

# Responding to the Needs of Youth Associating with Juvenile Gangs

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# Today's Topics:

- Introduction
- Gangs in Northern Virginia – Understanding Gang Involvement and the current nature of Gang Activity in Northern Virginia
- Gang Involvement in the context of Risk, Victimization, and Trauma - signs and indicators
- The role of helping professionals- how to respond appropriately and effectively to concerns about gang involvement and / or victimization by gangs
- Resources



Northern Virginia  
Family Service

# Intervention, Prevention, and Education

- The IPE Program of NVFS is an asset development intervention designed to increase the protective factors that ensure that gang involved youth, and youth at risk for gang involvement, have increased abilities to resist the destructiveness of gang involvement.
  - NVFS is the direct service provider of intervention and prevention services for the Northern Virginia Regional Gang Task Force.

# Who does IPE help?

- IPE Services are geared toward helping specific types of youth and families affected by gang involvement:
- Youth at risk but not yet involved – Prevention Cases
- Gang Involved Youth - Intervention Cases
- Youth and Families Victimized by Gangs
  - Victims of gang controlled trafficking
  - Victims of gang violence
  - Victims of gang intimidation and threats

# IPE Service Components:

## I. Individual and Family Services

- Effective prevention and intervention services include a combination of **intensive case management** and specific **interventions** designed to provide youth with the tools to resist gang involvement.

## II. Group Based Services

- Support and Education Groups for Parents of IPE youth
- Skills building groups and workshops for IPE youth
- Pro social group activities

## III. Community Outreach and Education Services

- Educational presentations to service providers, school staff, parent groups and other community members on effective prevention strategies and enhancing community response to gang prevention.

