Youth Gang and Violence

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Delinquency: Causes, Prevention, Intervention

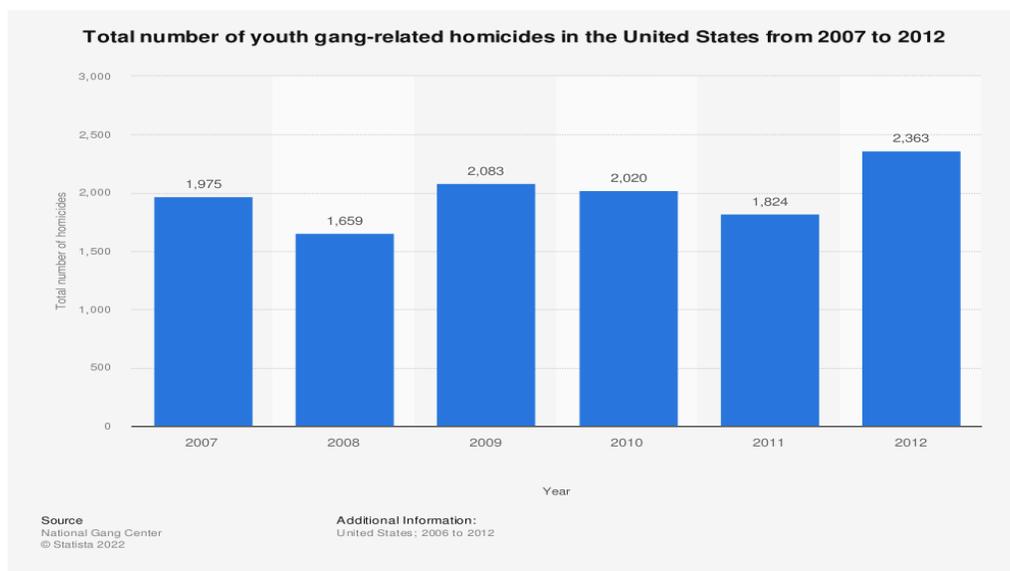Ms. Sara Kotecha

Nov 6, 2022

According to the National Institute of Justice, gangs are defined as a group of three or more people who organized or take part in criminal activity with a common name or sign. In the past decade the number of gangs has increased to over 30,000 nationally. After decreasing in the year 2003, they had a fifteen percent increase in 2006. To say that there is only one problem with youth gangs and violence would be an understatement. The amount of problems the kids endure as well as the community is disheartening. The complications of youth gangs include but are not limited to drug use, drug trafficking, violence, assault and even homicide.

There are many issues alone with substance abuse in the youth community. These problems are both short and long term. Some short term effects include relationship distress, emotional/economic burden, job loss and much more. The long term effects are much more hazardous as they include addiction, liver disease, lung disease, heart disease and even brain damage. In today's society I don't believe the youth community recognizes how dangerous addiction and drugs can be.

One of the most life threatening drugs that is popular in this world is called fentanyl. Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid drug that is only used as a prescription, but can also be made and sold illegally. Drug dealers are mixing their products with fentanyl as it takes very little to produce a high, making it the cheaper option. While high on fentanyl you may experience extreme happiness, nausea, confusion, sedation, breathing problems, unconsciousness and more. Mixing fentanyl with other drugs is highly dangerous and can lead to an overdose. Unintentional overdose is on the rise, as on average 39,000 people lose their life due to it. This is very worrisome as kids in gangs are more prone to taking or using drugs.

The first factor that can contribute to kids turning to the gang lifestyle is coming from an unstable or broken home. There are many factors that contribute to coming from a broken home such as violence, neglect, substance abuse and much more. This can look different for all kids as no one has the same home experiences. Neglect could also look like failure to provide food, water, clothing and or shelter. One of the main reasons why youths turn to gangs is they want to feel a sense of belonging and familyship. If they aren't getting it from their home or parents they will turn and look for it somewhere else.

Another factor that contributes to gang youth is the feeling of protection. Some youth believe that joining a gang will protect them from their neighborhood street violence. Street violence may include burglary, rape, assaults and even death. As the kids believe they will receive protection from their fellow gang members, they unknowingly are more likely to become victims of these crimes. On average more than 100,000 people a year report that they have been sexually assaulted, and 21.8% of these rapes are due to gang rape. These statistics are shockingly high considering they only cover one aspect of gang crime. According to the National Gang Center an average of 2,000 people were killed annually making thirteen percent of all homicides

Total number of youth gang-related homicides in the United States from 2007 to 2012

Year	Total number of homicides
2007	1,975
2008	1,659
2009	2,083
2010	2,020
2011	1,824
2012	2,363

Source
National Gang Center
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Additional Information:
United States; 2006 to 2012

due to gang violence.

