

Why do Juveniles Join Gangs?



AJ-Research Methods

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Introduction

Throughout the years I have always wondered why juveniles would be enticed to join a gang. What are their reasons for such an affiliation that can either cause them to end up in jail, handicapped or dead? In my research I came across several articles that contained "risk factors" that a juvenile possesses that might be associated in their decision to join a gang.

"Once a community pinpoints its most prevalent local problems and links those to specific risk factors, it is able to develop strategies that address the root causes of those problems." Phelan A. Wyrick and James C. Howell. However knowing the root causes of the problem does not necessarily help to develop better strategies. I believe this only gives us a better understanding on why they chose to join a gang.

"A strategic risk-based response must be grounded in a general understanding of youth gangs combined with an in depth knowledge of local youth gang problems. A community's assessment of its gang problem, in turn, must be based on an understanding of how a variety of risk factors relate to the onset and persistence of local gang activity and youth violence. The strategic response should implement state-of-the-art practices in program design to focus activities, optimize resources, and allow for tracking of program effectiveness." National Gang Center. 2010. National Youth Gang Survey Analysis. Available from: www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Survey-Analysis

This research paper will highlight the major risk factors that play a huge role on the decisions youth's make to join gangs and will be explained later throughout this paper.

In order to understand the mind of a gang member you need to know the basic background of a gang.

What is a gang?

1. A group of criminals or hoodlums who band together for mutual protection and profit.
2. A group of adolescents who band together, especially a group of delinquents.
3. An informal group of people who associate regularly on a social basis: The whole gang from the office went to a clambake.
4. A group of laborers organized together on one job or under one foreperson: a railroad gang.

When did gangs start and what were their primary functions?

According to the National Gang Center Bulletin No. 4 M a y 2 0 1 0 Bureau of Justice Assistance U.S. Department of Justice HISTORY OF STREET GANGS IN THE

UNITED STATES by: James C. Howell and John P. Moore;

“The history of street gangs in the United States begins with their emergence on the East Coast around 1783, as the American Revolution ended (Sante, 1991). But there is considerable justification for questioning the seriousness of these early gangs. The best available evidence suggests that the more serious street gangs likely did not emerge until the early part of the nineteenth century (Sante, 1991).”

Most gangs form as a means of protection and profit although some youths have joined to obtain respect, out of peer pressure, their significant others and/or family ties.

What are the general risk factors?

- Family Composition
- Household Income
- Friends
- Race
- Gender
- Age

A survey was taken of 27 individuals that are currently in gangs, were in a gang or are not involved in a gang whatsoever. The survey consisted of the list mentioned above, is there is preventions that they think would work if implemented in their community. It also asked and them what would be a reason they would join a gang They answered the following:

- There are different reasons for different kids depends their circumstances
- parties, girls, & drugs.
- respect and power.
- feeling of caring and attention in a gang
- make money
- protection because they get picked on
- grow up in a neighborhood that gangs is normal

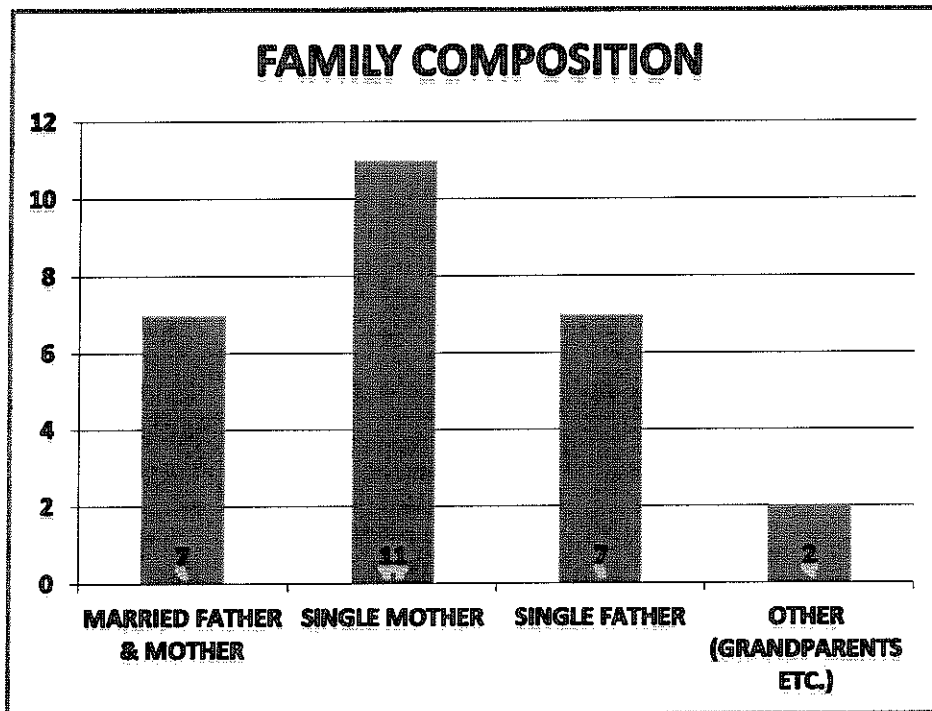
There was not a specific answer to prevention measures however the most common answer to that question was “none”. According to those surveyed, there is no functional prevention method that can be implemented that would successfully deter them from joining a gang. A gang is a way of life either you like the lifestyle or you don’t.

