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**Juveniles and Gang Activities**

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### **Juveniles and Gang Activities**

The involvement of juveniles in gang activities and juvenile delinquency is an issue that requires attention from different stakeholders to manage. According to Burfeind and Bartusch (2016), juvenile delinquency is any illegal action that would be deemed a crime if committed by an adult. Rather than a criminal undertaking, the act is delinquent when executed by a minor aged ten and seventeen. In recent years, studies have shown that many factors influence the involvement of juveniles in criminal conduct. One of the dominant factors is gang memberships. This paper discusses youths and gang activities as related to juvenile delinquency.

Growing up in adverse neighborhoods and environments where there are extreme levels of crime increases the probability of young people becoming involved in gang-related activities during their adolescence stage. Sayles (2021) defines a street gang as a cluster of regularly associating personalities with governance and in-house organization. A gang is an entity that claims control over an area or identifies with turf in society. They engage, either collectively or individually, in violence and other forms of illegal conduct. Furthermore, street gangs can be dominant in composition and size, with their memberships in hundreds or thousands and generally between twelve and twenty-four years. The gang members are linked via name or symbols and have some hierarchy level, where rank is given (Sayles, 2021). For instance, small gangs can unite under one large umbrella of a more prominent gang like the Bloods Gang in Southern California. In countries like the United States, street gangs have existed since the earliest years of crime.

Though gang activities were not dominant before the nineteenth century, the history of street gangs started gaining prominence in the late years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the United States as soon as the American Revolution ended. The emergence of street gangs was also fueled by

the poverty occasioned by large-scale immigration into the country. Many people came to America, mainly from European countries, in search of better economic fortunes. These immigrants settled in towns in the Northeastern region. However, due to their poor marketing skills, they found it hard to secure meaningful work, hence unable to earn income. The immigrants comprised poor households, who were forced by circumstances to live in crowded tenement buildings without adequate social amenities like water and bathrooms. The dream of a good life they sought by immigrating to the United States appeared far from their reach. As a result of hard times, crime rates began to rise in the region.

At the same time, Los Angeles, El Paso, and Albuquerque witnessed an influx of Mexican immigrants from Mexico moving to Los Angeles. This mass immigration fueled the spark of serious street gangs that reflected the polarization of the different ethnic communities. For instance, there was a combination of African-Americans, Latino-Hispanic, Asians, Latin America, and other groups that populated the entire gangland. The new gang philosophy led to juvenile delinquency, pitting adolescents against each other in clashes to dominate the changing localities and create and maintain their zones and honor.

In recent years, the number of gangs has increased, with their memberships growing tremendously. In the United States alone, the number of criminal gangs has risen by 40% in the last decade. Presently, these gangs are in every state and district. Such lineups in a neighborhood pose a threat to other citizens because they are synonymous with violence, and they target young and vulnerable juveniles for recruitment. Presently, America has more than 24,500 youth gangs that accommodate close to a million youth members. The figures account for close to 7% of the teen population of the United States. Furthermore, once these juveniles are recruited into these gangs, they are exposed to a life of criminal behavior. Nonetheless, it is possible to protect young

individuals from these gangs and prevent juvenile delinquency by understanding what leads them to join these groups.

One of the theories that best explain juveniles and gang association is the Social Disorganization Theory, which attempts to describe crime and delinquency in the context of social control. The theory highlights that the absence of social bonds at the society level is responsible for increasing juvenile delinquency cases like gang activity among youth. The major highlight of the Social Disorganization Theory is that juvenile conduct arises because the institutional structures that exist in the adolescent offender's environment have collapsed (Bellair, 2017). Entire neighborhoods are socially disorganized, lack cohesiveness and constraint that can limit crime and delinquency. The inability to achieve social order and exert informal social control creates a favorable environment for delinquent behavior to thrive. Experts who have studied juvenile delinquency and the breakdown in societal bonds suggest that the problems with juveniles joining gangs' connect to three issues; one is the community's economic status, the second is community heterogeneity, and the last is the mobility of such societies (Bellair, 2017). Poverty increases residential mobility, and societal heterogeneity has destabilized the societal fabric of social bond and control and has led to juvenile delinquency.