# **Gangs: A brief introduction**

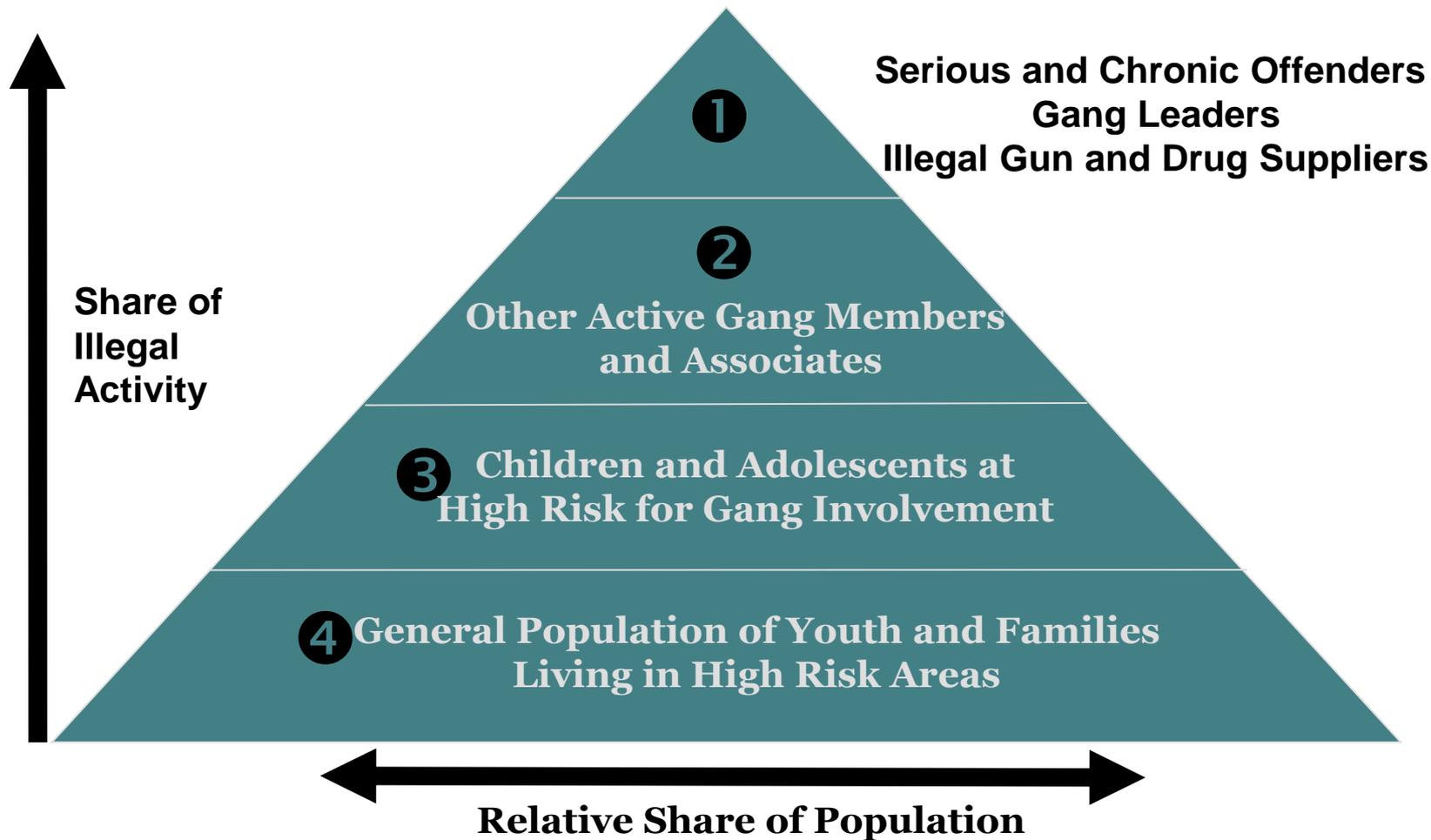
# Culture

- \_\_\_\_\_ is the way a society defines itself related to conduct, beliefs, traditions, values, language, art, skills, and social / interpersonal relationships.

# Types of Gangs in Northern VA

- Local / Street gangs
  - “Home Grown”
- Criminal
  - Drug Gangs
  - CSEC Trafficking
  - OMGs
  - National
  - International

# Crime and Gang Involvement



# Types of Gang Involvement :

## Gang Leaders

## Gang Members:

- Gang association: Not initiated in a gang, but hanging out with gang members; possessing knowledge of meetings and other gang activity.
  - “I am not in gang I just hang out with them....”
- Gang affiliation: Fully initiated into a gang and thereby considered an active member with responsibilities towards the gang (soldier / putting in work).
- Not active: Remaining in the gang according to other gang members, but the individual does not participate in meetings or other gang activities
- Copy Cat / “Wanna Be / Gonna Be”

# Girls in Gangs

## Old School



## Current evolution in NoVA

- No longer full fledged members
  - (if ever, depends on gang)
  - All the Risk, none of the protection/reward
- Commodity
  - Possible victim of gang controlled trafficking
- Victim / Object
- Used in facilitation of gangs' crimes
- Risks for Girlfriends of Gang Members
  - "I am not a gang member but my boyfriend is"

# Gang Member Mentality

- “A SUM ZERO WORLD “
  - In life there are only winners or losers / predators or their victims
- RESPECT (in a sum-zero world):  
Gang members have internalized beliefs that reflect the hierarchical language of power, equating respect with:
  - Submission
  - Obedience
  - Deference
- In other words RESPECT = FEAR

# **Risk Factors for Gang Involvement**

# Why do kids join gangs?

- Identity /A sense of belonging
- Love / Family
- Excitement
- Peer Pressure
- Financial Benefit / Basic Needs
- Power / Stature / Respect
- Protection
- Intimidation / Fear



# What can contribute to their vulnerability to gang recruitment?

- Risk Factors can be broken down into five domains or categories:
  - Neighborhood
  - Family
  - School
  - Peer Group
  - Individual
- Gangs exploit these vulnerabilities to manipulate vulnerable youth into joining; and use random violence, intimidation, and indoctrination to induce them to stay.

