
Gang Impact On Youth And Children

Abstract

The influence of gang violence and gang prominence has become a recent threat to younger generations and children. Its prominence is much higher in larger cities such as New York and Los Angeles but tends to be higher in the impoverished area. Not only is it an issue in the United States gang violence, and gang coercing has become prominent in most counties. This is especially so in counties that have fewer financial opportunities, causing younger generations to do whatever they can to provide for themselves or their families. In certain parts of the world such as El Salvador and Ethiopia it is has become life or death whether children join a gangs and many of them are forced into violence in fear that gangs may harm them and their families

Gang affiliation and violence have been around since the 19th century and has always been prominent in parts of the United States. Gang activity began around the mid-1970s in California, specifically in Los Angeles County. Several gangs have risen and impacted neighborhoods around the country, yet its most prominent impact seems to be towards the youth and children. Adolescence and children are the most impressionable due to higher content of gray matter in the brain; therefore, it is an easier target for gangs to prey on. Unfortunately, there are several more factors as to how and why gangs have a severe impact on children. Yet, not much help or refuge is available for children and families affected by gang presence. Identifying the cause and severity of the impact gangs cause towards youth and children will help prevent and ease the violence. Further investigating the causes and impact will help create resources for youth and families seeking refuge from gang violence.

The biggest impact gangs tend to have on children and youth is a false sense of family or belonging. Many of the youth who come from abusive households tend to turn to other forms of escape from abusive situations. Youth tend to turn to gangs as a second family despite the violence that continues, except the violence is no longer victimizing the youth now become the abusers or the one in power. Fragile families tend to be the most at risk of children turning to gangs for support, mainly due to economic insecurity and relationship instability (263 Krohn). Because of how fragile families are, the youth turn to whatever is most available to convenient in their situation, which tends to be gangs. Gangs tend to manipulate children and youth when they are at their most vulnerable point, and it is especially easy when children come from broken families. Since their families are so unstable, gangs can typically prey on youth by promising wealth, family, and leadership from the gangs. The youth are impressionable, especially when put in abusive family situations, so gangs are used as an extended family and means of escape from their family abuse. Unfortunately, young children and adolescence see it as such an easy way of escape that their lifelong commitment and obedience to the gang they are now in is overlooked, putting young children in the same danger they were in before.

Family history also plays a role in how negatively gangs can impact the youth, especially when families have connections to gangs or have had them in the past. Children and youth imprint on the "leaders" and older siblings of the households because these are the people they look up to and depend on. Families set an example for children and youth, especially during the concrete operational stage of development, which is from the ages 7-11 years of age. The development of

logical thought characterizes the concrete operational stage in Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Therefore, when children are exposed to gang affiliation and violence in their households, they will most likely develop the same attributes as their gang-affiliated family members because it is what they have learned throughout their development. Unfortunately, the chances that a child will commit a murder double if the child's family has a history of criminal violence, the child has a history of being abused, the child belongs to a gang, or the child abuses alcohol or drugs (122 Roufougar). The way children are nurtured has a tremendous impact on how much they learn and absorb as they are in the concrete development stage of their lives. This stage is impacted by the way the people around them act, and in gangs and violent family households, it tends to negatively impact their development of morality and right from wrong instincts. Gangs mainly use this to their advantage as violence, and gang affiliation has already been instilled into the minds of children and youth; therefore, making it much easier for young children to commit crimes and assist the gangs they are affiliated to. Unfortunately, family gang affiliation usually ends up being a cycle of violence, neglect, and abuse towards future generations of children that are brought up in homes that have connections to gangs. Gangs not only have an impact on the youth but the families of the youth as well because once families are affiliated with the gangs, it is very unlikely for them to get out of the gangs causing a cycle effect for future generations within gang-affiliated families.

