose mothers are in gangs or have gang affiliations may also experience negative consequences. The children of girls exposed to domestic violence suffer a range of long- and short-term consequences, such as increased probability of being victimized by peers, experiencing behavioral problems, and developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Jouriles, Brown, McDonald, Rosenfield, Leahy, & Silver, 2010; Margolin & Vickerman, 2007). The children of teen mothers are more likely to be born underweight, score low on cognitive development tests, and repeat a grade in school. The children with gang-affiliated parents are at a higher risk of becoming gang-affiliated themselves (Moore, 1991). Moreover, the children of incarcerated mothers are at a higher risk of continuing an intergenerational cycle of crime and incarceration (Dallaire, 2006). To prevent the intergenerational consequences of girls’ gang involvement, the research points to a need for services that respond to girls’ gender-specific risk factors and experiences, including histories of sexual abuse, domestic violence, teen pregnancy, and difficulty safely leaving a gang (Bowker, Gross, & Kelin, 1980; Brown, Tracy, & Sheldon, 1996; Hunt & Joe-Laidler, 2001; Moore & Hagerdon, 2001; Wang, 2000).

### NCCD and Girls

*To advance services that are responsive to girls’ needs, NCCD, the nation’s oldest private nonprofit criminal justice research organization, recently received two major grants from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), a component of the Office of Justice Programs. The first grant was awarded to the Center for Girls and Young Women, a division of the NCCD that responds to the growing population of girls in the juvenile justice system, to launch the National Girls Institute (NGI). The purpose of NGI is to develop and provide a range of training, technical assistance, and resources to organizations that serve at-risk and delinquent girls.*

*OJJDP awarded a second grant to Dr. Angela Wolf, NCCD associate director of research, to examine the individual, family, and community factors involved in girls’ desistance from gangs and gang-related crime. This will help close the knowledge gap on girls in gangs, and will inform evidence-based intervention strategies that are gender-specific and based on girls’ motivations for gang involvement.*

## The View from Service Providers

Interviews with Dawn Brown, Kevin Grant, Diana Sanchez, Betty Castillo-Morrison, and Jose Gomez—service providers working with gang-affiliated girls—validate the findings identified by the existing research. Girls in gangs experience physical and sexual abuse in the home, sexual abuse and exploitation by the gang, intimate partner violence, incarceration and recidivism, and difficulty leaving the gang. However, while the research suggests that girls require a general need for prevention and intervention services that address their unique experiences, service providers note that girls' service needs diverge depending on their level of gang involvement—whether girls are in gangs or at risk of joining gangs—and whether or not girls are detained in juvenile halls.

### *The Service Needs of Girls in Gangs and Girls At Risk of Gang Involvement: Life Skill Classes, Mentorship, and Peer Support*

Girls in gangs and girls at risk of gang involvement require services that develop life skills, provide mentors, and encourage peer support. Life skills that help girls make informed decisions, communicate effectively, and develop coping and self-management abilities can help promote girls' health and safety. These life skills enable girls to navigate and manage environmental conditions and pre-existing relationships. Girls in gangs and girls at risk of gang involvement benefit as they acquire the life skills that will prepare them to take positive actions to change behaviors and environments.

Girls in gangs and girls at risk of gang involvement also need mentors – individuals who can truly advise and guide them as they begin to navigate mainstream life. Women who were previously gang involved or at risk of gang involvement often make the most effective mentors. These women can identify with girls and draw on personal stories to connect with and advise girls. These characteristics are especially important for securing girls' trust. Girls must be able to trust staff in order to openly discuss delicate topics like sexual abuse and service needs, and to accept and access services.

Girls in gangs and girls at risk of joining gangs also respond to the guidance and advice of their peers. Structured or informal peer support, unlike staff mentorship, allows girls to learn from their peers' guidance and experiences. More importantly, peer support allows girls to develop their own leadership and mentorship skills when providing their own knowledge and advice. Peer counseling programs, overseen by program staff, both support and empower participants, giving them a sense of control over their own lives.

