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## Getting Out of Gangs, Staying Out of Gangs: Gang intervention and Desistence Strategies

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### Introduction

Adults working with gang-involved clients often have questions about the reasons that individuals remain involved in gangs long-term, and how they can assist teenagers and young adults with leaving the gang. This article describes the pivotal life points at which targeted gang interventions may have increased effectiveness, and recommendations for strategies.

A considerable amount of gang research over the past 30 years has identified factors leading to gang membership, including specific "pushes" and "pulls" that influence an individual's decision to join a gang. Individuals may be pushed into gangs because of negative outside factors, barriers, and conditions in their social environment such as poverty, family problems, and lack of success in school. At the same time, they may also be pulled into gangs because the gang offers a perceived benefit (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996) such as safety/protection, love and support, excitement, financial opportunities, and a sense of belonging.

Until recently, very few studies have examined the factors that may contribute to an individual's decision to leave the gang (desistence). Longitudinal studies in cities with emerging gang problems conclude that turnover of membership in gangs is constant, and most gang members report staying in the gang for one year or less (Hill et al., 2001; Peterson et al., 2004; Thornberry et al., 2003; Thornberry et al., 2004). Research with former gang members indicates that marginal and short-term gang members generally are able to leave the gang without serious consequences (Decker and Lauritsen, 2002; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). However, field studies conducted on a smaller scale in Los Angeles and Chicago in entrenched gang areas (Horowitz, 1983; Moore, 1991) found that gang members remained in gangs for a longer period of time and that the decision to leave a gang is more complicated. The ability and willingness of individuals to leave gangs appears to be related to factors such as the longevity of an individual's participation in the gang, and how established and severe the level of gang activity is in the community.

Even short-term gang involvement can have long-term effects, including increased participation in crime, school problems, decreased employment prospects,

exposure/involvement with drug and alcohol use/abuse, and increased risk of victimization. As early as 1927, researcher Frederick Thrasher noted that participation in gangs reduces the gang member's connections to other mainstream social pursuits:

*"... his conception of his role is more vivid with reference to his gang than to other social groups. Since he lives largely in the present, he conceives of the part that he is playing in life as being in the gang; his status with other groups is unimportant to him, for the gang is his social world." (1963/1927; p. 231)*

This process has been referred to as "knifing off" (Moffitt, 1993), as the gang member cuts ties to other important social groups and organizations such as family, friends, schools, and religious community to focus more intensively on gang participation and identity, leading to higher levels of delinquency. Research conducted with 6th- to 9th-grade students in 15 schools with reported gang problems found that "the onset of gang membership was associated with an 82 percent increase in delinquency frequency." (Melde and Esbensen, 2011, p. 535)

As a gang member is pushed/pulled into the gang, the experience of gang membership further separates him from successful participation in mainstream society, worsening the social conditions he experiences, and escalating his involvement in crime. Long-term gang membership is associated with an escalating succession of effects such as dropping out of school, increased risk of teen fatherhood/pregnancy, and lack of employment success (Thornberry, et al., 2003; Thornberry, et al., 2004). The longer an individual is involved in gangs, the more severe the effect becomes, and the greater the distance between the gang member and the mainstream.

### Why Gang Members Disengage: Pushes Plus Pulls

Desistence research has similarly identified a set of factors that may push or pull individuals out of gang participation. Interviews with former gang members in Fresno and Los Angeles, California, and St. Louis, Missouri, found that both internal (pulls) and external (pushes) factors, or a combination of pushes/pulls, provided the impetus and opportunity to leave the



gang (Pyrooz and Decker, 2011). Push factors “make persistence in that social environment unappealing, they are viewed as ‘pushing’ the individual away from the gang” (Decker and Pyrooz, 2011, p. 12). Pull factors, alternatively, are “circumstances or situations that attract individuals to alternative routes...toward new activities and pathways” (Decker and Pyrooz, 2011, p. 12).

