

Gang Violence

The Church and Gang Violence: Why the BPFNA Cares

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Why is the BPFNA concerned about gang violence? In August 2010, I represented the BPFNA at the annual gathering of the Progressive National Baptist Convention. Running our booth gave me lots of opportunities to talk with pastors and lay leaders of African-American churches throughout the country. Whenever someone stayed around for a conversation, I would ask, "What are some of the key challenges that your church faces?" About 90% of the people I asked had the same answer: "Gangs."

In some cases the presenting issue was keeping young church members out of gangs. In others it was convincing senior members that it was safe to attend worship. In still others, it was a desire to reach out to neighborhood youth already involved in violent and self-destructive behavior. Yet the core issue was the same – gang violence is affecting these churches, and they want to do something about it.

Surely, the challenges they face are not unique, nor is their desire to work for positive change. While some congregations have well-developed programs already in place, others struggle to know how to begin or how to assess whether what they are doing is effective. I came home with a conviction that the BPFNA could and should be a help to these churches.

We in the BPFNA won't become experts on gangs, but the good news is that we don't have to. Many people, churches, community groups, and (perhaps most important) collaborations of all of the above are already experts – doing excellent, informed, effective work. Our job is to connect those who want to know more with those who are already informed and active. This publication is an effort to do just that – to provide some information, but more importantly to provide connections and identify potential partners for churches looking to reduce gang violence.

Like all deep justice-based issues, gang violence will not be eliminated by any one church, no matter how well-intentioned or hard-working. Each and every church can, however, make a difference and be a part of the solution, especially when working in close cooperation with others. We pray that this publication will assist you as you discern, begin, or continue what God has called you to do about gang violence. ■

The Church: Embodiment of Hope

Rev. K. Frances (Fran) Cook
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The Rev. Fran Cook is a Baptist pastor whose ministry is lived out through Gang of One, the gang violence reduction initiative of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department in North Carolina. She shares here her thoughts on why the Church has a unique place in fighting gang violence....

The number of criminal street gangs is growing. Historically considered a problem of the inner-city poor, gangs are now expanding into small towns and rural communities and recruiting youth of all ages, classes, and ethnicities into membership.

In gangs, some youth discover a sense of belonging, excitement, and a "family" with one leader and one code by which all must live or suffer the consequences. It seems like just what they desire until reality sets in. They are asked to steal, sell drugs, or fight; a friend is shot, their family or their life is threatened by rival gang, or their own gang turns on them. Only then does the gang take on new meaning for them – the gang is not the hope they sought but the continuation of the despair they had hoped to escape.

The Church has a unique opportunity to restore "living hope" in these youth (1 Peter 1.4), the kind of hope in which they discover a sense of new life, love, and acceptance. By reaching out to them, the Church can stem the tide of gang membership by "recruiting" youth for church membership and offering hope in the form of caring relationships and positive programs.

Churches already keep many youth out of gangs through their people and programs. If called to do more, churches can:

- **Become educated about gangs**
- **Become more visible and vocal**
- **Be a safe place for vulnerable youth**
- **Start or expand a youth program**
- **Partner with other congregations or agencies**
- **Replace the gang**

By outreach to new youth, youth who may be at risk of joining gangs, churches embody the living hope and good news that we are children of the same God and members of the same human family. ■

The Community Collaborative Model – A Methodology

A comprehensive model of working against gang violence is multi-faceted and involves many people and groups working together. The model below, based on years of research and experience, includes: work to create positive forces to make young people less susceptible to gangs, to reduce the influence of active gangs, and to reintegrate offenders into the community to reduce the risk of reentering a gang.

Reviewing this list might raise some helpful questions. What is your church already doing? What are other groups in your neighborhood already doing? What is missing? Is God calling you to fill that gap? What resources and potential partners already exist to assist your congregation in doing what God asks you to do?

1. Primary Prevention

Focuses on populations living in high crime, high-risk areas, includes programs that address risk and protective factors.

- After-school Programs, Summer Camps
- Prenatal, Infancy, and Family Health Support
- Parenting, Financial, ESL & SSL Classes
- Citizenship Training
- Job Training
- Gang Education

2. Secondary Prevention

Identifies children and youth at higher risk and provides services to prevent delinquency and gang involvement. Window of opportunity: ages 7-14.

- School-based, Community-based, and Faith-based Programs
- Mentoring/Tutoring, Athletic, and Drama and Arts Programs
- Conversational Spanish Classes for Service Providers
- Educational/GED & Vocational Services
- Gang Resistance Training

3. Intervention

Targets active gang members and close associates, requires aggressive outreach, ongoing recruitment and careful planning and coordination, requires multi-disciplinary team for assessment, intervention planning, and case management.

- Truancy & Drop-out Teams
- GED & Vocational Services
- Alternative Activities
- Job Training & Placement
- Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services
- Emergency Room Intervention & Victim Services
- Gang Member “Call In”

4. Suppression

Targets active gang leaders for aggressive suppression, involves law enforcement, probation, and prosecution; removes dangerous and influential gang members from the community by effective use of intelligence, targeting, and vertical prosecution.