Peer pressure by youth's classmates, elders, and role models has become prevalent in contributing towards the impact younger children face. Because the youth and children are in the concrete operational stage, they are very vulnerable to peer pressure from the people around them outside of their homes. Youth and children could have healthy relationships with their families but are still susceptible to coercive situations caused by their peers who are in gangs already. Adolescent children tend to be much more vulnerable and naïve compared to individuals who have fully developed critical thinking skills; therefore, coercion by their gang-affiliated peers is much easier. Adolescents are extremely vulnerable to peer pressure, thereby substantially affecting their decision making when a coercive situation presents itself. Juveniles join criminal gangs for a variety of reasons, including a desire for protection and a sense of family (246 Finelli). Gangs take advantage of the adolescent's members by using them to recruit more people of equal or similar age. Other children and youth tend to trust someone their own age over someone who is older and intimidating. Adolescent children will idolize and look up to peers who are 'cooler' and part of a group of people alike, causing them to want to join also to have that sense of family and acceptance by their peers. Some measures that are taken to recruit their peers further is by including them in their street activities as a way to demonstrate what they can do if they were to join as well. Hosting parties and organizing special events, criminal street gangs can easily target juveniles for recruitment, drug trafficking, sexual exploitation, and criminal activity (247 Finelli). By including other youth into events and activities that are exclusive to the gang, they are baiting adolescences because gangs know impressionable juveniles will also want to join. After all, it is fun and cool for them. However, this form of thinking ends up being their demise because now they are required to recruit more and provide to the gangs they are in for the rest of their lives, causing the youth to drop out of school and abandoning their families for the newer families.

In recent years gang coercion and involvement amongst immigrant and refugee youth has increased tremendously. Unfortunately, because gang involvement has increased amongst these groups of people, it has created negative connotations and stereotypes towards immigrant and refugee youth. Some of the main reasons why gangs have become so prevalent in these communities are because they are seen as easy targets to recruit. Gangs will take

advantage of their vulnerability, especially because these groups of people migrate in search of better opportunities. The youth specifically as they are much easier to coerce into joining and have usually already been exposed to violence and have it internalized as something familiar. Within the neighborhood system, exposure to community violence is a risk factor as youth who are exposed to violence may experience internalizing and externalizing difficulties, which may lead to gang involvement (Goodrum 127). Refugee and immigrant youth have typically experienced some violence in their lives, already making it easier for them to internalize it. Because gangs are inherently violent, they use threats to persuade refugee youth to join, and gangs know because refugee youth have already had experience in situations where they are forced to survive by any means. Unfortunately, a lot of blame is put on the youth for even joining gangs but allot of these youth have no choice. The immigrant and refugee youth have already given up their families and survived treacherous conditions to migrate to a new location. So, being forced to join a gang as seen as another obstacle to overcome or even as an opportunity to survive in equally treacherous conditions. Gangs tend to specifically target individuals who are desperate for survival or those who are not well adjusted to newer territories. This causes refugee and immigrant children to live lives that they were trying to escape in the first place because they were under the impression that joining would be the best means of survival for them.

In the era of the internet and social media, gangs now can further expand worldwide in terms of recruitment, harassment, violence, and dealing. Because they are now more prevalent online harassment and bullying have increased in certain media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Gangs tend to gather in these two specific social media platforms because they can control who and what they want to see or target. Gangs can search for impressionable children for recruitment and because their information is online as well, which would make it easier for gangs to locate them for recruitment and harassment. Data from the National Gang Threat Association suggest that gang members use social media to conduct drug sales, market their activities, communicate with other members, coordinate gang actions, recruit new members, and brag about acts of violence or make threats (Patton 56). Everyone has access to the internet and social media: therefore, anyone could fall victim to online gang violence. Although most people tend to stay away from gang members online, some youth and children may not perceive it the same way as an adult would. Children and youth do not think about the consequences of coming into contact with a gang member's online presence. Often, adolescents involve themselves unknowingly by being in contact with someone affiliated with a gang, thinking they want to be friends. The friendship can later turn into requests of harassing opposing gangs or people who the gang does not like in which they now become a gang affiliate. Because so much information is shared online, if the child attempts to leave or quit contributing to harassing people online, the gang, the child is affiliated with already have his contact information and will track them down. So, street gang violence has become an issue, but now online gang harassment has become as dangerous as in person. If anything, it is much easier to fall victim to gang harassment online because users can be anonymous and harder for authorities to track down compared to in real life where authorities can physically intervene.

