Getting Past Suppression
STREET GANG INTERVENTIONS

Interventions targeting both the gang and gang behaviour are now widespread. This chapter describes some of the driving theories and practices in the prevention, treatment, and suppression of youth gangs. It presents common examples of each type of programme, drawn from different regions, and, where it exists, evidence of programme effectiveness and efficiency.

Three approaches: prevention, treatment, and suppression. *Prevention* efforts aim at reducing the risk that vulnerable youths will join gangs and increasing the general youth population's resistance to gang membership. *Treatment* emphasizes changing the attitudes and behaviour of youths already affiliated with gangs and the social conditions and processes that support youth gang organization. Youth gang *suppression* involves activities used to punish, pressure, or divert gangs and their members in order to reduce their anti-social behaviour. Some initiatives may combine two or more of these types of approaches in a broader strategy. A hallmark of the public health approach that has recently influenced the study of youth gangs is a preference for scientific evidence in the design, implementation, and evaluation of interventions. Nevertheless, in many contexts youth gang intervention proposals are highly politicized and other factors often override the evidence base.

Social, political, and cultural dimensions. While there are broad commonalities among youth gangs, they can also diverge in their organization, reach, goals, intensity of the violence employed, economic activity, and hierarchy. Ideally, these differences should influence intervention planning. Some aspects of gang culture are now global. Local cultures often interact with the globalized 'gangsta' culture to create a complex system of meanings, with each society generating specific gang cultures and intervention 'styles'. Gender dynamics can also play an important role.

The youth group continuum. One of the most formidable challenges in designing interventions for youth gangs is the development of an appropriate definition of such groups. It is important to be aware of this issue during the intervention design process.

Youth gangs lie on a continuum of youth groups. Youth drug gangs are often enmeshed in dynamic drug markets and are forced to interact with adult and prison gangs that have control of this business. The flexible form of many gangs tends to preclude the development of simple interventions.

Multi-component, long-term strategies are most likely to achieve sustained impacts.

An expensive recipe: long-term, multi-component, integrated approaches. There can be no single strategy or 'silver bullet' for gang-related problems. Instead, strategies should apply multiple interventions combined in creative, coherent, and meaningful ways to reach well-defined outcomes. The costs of sustained, multi-component strategies can be considerable, however. Evaluations provide a scientific basis

for describing the process of implementation of a programme and its fidelity to the programme protocol, as well as an assessment of its outcomes and wider impacts on the society. The costs involved can be prohibitive, however, and some gang researchers remain sceptical about the utility of evaluations.

Gang prevention strategies. The process by which a young person becomes a gang member is a gradual one. Prevention strategies recognize the importance of this acclimation period, targeting both the general population of youth and at-risk (delinquent) youth at this stage. Programmes specifically targeting at-risk youth often involve the provision of educational and other alternatives to joining a street gang. Gang prevention is driven by the theory that it is more cost-effective and less difficult to prevent youth from joining a gang than it is to try to extricate them from gang structures later. Prevention strategies can be divided into youth-oriented and environment-oriented efforts, although projected outcomes often include both individual and environmental changes.

Gang treatment strategies. Treatment strategies, directed at active gang members, aim to change their behaviour and divert them from crime to alternatives such as after-school programmes, sports, and job training. They also aim to influence gang processes. Treatment can be youth- or environment-oriented. Youth-oriented strategies tend to recruit individual gang members into specially designed counselling or individual, group, or family therapy programmes. Environment-oriented treatment strategies employ 'detached workers' who develop gang member contacts. Simultaneously, community residents and organizations are mobilized.

Gang suppression strategies. Gang suppression strategies use the police, courts, and prisons. Vigilante armed groups, with varying degrees of state authorization, have also sought to suppress or control gangs. Gang suppression strategies can be classified as coercive or alternative, though many programmes incorporate elements of both. Coercive strategies emphasize arrest, punishment, and incarceration to isolate and reduce the number of gangs and gang members. Alternative youth gang suppression strategies include community policing, as well as peacemaking negotiations and voluntary disarmament.

Conclusion. Although gangs are a global phenomenon and in many cases appear to be influenced by a US-style gang ('gangsta') culture, they are ultimately context-specific, a fact that gang interventions need to reflect. According to the available evidence, suppressive approaches remain the dominant means of dealing with gangs. Mass arrests may temporarily lower the rate of violent acts, but they generally fail to address the underlying motivations for gangs and gang membership. More promising are efforts that have combined classical law enforcement approaches with treatment and prevention components. While gang intervention strategies are increasingly evidence-based, it appears that factors other than evidence often determine which programmes are implemented. Long-term programmes are costly and out of reach for many communities. Furthermore, preferences for certain types of interventions—school-based curricula in the United States and 'Mano Dura' in Central America—appear to be culturally entrenched, regardless of the evidence. It also appears that long-term success requires long-term commitment. There are no short-cut solutions to the world's gang problems.