



Younger Siblings of Gang Members: Risk Factors and Best Practices

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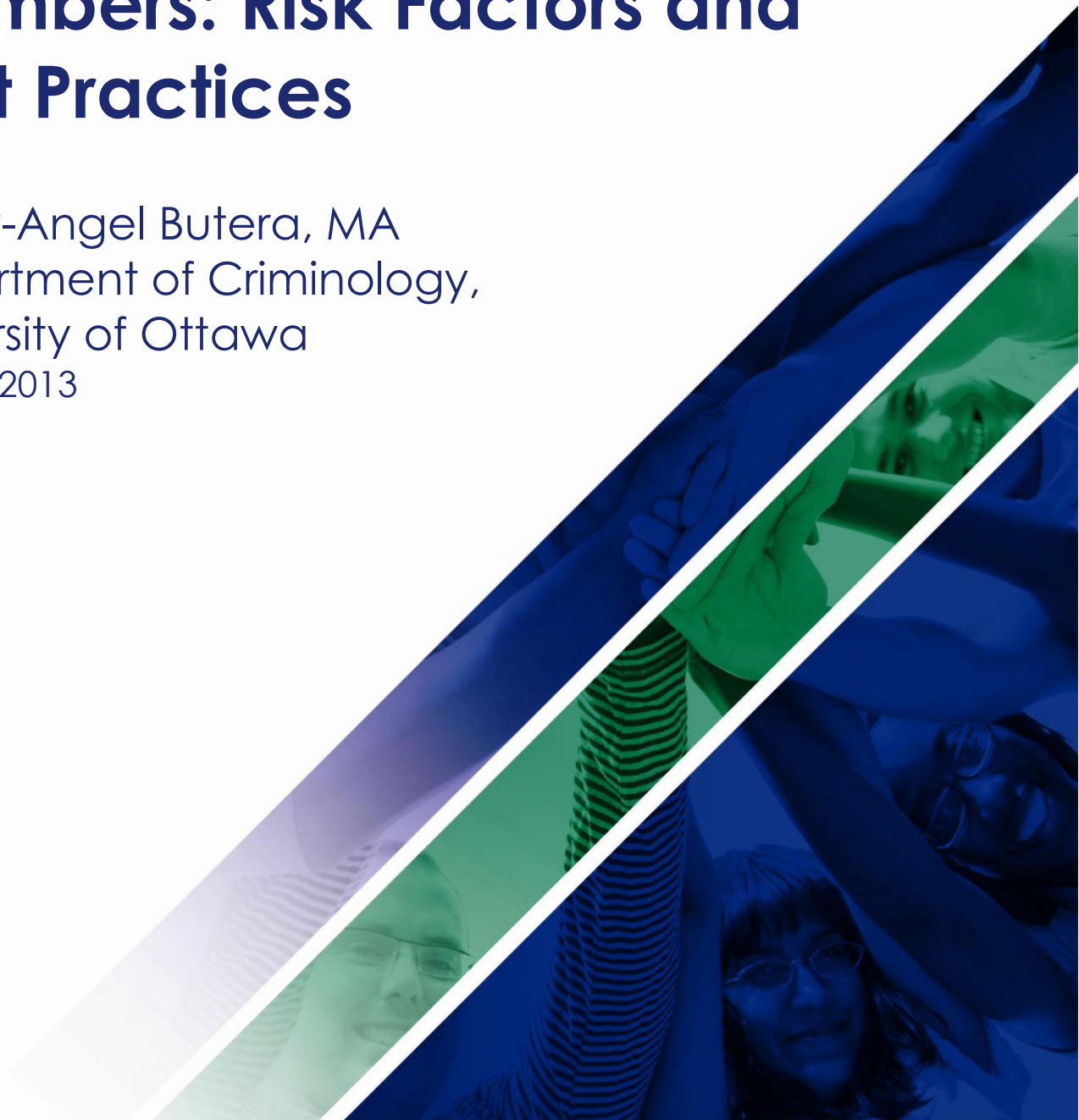


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Executive Summary

Siblings of known gang members are at a particular risk of being drawn in to gang involvement. Sibling anti-social behaviour has been found to be a risk factor for gang membership in the six to eleven age group and delinquent/gang-involved siblings is a risk factor in the twelve to seventeen age group. Younger siblings of gang members can be recruited as active members, they can be used to conceal weapons, and deliver and deal drugs. In addition, family involvement in gang activity can also increase the risk for gang membership in young people.