Most desistance studies note that the effects of these pushes and pulls are cumulative. Former gang members in Los Angeles noted that maturity, increased family commitments, and peer victimization created a snowballing effect which, in combination, led to the decision to disengage from the gang (Vigil, 1998). Research with gang members in St. Louis found that exposure to gang-related violence involving the gang member, his close friends, and/or family members led the individual to renounce ties to the gang (Decker and Lauritsen, 2002). Decker and Lauritsen note: “Familial ties and victimization experiences were cited far more often than institutional affiliations as reasons to terminate the ties to the gang.” (2002, p. 58)

Increased family responsibilities and, in particular, the birth of a child, also may provide an incentive for a major lifestyle change for gang members: “For many young men, fatherhood acts as a significant turning point, facilitating a shift away from gang involvement, crime and drug sales; a decline in substance abuse; and engagement with education and legitimate employment” (Moloney, et. al., 2009, p. 306).

#### Pushes

- Grew out of the gang lifestyle
- Criminal justice system involvement
- Police harassment or pressure
- Personal or vicarious victimization

Decker and Lauritsen, 2011

#### Pulls

- Familial responsibilities
- Job responsibilities
- Significant other
- Moved
- Family left the gang
- Gang fell apart

Each individual who is involved in gangs has a tolerance limit for the negative experiences connected with his gang membership. When that limit is reached, the negatives of gang membership start to outweigh the positives (Pyrooz et al., 2010), and other alternatives become more appealing. Decker and Pyrooz note that:

*“...many of the people interviewed talked about how things eventually built up for them and they had to find a new lifestyle—that the gang lifestyle and its attendant pressures (arrests, being stopped by the police, living under the threat of victimization) just got to be too much for them. These pressures, coupled with increasing family and job responsibilities, laid the groundwork for getting out of gang life.” (2011, p. 13)*

While the combination of factors that lead to gang desistance is different for each individual, the overall

factors that appear to influence gang desistance have implications for gang intervention programming.

## Using Gang Desistance Research to Identify Leverage Points

Desistance research highlights crucial leverage points in a gang member's life that may lead him to reconsider and end his gang membership. These experiences include involvement with the criminal justice system, negative contacts with law enforcement, victimization by other gang members, periods of disruption of the framework of the gang, and client maturation/life change events such as a romantic relationship, pregnancy, birth of a child, family health issues, etc. (Decker and Lauritsen, 2002). Whether these points occur abruptly or over a period of time, they influence the client's view of his own gang membership and its value to him.

These leverage points provide an opportunity when clients who have previously been committed to the gang lifestyle may become more receptive to alternatives:

*“Many of these gang members, though lacking work opportunities and experience, aspire to lead a “conventional life,” particularly to obtain legitimate employment, to have their own place, and to have a family. They are cognizant of their limited educational background and lack of technical training, and realize that their future employment prospects lie in low-paid occupations unless they can obtain further education. . .Where they may once have been uninterested or disdainful of various job-opportunity, training, or educational programs, after fatherhood many were increasingly desirous of such supports, but sometimes found them difficult to access.” (Moloney et al., 2009, p. 318).*

Using these leverage points to focus gang intervention activities may increase long-term programmatic effectiveness.

## Creating a Gang Desistance Plan

While the majority of desistance research has focused on gang members' reasons for leaving the gang, research conducted with 91 gang-involved fathers in San Francisco (Moloney et al., 2009) focused on their long-term success at staying out of gang and criminal involvement. The personal circumstances of these research subjects demonstrate the long-term negative effects of gang affiliation and separation from mainstream pursuits:

*“Less than half received a high-school diploma, and more than one-quarter dropped out of school and never returned. . .Close to half of the fathers had jobs, although the overall median job income was relatively low at U.S. \$1,300 per month. Additional income among gang fathers came from a variety of sources, especially drug sales.” (Moloney et al., 2009, p. 310).*



While little research has been conducted on long-term gang desistance strategies, more extensive research on criminal and substance abuse desistance can help to inform gang intervention strategies. Best practices in those areas include removing barriers which may keep the individual stuck in a life of gangs and crime while simultaneously helping the individual to gain and maintain “new adult roles and responsibilities” and affirming these steps forward (Hussong et al., 2004). Further, research by Moloney et al. (2009) provides insights into components of interventions with gang members that may increase long-term success with desistance.