Since social disorganization is rampant in urban settings because of societal elements like growth and development, adolescents in these areas are exposed to scenarios where they lack conformity, uniformity, and universality to conventional social norms (Bellair, 2017). In this regard, the teenagers in these environments incline towards delinquent conduct and criminal activities, occasioned by poor social circumstances that limit their chances of prospering. In essence, the lack of institutional structures can result in adolescents developing antisocial conduct like bullying, aggression, and delinquency. In addition to that, just like in other theories,

the Social Disorganization Theory relates delinquent behavior and crime to the prevailing environment. Bellair (2017) argues that factors like inherent socioeconomic inequalities, residential instability, urbanization, rapid social change, among others, weaken the capacity of the society to decide the standard norms of social control. These environmental issues weaken the bonds adolescents have with their communities regarding attachments, feelings, and commitment. In the end, such circumstances merge with feeble familiar social control methods to trigger delinquency.

Again, youth gangs are well-established, with clear ranks and a decision-making hierarchy. Regardless of the youth leadership in question, a well-established neighborhood gang will have the overall head who will decide which juvenile joins the gang and those not allowed to join such entities. Once a young person has been accorded an opportunity to join a gang, they are taken through the sanctification process, also called the right of passage, before being a gang member. Just like other social groups, the initiation process is used to decide whether the new inductees are physically and mentally ready to be worthy of the gang's membership. In simple terms, they want members who will not flee at the first sign of trouble with the authorities, which explains the number of youths ready to die for their gangs to achieve their objectives. The initiation process ensures the transmission of the gang's meaning and purpose of existence.

Furthermore, some recruits in these youth gangs are ready and willing to do anything to be accepted into these gangs. Commonly, new gang members are initiated using violent processes that the crew considered an act of love. McLoughlin (2016) suggested that in many cases, the young inductees are beaten thoroughly by the gang members using tools like brass knuckles and baseball bats in a period not less than thirty seconds. This initiation method is used to determine whether a new member of the youth gang can fight to preserve the gang's territory

and reputation. According to McLoughlin (2016), having excellent fighters is a plus for such entities because it reduces the number of fights the unit will need to engage in. Though violence as a means of initiation is directed at new gang members, the process can vary between different gangs. For instance, in some teams, the initiates are required to go on a mission. The initiates are forced to engage in acts of lawlessness, usually against rival gangs and in rival turfs. For example, such units can send the initiates to carry out armed robbery, assault, transport prohibited drugs, and write graffiti on enemy territory. Also, there are radical forms of initiations like drive-by shootings and rape. Subsequently, such violent conduct has implications for the community and juveniles who engage in such gang-related violence.

The countless implications resulting from juvenile gang involvement can have varying levels of medium and long-term adverse aftermaths. For instance, juveniles who engage in gang-related activities face the likelihood of quitting school, teen parenthood, drug abuse, juvenile incarceration, among others (Van Ngo et al., 2017). In addition, juveniles who engage in gang activities at an early age are likely to experience economic turmoil in their adult life. Apart from the youth involved in gang activities, their conduct as a gang also affects their society. Gang activities, especially those related to gang wars, lead to the death of young people with a lot of potentials. Where deaths are unlikely, many adolescents will end up with long-term injuries that render them immobile and unproductive in the community. According to Van Ngo et al. (2017), communities with youth-related gang activities are affected by petty theft issues, undesirable economic consequences, assault, vandalism, illegal drug business, and increased cases of homicide involving juveniles.

As a result, society lives in fear because their lives, that of their close relatives, the schools, and businesses become victims of violence and theft. These problems lead to much-

sider societal issues like chronic illnesses and mental health issues, especially among the juveniles themselves or their close family members who cannot make peace because their children are gang members. Additionally, youth gangs within the school environment are disruptive to the learning process because they instill fear among other students and increase violence within the school environment. The impact of youth engagement in gang activities is manifested in different ways. However, some strategies can be adopted, including identifying the early warning signs of gang activity among adolescents.