The third factor that leads kids into joining gangs is low education attainment and expectations. As teens drop out of school they then have to find a way to make a living which many do illegally. The fastest way gang members make money is robbery of innocent people. Currently New Jersey has one of the lowest percentages of kids not graduating from high school on time at 9.5%. My home state New Mexico, currently has the highest percentage of kids not graduating on time which is at 28.9%. As I was doing my research on this topic it was very emotional seeing the state I currently reside in having one of the better education systems, yet my hometown having one of the worst. There are many reasons why kids dropout of school but the three main reasons include failing classes, becoming a caregiver and boredness.

I believe schools need to do more for the youth that they are failing. Individuals who are living in poverty are highly affected by the schools they are attending for many reasons. Schools that lie in high poverty have limited budgets and resources. This creates problems in hiring educators, preparing students for a higher education or workplace, creating unsafe environments for students and much more. These kids also have fewer opportunities to excel in their studies which may eventually lead them to dropping out. These schools have fewer programs to offer if the kids are wanting to better themselves and or the community.

Parents play such an important role in their children's life as they heavily influence their decision making skills. Fortunately I was lucky enough to be brought up in a supportive household where my parents took care of me, but not everyone is that lucky. Uninvolved or neglectful parents can cause much harm to kids as they develop low self esteem, depression, difficulty making friends and mental health issues which could all lead to the joinment of a gang.

Some parents are very much present in their children's life but still their kids may turn to the gang lifestyle. Some important warning signs that these parents should look out for include a decline in grades, change of friends, substance use, secretive tendencies, tattoos and disobeyment.

  The first program that I found located in Denver was called grasp which was established in 1991. Grasp stands for gang rescue and support group and is run by ex-gang members. This program works with teens that are currently active in gangs, teens looking to join a gang as well as their families. They offer their support and services to both male and females from the ages of 14-21. The services and programs that grasp has to offer cover all three levels of intervention. The services offered that fall under primary intervention include parent awareness training, community and school outreach, community mobilization and more. The services that fall under secondary intervention include crisis response, hospital intervention and family/youth advocacy. The tertiary programs that they offer include healing circles, job training, tattoo removals and more. Their services are also offered to kids who are struggling with substance abuse issues, history of juvenile justice involvement and kids who suffer from family dysfunction.

  The second program that I found that advocates for youth involved in gangs is the positive alternative to youth gangs also known as PAYG. This program aims to prevent at risk youth from joining gangs and getting into conflict with the law. PAYG developed a tool to identify which neighborhoods have the highest crime rates and were able to provide the schools in these areas with their programs. The program also offers services that include all three levels of intervention. They offer mentoring, one on one support, assemblies, after school programs, summer programs, family support programs, parenting classes and more. Another service that is

offered is a follow up program. This is aimed at their kids who are specifically in grades 11 and 12 and provide tutoring and other services in order to help them receive a higher education.

The consequences of joining a gang include exposure to drugs/alcohol, inappropriate sexual behaviour, unemployment, juvenile conviction and incarceration, removal from family, pregnancy and even death. There are many alternatives to joining a gang that kids might not know about. Avoiding the want or need to join a gang could be both small or large. You could join sports teams, join after school clubs, get a part time job and even try to learn or discover a new talent. This will look different for each teen but it is important to keep yourself distracted and busy if you really feel the need to join a gang.

After graduation I plan on going to graduate school to become a juvenile justice social worker. This research project really justified my want to help youth in need. If I were to create a plan to help these specific kids I would really want a program similar to grasp. Once I finish graduate school my plan is to go back to Albuquerque, New Mexico and help better the community I came from. The city of Albuquerque has a dangerously high crime rate and is only getting worse as there is a steady increase in homicides, auto thefts and robberies each year. The youth as well as their parents need to know that they are safe in their own environment.

My plan would be to create a non-profit organization specifically for kids under the age of 22. As I was looking up prevention programs I saw many that were online but I would want a program that these kids could physically attend. The services would include all three levels of intervention but I would want a program that heavily focuses on their life after they are able to safely exit their gang. Many kids who exit gangs or juvenile systems don't get the help they need to start their life back up again. They are then viewed as dangerous kids which could be harmful

to the environment. It will be extremely hard for them to find jobs and gain the community's trust back again. My aim would include not giving up on these individuals. People all make mistakes in life and should be given the opportunities for a second chance.

One of the main programs I would like to run would be job training classes. This class would prepare the youth for job interviews. We would explain to them everything they need to know and how to make a good impression during interviews. Money management would also be something that I would like to teach as many weren't taught throughout high school. As I went through both highschool and college I was never offered a program like this. It could help improve your knowledge and get you closer to achieving your goals. I think this would be beneficial as these teens would have to start focusing more on their future. I would also include support groups for these teens and their families, having guest speakers who were once in their shoes. As a teen seeing someone else improve their life when they have been in similar positions is really inspiring, and I would be hopeful that they would want to do the same.

Citations

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