



No. 240

School Strategies to Deal with Gangs

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Analysis of the reasons why young people join or form criminal gangs indicates that gang membership is intimately related to peer interaction. Peer groups come in a wide range of shapes and sizes, and school is an important site for the incubation and sustainment of diverse peer networks. School experiences have long been associated with risk and protective factors pertaining to juvenile crime and gang-related behaviour. Factors such as low school commitment and low academic achievement are directly linked to potential deviancy, whether this be self-destructive behaviour (as with drug abuse) or antisocial group activity (such as gangs). On the other hand, factors such as encouragement of student participation in school decision-making can help foster pro-social interactions and relationships. This paper provides a brief overview of various anti-gang approaches and strategies used within a schooling context.

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Gangs exist within and outside schools, though not all delinquent behaviour is gang activity and not all gang activity involves crime or deviance. An earlier *Trends and Issues* paper (no. 237) stated that an important part of gang research is to explore ways of stopping criminal gangs from forming and/or growing. A working definition of a criminal gang for the present discussion is one in which a group sees itself as a "gang", and is perceived by others around it as a "gang", primarily because of its illegal activities.

In a school context, gangs may be associated with group fights or group bullying of individual students. Gang-related behaviour may also involve actions directed against school property (such as vandalism) or intimidation of teachers (through threats and actual violence). Gangs may form for a variety of reasons—alienation from schooling, peer pressures, family ties, the need for protection. As with gangs in the general community, each type of group formation within a school has to be examined in its own right to ascertain its basic features, activities and membership.

Any discussion of crime and gangs must take into account the role played by schools in shaping the social resources and social identities of young people. Schools can play a general social inclusion role, and they can institute specific gang prevention and intervention activities.

Contextually, government attempts to improve educational participation has had intended and unintended consequences. On the one hand, a large and growing proportion of the 15–24-year-old age group attends an educational institution (85 per cent in 1998). On the other hand, a growing number of these young people are combining full-time study with part-time work (Szukalska & Robinson 2000). This is creating enormous stress for many young people as they attempt to negotiate their multiple responsibilities, and to forge a social life on relatively low incomes.

Absenteeism (particularly when associated with truancy) and bullying have major impacts on school experiences and in-group and between-group activities. Accordingly, considerable attention is being directed at improving whole-of-school environments, and

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in dealing with school “trouble-makers” and truants in ways that keep them in the system rather than excluded from schools and educational opportunities (see Ingersoll & LeBoeuf 1996; Garry 1996; Stranger 2002).

Specific Anti-gang Programs

A summary of school-based gang prevention and intervention programs in the United States has been compiled by Gottfredson and Gottfredson (1999). It includes a wide range of activities and approaches. Space precludes discussion of each of these techniques and approaches, however, several strategies and programs can be explored in order to illustrate potential measures that might be adopted in Australia.

Anti-Gang Education

International research has determined that the most cost-effective approach to reducing serious youth and adult gang-related crime is to discourage children and young people from joining gangs in the first place (Howell 2000). In this regard, the Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) program aims to assist students in learning about their school and neighbourhood, and the importance of pro-social behaviour. In particular, the curriculum stresses the negative impact of drugs and conflict, while simultaneously promoting the positive things young people can do for their communities and for themselves.

The program involves uniformed law enforcement officers teaching a course to middle-school students which covers:

- crime, victims and rights;
- cultural sensitivity/prejudice;
- conflict resolution;
- meeting basic needs;
- drugs/neighbourhoods;
- responsibility; and
- goal setting (Howell 2000, pp. 11–12).

Preliminary evaluation of this approach has indicated positive, if

somewhat modest, program effects (Esbensen & Osgood 1999). Specifically, students completing the GREAT program had more pro-social attitudes and lower rates of some types of delinquent behaviour than students in the comparison group. An important observation by the evaluators is that the research supports the notion that trained law enforcement personnel can serve as prevention agents, as well as law enforcers (Esbensen & Osgood 1999, p. 237). In an Australian context, this raises interesting possibilities for, and questions about, relevant “Police in Schools” programs, particularly in relation to curriculum matters. For example, to what extent should police take an active role in preparing and delivering classes dealing with gangs and related issues? Should officers wear uniforms during presentations in schools? Who should fund this type of education?

Violence and Bullying

In the United States and in Australia (see Howell 2000; White et al. 1999), bullying at school creates a need for protection and encourages some young people to hang around in particular groups. The formation of self-defence peer groups, in turn, can foster a sense of group identity, pride and assertiveness. Anti-bullying programs that attempt to address these issues are frequently based upon provision of information to teachers, students and parents about the phenomenon. They can also involve periodic surveys of students as a means of monitoring the issue and reassuring students that authority figures are conscious of the problem.