The process of initiating adolescents into gangs does not happen overnight. It is a continuous process that allows for some of the signs of gang involvement to be detected. The most fundamental symptoms include; change in the music genre, change of wardrobe, gang signs of personal effects, change of friends, and withdrawal from family. Also, a decline in performance in classwork, an increase in indiscipline cases at school, encounters with law enforcement agents, and vast amounts of cash that one cannot explain, among others. Other signs can include the use of specific hand signals to communicate with their peers and breaking curfew. According to Bushman et al. (2016), wannabees who aspire to join youth gangs will adopt the languages and styles used by their preferred crews; hence, they will likely be marked as potential candidates by the gang members. In addition to that, adolescents who have unexplained injuries or drug use can also indicate gang relations.

Nonetheless, since some of these signs are common with different youths, for instance, musical preference or clothing style, it is essential for parents, teachers, and law enforcement officers to look for multiple signs that can help determine the possibility of gang relations among the youths. Suppose an adolescent is suspected of gang association, they should be accorded immediate assistance and early intervention should be deployed.

According to Longfield (2019), early detection deterrence policies that target high-risk adolescents must be implemented if the youths are to be saved from gang relations and activities. For progress to be made, society must first scrutinize the gang problem and use the assessment to develop a community-centric range of responses. These interventions must involve the community, representatives from the government like law, the police, parents, political and religious leaders, and probation officers, former gang members who have reintegrated into the community, non-governmental entities, and the local administration (Longfield, 2019). These stakeholders must collaborate to develop interventions and remedial strategies, integrating community sensitization programs and support services. Furthermore, societies that consolidate and marshal themselves using research-based strategies that focus their resources to effectively deter the formation of gangs, hence avoiding the resulting criminal conducts of such entities.

Notably, there are various ways of working with the youth to limit delinquent behavior in early prevention approaches. For instance, society can direct focus at an individual level on the high-risk categories of adolescents. Other prevention approaches include working at the school, family, and community levels to enhance protective and surveillance strategies. Pardini (2016) suggests that the community and various stakeholders must collaborate to offer aid to the juveniles involved in gang activities. These interventions should target locations where gang activities are prominent and severe. Examples of intervention strategies in such areas include the treatment and management of drug and alcohol use, job teaching and employment, counseling services, tattoo removal, legal aid, mentoring, and community integration.

Also, law enforcement officers have a significant role in dealing with juveniles and their gang-related menace. Some of the actions police can take to make contact with the families of adolescents suspected of engaging in delinquent behavior. Furthermore, the police can directly

intervene in cases where there is gang-related violence, conduct patrols in locations where youth gangs are known to operate, conducting community civic engagement drives to address and highlight incidences of gang violence involving known adolescents in the community. At the same time, communities should remain vigilant, especially where incarcerated gang members, who have served jail sentences, are returning to the community. These former inmates can influence juveniles into engaging in gang activities by recruiting them to form new gangs. In this regard, Pardini (2016) argues that there must be community-based strategies that deal with reintegrating such individuals back into society in a gradual manner. For instance, one of the strategies that human rights activists have championed is adopting gang suppression methods that rehabilitate some of the violent gang members and the criminally active minors. Though there is no single solution that can work on all of the problems resulting from the activities of juvenile gangs, once the society is determined to deal with the menace, they are in an advantageous position. The community gets a head start developing strategic plans in deterring juvenile gang activities, their development, progression, and full-establishment.

To sum it up, the influence of gang activities on juveniles is long-lasting and weighty. Furthermore, the consequences of juvenile involvement in gang activities and the resulting burden on society are detrimental to the progress of a community and a country. Youths drop out of school and resort to using drugs and other unwarranted substances harmful to their health. In this regard, deterrence, mediation, and clampdown strategies are crucial to solve the rampant youth gang menace. Nonetheless, to achieve a lasting solution, stakeholders like parents, teachers, community and political leaders, and law enforcement officers must adopt a radical approach in their thinking to help manage juvenile gang relations. Only then will the menace be dealt with and prevent its cascading effect on the community.

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