### *The Service Needs of Girls in Gangs: Sexual Abuse and Gang Desistance*

Girls in gangs commonly require services that address sexual abuse (Brown, 2011; Castillo-Morrison, 2011; & Grant, 2011). Girls in gangs often experience sexual molestation or rape before becoming gang involved. Such sexual abuse is sometimes a part of female gang initiation. In some cases, once involved with the gang, girls continue to experience sexual abuse at the hands of the gang.

Girls in gangs also require support when attempting to leave a gang-involved lifestyle. Pregnancy is a commonly cited reason for girls to reduce and eventually end their official gang involvement (Brown, 2011; & Sanchez, 2011). Because of this, girls require desistance services that consider the complex issues girls in gangs face, including pregnancy as a gang exit strategy and the ongoing trauma of sexual abuse.

### *The Service Needs of Girls in Juvenile Halls: Legal Education Services, Recidivism Prevention, and Creative Therapeutic Services*

Girls in juvenile halls experience a wide range of service needs including legal education, recidivism prevention, and art therapy. They experience life in juvenile halls as “an oppressive situation” where they are “very insecure because they don't know the legal system ... [or] where the legal system is taking them,” says Ms. Castillo-Morrison. Legal education services might allow girls to understand the juvenile justice system, their legal rights,

and link girls to reliable and trustworthy advocates and service providers. Ms. Castillo-Morrison also finds that legal education may increase an individual sense of control, potentially reducing the sense of insecurity and oppression experienced by girls in detention centers.

Girls preparing to leave detention need services to specifically help prevent them from reoffending (Brown, 2011; Castillo-Morrison, 2011). Service providers can support girls with recidivism prevention through intense “pre-release” case management. This intense case management involves the coordination of appropriate goals, services, and the provision of constant and ongoing support by experienced and sensitive case managers. More importantly, it requires the direct involvement of girls in the planning and decision-making process that comprises their case management.

Opportunities for healthy self-expression are critical for girls. Creative therapeutic services like poetry, song, yoga, and dance serve as emotional outlets for girls. Such programming provides girls with a sense of freedom, pro-social outlets for expression, and a validating context to process physical and emotional trauma.

### ***Jumped In: What Gangs Taught Me about Violence, Drugs, Love, and Redemption***

*For more information about service provisions for gang members and the particular problems facing girls in gangs, read Dr. Jorja Leap’s new book, Jumped In: What Gangs Taught Me about Violence, Drugs, Love, and Redemption. Through oral histories, personal interviews, and eyewitness accounts of current and former gang members, Jumped In tells the story of Los Angeles’ gang members and the people who interact with them.*

*To learn more about Dr. Leap’s work and publications, please visit <http://publicaffairs.ucla.edu/jorja-leap>.*

## **Examples of Programming and Services for Girls**

This section of *Focus* will highlight some of the programming pioneers in the field of service delivery and programming for girls in gangs and girls at risk

of gang involvement. These pioneers include Girls & Gangs, Kevin Grant Consulting, Barrios Unidos, Fathers and Families of San Joaquin, and Stockton’s Operation Peacekeeper. This section of *Focus* will also describe how each program responds to the level of girls’ gang involvement and whether or not girls are detained in juvenile halls.

### ***Girls & Gangs***

Girls & Gangs is a Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization that serves girls between the ages of 12 and 18 who are involved in gangs or the juvenile justice system. Girls & Gangs provides girls pre- and post-release with holistic, gender-responsive programming that recognizes gender as a key factor in affecting and guiding services. Girls & Gangs initiates contact with girls before they are released from detention. Pre-release, the organization provides intense case management and mentoring, and, in collaboration with girls, creates an action plan that includes healing from any underlying trauma or abuse. Post-release, Girls & Gangs offers life skills trainings, advocacy, and customized services designed to work on girls’ individual needs.