I mentioned to one of the surveyors if programs like the YMCA where kids are able to be in sports may be a helpful tool. He answered “no, just because you have facilities like that doesn’t mean someone will not join a gang. I mean even gang members like to play sport and that is just a place where we can play”

This takes us back to the list of risk factors that I mentioned above. Below I will discuss each subject in detail.

Risk Factor #1

Family Composition:



20 out of the 27 surveyors live in a household that consist of only one parental figure.

“Unsupervised youths with little or no opportunities eventually find interest in gangs and over a long period of time gangs become more institutionalized in the community and have greater influence over the lives of young people. Most gangs define their gang according to affiliation and cultural aspects that make it

like a family to members. Families that are unstable, dysfunctional or are headed by single mothers have a difficult time controlling and supervising young people.” Erika V. Cox, *Understanding Gangs: More Prevalent in Lower-Class Neighborhoods*.

One of the surveyors mentioned that the reason he was always out on the streets was because there was no one home to come home to. His mother had to work to be able to pay the rent and bills, therefore, there was little or no supervision in the household.

I believe that having a parent in the household is essential in the upbringing of a child. A juvenile that has too much freedom because of the lack of supervision is more likely to commit criminal activity and/or join a gang in order to fill a void. Juveniles see gangs as their new family and their fellow gang members fill the void. In some cases having family members that are already in a gang is another major risk factor in a juvenile’s life. Seeing day in and day out their lifestyle will seem normal to them and after a while it becomes part of their life.

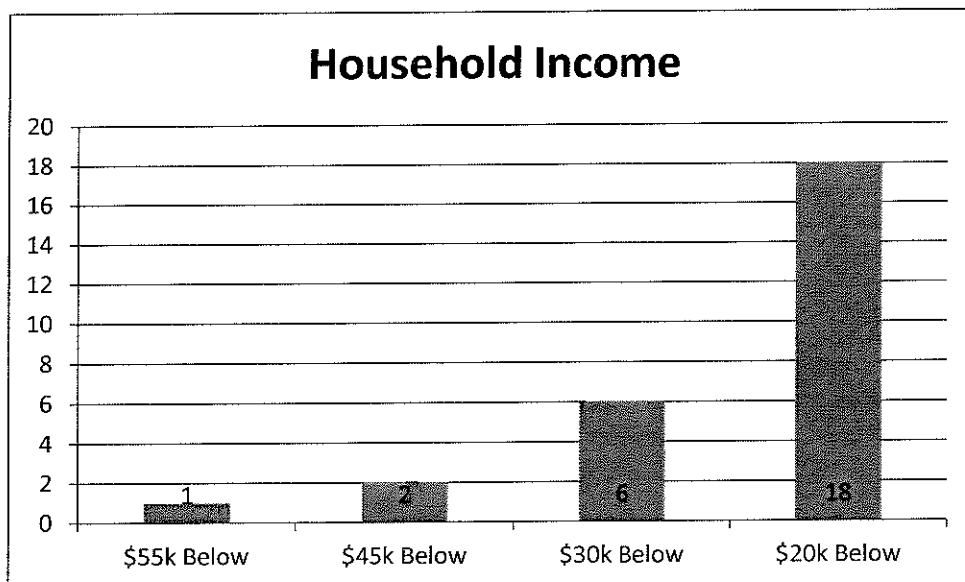
Phelan A. Wyrick and James C. Howell mentioned in his article, “Strategic Risk-Based Response to Youth Gangs” Key family risk factors for gang membership include the family structure (e.g., broken home), family poverty, child abuse or neglect and gang involvement of family members (Howell, 2003b). Poor family management, including poor parental supervision (monitoring) and control of

children, has been shown to be a strong predictor of gang membership (Hill et al. 1999; Le Blanc and Lanctot, 1998; Thornberry, 1998; Thornberry et al., 2003). Among these risk factors, poor family management may be the most amenable to change, primarily through parenting classes and, in some cases, family counseling.