Anti-violence strategies recommended for schools in New South Wales have included, among other things:

- mentoring programs for boys—these seek to develop positive constructions of masculinity, that are linked to a broader gender-equity strategy that addresses negative attitudes towards homosexuality and violence against gay men and lesbians;

- anti-bullying strategies—these include avenues whereby school communities can review current practice, identify training needs and develop whole-school behaviour management strategies for classrooms and playgrounds;
- anti-racism policies and practices—these provide schools with materials to evaluate their anti-racism initiatives that help to promote racism-free working and learning environments; and
- appointment of community liaison officers—whose role is to ensure that ethnic minority communities are involved in the education and welfare of their young people and that potential ethnic disputes impacting on schools are identified and addressed (NSW Cabinet Office 1996).

In addition to school-based activities, some consideration ought to be given to after-school activities and how these may be linked in some way to anti-gang initiatives. These, for example, could either be based within schools or alternatively around community groups such as sporting clubs.

Another aspect of the quest to make schools safe is the role that police might play via programs such as “Adopt-a-Cop” and “Police in Schools”. The presence of a police officer, at least on a periodic basis, may provide opportunities for students who feel vulnerable to gang attack or threats to bring the problem to the attention of authority figures most likely to be seen as best equipped to deal with gangs. Police can also play a passive crime prevention role insofar as their physical presence in school may in itself be enough to deter the exhibition of gang symbols, dress and behaviours. Whether such programs involving active police presence are educationally desirable, economically feasible and socially warranted is a matter requiring further examination and careful consideration. In addition, thought needs to be given to protecting from reprisals those who report matters for investigation.

School Absences and Exclusions

Truancy and exclusion from school are closely associated with the likelihood of offending, and provide a fertile ground for gang membership and activity (Hayden & Martin 1998). There is often a tension between:

- school objectives to limit the damage and distraction caused by a few “trouble-makers” by isolating them (including removing them from the school); and
- educational and crime prevention objectives that encourage the connection of people across communities, including the school community (by fostering a socially inclusive environment).

It is important that issues of school alienation and expulsion of “trouble-makers” are dealt with in ways that do not compound the problem. The challenge is how to retain students who typically present as disruptive to the schooling process.

One response to this is school-based truancy programs that emphasise curriculum change, often with a more vocational and “practical” orientation, as a means to keep student interest (Stranger 2002). Also, schools can be used by community organisations on evenings and weekends for recreational and artistic activities. In many cases, this not only represents the school as a community resource, rather than a compulsory institution, but the “outside” activities (such as art, photography, music or dance) might appeal to those who resist a “normal” curriculum. These strategies focus on youth participation, which can be achieved by opening the school up (figuratively and literally) to potentials that young people find exciting and energising.

Retaining disruptive students might also be achieved through the creation of meaningful incentives for attendance and cooperative behaviour. For instance, Stranger (2002) refers to Sorell High School in Tasmania, which operates a positive points system for all students. Rewards are

collective and thus they encourage students to work together. If they do so, and a predetermined tally is reached for the class, then the rewards might include an excursion to the Aquatic Centre, rock climbing or a movie.

Re-entry approaches are needed for excluded and disaffected pupils. British research has demonstrated that by excluding children from school, education departments actually shunt costs across to other agencies, such as the police and social services, while potentially causing immense harmful effects on family relationships (Hayden & Martin 1998). One solution to this is to ensure that expelled students have somewhere else to go to school. The use of alternative schools can be a viable option that either prepares students for regular schooling at some point in the future, or provides ongoing alternatives for young people who cannot cope (for whatever reason) with mainstream offerings. In Victoria, alternative teaching programs provide opportunities for students at risk of exclusion to gain skills during 10-week placements at specialist teaching units to enable them to remain at school. Many alternative schools in the United States also have a strong community service component that helps students connect positively with their local neighbourhood while simultaneously improving their self-esteem (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf 1996).

There are also innovative methods that can be used to include truants and rule-breakers within the school system while separating them from ordinary classes. Some of these include:

- more proactive communication between teachers, parents and children; and
- the use of in-school suspensions.

There are graduation incentive programs in the United States which involve a range of learning experiences and opportunities combined with modest cash and scholarship incentives (Hayden &

Martin 1998). In other words, making schooling financially, as well as educationally, worthwhile could assist in reducing crime and gang-related activity.

The use, in school settings, of restorative justice methods of conflict resolution has also been touted as a possible answer to youth misbehaviour, and could possibly be used to quell the emergence of gangs and gang-related behaviour in schools (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf 1996; Cameron & Thorsborne 2001). Youth conferences have been introduced in the school setting in Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory (see Strang 2001; Strang & Braithwaite 2001). However, a number of difficult practical issues have been identified in relation to the use of conferences in this setting. For example, the traditional management and disciplinary culture of many schools (with an emphasis on punishment and behavioural control) have inhibited successful implementation of conferencing strategies (that emphasise restorative justice in pursuit of a supportive school environment) (Cameron & Thorsborne 2001).

