

Getting Serious About Community-Based Approaches to Youth Violence Prevention

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In their paper “A Community-Based Systems Learning Approach to Understanding Youth Violence in Boston,”¹ Bridgewater and colleagues demonstrate the complexity involved in reaching a deep understanding of the etiology and escalation of youth violence, especially in relation to gang membership and gang violence. Indeed, gang activity continues to be a prevalent issue in the United States. Recent national surveys have shown that in all jurisdictions served by city and county law enforcement agencies, 32.4 percent reported experiencing gang problems.² An additional concern is that a significant portion of gang members are youth, with members under the age of 18 making up approximately 37 percent of gangs.³ The Youth Violence Systems Project (YVSP) represents a unique attempt to understand the dynamic nature of youth violence and gang involvement with the explicit goal of determining where prevention efforts should be targeted. This is accomplished with a group model-building process in which community members and researchers enter into a “real” partnership at each stage of model development, evaluation, refinement, and simulation (through focus groups, neighborhood briefs, academic-community advisory board input). As I will briefly articulate in the following paragraphs, this community-based systems learning approach advances both theory and practice in the area of youth violence prevention, but also suggests the need for refinement and expansion of the models.

CONTINUUM OF GANG INVOLVEMENT

Although considerable research has been conducted on youth gang involvement, an agreed upon definition of what constitutes a gang is still lacking. Different definitions are employed for researchers, theorists, and policy makers. However, it is universally agreed that gang involvement co-occurs with violent behavior even above and beyond youth who engage in delinquent behaviors.⁴ What is often missing from these investigations is the recognition that there are multiple pathways to gang involvement. Bridgewater and colleagues demonstrate convincingly that youth enter gangs and engage in gang-related activities in different ways. In Figure 4, the authors indicate how youth can be uninvolved, off the edge members, rookie members, and rogue members. These roles then cross with the level of organization of the gang and gun use. These models are generated from data that were gathered from the multiple methods of assessment, from interviews to focus groups. Transposed on this flowchart is the dynamic movement of youth across these gang member roles and the targeted interventions to reduce progression from uninvolved to more organized shooter gang involvement. From a prevention standpoint, these models offer communities multiple entry points of intervention, which is demonstrated through the 12-year simulation to “clear the streets.” It will be imperative to determine the impact of targeted community-based interventions on the movement across gang roles. It would be equally important to determine whether efficacy varies depending on the extent to which individual youth are entrenched in the gang community.

COMPREHENSIVE THEORY BUILDING

Much of the earlier research on gangs focused on the activities of gang members and the negative consequences of gang involvement. Considerable research has also attempted to understand the motivation of youth to become involved in gangs. Bridgewater and colleagues drew upon multiple theories to develop their models, but their models appear to be heavily informed by the constructs of addiction or affinity to violence, community trauma, and the cycle of maintaining gang reputation and identity

through the use of violence. It would be important to expand these models to include other aspects of the youth's ecology more directly, including peer networks to assess deviancy and influence, family disruption, and community safety issues.⁵

Bronfenbrenner's classic ecological framework illustrates the system levels that exist within youth development. It explains the person-environmental factors that are organized in a contextual depiction where the levels of the framework consist of the microsystem or the immediate social environment, (e.g., roles, relationships, and activities); mesosystem or social environment impacting development indirectly (e.g., parental employment setting; school administration issues; peer group in school); exosystem (e.g., parents' friends; activities of teachers at school); and macrosystems, which focuses on broader societal factors (e.g., socioeconomic status, culture).

Additionally, a social control theory of gang involvement posits that youth who lack strong attachments to family, adults, the school or other social agencies are more likely to become involved in gangs because they have not internalized conventional, nonviolent norms.⁶ Neighborhood factors may include availability and access to drugs or being in neighborhoods where other youth are engaged in deviant behavior.⁷ It may also include concerns for safety due to violence or feelings of a need for protection.⁸ Often neighborhoods with a high prevalence of gangs will also make the youth fearful of victimization, which may then serve as a catalyst for joining a gang. Involvement with delinquent peers has been identified as a precursor to becoming involved in gangs,⁹ where peers serve to strengthen beliefs and attitudes about the perceived benefits of joining a gang. Therefore, for those youth who lack strong social bonds to parents or other social institutions, deviant peers can serve as a strong influence. Lower commitment to school and increased academic difficulties has also been shown to increase the risk of gang involvement. These variables need to be considered in the Youth Violence Systems Project (YVSP) simulation because peer, family, and school ecologies could exacerbate gang involvement or they could contribute to desistance in gang involvement.

WHAT ABOUT GIRLS?

Until recently, much of the gang research has focused predominately on the experiences of males, with less attention given to how the process of gang initiation unfolds for females. This is unfortunate given an increased awareness that females are involved with gang activity and make up a significant portion of gang membership. While the number of female gang members is difficult to ascertain, some researchers believe that female gang membership is between 10 and 35 percent,¹⁰ with some studies showing the numbers to be as high as 20 to 46 percent.¹¹ It stands to reason that the dynamic movement through the gang roles could be different for females than males. Girls join gangs in some cases to seek refuge from victimization in the home, but at the same time, are at-risk for subsequent victimization from gang members. Bridgewater and colleagues find support for the feedback loop between community trauma and youth violence and I would suggest that this relation will be even stronger for girls in gangs given that they are likely to marry a gang member.¹²

CONCLUSION

Bridgewater and colleagues describe a complex, multi-faceted approach to community-based systems learning approach to youth violence prevention, which allows for data from multiple reporters into a computer model to illustrate the dynamic nature of gang involvement. This level of innovation is unprecedented in most youth prevention research programs. The authors are too be commended for this innovation, but are also realistic about how relationships among community stakeholders need to be developed, fostered, and maintained or no level of innovation will be effective. Active and effective listening, communication-building, and respect need to be encouraged at every stage of community-based prevention/intervention efforts. Only then will we get serious about youth violence prevention.

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