# Risk Factors in the context of NEIGHBORHOOD

- Presence of gangs in the neighborhood
- Availability of marijuana and other drugs
- Frequent criminal/delinquent activity by residents
- Community mistrust of police
- Isolation of residents / lack of access to resources

# Risk Factors in the Context of FAMILY

- Role Reversal and Intergenerational Conflict
  - “normal” teen / parent conflict is compounded by additional conflicts due to varying rates of acculturation and language acquisition.
- Reunification Issues
  - separation due to immigration, CPS, or running away
- Isolated / lack of access to resources due to:
  - Immigration status
  - Mistrust of authority
  - Domestic violence
- Family / household structure

# Risk Factors in the context of SCHOOL

- Difficulties in School
  - Learning disabilities
  - Low academic achievement
    - \*9 in 10 admitted gang involved youth suffer from learning disabilities (many are undetected)
- Low school commitment / attachment
  - many gang involved youth display signs of truancy prior to any delinquent acts
- Low academic aspirations
  - Perception of many youth that higher education is not useful or available
  - Focus on work and earning money now vs. future

# Risk Factors in the context of their PEER GROUP

- Association with friends who engage in problem behaviors and who are not positively connected with school or community resources
- Often associating w/ older males (true for males and females)

# Risk Factors in the context of the INDIVIDUAL

- Perceived lack of opportunity / sense of hopelessness about the future
- Early exposure to family and community violence
- Discrimination and exclusion
- History of trauma/victimization
- Little to no experience using critical thinking/decision-making skills

# Trauma and MH Needs of GI Youth

- Extensive Unmet MH needs
- Pre-gang exposure trauma histories common:
  - Child Witness to Domestic Violence
  - Victims of Physical, Sexual, and Emotional Child Abuse
  - Experience of systemic / epidemic violence: war, on-going community violence, sanctioned political violence, oppression, and / or corruption
  - For immigrant youth and families – Triple Trauma Paradigm
- Traumatic Experiences Resulting from Gang Involvement
  - Exposure to extreme violence (as victim, perpetrator, and witness / bystander) - especially youth with GI in home country
    - forced bystander as part of indoctrination, gradual forced perpetrator role “if you knew what I did you would not like me”
  - Trauma Bond
  - Survival Mode

# Current Immigrant Youth's Vulnerabilities

- **Family Reunification**
  - Lack of relationship with parents/sponsors
    - Youth don't trust caregivers and may be resentful of being abandoned in past
  - History of living independently based on necessity results in challenge to adjust to being part of a family and following rules
  - Parents lack knowledge/experience in parenting a teenager – complicated by trauma
  - Adjustment to new family composition
  - Families lack to access resources due to low navigational capital and status issues
  - Very low income families with long work hours, high stress levels, and parents may have own trauma history
- **School**
  - Lack of experience with school structure
    - Schools in Central America don't mandate attendance
    - Unfamiliarity with school expectations/rules resulting in unintended disciplinary issues
  - Interrupted education/lack of education
  - Placement in 9th grade regardless of age requiring more years to earn credit than can legally stay in school.
  - Schools not equipped to appropriately meet needs
- **Extensive Unmet Mental Health Needs**
- **Acculturation**

# Identifying Gang Involvement & Gang Victimization

# Gang Member or Victim?

## “Compliance” in the Context of Gang Victimization

- Loyal– willing to do their part (no matter how self-abusive) for their gang. “First is god then your mother then your gang. you live for god you live for your mother, you die for your gang.” - female gang member
  - Most common with those gradually indoctrinated
- Resigned – hopeless about future, hopeless about any alternative, resigned to their perceived “fate” or feel they deserve the treatment they are receiving.
  - Most common with those who have extensive pre-gang / pre-assault trauma histories and past histories of sexual abuse
- Terrified – threats and demonstrations of gang’s ability to “get to” their family members terrifies victims into initial silence / compliance.
  - Are more likely to assist Law Enforcement/testify eventually, if safety planning assistance is available
  - Most common with those who’s first contact with the gang is as a victim of brutal assault and exploitation.