Gang interventionists can help gang members who are seeking to leave the gang lifestyle by providing them with accurate advice about transitioning out of gangs and helping them design a plan for leaving the gang lifestyle. This gang desistance plan should identify/remove barriers and replace them with appropriate opportunities to successfully reenter the mainstream world.

### **Step 1: Remove barriers**

Without a high school diploma, and with more street skills than employment skills, the gang member who decides to change his life may quickly run into barriers to the noncriminal world. These barriers might include lack of education and/or literacy, lack of employment skills, lack of documents needed to work, unfamiliarity with the methods of obtaining employment, unfamiliarity with the protocols necessary to succeed on the job, and personal issues such as anger management issues, family conflict, mental health issues, and involvement in substance abuse.

Interventionists should help gang-involved clients identify and remove barriers that currently keep them from leaving the gang and participating in prosocial activities. These might include the following:

- **Threat of violence from the gang**

“Blood in, blood out” is a common phrase used by street gangs to describe the process of entering and leaving a gang, though it is rarely acted upon in a fatal manner. It can be interpreted as follows: gang members may shed their blood (during the initiation) to get into the gang, and they are frequently told that they have to shed their blood to get out.

However, most individuals are able to leave their gangs without the threat of violence. Interviews conducted by Decker and Pyrooz (2011) with former gang members found that the overwhelming majority (91 percent) “just left their gang and did not have to engage in any exceptional means to quit” (p. 13).

In the worst cases, though, gang members are threatened with death if they leave the gang. In prison gangs, this threat of violence is occasionally carried out. It also has been acted upon by street gangs, and in some cases, gang members who

attempted to leave the gang have been threatened, assaulted, and even killed. Any adult working with gang members should be aware of the potential risks and consequences, both to the gang member and to his family, and ensure that any advice that is given takes these risks into consideration. Gang interventionists also should ensure that they are familiar with local gangs, their rivalries, territories, and current activities and conflicts.

Clients should be advised not to openly discuss leaving the gang with their gang or its leaders, or to participate in departure rituals such as getting cliqued or jumped out. These approaches can result in serious harm to the client. In most cases, gradually disconnecting (fading away) from the gang is the best approach. Gang interventionists also must be careful not to share information about the client’s plan with other gang members or clients.

The risks posed to individual gang members vary by community and individual, so interventionists must carefully address the following considerations with each client:

- Is the gang member or his family at risk of immediate harm for cutting ties with the gang?
- Does his gang typically threaten or victimize individuals who try to leave?

Based on the answers to these questions, the interventionist should work with the client to develop a plan for the client’s departure from the gang. This plan should include the following steps:

- Avoid direct confrontations and making statements about leaving the gang
- Spend less time with the gang/individual gang members
- Focus on court/family/school/work responsibilities
- Practice refusal skills and excuses
- Notify interventionist/law enforcement in the event of safety concerns

***Adults can help gang members who are seeking to leave the gang lifestyle by providing them with accurate advice about transitioning out of gangs and helping them design a plan for leaving the gang.***

Ideally, the client’s desistance plan should limit his ability to spend time with other gang members by increasing his participation in alternative activities (job/school/spending time with family). It may also include family or criminal justice sanctions such as curfews, no-contact probation orders, electronic monitoring, etc.

Clients also need coaching on making excuses if they are directly confronted by the gang, using family members to provide a barrier to gang attempts to reach them, and on how to reach out to interventionists and/or law enforcement if they are



directly or indirectly threatened. In some situations, more extreme solutions such as moving or relocation may be required to protect an individual from gang retaliation or punishment

- **External identification as a gang member**

Gang symbols, clothing, tattoos, and other visual cues can mark an individual as a gang member, making the transition out of the gang more difficult and dangerous. Gang attire and tattoos pose barriers to educational and employment opportunities and acceptance in mainstream pursuits, and they also can lead to confrontations with rivals and enemies.