There are a number of reasons young people choose to follow the same path as their gang-involved family members or siblings, including: feeling obligated to carry on in an older sibling's footsteps, feeling that gang membership is inevitable due to an association with the gang activity of a sibling, a desire to emulate older siblings (especially brothers), the normalization of gang activity at home, and a desire to lead the "glamorous" gang lifestyle of older siblings. However, the association of younger siblings to their gang-involved older siblings can create risks, trouble, and harm for the younger sibling. Female siblings of gang members are at a particular risk for sexual exploitation and abuse.

While the literature focusing on the risk of gang involvement of younger siblings of gang members and programs of prevention is limited in scope, there are some key points to take away from the research that has been conducted. Multiple agencies such as the police, schools, voluntary and community organizations as well as the family must work together to create protocols to identify younger siblings that are at risk of gang membership, share information, and implement programs to safeguard these young people. Successful programs of prevention and intervention will take into account the communities they will take place in and should involve families whenever possible. Where complicated family situations exist, support should be given for issues such as abuse or involvement in criminal activity.

Enough is Enough is a successful program implemented in the U.K mobilizing multiple agencies to reduce gang involvement and specifically focuses on protecting younger siblings from gang involvement. The *Gang Mentoring* pilot conducted in the U.K showed that short youth mentoring programs can have small, positive effects but cautions that they are unlikely to be effective tools for reducing gang activity on their own. There is also a danger of labeling younger siblings of gang members as gang associated and a risk of net widening. While a mentoring approach is promising, more research and evaluation in this area is necessary to guide program components and implementation.

Introduction

Gang-involved youth are often vulnerable individuals who are at risk of being both perpetrators and victims of harm (Safeguarding Children, 2010). A significant amount of literature has focused on risk factors for youth gang involvement and has found that the risk factors found within and across the five developmental domains (individual, family, school, peer group, community) have a cumulative effect, meaning that the greater the numbers of risk factors experienced by the youth, the greater the likelihood of gang involvement (National Crime Prevention Center, 2007; Howell & Egley, 2005; Hill, Howell, Hawkins & Battin-Pearson, 1999). Major risk factors include negative influences on the youth's life, limited attachment to the community, over-reliance on anti-social peers, poor parental supervision, alcohol and drug abuse, poor educational or employment potential, and a need for recognition and belonging (National Crime Prevention Center, 2007).

It has also been recognized that sibling anti-social behaviour and involvement in gangs is a significant risk factor for the subsequent gang activity of younger siblings (Aldridge, Shute, Ralphs & Medina, 2011; Medina, Ralphs & Aldridge, 2010; Safeguarding Children, 2010; Chettleburgh, 2008; National Crime Prevention Center, 2007; Hill et al., 1999). In the United States, the involvement of family members (especially siblings and cousins) in gang activity has been found to be a strong predictor of gang involvement and membership in East Los Angeles, the American Southwest, and in Hispanic and African-American adolescent males (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Vigil, 1983, 1988). In the United Kingdom, police chiefs perceive peer pressure from brothers and sisters to be one of the key risk factors for the recruitment of younger siblings into criminal activity. It has been suggested that a child protection approach be taken when the gang activity of an older sibling puts younger siblings at risk of danger (Laville, 2007).

Notably, sibling anti-social behaviour has been found to be a risk factor for gang membership in youth as early as ages six to eleven, and delinquent or gang-involved siblings is a risk factor for gang membership in the twelve to seventeen age group (OJJDP Strategic Planning Tool). Siblings of gang members can be at risk of being drawn into gang activity as an active member and can be used to deliver and deal drugs, conceal weapons, or they can be attacked by other gangs (Safeguarding Children, 2010; Chettleburgh, 2008). Furthermore, family members involved with or associated with gangs can increase the risk for gang involvement in youth (Safeguarding Children, 2010).

Literature focusing on the risk of gang involvement of younger siblings of gang members is limited in scope. Much of the existing literature concentrates on all risk factors of youth gang involvement and programs of prevention in a general sense. This report has been commissioned to examine the literature relevant to the particular risk of gang involvement of younger siblings of gang members. It is intended to help service providers and other organizations respond to the needs of younger siblings of gang members who are at risk of gang-related recruitment and activity.

Drawing from sources from the U.S, U.K, New Zealand, and Canada, this report looks first at the motivations behind the gang involvement of young people based on multi-generational family and sibling gang involvement. It then examines female sibling gang involvement and consequences. Finally, this report looks at key elements necessary to tackle this issue and two programs of prevention that have been implemented specifically for younger siblings of gang members.