- GangNet
- Geomapping & Tracking
- Legislation – Federal, State, Ordinances

5. Reentry

Provides ex-offender, ex-gang members with support services for successful return to the community.

- System of Support
- GED & Vocational Services
- Job Training & Placement
- Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services
- Housing

Why Do Young People Join Gangs?

Understanding why young people join gangs is essential in working to prevent gang involvement and to rescue young people who are already gang-involved. Based on this understanding of what puts young people at risk, what programs already existing within your church serve to reduce gang violence? How might it change your motivation and energy to understand these programs as a real means of saving young people in your church and neighborhood? What else might God empower you to do to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors for the young people within your sphere of influence?

Young people join gangs for a variety of reasons, some of which are the same reasons children join other pro-social groups.

Some of the reasons for joining a gang may include:

- A search for love, structure and discipline
- A sense of belonging and commitment
- The need for recognition and power
- Companionship, training, excitement and activities
- A sense of self-worth and status
- A place of acceptance
- The need for physical safety and protection
- A family tradition

Risk Factors for Joining a Gang

Racism: When young people encounter both personal and institutional racism (i.e., systematic denial of privileges), the risks are increased. When groups of people are denied access to power, privileges, and resources, they will often form their own anti-establishment group.

Poverty: A sense of hopelessness can result from being unable to purchase wanted goods and services. Young people living in poverty may find it difficult to meet basic physical and psychological needs which can lead to a lack of self-worth and pride. One way to earn cash is to join a gang involved in the drug trade.



Lack of a support network: Gang members often come from homes where they feel alienated or neglected. They may turn to gangs when their needs for love are not being met at home. Risks increase when the community fails to provide sufficient youth programs or alternatives to violence.

Media influences: Television, movies, radio, and music all have profound effects on youth development. Before youth have established their own value systems and are able to make moral judgments, the media promotes drugs, sex, and violence as an acceptable lifestyle.

Protective Factors

Well-developed social and interpersonal skills
High sense of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and personal responsibility
Reflectivity, rather than impulsive thought and behavior
Internal locus of control (i.e., the belief of being able to influence environment in a positive manner)
Flexible coping strategies, well-developed problem-solving skills and intellectual abilities

Gang Prevention

Youth gang involvement is not a new phenomenon in the United States. Gangs have been known to exist in our country since the 18th-century. Philadelphia was trying to devise a way to deal with roaming youth disrupting the city in 1791. According to the National School Safety Center, officials in New York City acknowledged having gang problems as early as 1825. The gang problem is not likely to go away soon or to be eliminated easily.

Here are a few gang-prevention strategies:

The family and the community are essential to the development of the child's social, emotional, and physical needs. If the family is the source of love, guidance, and protection that youths seek, they are not forced to search for these basic needs from a gang. The family and community share responsibility for teaching children the risk of drugs.

Strong education and training are directly related to a youth's positive development. Young people who successfully participate in and complete education have greater opportunities to develop into reasonable adults.

Graffiti removal reduces the chance that crimes will be committed. Since gangs use graffiti to mark their turf, advertise themselves, and claim credit for a crime, quick removal is essential.

Conflict resolution programs teach gangs how to deal better with conflicts and help eliminate gang intimidation tactics.

Recreational programs such as sports, music, drama and community activities help build a sense of self-worth and self-respect in young people. Youth involved in such activities are less likely to seek membership in a gang.

—from Research Review: Gang Violence and Prevention by Mary H. Lees, M.A., Human Development Department; Mary Deen, M.A., Extension Youth Development Specialist; and Louise Parker, Ph.D., Extension Family Economics Specialist; Washington State University

The Ten Point Plan for the 21st Century

from the Boston TenPoint Coalition

This well-researched and successful plan offers a model for other communities wishing to reduce gang violence. What can your church do toward these priorities? What might you do to promote an equally comprehensive plan for your community?

The Ten Point Plan for the 21st Century are actions to help youth develop more positive and productive lifestyles....

1. Promote and campaign for a cultural shift to help reduce youth violence, both physically and verbally within the Black community by initiating conversations, introspection and reflection on the thoughts and actions that hold us back as a people; individually and collectively.
2. Develop, as churches, a curriculum regarding Black and Latino history with an emphasis on the struggles of women of color to help young people understand that the God of history has been and remains active in all our lives.
3. Acknowledge and respond to the impact of trauma as a physical and emotional reality on the lives of our young people and their families as a direct result of violence.
4. Build meaningful relationships with high-risk youth by recognizing their reality on their terms and in their spaces.
5. Focus specially on connecting and rebuilding the lives of youth who have been incarcerated and stigmatized by mainstream society.
6. Provide youth advocacy and one-on-one mentoring for high-risk youth.
7. Provide gang mediation and intervention for high-risk youth with the goal of establishing cease-fires and building the foundation for active peace.
8. Establish accountable, community-based economic development projects that are organic visions of revenue generation and demystify the accumulation and power of money through financial literacy.
9. Build partnerships with the social/secular institutions of our city, with suburban and downtown communities of faith to help provide spiritual, human and material support.
10. Provide ongoing training for individual churches along with a systematic program in leadership development to create, maintain, and sustain community mobilization.