Implementing a process of suspensions and expulsions, as well as youth justice conferencing outside the school, have led to some young people being doubly punished—by the school, and by the juvenile justice system (see Scher & Payne 1999). Professional, administrative and legal guidelines should be put into place in order to ensure that young people’s rights are protected and that conferencing processes reflect a restorative outcome (see Cameron & Thorsborne 2001; Scher & Payne 1999).

Peer Relationships

Making gang membership less attractive might involve efforts to present positive pro-social models of behaviour that are “cool” from the point of view of youth subcultural styles. This can be achieved with school and

community interventions which involve the use of adult and peer mentors. Designated and trained mentors can provide guidance and assistance to younger cohorts. Closely related to this is the use of peer mediators—students whose role is to work through cooperative ways to resolve and reduce conflicts within school settings.

The point is to make “gang stuff” unattractive as a peer group option. As Gordon (2000, p. 57) emphasises:

Anti-gang programming appears to be most effective when it is aimed at the supply of new gang and group members, rather than existing and well-established street gang members. Programs in high schools can reduce fear and intimidation, dry up the source of gang personnel, and help generate a broader, negative perspective of gang membership, especially among younger adolescents.

It is important that efforts do not involve ridicule of “gangs” by student peer groups. Rather, the point is to make group membership itself positive in the sense of acknowledging things such as the support and belonging offered by gangs, but addressing the negative, antisocial behaviour.

School authorities and student peer leaders may provide leeway for modes of acting and dressing that do not necessarily present as conforming, and that may in some respects be rebellious in style without being antisocial and violent. Boundary-setting and making rules does not have to be authoritarian, top-down or conservative.

It may be useful here to target gang leaders directly, to give them an opportunity to talk about issues, be provided with individual support and to be offered positive alternatives to certain types of behaviour. Gang leaders can become positive role models through this process (analogous to the learning of parenting skills, in order to assist their members). The promotion of a positive code of ethics (protect the weak, don’t beat them up!) can serve to re-establish boundaries and

benchmarks for respectful behaviour.

For specifically anti-gang programs in schools, it has been suggested that three types of strategies could be included at any one time. These are:

- in-school safety and control procedures;
- in-school enrichment procedures that make the school experience more meaningful, effective and enjoyable; and
- formal links to community-based programs (Goldstein & Kodluboy 1998).

Ideally, any program development ought to rest upon extensive collaboration between school and community agencies, as well as with parents and students.

School is not always the answer for some young people, and many youth are forced by circumstance out of school (see Hayden & Martin 1998). For these young people, the street is both somewhere to escape to, and a place in which conflict is inevitable (with each other, and with authority figures). The specific kind of schooling available, the nature of youth relationships at the local neighbourhood level and the specific community context will all shape how young people deal with their own personal circumstances.

Schools and Social Inclusion

By focusing on social inclusion, schools can play a key role in preventing antisocial behaviour and gang formation. Schools make efforts to enhance the positive educational experience of young people through giving effect to different types of positive social connection (White 1996). A socially inclusive educational experience would focus on three key elements (see Box 1).

Building positive peer relationships and strengthening the sense of social inclusion can be fun and exciting. The social content of any particular program will have a major bearing on who participates and what they get out

of it. For example, NRMA Insurance sponsors a “Croc Eisteddfod” in Moree, New South Wales (NRMA Crimesafe 2000). The event involves music, dance and sport and, among other things, is intended to promote reconciliation among young people. The novelty of the event, combined with ample opportunities for all students to be part of planning, rehearsing and participating, enhances the potential for developing social cohesion among the students.

Relationships between groups of young people in a school setting can at times involve conflict and violence. Whether or not this is due specifically to “gang” influences is highly contentious in the Australian setting. Nevertheless, there are a range of measures that can be adopted to reduce group tensions and to foster a spirit of cooperation and respect within school.

General Educational Strategies

Strategies to address gang-related issues (see White et al. 1999) might include:

- providing young people with **specific education in cross-cultural issues** in order that the backgrounds, cultures and patterns of life pertaining to specific ethnic groups can be better understood by all concerned;
- directing attention to the provision of **anti-racist education**, so that issues of discrimination, prejudice and unequal power relations can be analysed and discussed in an enlightened, informative and empathetic manner;
- developing at the local, regional and state levels a series of **youth reconciliation projects**, that will promote the diversity of cultures among young people, aim to reduce violence between them, and give young people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds the practical opportunity to get to know each other at a personal and group level;
- providing **quality educational facilities and services** for the young people, particularly those

which are based upon a multicultural curriculum and atmosphere, in which students are provided with adequate individual and group support, and in which anti-racist strategies and practices are applied across the whole school population;

- concerted action on the specific issue of school bullying so that appropriate **conflict resolution and anti-violence strategies** can be put into place in order to reduce the number of such incidents and to reassure students of their safety and security within the educational institution; and
- devising **special provisions** for those young people who, due to their bullying or gang-related behaviour, might normally be excluded from school, but who still require community support and appropriate educational programs to ensure that they have the chance to contribute positively to society, rather than to be marginalised even further from the mainstream.