Examining Sibling Gang Involvement

Family Tradition and Multi-Generational Gang Involvement

It is not uncommon for young people to have family ties to gang involvement. Gang activity can be multi-generational, with grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, cousins and siblings participating (Brooking, Gardiner & Calvert, 2009). Family members may be viewed as role models and there may be feeling of obligation to follow in the footsteps of family members (Brooking et al., 2009). Future gang involvement is rarely seen as a choice, and young people may find it difficult to see a different outcome for themselves,

My real dad is involved in the gangs and my step-dad is in the mob. Most of my family are in the Mob. It's hard to be different. My cousins, dad and uncles are in it. I can imagine when I'm older, I would be in jail. I will try to control that, try to change. But it's hard because the way I've been brought up. But if I do go to jail, I'll see my real dad in jail. I haven't seen him since I was 11. (Brooking et al., 2009)

Familial gang association has been identified within Ottawa as well. It has been suggested that a cycle of multi-generational gang involvement has been perpetuated in the Ottawa region by adult males, especially those from refugee communities who settled there in the mid-1990s and who were now fathers of young gang-involved youth (Chettleburgh, 2008).

However, it is important to note that not all youth with family ties to gangs will become gang-involved, want to participate in gang activity or believe that their involvement is inevitable,

Sometimes hard to do things differently to family—they stick to their thing and I do my own thing. They don't bring their stuff to me. If something goes down they don't talk to me about it. I don't want to be like them but it's hard to avoid gang life. My dad knows that I don't want to be a patched member and doesn't push me into it—same with the rest of the family. (Brooking et al., 2009)

It is has also been found that some young people join gangs for social reasons, or simply to be around their friends and family (especially siblings or cousins) who are already part of the gang (Howell et al., 2005).

Following the Sibling Path

As with family ties to gang involvement, younger siblings of gang members can find it difficult to avoid following the same path. This occurs for a number of reasons:

- First, there may be feelings of obligation to carry on in an older sibling's footsteps.
- Second, a younger sibling may feel that it is impossible to avoid gang involvement given that he or she is already associated with gang activity because of his or her older sibling, "... my brother was a big influence in my life so I followed him in...it just seemed the natural thing to do" (Chettleburgh, 2008).
- Third, there may be a desire to emulate older siblings, primarily brothers. Younger siblings, mostly males, will often follow the choices and behaviour of their older siblings instead of making their own decisions (Brooking et al., 2009).
- Fourth, the gang culture and lifestyle has most likely been normalized for younger siblings at home (Brooking et al., 2009). One youth described that his older brother was involved in a gang and he always remembered being in and around gang members, "although I didn't think of them as gangsters just the guys in the 'hood'" (Chettleburgh, 2008). As for another youth, "all the whānau [family] are connected to the gang. I see gang life every day cause my brother is a patched member and lives with us at the family home. It [gang life] doesn't bother me, it's just life" (Brooking et al., 2009).

- Lastly, there may be a desire to lead the perceived “glamorous” gang lifestyle of the older sibling and retain a sense of power and belonging, “in my neighbourhood, people give you respect when you’re in the gang. They know who you are, they know who my friends are, and they don’t mess” (Chettleburgh, 2008).

Difficulties can arise for younger siblings because of the association of having an older brother in a gang. This association can create risks and trouble for the younger sibling,

My older brothers are in gangs and had history at the school. My oldest brother set up one of the first gangs there had done a bit of fighting so they [school and peers] saw me as being the same. They thought I was the same as my brother... Near the end of 3rd form another gang started to get agro toward my group of friends... they thought we were a gang even though we didn't have a crew name. We were just a bunch of mates that hung out. Some younger members from established gangs started fights with us and we would retaliate. (Brooking et al., 2009)

Female Siblings and Gang Involvement

Risk factors for female gang membership include living in impoverished and dangerous neighbourhoods with high levels of gang activity, school-based problems, individual factors (such as low self-esteem), low parental involvement, and troubled family situations in which multiple family problems are present (such as alcohol and drug addiction, physical and sexual abuse) (Miller, 2004). A significant risk factor contributing to female gang involvement is gang-involved family members. It has been found that female gang members were much more likely to have siblings in gangs and were much more likely to have two or more gang-involved family members (Miller, 2004). Girls may turn to their siblings or extended family members to obtain a sense of belonging and attachment. If these family members are gang-involved, it is more likely that the females will join gangs themselves (Miller, 2004).