# Unique aspects of gang controlled vs. pimp controlled trafficking

- Gang Related Safety Issues – unique to each gang, each case
- Victims are often unaware that commercial sexual exploitation is occurring
- Where, when, and how it is occurring is different
- The language used by perpetrators and victims is different
  - “Pimp Code” vs. Gang Rules
- Resultant Service Considerations:
  - Safety Planning requires knowledge of specific gangs and collaborative relationships with law enforcement and gang experts.
  - Provide trauma-informed assault recovery services AND intervention to address their specific type of interaction with and/or dependence on the gang.
  - Include elements to assess for gang controlled trafficking in screening instruments.

# Possible signs of Gang Involvement

- Changes friends, refers to friends as “family”
- Changes in behavior – violating house rules, unexplained time away from home, etc
- Unexplained bruises, injuries
- Large sums of money or new possessions (without own income to purchase – video games, cell phones, expensive shoes, etc.)
- Starts to carry weapons
- School grades and/or attendance begins to slip
- Either possess or has on computer or cell phone: pictures of himself/herself or friends displaying hand signs, weapons, gang clothes/ bandannas
- For girls: frequent running away, skipping school, older boyfriend

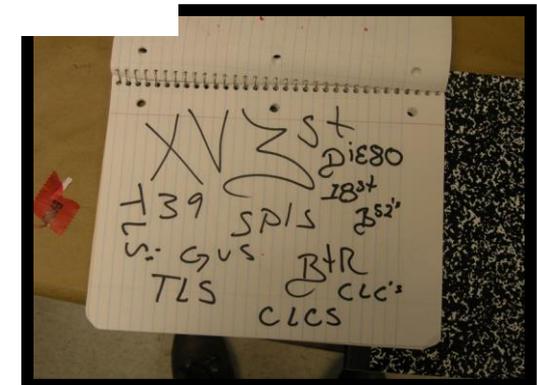
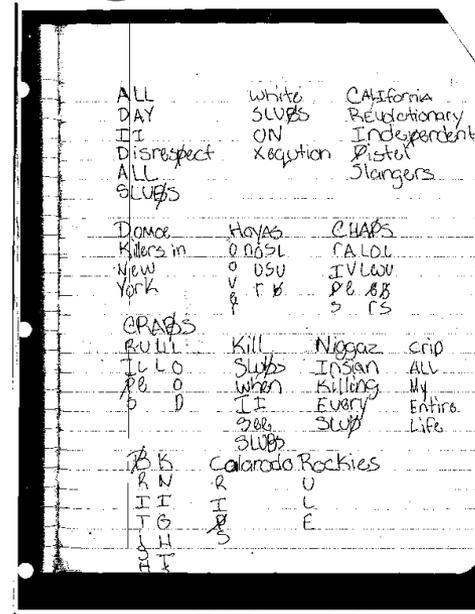


Past or current?

August 2015 photo

# Possible signs of Gang Involvement

- Doodling, writing on school books, notebooks, possessions or walls that looks gang related
- Watch for crowns, stars, series of numbers, series of letters, letters crossed out, pitchforks, nicknames
- Many gangs use simple substitution; numbers for letters



# Possible Signs of Gang Involvement

- Tattoos – Initials, names, numbers, tres puntos, tear drops, burn marks, crowns, stars, dog paws
- This includes temporarily marking the body with a marker



# Possible Signs of Gang Involvement

- Hand Signs – Starts to use hand signs or practices manipulating his/her hands or fingers.
- Representing - Calling out names / numbers / code words (often disguised or coded – JDC example)



# Possible Signs of Gang Involvement

- Clothing/ Colors – Starts to wear a predominate color or displays a predominate color. Hangs with friends who do likewise.
- Footwear, belts, hats
- Also – refusal to wear certain colors.



# All of the Above Subject to Change

- Reasons: Fly beneath the radar screen of police, and adults.
- Gangs find new ways to identify themselves and each other

# **Working with Gang Involved Youth**

# Gang Expertise Required

- Effective gang prevention and intervention services require knowledge of and experience with the following:
- Knowledge of all local gangs including the history, culture, and operations of each.
- Knowledge and experience with safety planning
  - youth being recruited or intimidated
  - youth remaining in gangs
  - youth who are attempting to leave
  - Experience providing safety planning for direct service staff is also essential.
- Knowledge of and experience providing psycho-educational interventions within the context of gang involvement or gang victimization.