The gang member should be asked to identify clothes associated with the gang lifestyle and to discard them. Highly visible gang tattoos also should be identified, hidden, and considered for removal or masking. The interventionist should identify resources that can provide the gang member with alternative clothing through the use of vouchers, guided shopping trips, donations from thrift stores and/or dry cleaners, and corporate sponsors. A shopping trip with coaching by the gang interventionist can provide the client with guidance on work-appropriate clothing choices. Partnering with local medical professionals or tattoo removal facilities to perform free or low-cost tattoo removals also can be helpful.

The interventionist should help the gang member identify danger zones where rivals may be present (on the bus, at school, on certain street corners, in certain neighborhoods) and help the individual develop an action plan to avoid encountering rival gang members and/or to respond to an inadvertent confrontation.

Long-term gang members with high-profile street reputations are likely to experience more difficulties with disengaging from the gang. The individual's history of gang involvement may include long list of prior hostilities with rival gangs and participation in violent crimes. As a result, rival gang members are unlikely to stop pursuing their grievances against the client simply because he has taken steps to distance himself from his gang. Interventionists need to spend time explaining this issue to the client and working with law enforcement or criminal justice agencies to assess the individual's risk of being targeted for retaliation to ensure that the measures taken to disconnect the individual from the gang will be safe. Public transportation, for instance, may not be a safe option for some gang members.

Even for less-involved gang members, proximity to the gang or neighborhood may keep the individual tied to gang activity, drug use, and crime. Understanding and addressing the connection between the individual, the gang, rival gang members, and the community is crucial to effective intervention.

### **Changing Self Image**

*Frank K. joined the JQA when he was 10 years old. He had a poor relationship with his parents, and his younger brother eventually joined the gang as well. Frank K. gradually gained stature in the gang. By age 19, he was given responsibility for recruitment of new members and for ensuring that all of the schools in the gang's territory were controlled by JQA members. His younger brother played a similar role in the gang. In 2011, Frank K. was assaulted by prison gang members in retaliation for a homicide committed by JQA, and his home was burglarized by the prison gang. As a result, Frank K. decided to decrease his gang involvement to protect himself and his family.*

*Frank K. met with a gang intervention specialist to discuss his future goals. While he was confident about his leadership skills in his gang, he was unsure how to be a good father, boyfriend, and role model to his brother. Over a period of months, the interventionist worked with Frank to help him identify changes he should make, including removing gang tattoos, changing his style of dress, and reducing the amount of time he spent with the gang. Frank K. suffered a few setbacks during this process, including being fired for having an argument with another employee. However, the interventionist continued to encourage Frank K's behavioral changes, meeting with him two to three times a week to discuss his daily activities and helping him change his behavior patterns. Prior to each tattoo-removal session, Frank K. also met with his interventionist to discuss the internal and external changes he was making.*

*The interventionist also assisted Frank with obtaining professional attire and feeling comfortable in normal clothing. Once Frank became comfortable with these changes, the interventionist took him to an employment center where he received leads about two jobs, both offering more money than he was currently making. The employment counselor told Frank K. that he was given the leads because of his professional appearance and because he appeared focused and goal-oriented during the interview. This positive feedback increased Frank's self-confidence. He successfully interviewed for one of the jobs and was hired.*

*Frank K. shared with his intervention counselor that he felt like a normal person, not a gang member, at the job interview, and that he feels he is learning to function in mainstream society. Frank states that he will keep making efforts because he wants his son to see him as a good father, not a gang member who passes on the gang lifestyle to his child. Frank realizes that he has more changes to make and that he has to be consistent in his new way of life.*



- **Internal identification as a gang member**

Gang membership provides an individual with an identity linked to aggression and violence. Giordano, Schroeder, and Cernkovich (2007) characterized this self-concept as an “anger identity” and noted that individuals involved in gangs came to view themselves as having low levels of impulse control and a hair-trigger tendency to resort to violence.