Older siblings and relatives can have significant influence on the decisions of young women to join a gang and they may do so in order to be with or to be like their older siblings (Miller, 2004). Young women may perceive that being involved in a gang in which their older sibling is also a member can impart status upon them,

'Cindy' was never anybody's [expletive] or prostitute or whatever. She was very much, her brother's one of the founding guys, so why would she have a lower status? They wouldn't even allow her to be used or beaten by those other gang guys. So, she had some power. (Nimmo, 2001)

Sisters of gang members are a particular risk for sexual exploitation and abuse (Safeguarding Children, 2010). Female relatives of gang members are at risk of being under pressure to have sex with gang members or of being the victim of sexual violence by gangs (Safeguarding Children, 2010). They may not be recognized as active members of a gang but as a member's girlfriend, sister, or relative, and may be used for holding weapons or drugs, or as sexual objects (Safeguarding Children, 2010; Laville, 2007).

Prevention and Intervention: Best Practices

The majority of the literature discussing prevention and intervention of gang recruitment and membership is geared toward all youth at risk of gang involvement and often does not refer specifically to younger siblings of gang members. However, there are some key elements and programs that can be drawn from this literature.

Overall, it is clear that there must be multi-agency cooperation driven by intelligence-based evidence including police, children's services, schools, voluntary and community organizations, and other relevant stakeholders. In the Ottawa region, such groups would include Ottawa Police Service (especially the guns and gangs unit and the Direct Action Response Team), Youth Services Bureau, Children's Aid Society, Boys and Girls Club, Roberts Smart Centre, local schools, and other volunteer and community agencies. This joint partnership will allow information sharing and collaboration in making decisions and choices as to best practices in the prevention of children from gang activity (Safeguarding Children, 2010). This multi-agency approach must have a systematic way of identifying individual children that are at risk, including the younger siblings of known gang members, a method of tracking those children, and a number of interventions and diversions to protect these youth and prevent them from recruitment (Safeguarding Children, 2010).

Each community or neighbourhood has its own characteristics and needs, and faces its own challenges when it comes to programming projects of prevention and intervention. Effective projects will take these into consideration and tailor their content accordingly, drawing from the support of the community and on-the-ground knowledge from various organizations within those communities to help the youth that live there.

Key Roles in Prevention and Intervention

The Police

The police play a key role in identifying and referring youth at risk of gang involvement using risk assessment processes. They need to be particularly aware of any siblings or other children living in homes that are connected to gangs in some way and this information should be shared with social workers and other practitioners regarding their concerns about the safety and welfare of these children (Safeguarding Children, 2010). Appropriate sections and units within the police should share information as well (Safeguarding Children, 2010).

Schools

Due to their close proximity and interaction with youth, schools are particularly important in identifying and protecting youth at risk of gang involvement. They are in a good position to recognize the signs of gang activity and identify those at risk of harm from gangs, including siblings of gang members and also youth at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse by gang members. It would be useful for schools to have a member of staff designated for child protection who ensures that when the safety of a child in relation to gangs is in question, the police or Children's Aid are contacted (Safeguarding Children, 2010). Programming in the curriculum and positive extracurricular activities such as strengths-building programs and sports should be created to support the well being of children at risk of gang activity (Safeguarding Children, 2010).

The Family

Whenever possible, programs of prevention and intervention should include parents (Safeguarding Children, 2010). Family approaches to identifying and tackling the risk of youth gang involvement can be powerful in reducing the risk of harm to the child and the entire family (Safeguarding Children, 2010). Family group conferencing and family intervention projects can be useful, and support should also be provided to deal with other risk factors such as domestic violence, or family members' involvement with gangs (Safeguarding Children, 2010).

Younger siblings of gang members may come from complicated family situations where multiple family problems are present including physical or sexual abuse, and drug or alcohol use. The criminal or gang involvement of a parent can be a significant barrier to engaging them effectively in a parenting intervention (Aldridge et al., 2011). Furthermore, a small number of parents may see their children's gang involvement as beneficial in terms of material gains, status, and perceived security and may not want to participate in interventions because their perks will end,

Our families – brothers, uncles, dads, whatever – are known throughout [city]. So even though we are female, we know that – we're not you know, untouchable – but we are in a certain respect because we've got back-up. Not will you – they can't take the piss basically because they know they'll get – they'll get it. (Aldridge et al., 2011)

The involvement of parents or other caregivers must be approached cautiously as they may not know how to react to the information that their child is at risk for gang involvement or in some cases they may condone it (Aldridge et al., 2011). On the other hand, parents can be a useful source of information to assess the risk of harm to their child because they are most likely to have observed behaviours and signs of gang influence (Safeguarding Children, 2010).