# Basic Principles

- Introductions – words and body language
- Prioritize respect
- Set clear boundaries & expectations from beginning
  - Honesty – challenges, knowledge, consequences
  - Weapons, reporting, etc.
- Familiarize with client history
  - Role in gang
  - Functional history
- Situational awareness
- Self-awareness
- Don't take something you can't replace
- Understand that gang involvement is often a SYMPTOM and that youth and their families often need services to address the needs that lead to gang involvement

# When trafficking/victimization is a concern:

- Demonstrate your awareness of risks in the community / ask for their input:
  - Proactively let youth know these subjects are not “off limits”
  - Example - “Are you worried about girls you know being used or abused by gangs?”
- Be prepared to be “tested” for your reaction
  - they have likely been groomed to blame themselves and assume you will too
  - “those girls deserve to be treated that way”; “it’s their fault they were dumb enough to hang out with a gang”
- Provide opportunities for youth to disclose concerns without fear of judgment
  - Be aware of your word choice / language used – avoid victim-blaming

# Trauma Informed Approach = Gang Prevention

What children and youth who have experienced trauma need in order to recover:

- A Sense of Safety
  - Information and Coping Skills
    - Hope and Optimism
- A Sense of Connection / Supportive Relationships
- Being Resilient means feeling :
  - Safe
  - Capable
  - Lovable

# Individual interventions:

## Instilling a Sense of Safety

- Be Consistent (do what you say you will, be on time, be present)
- Create safe environments for youth that include normal routines, structure, and predictable outcomes.
  - No surprises!
  - Implement your setting's program consistently.
  - Maintain clear behavioral expectations. Praise publicly, correct privately.
- Avoid power struggles. Create and offer choices that are acceptable to both you and your students. Choices give a sense of control and personal responsibility.
- Use gentle, affirming language and gestures. Use an even tone, low to moderate volume, and open posture. Stand shoulder to shoulder, sit or squat at eye level, and avoid sudden gestures. Avoid touch.
- ❖ Youth act out when they feel threatened - reduce acting out by increasing safety.

# Individual Interventions

## Providing Information & Coping Skills

- Be proactive about providing resources and information - they might not ask.
- Be mindful of transitions/ terminations
- Teach and model life skills:
  - **Self-Regulation**
    - Use verbal responses instead of behavioral
    - Recognize signs of escalation
    - Seek adult support
    - Problem solving
    - Coping Skills
    - Practice!

# IPE Gang Prevention Interventions

- Critical Thinking
- Goal Setting
- Decision Making / Problem Solving
- Healthy Relationships
- Resistance and Refusal Skills
- Anger Management
- Communication and Negotiation Skills
- Myths and Realities of Gang Life
- Safety Planning

# Individual Interventions

## Instilling Hope:

- Build opportunities for success into various settings, academic and social.
- Recognize progress - break up goals into manageable tasks.
- Help youth become engaged with school and provide supports to improve school success.
  - Consider Special Education needs and ensure youth are assessed for learning disabilities and first language literacy level as well as interrupted education.
- Provide opportunities for youth to help others and “give back”
- Provide age appropriate opportunities to be a kid, have fun

# Individual Interventions

## Developing a Sense of Connection/Supportive Relationships:

- Factors that can increase resilience include:
  - A strong relationship with at least one competent, caring adult
  - Feeling connected to a positive role model
- Remember that all youth have strengths. Find them and build upon them.

# Safety Considerations for Service Providers

- Be aware of the nature of gang activity in neighborhoods where your clients live and how that may affect their decision making
- Be aware of your words
- Remain diligent
  - Recognize that when working with a gang involved youth, they may not be making decisions independently
- Know your role/maintain professional boundaries
  - Stay in your role, provide your specified services only
  - Follow established referral and discipline protocols
- Report and/or refer - Do not confront and do not attempt gang interventions without appropriate training
  - Law Enforcement
  - County Gang Prevention Coordinator
  - Gang Intervention & Prevention Programs



Questions?