According to the OJJDP, research indicates that parents play a pivotal role in keeping young people out of gangs. Negative influences within the family—including domestic violence, child abuse, harsh or inconsistent parenting practices, and/or drug/alcohol abuse by family members—can increase the risk that a youth will join a gang. Parents can protect their children from gang activity through taking positive actions, such as monitoring their children’s activities, fostering close relationships with them, and using positive discipline strategies.

Risk Factor #2

Household Income



As you can tell by the graph all of the survey of the surveyors falls under a low income category. This brings me back to family composition. Usually there is one parent in the household therefore they are the ones that bring in all the income into the household. Because they have to work twice as hard as family that has a solid family composition the supervision they have on their kids a very little or none at all. Furthermore, juveniles find the need to have money, nice clothes, cars, etc. and they turn to criminal activity to obtain such items desired. Gangs entice the youth by flashing their nice cars, nice clothes and lifestyle. This gives them the idea that the lifestyle is glamorous and filled with money. Yet another reason why a person would join a gang.

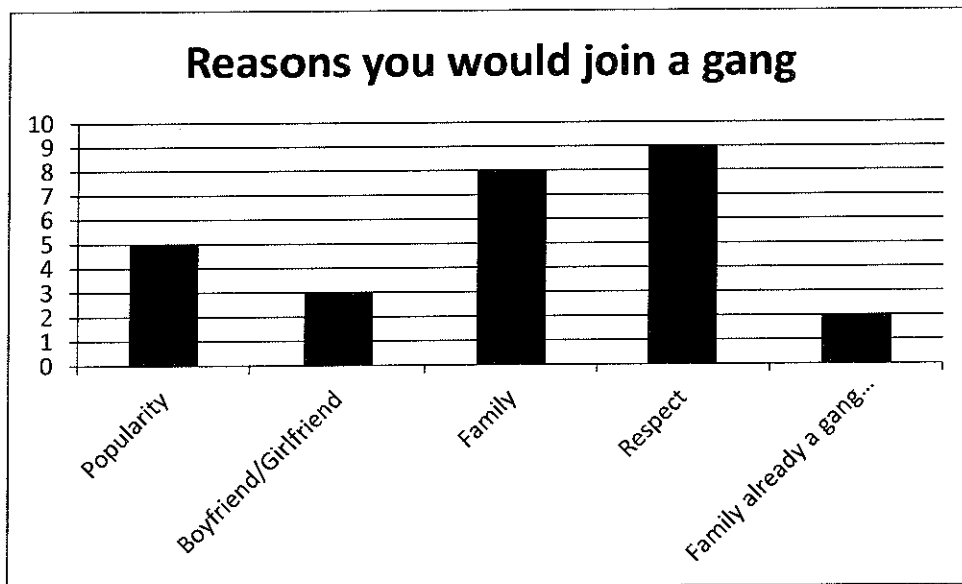
I was watching an episode on Gangland. An ex gang member that is currently in prison was explaining that from an outside perspective the gang lifestyle looks appealing. Seeing peers with expensive clothing, cars, jewelry made him want the same thing. But that was far from it, once in a gang you have to put in a lot of work (i.e. criminal activity). Unless you are one of the top ranking members you are considered a soldier that makes almost minimum wage selling drugs.

I believe that if juveniles were educated early on about the economics of joining a gang they might reconsider their decision in the first place. They are persuaded by all these material things that they normally would not be able to have. However, once their

choice to join a gang has been made it is extremely difficult to get out of it. All because they desired the commodities that their household income simply could not provide.

Risk Factor #3

Friends



As you can tell by the graph above popularity, boyfriend/girlfriend and respect play a role in a juvenile's decision to join a gang. Peers can have a strong influence on a juvenile that are already at risk because of their family composition and household income because of reasons already provided they are more susceptible to peers persuasion.