These interventions do not necessarily target gangs or gang-related behaviour as a problem, but, aimed at changes at a whole-of-school level, they are essential parts of any anti-gang strategy.

Developing a Framework for What Works

School-based gang prevention and intervention programs work best when there are local solutions to community-defined problems. They also reaffirm the centrality of a large degree of institutionalisation of “good practice”, rather than reliance upon ad hoc interventions and short-term commitments to specific projects. Importantly, successful prevention and intervention activity would appear to rest upon the development of an informed and strategic vision of what needs to be done, why and by whom.

When schools structure activities and train those who deliver them, the predictors of moderately successful prevention

Box 1: Socially Inclusive Schooling

Role of Schools as Social Connectors

Positive intervention strategies can be developed on the basis of the role of the school as an important source of physical and social connection within the community. The kinds of connection that need to be recognised include:

- youth peer groups and how the school provides a space for particular kinds of friendship networks and identity formation;
- the potential for schools to play a greater role in family and community life by virtue of both physical resources and elaboration of lifelong learning ideals; and
- the ways in which schools already constitute an important nodal point for multi-agency partnerships and collaborations for a range of government and non-government agencies.

As connectors, schools might focus on problems of social disconnection, youth identity and social spaces, families and communities, and intervention agencies.

Role of Programs as Social Includers

Some institutional and educational practices result directly in turning young people off education (resulting in school absenteeism) or away from schools (through things such as suspensions and exclusions). From a program perspective much can be achieved by developing measures that attempt to sustain a strong connection between student and school, in ways that are premised upon heightening the sense of social inclusion. Schools can connect people; programs can strengthen the connection. Inclusionary programs might focus on principles and practices of inclusion, moving beyond punishment and exclusion, restorative justice strategies and, overall, address perceptions of alienation and absence.

Role of Groups as Social Supporters

Education is never simply about individuals—it is a social process involving many different interactions between diverse groups of people. A central feature of youth experience is the peer group. The construction of strong bonds within a school setting has to acknowledge the importance of group behaviour, as well as individual wants and needs. Pro-social and pro-educational activities have to be built upon cooperation and collective input into institutional processes and management. Social support strategies in this context might focus on individuals as group members, antisocial behaviour, rule-makers and rule-breakers, and restorative social justice.

and intervention activities are seen to include:

- the extensiveness and quality of training;
- the level of supervision of the activity;
- principal support for the activity;
- the degree of structure or “scriptedness” of the activities;
- local responsibility for initiating the activity;
- the use of multiple sources of information, including “experts”; and
- the activity being part of the regular school program, not an add-on such as after-school

activity (Gottfredson & Gottfredson 1999).

Some of the evaluations have shown that schools are engaging in a wide range of activities, but in many cases much of that activity was seen to be weak (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1999).

Preventive skills-based programs should provide basic life skills. They also need to overcome perennial problems in delivery. For instance, a youth gangs workshop in Glenorchy, Tasmania (9 July 2002), attended by youth and community workers, discussed a range of specific delivery issues. The participants

at the forum identified the following concerns as especially problematic:

- the use of too much “social worky” language, a form of communication that did not strike a chord with the young people and that further alienated them from the process;
- the implementation of programs often seen to be impractical, and perceived as too general and “theoretical”;
- the credibility surrounding the people providing the life skills programs (that is, middle-class people from very different social and family backgrounds to the recipients);
- the need for immediate protection skills in relation to issues such as family abuse and drug and alcohol use;
- the need for consistency over time and realism about the change process (in terms of how long it takes, and the resources it requires); and
- the importance of building a sense of community involvement by communicating the actual consequences of things such as vandalism (how money spent fixing damage affects the budget available for things such as skating parks).

According to experienced youth and community workers, realistic anti-gang strategies have to start where the young people are coming from, rather than solely reflecting the interests or thinking of service providers. Listening and observational skills on the part of the practitioner are crucial aspects of the intervention process.

Conclusion

Schools have a positive role to play in providing positive pro-social alternatives to the choices that many young people make of participating in an illegitimate rather than legitimate group (Gordon 2000). Providing an alternative is crucial and this can be achievable if the school also ensures that students are not marginalised, whether this be

through educational processes (that emphasise failure as well as success) or social processes (for example, individuals from the same cultural or ethnic group feeling like outsiders within the school context). As with any anti-gang strategy, close liaison between school and community (that includes active input by young people themselves) is essential.

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