In some parts of the world, gang affiliation is equated to masculinity and becomes an important part of manhood. To be rejected from a gang or excluded is to be emasculated and a great deal of shame for male youth and male children. In Puerto Rico and Colombia, it is especially prevalent in poorer parts of these countries where gang violence is much higher. The more violence and gang activity a young male does, the more masculine he is considered by his male peers; therefore, more respect is gained by that individual. Gang researchers in the USA noted

this, stating the gang could act as a “vehicle” for achieving manhood, particularly for youths ‘cut off from the possibility of manhood for a prolonged period”, arguing that the “gaging process” provides symbolic evidence of the “urge for manhood”...However, in general, the socio-economic exclusion is emasculating. Gang affiliation has thus been conceived as a response to emasculation by some (180, 183 Baird). Gang affiliation has become a vessel of masculinity for male youth. Still, it has also become a way to redeem male youth from being rejected and emasculated from non-gang related things such as not being able to provide or being excluded from certain work. It has become especially prevalent in New York as well now, and to be the “baddest” is to be the most masculine in the gang. Unfortunately, this has become a global issue that is not really mentioned in the impact of gangs and gang affiliation. Men and male youth are easily ostracized for being in gangs, but the root of it is never investigated, and masculinity was not seen as a contributing factor. Gangs have become a beacon for masculinity to men who have been socially excluded by their peers and turn to violence and criminal activity to regain their manhood and sense of masculinity. However, the gain of masculinity comes at a high cost and could result in incarceration and even death to young male adolescence wanting to prove themselves as a man.

In recent years there have been measures taken to help prevent the involvement of minors becoming coerced into joining street gangs and recovery for youth seeking to escape from the gangs. Some adolescences and children can seek help now that there are more resources available to help them out of violent situations. Some people have taken up becoming mentors for children and youth involved in gangs or to help prevent involvement. The mentors have past experiences in gangs or are familiar with them. This way, adolescence, and children can relate and look up to these individuals easier. Because most children and youth do not have a mentor or someone to look up to, these mentors help fill that role and help steer them into a different path in life. The program attempts to facilitate behavior change through two distinct intervention strategies. Spotlight provides support based services, which include mentorship activities and probation counseling...the second strategy is deterrence-based and aims to discourage future reinvolvement through intensive probation supervision and targeted surveillance checks by an intensive support and supervision program worker (297 Weinrath). Programs like these only work if the child or adolescent complies and wishes to get out of gang involvement, but if they are not willing to leave the gang or are incompilant, then the program will not work for the individual at all. Luckily the program does offer services to help families and youth affected by gang affiliation find safer places to live and recourses to help families and youth recover from the violence experienced from gangs. Helping families intergrade into safer environments and form better relationships with the children and youth in their families will help prevent reinvolvement with gangs and gang-affiliated individuals. Creating safe havens for youth and their families from gang involvement will lower the impact gangs have on youth and children tremendously.

Moreover, a gangs impact not only affects the youth and children but also affects their families and living environment. Youth and children are the most vulnerable to gang recruitment, overdoses, and death because of how underdeveloped they still are. There are so many factors as to how gangs have a direct impact on youth and children the ones that have caused the most impact are how gangs have affected the way youth and children live, their mental health, sense of security, masculinity, and overall living conditions. Children should not have to fear death or getting beaten by opposing gangs, nor should they have to fear to serve the gangs they were forced to join. Because the youth are still at an age where their logical thinking is not concrete and solidified yet, gangs have an easier time convincing them to join and do as they told,

despite the repercussions. Luckily, there are many more resources for families and youth trying to get out of gang affiliation and involvement safely. Some volunteers mentor children and youth with no mentor figure or need someone to help guide them in the right direction and avoid joining gangs. Being able to isolate and target the issue helps achieve what specific needs certain communities need to help eradicate gang involvement in minors. Not all communities are the same, and each has specific vulnerabilities, which is what gangs use to target children and youth in these communities. Furthermore, the impact gangs cause can be lessened and resolved by uncovering how much of an impact they cause and how they are causing has implications in the youth and children in vulnerable situations and communities.

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