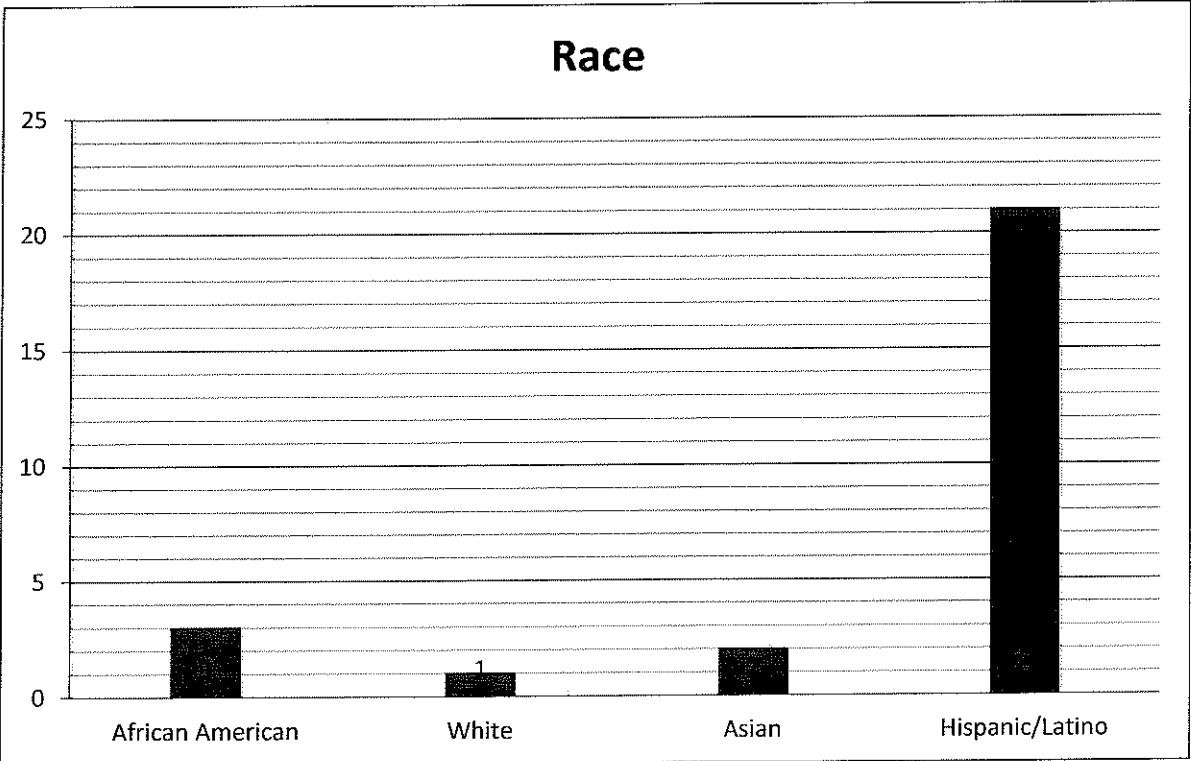
In a Juvenile Justice Bulletin provided by OJJDP they mentioned peer group risk factors

Friendships, “One of the strongest risk factors for gang membership is associating with peers who engage in delinquency (Thornberry, Lizotte, et al., 2003). Aggressive and antisocial youth begin to affiliate with one another in childhood, and this pattern of aggressive friendships continues through adolescence (Kupersmidt, Coie, and Howell, 2003; Warr, 2002). Association with aggressive peers during childhood and early adolescence is a strong predictor of joining a gang (Craig et al., 2002; Lahey et al., 1999), as is the experience of having been rejected by peers (Huizinga and Lovegrove, 2009).”

Risk Factor #4

Race

The survey that I conducted has more of a Hispanic number because the neighborhood surveyed was primarily composed of a Hispanic population.



According to the 2008 NYGS, half (50 percent) of all gang members are Hispanic/Latino, 32 percent are African American/black, and 11 percent are Caucasian/white (National Gang Center, 2010). Studies where youth self-report gang membership show more equal proportions of racial/ethnic groups in samples. For example, in a 15-city sample, racial and ethnic proportions of youth reporting gang membership were quite similar for whites(7.3 percent), blacks (8.3 percent), and Hispanics (9.0 percent), but larger (12.9 percent) for multiracial groups (Esbensen et al., 2008).