The gang member’s internal identity also may include a script that describes what it means to be a man/woman, methods of self-protection, the role of the opposite sex, one’s standing in the community, ways to obtain respect, and a view of success. These scripts are shaped by the processes of gang involvement and even may be survival mechanisms. However, these internal scripts are often incompatible with the prosocial changes that the client wishes to make. The client’s desistance plan should identify internal scripts that may pose a barrier between the client and the mainstream, and should devise strategies to change these scripts.

- **Mental health/substance issues**

Many gang-involved clients have untreated mental health issues such as post traumatic stress disorder, anger management issues, attention deficit disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, etc. In some cases, these clients may cope with untreated mental health issues by using drugs and/or alcohol. It is important for the gang interventionist to work closely with the client to identify substance abuse/mental health issues and then support the client in dealing with these issues. Typically, the gang interventionist is not a substance abuse treatment provider, but interventionists should develop relationships with local providers, learn about available services, be able to explain the treatment process and services to clients, help the client access services, and “bridge” the client into these services by providing transportation and going with the client to initial meetings to provide support.

- **Dependence on the gang for social support**

For many clients, the gang serves as their primary mechanism of social support. The gang represents friendship, family, and community. When the client leaves the gang, this source of love and support is lost. Gang members in transition often have difficulties developing new social connections to replace their former gang associates. Addressing this barrier will require the interventionist to facilitate new sources of social support for the client, including working with the family, identifying new peer groups, and identifying a support network for the client at school, at work, and in the community.

- **Multigenerational Gang Families**

Numerous studies have documented the existence of multigenerational gang affiliation in entrenched gang areas. In one study (Sanchez-Jankowski,

1991), 32 percent of the fathers of gang members who were interviewed stated that their children belonged to the same gang to which the fathers had once belonged, and 11 percent stated that as many as four generations had belonged to the same gang. Miller (2001) found that 79 percent of the female gang members she interviewed had at least one family member involved in gangs, and 60 percent had two or more family members involved in gangs.

In multigenerational gang families, interventions with gang members who wish to leave the gang can be extraordinarily difficult, because the family may be antagonistic and unsupportive toward the client’s efforts to change. In such instances, residential programs outside the home area that offer structured educational/vocational opportunities, like the Job Corps program, may be a helpful alternative.

Interventionists often find that gang members experience multiple barriers to leaving the gang. The desistance plan should prioritize the most serious barriers first, and then work with gang members over time to systematically address and/or remove these barriers. In some rare instances, the danger to a gang member attempting to leave the gang may be so great that the individual is required to relocate outside the local area or even to another state. If so, collaboration with other local agencies, particularly law enforcement, is vital to protect the individual’s safety.

## **Step 2: Help the client “gain and maintain” adult responsibilities**

- **Help the client envision his personal identity**

The development of internal gang-influenced scripts was discussed earlier. To successfully leave the gang and rejoin the mainstream, the client must rewrite his internal identity, including methods of handling conflict, gender identity, criminal behavior, personal ethics, interpersonal relationships, and sense of personal safety. This is a long-term process. Gang interventionists can help the client identify his “gang programming” and the gang-influenced scripts that are incompatible with his goals, as well as rethink his programmed “gang” responses to a variety of situations.

For instance, street-thinking would suggest a violent response to perceived disrespect or criticism to avoid losing face with violent peers. On the job, however, the former gang member is going to have to learn other methods for responding to his boss and fellow employees if a conflict arises. To support these changes, it may be helpful for the client to participate in evidence-based therapeutic interventions such as cognitive behavioral therapy or aggression replacement therapy. These types of programs address critical thinking errors and interpersonal skill deficits while providing gang members with new tools for handling difficult situations as they reframe their self-images.