Voluntary and Community Organizations

Voluntary and community groups often have the best on-the-ground knowledge of the issues in the communities they serve, and about the youth and families involved in gang activity (Safeguarding Children, 2010). They are able to reach kids at risk of gang involvement and harm and provide support to their families (Safeguarding Children, 2010). These organizations or groups are in a good position to accumulate information on gang activity in their area and should be encouraged to share information with police and Children's Aid (Safeguarding Children, 2010).

It has been suggested that programs created to de-glamourize gang culture and lifestyle can be effective in reducing gang involvement (Safeguarding Children, 2010). Support services such as youth projects, peer mentoring, positive activities and access to advice from respected, trusted adults maybe useful to challenge the myths of gang lifestyles in relation to possessing firearms and dealing drugs (Safeguarding Children, 2010). Voluntary and community organizations can be useful sources of this type of support (Safeguarding Children, 2010).

Examples of Programs Aimed at Younger Siblings of Gang Members

Enough is Enough: Waltham Forest, U.K

The London borough of Waltham Forest in partnership with multiple agencies created a gang prevention program called *Enough is Enough* in January of 2011 (Enough is Enough, 2011). This projected three-year program focuses on a holistic and intelligence-based approach to gang and youth violence in Waltham Forest. It involves youth and their families, multiple stakeholder agencies, and other partnerships in the voluntary and community sector.

There are four main elements to this program. The first element is the Family Partnership Team that brings together a number of experts with expertise in social work, housing, substance abuse, education, and unemployment to work with gang members and their families with a focus on partnership. The second element is working with the community and setting up 'A Better Way Partnership' to make sure that the program takes into account community needs and sensitivities. The next element is enforcement, or the implementation of enforcement measures for gang members who do not engage with the program. Finally, and most pertinent to this report, there is an early years involvement element to *Enough is Enough* designed to protect younger family members and prevent them from choosing the same gang lifestyle as their siblings (Enough is Enough, 2011).

Coordinators of *Enough is Enough* worked with local schools to help with the issue of gangs, created a self-assessment risk management tool for schools and youth organizations in relation to health and safety, anti-social behaviour and youth violence, designated a Victims Champion from Victim Support to focus on youth affected by gang violence, secured funding for projects to help protect young women at risk from gang violence and reduce the risk of gang involvement, and brought in an early intervention advocacy worker to work with the Family Partnership Team in engaging younger siblings who are at risk of gang involvement (Enough is Enough, 2011).

Since its implementation, Waltham Forest has found that serious youth violence is down by twenty-four percent, gun crime is down by thirty-one percent, knife crime is down by sixteen percent, personal robbery is down by eleven percent, the number of violent criminals being brought to justice has increased and there is a reduced fear of crime within local communities (Enough is Enough, 2011).

Gang Mentoring Pilot: U.K

Youth mentoring has emerged as a popular intervention strategy for providing youth with adult support and guidance throughout their development. It has also been suggested that youth mentoring programs may reduce the risk of offending and they have been proposed as an effective tool to address the risk of gang membership (Medina et al., 2010).

Particularly relevant to this report is a *Gang Mentoring* pilot done in the U.K as a result of the perception that younger siblings of gang members were at a higher risk of gang involvement and that there was a lack of specific preventative services for these youth. This intensive, four-month (extended another four months) program focused on a small group of younger siblings of gang members that had been identified as being at risk of gang involvement. The goals were to provide these youth with mentoring, offer support to their families, promote social inclusion, raise aspirations, ensure school attendance, engage youth in positive activities in partnership with schools and other organizations, and provide information, advice and guidance to the youth, their parents and families (Medina et al., 2010).

It was found that the pilot was successful in creating positive relationships between the mentors, the children, and their families. School staff and parents had a positive view of the intervention and felt that the program had a positive impact on the children and family life. It was noted that mentoring may be a way to engage with hard-to-reach families since these programs focus on helping their children rather than blaming the parenting skills of the parents (Aldridge et al., 2011; Medina et al. 2010). Some improvements were noticed in school attendance, punctuality, communication, and social skills. However, there was no impact on academic performance and in a few cases, behaviour worsened. All groups cited after school activities as the most positive aspect of the pilot but there were issues in finding accessible and affordable programs, which impacts the ability of parents to continue these activities once the intervention ends. Parents exhibited concern for the future of their children and questioned the likelihood of any observed changes in behaviour continuing long term. Generally, the children formed good relationships with their mentors and some of them would have wanted an even closer emotional relationship with their mentor but the short time frame of the pilot may have prevented this (Medina et al., 2010).