—The Boston TenPoint Coalition works to mobilize the community on behalf of a primarily African American and Latino population at high risk for violence, drug abuse, and other destructive behavior. www.bostontenpoint.org



Parent Resource Guide

Many excellent basic free resources exist which your church can make available to parents, grandparents, and interested others within your church. This is but one example. (See resource guide at right to learn how to order this and other similar guides.)

How can you keep your child from joining a gang?

Here are a few ideas:

- Get your child involved in quality, out-of-school time activities such as sports, music, or art
- Volunteer at your child's school
- Establish rules; set limits; be consistent, firm, and fair
- Get to know your child's friends and their parents
- Listen to your child
- Show respect for your child's feelings and attitudes
- Do not buy or allow your child to buy gang-style clothing
- Become educated about gang activity in your community
- Know where your child is at all times
- Demonstrate love and acceptance at home

When should you be concerned about your child's possible involvement in a gang? When s/he:

- Admits to having friends who are gang members or gang associates
- Is obsessed with one particular color or style of clothing
- Withdraws from and shows disrespect toward your family
- Associates with new, unknown or undesirable friends
- Shows excessive need for secrecy and privacy
- Is obsessed with gang-influenced music, videos, or movies to the point of imitation
- Uses hand signals (not American sign language) while with friends and practices them at home

When should you be concerned about your child's possible involvement in a gang? If there is evidence or the appearance of:

- Physical injury and your child will not discuss the events surrounding the injury
- Peculiar drawings or language on notebooks
- Unknown tattoos
- Possible use of alcohol and drugs with an attitude change
- Unexplained cash or goods, i.e. clothing or jewelry

What if my child is already in a gang? It is difficult but possible to get out:

- Don't try to handle the situation on your own - get help
- Let your child know that you are there for them
- Let your child know that there are other people and agencies there for them
- Let your child also know that these same people are observing their behavior, sending a clear message that the community is not going to tolerate any gang infiltration

Resources

This publication is meant to be only an introduction to the work your church can do to prevent gang violence. Below you'll find some resources to go deeper – including models of effective violence reduction work, further information about gangs and gang violence, and free online publications.

Some effective models:

The Boston TenPoint Coalition www.bostontenpoint.org
Mobilizes the community on behalf of a primarily African American and Latino population at high risk for violence, drug abuse, and other destructive behavior. The web site offers a comprehensive look at their work which offers a model for other communities.

CeaseFire Chicago www.ceasefirechicago.org
Using the Boston model, and mindful of violence as a public health issue, the Chicago Project added community and public education components and involves churches and clergy. Launched in one of the city's most violent communities in 2000, the program was quick to produce results reducing shootings by 67% in its first year.

Some sources of further information:

The Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org
OJJDP provides US government-sponsored studies on youth violence and juvenile delinquency.

STRYVE www.safeyouth.org
A national (US) initiative, led by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which takes a public health approach to preventing youth violence before it starts. Resources include access to up-to-date information, effective strategies & online training.

Focus Adolescence Services www.focusas.com/Gangs
Provides a wealth of information, resources, and support on a variety of teen and family issues. Provides excellent basic gang/violence prevention information as well as further resources and links.

The National Gang Center www.nationalgangcenter.gov
The latest information about anti-gang programs and a wide range of links and resources, including the downloadable flyer *Parents' Guide to Gangs in English and Spanish* and The Strategic Planning Tool (SPT), an electronic tool to assist communities in assessing their gang problems and planning strategies to deal with those problems.

Some free on-line resources:

A Parent's Quick Reference Card: Recognizing and Preventing Gang Involvement
www.justice.gov/usao/fls/CBI/MISC/WhatParentsCanDo.pdf

What Shall We Then Do? A Family Freedom Kit for Prisoner Aftercare
Designed to prepare churches and communities to open their doors to returning citizens and their families, this holistic tool is available to you as a free download at: www.nationalministries.org/justice_ministries/prisoner_re-entry/family_freedom_kit_wswn.pdf

Prisoner Re-entry and Aftercare Ministry Toolkit
www2.nationalministries.org/justice_ministries/prisoner_re-entry/PrisonerRe-entryToolkit.pdf

Prisoner Re-entry and Aftercare: Churches as Stations of Hope (The Christian Citizen, Volume 2, 2010)
www.nationalministries.org/resources/christian_citizen/docs/christiancitizen_vol_2_2010.pdf

This publication was compiled by LeDayne McLeese Polaski and published by BPFNA ~ Bautistas por la Paz. Many thanks to the Rev. K. Frances Cook, Director of the Gang of One Program and Certified Gang Specialist with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, for her help, advice and encouragement in the completion of this document.