Girls & Gangs provides services to official and unofficial gang members (Brown, 2011). Official gang members are girls who have been formally initiated into a gang or self-identify as gang members. Unofficial gang members have not been officially initiated into a gang or do not self-identify as gang members; however, these girls are often closely tied or heavily involved with gangs because of family, friends, or romantic partners. Although they do not self-identify as gang members, unofficial gang members receive the same Girls & Gangs services as gang members because many are frequently “on the verge” of joining the gang (Brown, 2011). Girls & Gangs provides unofficial and official gang members with the general courses and programming that requires them to reflect on their experiences as girls and as gang members or affiliates. For example, as part of this process, they are asked to think about the different gender roles and power dynamics that exist between men and women in the gang and the consequences of gang affiliation. Dawn Brown explains that, “while programming is equally intense for both groups [official and unofficial gang girls], it is easier for the

gang to let go of unofficial gang members than official gang members.” Ms. Brown’s experience points to the importance of prevention: Preventing gang participation reduces girls’ gang involvement.

### *Kevin Grant Consulting*

Kevin Grant Consulting is an Oakland-based consulting agency founded and run by Kevin Grant. Mr. Grant’s consulting agency designs, implements, and manages a range of certified programs for juvenile and adult parolees across the country. One of the many programs run by this organization is a girls group under the Alameda Probation Department. Although attending the girls group is a probation condition, Mr. Grant utilizes this program as one way to identify and support gang-involved girls interested in becoming inactive.

Mr. Grant works with girls who are officially accepted by the gang as members, and often have a gang-affiliated family member. Kevin Grant’s work with girls in gangs, due to limited funding and resources, focuses on the group that is the most difficult to serve: hard-core girls. Mr. Grant utilizes the girls group as a way to identify and target hard-core girls and engage them in opportunities that could result in desistance from gang activity. These hard-core girls are identified through multiple channels. In certain instances, probation officers pre-identify hard-core girls for Mr. Grant, based on their knowledge of individual cases. More often, however, Mr. Grant is able to identify hard-core girls based on his outreach work with adult and juvenile parolees. Mr. Grant engages hard-core girls in programs that take them out of their community, expose them to job opportunities, and build skills that can help them resist returning to old behaviors. However, Mr. Grant points out that when referring girls to programs, it is important to ensure that sensitive needs, like histories of sexual abuse, will be adequately addressed.

### *Barrios Unidos*

Barrios Unidos is a Santa Cruz-based grassroots organization that approaches programming with the

belief that, “community workers who have experienced and overcome the challenges facing young people today are best able to assist them in choosing life affirming behavior” (Barrios Unidos, 2011). Barrios Unidos works with youth and adults in the local community but also in detention, providing community outreach and economic development. Barrios Unidos works with girls in gangs through one-on-one mentorship with staff. Diana Sanchez, who works with Barrios Unidos’ Juvenile Hall and Educational Program, offers a portrait of the importance of mentorship, noting, “These young ladies ... have been ... told to [better their lives] by themselves ... but they don’t know how and they cannot ask for help” (Sanchez, Juvenile Hall and Educational Program Coordinator, 2011). Ms. Sanchez’s mentorship aims to provide girls with the help that girls themselves identify as necessary for taking their lives in a positive direction.

Barrios Unidos, thanks to Ms. Sanchez, also provides girls in gangs with *Xinachtli*. *Xinachtli* is an indigenous-based youth leadership development program that assists young women through their rites of passage. It focuses on the prevention of substance abuse, teen pregnancy, relationship violence, gang violence, and school failure (Jerry Tello, 2011). Ms. Sanchez, one of the first *Xinachtli* group facilitators in Santa Cruz County, implements *Xinachtli* at the local high schools served by Barrios Unidos, and as a private contractor through Santa Cruz County Mental Health because of the need for gender-specific programming. She says, “Oftentimes nobody thinks of gender-responsive services for girls, so I just have to advocate and put forth sheer example and sweat equity to provide these programs” (Sanchez, 2011).