Based on this pilot and a review of the existing literature on mentoring programs undertaken in the United States and the United Kingdom, the researchers suspect that short mentoring programs will not have a long-lasting, sizeable impact on offending or gang involvement (Medina et al., 2010). Literature shows that mentoring relationships are more likely to produce positive outcomes and avoid harm when they are close, consistent, and enduring, however there has been limited success in establishing and sustaining these relationships (Rhodes & Dubois, 2006). Thus, short mentoring interventions on their own are unlikely to be effective tools for reducing gang activity and will be more successful as part of broader intervention packages (Medina et al., 2010). The researchers of the pilot note that there is a concern that identifying young people as potential gang members can have long-term stigmatizing and net-widening effects. This includes the judgment of young people because of their family's involvement in gangs, or the labeling of young people as "gang associates",

If my dad or my brother came to pick me up from school it would cause issues at school—kind of intimidate people at the school just by who he was. Once people [teachers] knew, I got treated differently, like I was some kind of piece of [expletive]. They would only be there to pick me up—didn't even come into the school. (Brooking et al., 2009)

As well, the reputations of older brothers can influence the treatment of younger siblings by school staff,

My older brothers are in gangs and had history at the school. My oldest brother set up one of the first gangs there and had done a lot of fighting so they [school and peers] saw me as being the same. So they thought I was the same as my brother... (Brooking et al., 2009)

Furthermore, the risk of net-widening is high when using criteria such as "being the sibling of a gang member" or "living in a gang area" as the key criteria for justifying intervention. The potential for net-widening can be decreased when the risk assessment for gang involvement is taken together with the risk assessment for offending (Medina et al., 2010). There needs to be a balance between maintaining communication with school personnel regarding the family gang involvement of the youths being mentored, and ensuring confidentiality to decrease the potential of stigmatization and labeling.

Meta-analyses and studies of mentoring programs in the U.S have shown that mentoring programs can be successful interventions that can create positive changes in the behaviour, attitudes, and academic performance of youth (Dubois et al., 2011; Duralak, 2011). Some of these small, positive changes were shown in the *Gang Mentoring* pilot. However, while it is a promising form of intervention, it is still at an early stage of development and more research is necessary to identify the characteristics of successful programs, especially for gang prevention (Dubois et al., 2011; Medina, 2010). It has also been noted that the real impact and efficiency of mentoring has not been clearly documented yet and few evaluations look at whether the benefits of mentoring are sustained at later points in the youths' development (Dubois et al, 2011; Medina et al., 2010). Researchers must play a large role in all phases of designing, implementing, evaluating, and distributing interventions in the area of youth mentoring (Dubois et al., 2011).

Conclusion

Family members (especially siblings) that are involved in gang activity are one of numerous risk factors that contribute to youth gang membership. Reasons why younger siblings of gang members find it difficult to avoid gang involvement include feeling an obligation to continue on in their sibling's path, a fatalistic outlook that gang life is inevitable due to an association with gang activity because of an older sibling, a desire to model older siblings, a normalization of the gang lifestyle at home, and a desire to lead a "glamorous" gangster life. Female youth look to gang-involved siblings and other family members for a sense of belonging and attachment and join gangs to be around or with their older siblings. Furthermore, gang involvement can give them status and they are particularly at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse.

The literature from the U.S, U.K, and Canada suggests that prevention and intervention can only be successful with multi-agency cooperation and intelligence sharing. The police, schools, family, and voluntary and community organizations must look to each other for support and recognition of younger siblings of gang members that are at risk of gang membership. They should work closely together to determine methods of identifying siblings of known gang members and sharing this information, and to implement programs necessary to safeguard these young people. Prevention and intervention programs must take into account the communities they are to take place in and should involve families as much as possible, while recognizing that complicated family situations exist.

Enough is Enough is a successful program from the U.K that utilizes multiple agencies to reduce gang involvement and includes a specific element to prevent young people from making the same choices as their gang-involved siblings. Research shows that, when done properly, mentoring programs as a form of intervention can lead to positive developmental outcomes for youth. However, it is clear that more research and evaluation needs to be done in this area and that service providers must be cautious of labeling young people as gang associated because this can create a risk of stigmatization and net-widening.

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