Ongoing coaching by interventionists is also helpful to support these internal changes as the client redefines his identity as a person, parent, and member of the community. Instead of being proud of his prowess in fighting, for instance, the gang member can be encouraged to take pride as a breadwinner and provider, good parent, positive role model, and successful employee, among his other positive responsibilities.

- **Help the client set and achieve goals**

Gang clients may be unclear about their personal and professional goals and also may feel trapped by the number of steps they must take in order to reach those goals. Because of the quick pace and fatalistic mentality of the gang lifestyle, gang clients also may have difficulty being emotionally engaged in long-term outcomes. A gang interventionist can use techniques such as motivational interviewing to help a client identify short-, medium-, and long-term goals. Then the interventionist can help the client break these goals down into manageable tasks and walk the client through the process of achieving these smaller goals.

For instance, a client whose long-term goal is to get a job currently cannot do so because he does not have a driver's license. His short-term goal would be to obtain a driver's license. The interventionist can help him create a short list of tasks that he must complete to get his driver's license: locate his birth certificate/social security card/proof of residency, clear up traffic tickets, and study for his driver's test. Successfully completing each of these tasks will bring the client closer to meeting his short-term and long-term goals. Once these tasks are accomplished and the goal is met, the interventionist can help the client by mentally reviewing the process, acknowledging the client's success and/or missteps, and using the goal-setting and task-identification process to help the client with his next goal.

Accomplishing short-term goals helps build the client's self-confidence, which, in time, can help sustain the momentum of his long-term goals. If the client gets discouraged, the interventionist can help him revisit the goals he has successfully completed. This serves to remind the client that change is a long-term process, but that he is making consistent and measurable progress.

- **Provide access to educational opportunities**

The interventionist should work closely with a local educational agency to assess the client's educational status and identify any literacy deficits. Providing the client with maximum results as quickly as possible is crucial. Gang interventionists should identify the fastest way for the individual to complete or catch up on his high school education using credit recovery programs, general equivalency degree (GED) classes, educational assistance programs, alternative school settings, or programs within mainstream high

### **Providing Employment Support**

*Mathis is a 34-year-old OB gang member who has served multiple short prison sentences and typically reoffended within 2–3 months after release. During his last period of incarceration, he participated in gang intervention activities for about five months. As a result of his participation in these activities, he realized the importance of being involved in the lives of his wife and children. He decided that gaining legitimate employment was important to avoid returning to his previous involvement in drug sales.*

*After release, Mathis reconnected with his family for a few weeks and then met with a gang interventionist to discuss employment options. Mathis and his wife had many questions. Mathis previously had negative experiences working with employment agencies and felt that they did not help him find a job. The intervention specialist reassured Mathis that the intervention agency provided regular training to the employment agency on working with gang members. He also told him about the program's successes with other gang-involved clients.*

*The intervention specialist spent time discussing the process of working with the employment agency, and helped Mathis gather identification documents and enroll in the employment agency's computerized client database. The intervention specialist also personally introduced Mathis to an employment counselor with experience working with gang-involved clients. This introduction helped Mathis feel more comfortable with the process. While talking to the employment counselor, Mathis disclosed that he wanted a job, but that he had no idea what type of work he would like to do. The employment counselor discussed several options with Mathis, including welding classes, and even showed Mathis how he could obtain funding to pay for this training. Shortly after this meeting, Mathis decided to delay accepting full-time employment and enrolled in the welding certification program. While in the welding program, Mathis met with his intervention specialist two to three times a week to discuss his desistance plan and daily activities. After Mathis completed his welding certification, he decided to enroll in an advanced welding course to increase his employability and earnings.*

*Five months after his release from prison, Mathis continues to do well and has not reoffended. As a result of his welding certifications, he can earn \$18–\$20 per hour in the local job market. He is proud of his accomplishments, as are his wife and children.*



schools that serve high-risk students. Once the initial educational goal is accomplished, the client should be encouraged to identify future vocational/educational goals. To effectively assist clients, interventionists need to build relationships and gain familiarity with the services of local educational programs and services, such as those offered by local school districts, community colleges and technical centers, neighborhood and alternative educational programs, and government agencies such as vocational rehabilitation.