Through *Xinachtli*, Barrios Unidos also provides girls with peer support. As girls proceed through the *Xinachtli* programming, they share their experiences and lessons with each other. In doing this, girls strengthen their voice and, with the support of staff like Ms. Sanchez, are able to access the resources that allow them to leave the gang.

## Fathers & Families of San Joaquin

Fathers & Families of San Joaquin is a Stockton-based grassroots non-profit organization whose mission is “to involve and engage fathers to improve the well-being of children, families and communities” (Fathers & Families of San Joaquin, About Us). Fathers & Families of San Joaquin works to address the varying needs of men, fathers, their families, and communities by providing socially relevant and culturally sensitive services, developing local leadership, unifying the efforts of exiting groups, and addressing critical problems affecting the community. Fathers & Families of San Joaquin also serves girls. Betty E. Castillo-Morrison, or as the youth she serves call her, “Grandma Betty from the hood,” supports Fathers & Families of San Joaquin in a variety of ways, including the organization’s work with girls.

Ms. Castillo-Morrison works with girls in juvenile detention centers, whether placed for a short or long period of time for a range of minor to major offences. Although Ms. Castillo-Morrison does come in contact with girls who have different degrees of involvement with gangs, the services and programs she offers girls are the same. She and the girls write poetry, read together, learn about different cultures, listen and dance to music, and engage in grief management. Ms. Castillo-Morrison’s goal is to create the conditions that allow girls to establish friendships, and a family-like environment where gang-affiliation or any other identifier that divides girls in detention is removed. In doing this, she is able to develop girls’ trust in her, address girls’ grief and trauma, build girls’ self-confidence, and, more importantly, situate girls in detention in a position where they will be able to change behaviors and environments that will allow them to transform their lives.

## Operation Peacekeeper

Stockton’s Operation Peacekeeper utilizes outreach workers to reduce gang-related violence. The program, in partnership with law enforcement, community, and faith-based organizations, engages with at-risk and gang-involved youth to provide them with the resources necessary to abstain from becoming involved

*I once knew a woman  
As she was living without direction she fell  
Fell  
Fell  
Fell*

*As she fell, she was caught by the cloud,  
then the wings of angels, and she floated  
Floated  
Floated  
Floated*

*As she floated she thought  
Thought  
Thought  
Thought*

*As she thought, she grew  
Grew  
Grew  
Grew*

*And then she knew and she flew  
Flew  
Flew  
Flew*

*To her home, life, freedom and HEART  
Love, Grandma BC from the hood*

Ms. Betty Castillo-Morrison writes poetry with girls in juvenile detention centers.

with gangs (Peacekeeper, 2011). The organization’s outreach workers, called peacekeepers, develop strong relationships with youth and essential partners, such as the schools and local service agencies, to assure that their clients will be able to access services. Recently, the Peacekeeper program has expanded to focus its outreach efforts on girls at risk of joining gangs. Outreach workers build relationships with these girls (Gomez, 2011), and once relationships and trust are established, the workers are able to evaluate girls’ needs and refer them to responsive local agencies and service providers.

## Conclusion

Gang-affiliated girls have special service needs. These needs vary depending on the level of girls’ gang affiliation, as well as whether or not girls are in detention. Girls in gangs and girls at risk of gang involvement require life skill classes, mentorship, and

peer support. Unique to girls in gangs, however, is a need for gang desistance services, as well as services that address histories of sexual abuse. Girls in juvenile halls also require unique services. These girls require assistance with understanding the legal system, preventing recidivism, and creative therapeutic services that allow them to process their emotions. A variety of individuals and programs have begun to address gang-affiliated girls' service needs. However, more research and gender-specific services are necessary.

## Resources

Fathers & Families of San Joaquin  
<http://www.ffsj.org/>

Girls & Gangs  
<http://www.girlsandgangs.org/>

Kevin Grant Consulting  
<http://www.kevingrantconsulting.com/>

Santa Cruz's Barrios Unidos  
<http://www.barriosunidos.net/>

Stockton's Operation Peacekeeper  
<http://www.stocktongov.com/government/departments/manager/peacekeepers.html>

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