Combating Gang Violence Requires Extensive Approach

Law enforcement has been working to combat gang violence for decades, but despite their efforts many cities are still facing the danger of gang violence.

Don Josi, professor and chair of Criminal Justice at South University – Savannah, says there has been an explosion of gang violence in recent years. “Every urban city has gang problems,” he says.

Education into the root causes of gang violence is key to starting efforts in gang prevention and intervention. Josi says people join gangs because they can relate to the other members and form a common bond with them. “For many, it is the first positive reinforcement they have experienced,” he says.

According to Jim Allen, a self-identified member of the Vice Lord Nation gang in Chicago, a gang serves multiple purposes for its members.

Social and economic factors often push young people into seeking gang membership.

“To us, gangs serve as a social, educational, political, and economical group for men and women,” he says.

“The first fraternal order most at-risk children join are gangs,” Allen continues. “A youngster can be gang-affiliated at the age of 10 or 11, but initiation comes at an older age.”

Once a person is initiated into a gang, Allen says, they are typically free to leave the group if they wish to do so.

“Most gangs will allow a person to freely leave, and some require blood,” Allen says. ‘In other words, ‘blood in, blood out.’ “

Regardless of whether a person leaves a gang, Allen says members have a bond.

“If you come from the streets and you were ever initiated with a gang, that experience stays with you,” he says.

Many say positive change begins with taking on common stereotypes associated with gangs.

“There is a difference between a gang member and gang-banging,” Allen says. “Gang-bangers are people who are members of a group that commit criminal acts i.e. the bankers and Wall Street CEOs who drove America into a deep recession. Nevertheless, not all gang members are gang-bangers.”

In communities where gang activity has become a way of life, Allen says awareness and dedication are necessary to help end crime and violence. He says it also requires a joint effort between law enforcement, local officials, and current and former gang members.

“In the streets, reason and logic don’t always win,” he says. “It’s very challenging. It takes a skilled person to implement programs of peace in these communities. That person has to be instilled in the game and know the situation.”

Josi agrees that it is helpful for current and former gang members to work with police, adding that current gang members can provide most current information. “If you’re out of the gang for one year, you’re completely out of the loop,” Josi says. “It would be like going to an ex-spouse and asking for keys to the house and combinations to the safe.”

Combating gang activity is a priority for many local police departments that has extended up to the federal government level. Earlier this year, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder said the Obama administration will offer its full support on initiatives focused on preventing gang violence.

Meanwhile, there are a number of programs focused on helping individuals break away from the gang lifestyle.

Gangstyle, a web resource for gang members and former gang members, provides readers with the information and support to help them disassociate with their gangs and create a new lifestyle.
Bor D, site administrator, says that the main purpose of Gangstyle is to provide a place for expression and shared experiences.

“Beyond gang divisions there is that shared experience of pain and loss that is common regardless of the gang you represent,” Bor D says.

Another organization, Houston-based Prison Entrepreneurship Program (PEP) gives incarcerated former gang members a chance to turn their lives around. This nonprofit organization works to connect convicted felons with top business executives, Master of Business Administration (MBA) students, and politicians, who serve as mentors.

David Joekel, PEP executive relations manager, says that the mentors constructively redirect the inmates’ ambitions by equipping them with values-based training in entrepreneurship, which enables them to productively re-enter society.

The PEP provides graduates with job placement and training. They also offer participants services such as transitional housing, transportation assistance, and enrollment in PEP’s post release continuing education program.

Many PEP participants are former gang members.

“We do not recruit inmates who are still involved with their gangs,” Joekel says. “However, former gang members have been some of most successful participants of our program. They already have innate leadership qualities and experience with many aspects of entrepreneurship.”

Davis Nguyen, a former gang member and PEP graduate, is one of the program’s many success stories.

“After roaming the ‘streets’ for more than seven years, and participating in that negative life style the first five years of prison, it finally got old,” Nguyen says. “My life wasn’t turning out the way I wanted, or imagined, so I had to make a change.”

Nguyen learned of PEP after founder, Catherine Rohr, visited the prison where he was incarcerated to recruit future participants. Rohr accepted him into the program and made him one of her Peer Educators.

Since joining the program, Nguyen has been released from prison and is currently a full-time undergraduate finance student at the University of Houston. He also works part-time as a development associate for PEP.

Nguyen credits PEP for helping him to achieve his dream of attending. He says PEP provides him with the resources he needs to achieve his goals, teaches him accountability, and provides support when he starts to waiver.

Nguyen encourages troubled gang members who wish to leave their negative lifestyle in the past to stand strong.

“There are times when your old lifestyle will creep in and tempt you, but you must have courage to withstand it,” Nguyen says. “Also, sometimes you know where you want to go, but don’t know how to get there. Find yourself a mentor or a positive role model to help guide you along the correct path.”

Joekel says that PEP has 620 graduates to date, with a recidivism rate of less than 10%. PEP graduates have obtained a wide range of jobs, from waiting tables, to hedge fund managers.