In an episode on Gangland a gang member mentioned that his family and he had moved to a suburb area composed of primarily of Caucasians and that he was one of the few Hispanics in town, because of that he was constantly being bullied. He and the other Hispanics in school decided to band together to stop the bullying, hence this is how their gang was created.

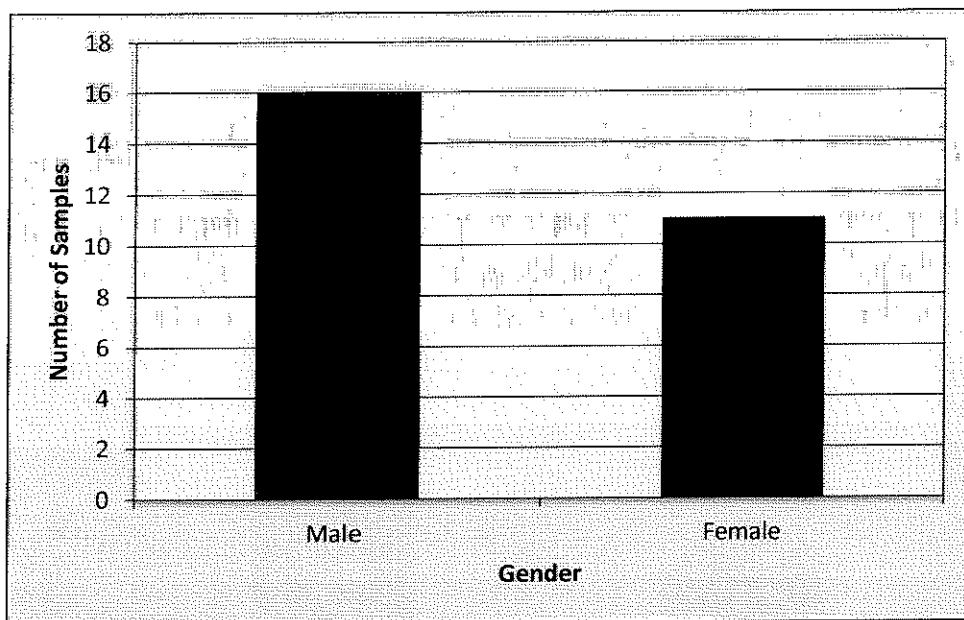
“A gang is a group of individuals who band together through a common identity or a common goal. Throughout history the word "gang" has been used synonymously with the word "group". It is only in recent history that it has been used in an exclusively negative way to describe groups of people involved in violent and criminal activities.”

The human being is an animal, a mammal. We have our own set of instincts like any other animal. An animal that is afraid and angry is a very dangerous thing. When human

beings choose to allow themselves to live in fear and anger, in a strictly survival frame of mind without a plan of action to get out of the larger situation (hope), they are very dangerous. Humans are social animals so we usually run in packs. Our instinct tells us that there is safety in numbers. Some may think they join a group looking for a family or to belong or to be cool but it really is about safety.” Karlin Brock, -Understanding gang mentality and why people join them. When it comes to gangs, race is utilized as a means of protection and safety.

Risk Factor #5

Gender



From the survey I took males join gangs for respect, popularity, safety and protection for the reasons mentioned in the above section. Males are still the dominant ones in the gender roles but it has become more common that women are also getting into gangs.

In the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, the male-to-female ratio of gang members was approximately 2 to 1 (11 percent of males versus 6 percent of females) (Snyder and Sickmund, 2006). But a more recent 15-city sample that used self-reports classified 8.8 percent of boys and 7.8 percent of girls as current gang members (Esbensen et al., 2008).

