

GANGS AMONG LATINOS IN THE U.S.

The Issue

It is estimated that in 2009 there were about 1 million gang members in the United States.¹ Gangs are primarily comprised of adolescents under 18 (40%) and Latinos (47%).¹ The high rates of Latinos involved in gang activity is a result of various contributing factors such as low attainment of education, the environment in which they live in, poverty, and culture. Considering that the Latino population is the fastest growing community in the U.S., it is important to better address these risk factors in order to effectively reduce this disparity among the Latino population.

Risk Factors

In the United States, nearly 1 in 4 Latinos live in a household with an income below the federal poverty level. In addition, only about 62% of Latinos graduate from High School compared to 91% of non-Latino Whites and 87% of African Americans. Even though Latinos constitute 16% of the 18-year-old population in the US, they represent only 7% of college graduates.²

The environment in which Latinos live plays a pivotal role in gang activity. Violent neighborhood conditions create an environment conducive to engaging in this activity, particularly among youth, who may consider gang involvement as a viable option for protection.¹ This is especially of concern considering that due to lack of resources, recent migrants more commonly move into neighborhoods with prominent gang activity in both rural and urban areas. In both areas, population rates for Latinos and gang affiliations have been rising in the United States.

Latino adolescent males have higher death rates due to firearm homicide than non-Latino males.² In addition, the rate of incarceration of U.S.-born Latino males age 18-39 is seven times that of their foreign-born Latino counterparts.³ Gang involvement often leads to other risky and illegal behavior. It has been shown that gang-involved Latino adolescents are at high risk for drug use and start using at a much younger age than their non-Latino counterparts.⁴

Definition of Street Gangs

Federal law defines the term gang as “an ongoing group, club, organization, or association of five or more persons that has as one of its primary purposes the commission of one or more criminal offenses.”⁵ Overall, street gangs are open about their activities, with two of their main aims being violence and defending their social spaces.⁵ Even though gang affiliations range through social structures and races, minority gangs remain at the top of the list as the largest and the most active in the country, with notable examples being Latino gangs MS-13 and Latin Kings, and the African-American Crips.⁶

Gang History

Research has shown that Latino Gangs often supply emotional support and financial protection, characteristics that are lacking in many of their households.⁴ In their origin, gangs were formed to provide social networks that were often lacking in many minority communities. The lack of economic and social opportunity turned these groups into criminal enterprises.¹ Historically:

- “Gang-Like” activity among the poorer classes has been present in America since the early 1800s. Gang members tended to be of the same race or ethnic background and banded together for protection, socializing or financial gain.⁶
- The 1930s and 1920s saw the rise of Chicano gangs in Los Angeles, and their Zoot Suit Style of dress became a familiar sight. These groups strengthened and grew in numbers as they fought against harassment from white residents and soldiers.⁶
- The 1950s also saw the growth of female gangs.⁶
- The 1990s saw an expansion of gang involvement as the population expanded, the U.S. economy worsened, and the gap between the rich and the poor widened.⁶

Latino Gang Involvement

Even though Latino gangs began as small organizations that were highly disorganized, the 1980s saw the systemization of gang involvement in this population and an increase in members ages from 14-20 to 12- 40 year old. The networks grew from a group of boys who shared a culture, customs, and language to groups that bestow monikers on their members, have identifying symbols and colors, and initializing rituals for their members.⁷ Notably:

- Committing crime and imprisonment gained members status and allowed groups to expand throughout the community.
- Being stabbed or shot in gang fights gave members “veteran” status, and these gang leaders began to recruit new members and train them in gang-related criminal activities.
- Gang fights are turf-oriented, and many times progressed to gang wars.
- As the Latino population in the U.S. grows, there continues to be an expansion in their membership.
- Gang activity confronts men and women who are migrating to both rural and urban areas in the United States, so much that gang membership is often viewed as a viable option.⁶
- The deportation of individuals in these communities with gang ties have allowed the expansion and extension of these criminal enterprises into other countries such as in Central America.⁶

- MS-13, or Mara-Salvatrucha has an estimated following of 30,000 to 50,000 around the world and 8,000 to 10,000 in the U.S. alone.⁹
- The Latin Kings, whose origins are based in Chicago, is the second largest gang in the United States with an estimated following of 20,000 to 35,000.⁹

Characteristics of Male Involvement:

- About 78% of all male gang members that are incarcerated have emotional and learning disabilities.¹
- The majority of those involved are low income, have a history of failure in school and truant behavior, have friends who are also delinquent, and had early involvement in petty theft and behavioral disorder in grade school.¹

Characteristics of Female Involvement:

- Early exposure to sexual activity/abuse, early drug use, and exposure to violence.¹
- Low income neighborhoods and families.¹
- Family dysfunction.¹
- Lack of involvement in positive activities in and out of school.¹
- They assist male gang members in the following ways:⁹
 - Carry drugs and weapons and provide safe houses for contraband;
 - Engage in prostitution;
 - Engage in drug sales, vandalism, and credit card and identity theft.
- Latina gangs are starting to evolve exclusive of the traditionally male-dominated Latino gangs. While the number of all-female gangs remains low, the role of women in gangs is evolving. Women are taking more active roles, assisting in the movement of drugs and weapons, and gathering intelligence from other gangs.⁷

Addictions among Gang Members:

- Gang membership facilitates drug use in those individuals who were already abusing drugs before becoming a member, and the vast majority of gang members in general use drugs.⁴
- Drug use among high at-risk individuals is 15 years old for marijuana and 19 years old for cocaine, for alcohol the age is much younger at 12 years old—this substance is usually introduced by a family member.⁴
- Drug using behavior among Latino gangs has its origins in the 1980s cocaine and crack trade.⁴ Furthermore, gang members have had involvement in the selling of other drugs, particularly PCP, heroin, methamphetamine, and marijuana.⁹

Conclusion:

When analyzing the factors that contribute to gang activity, key points become prominent. First, these individuals have low achievement in school and were put off of traditional educations. Second, these individuals have traditionally come from poor, disenfranchised communities of color. While looking for a network of support and protection they join these groups whose culture is one of violence. Gangs have provided support to youth in areas where they have found none. This support has extended both emotionally and economically. Involvement in gang activity leads to further at-risk situations and behavior. Taking all this into consideration, it becomes important for us to look at what alternatives can be offered to these youth—alternatives that will provide similar support networks and opportunities so they do not feel the need to join this illicit way of life.

Public Policy Recommendations

1. Invest resources in alternative rehabilitation programs for youth that focus beyond legal system punishment (e.g. jail time, probation).
2. Create programs for at-risk youth in low income communities to offer support networks not found through the traditional education system or outreach programs.
3. Fund collaborative research that includes law enforcement, community members, schools, and youth in order to offer comprehensive solutions for the youth.

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