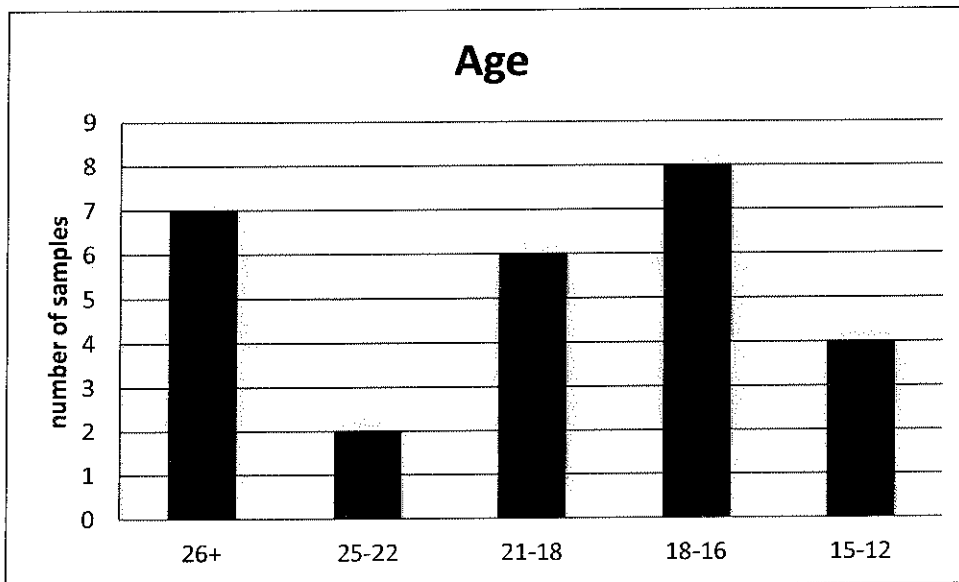
During the critical stages in a girl's life 12-17 yrs old is when girls are more prone to join in criminal activity because their boyfriends are in a gang or ask them to do so. The young ladies that completed the survey answered that they would join a gang because of their boyfriends. This can lead then to live in a life that consists of the gang life. More than often leading to pregnancy and depending on their boyfriends.

“Most female gangs are either African American or Latina, although there are small but increasing numbers of Asian and white female gangs. Autonomy and male dominance, which are ongoing issues for all female gangs, tend to vary with ethnicity. For example, gender expectations in each ethnic group might suggest that African American and white female gang members would be more autonomous and Latinas more subordinate to males. They usually are, but not always. In other words, there is no universal ethnic continuum. Indeed, some factors related to female autonomy and male dominance affect gang members regardless of ethnicity. Male unemployment and the incarceration of the many males who are convicted of illegal economic activities remove males from both Latino and African American households. As a result, women must rely on their own resources to support themselves and their children”

Early on education to young ladies will be very helpful when considering the lifestyle just because their significant other is in a gang. Educating them that they can be independent women and have their own choices (providing examples) maybe can help a young lady in making a right choice.

Risk Factor #6

AGE



This category ties all the above risk factors together. The younger the juvenile is the more vulnerable their mind is. The more glamorous the lifestyle is. The older group that was surveyed will still represent their neighborhood because that is all they know. However, if they had another path in life they would change their choices they have made.

As a kid is growing up they develop at risk signs that parents can utilize to minimize the chances of joining a gang:

Negative changes in behavior, such as:

1. Withdrawing from family.
2. Declining school attendance, performance, or behavior.
3. Staying out late without reason.
4. Unusual desire for secrecy.
5. Confrontational behavior, such as talking back, verbal abuse, name calling, and disrespect for parental authority.
6. Sudden negative opinions about law enforcement or adults in positions of authority (school officials or teachers).
7. Change in attitude about school, church, or other normal activities or change in behavior at these activities.

All the above signs are able to be seen at an early stage. The younger the child the more success a parent will have to solve a problem. As opposed to when they are in their rebellious teenager stage and might be too late to correct.

In conclusion, gangs are not a condition that can be cured or solved. I believe that the solution starts at home. Family has the power to reduce the chance that their child would turn to gangs to fill in a void they have at home.

Educating juveniles in high school about alternative life styles, other options they have, what career choices they have that will make them successful in the future and a real life reality check about where gangs can lead you can help juveniles think twice about their life choice. Juveniles are drawn to money, success and power and if they knew that they can obtain anything they want by being educated I am sure they would have a different outlook on life.

Not only do we need to educate the juveniles, the parents need to be educated as well. They need to know the number one factor in a juvenile's decision to join a gang comes from their own home. Parenting classes for at risk youth might bring light the problems within the home that they are over looking.

A random survey was conducted by police officers of what they thought the most common race, gender, reasons why they join a gang and what can be done to prevent someone from joining a gang. To my surprise when I compared the same surveys to the surveys that were done by random people and current gang members the answers were quite similar. It is clear that law enforcement has an understanding of what would motivate a juvenile to join a gang but again we come back to the fact that it

starts in the home and there is nothing anybody can do to prevent that other than the family itself.

Family structure and education about the lifestyle play a big part. You can implement all the programs you want in a community but without those two they will never succeed.

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