- **Provide access to economic opportunities**

Gang interventionists should help clients identify short- and long-term employment goals and work with clients over time to ensure that they are ready to work; that they have addressed any educational deficits, substance abuse, or mental health issues; and that the employment opportunities provided "set the clients up to succeed." It can take a considerable amount of work for a client to be ready to start employment. In the short-term, however, the individual may need to earn money immediately by doing less-skilled work for less pay.

These types of jobs can help the client build a work history, identify problematic thinking and behaviors, and teach the client basic work skills, such as showing up on time and getting along with coworkers. They should be presented to the client as stepping stones to his long-term goals. The client's long-term plan should include opportunities to earn more pay and attain greater professional respect. Steps the client must take to accomplish that long-term goal might include participation in vocational training, college or technical classes, and/or employment training programs that provide job opportunities in skilled fields.

Interventionists should understand that employment that meets the client's need to feel respected for his work is crucial to long-term gang desistance success:

*"When they managed to break into a job in which they had a sense of dignity, gang fathers were more likely to sustain those jobs longer. . . On the other hand, employment in menial jobs such as janitorial, restaurant work, retail sales, and telemarketing was often short-lived, inconsistent, and instrumentally and intrinsically unfulfilling." (Moloney et al., 2009, p. 318).*

Once a client has obtained employment or is attending training/education classes, the role of the interventionist is to continue to support his success and provide coaching to help him resolve any difficulties. It may take a client more than one try to succeed at maintaining employment, and interventionists should be prepared for this possibility. Interventionists cannot assume that the client will just understand how to be successful at maintaining employment. Instead, an interventionist should continue to meet with a client

### **Strengthening Family Bonds**

Jason is an 18-year-old gang member who was referred to gang intervention services by juvenile probation when he was 15 years old. Jason maintained infrequent contact with gang intervention personnel over a two-year period while he rotated in and out of the juvenile justice system and struggled with his parents' substance addictions. Eventually, Jason moved in with his girlfriend's family, and her parents assumed guardianship of him. His girlfriend became pregnant and gave birth to a son. Jason successfully completed juvenile probation but could not maintain employment because of his literacy issues.

Jason's primary goal was to gain employment in the transportation industry so he could take care of his son and girlfriend. He also wished to rebuild his relationship with his parents, who were working to address their substance addictions. The gang interventionist connected Jason with a local program that helped him access necessary identification documents and get enrolled in an online high school diploma program to address his literacy deficits and complete his GED. The interventionist also helped Jason access family counseling services so he could start rebuilding a relationship with his parents and develop more effective skills to parent his young son.

During repeated meetings with his intervention specialist, Jason shared that his biggest fear was having his son ask him about his gang-related tattoos. With the assistance of his intervention specialist, he enrolled in a tattoo removal program. During the tattoo removal process, the intervention specialist received information that the gang was considering retaliation against Jason for leaving the gang. The intervention specialist helped Jason explain to the gang that he was focusing on taking care of his family and accomplishing his career goals. The intervention specialist also helped Jason create a plan to avoid future interactions with the gang. Jason successfully completed his high school diploma, received his transportation worker identification credentials, and obtained an entry-level position.

*He is currently working and taking care of his son and girlfriend.*



on an ongoing basis to discuss his daily problems and successes, provide feedback, identify areas for improvement, encourage the client's goals, and praise his efforts.

- ***Provide support to bolster the client's efforts to change***

When the social structure that the gang provided is no longer present in the client's life, it is crucial to teach the client how to seek out and gain support that can help sustain his positive efforts. It is also important to provide the client with opportunities and coaching to help him gain access to more positive peer groups where he can meet his need for belonging and socialization. Interventionists can help facilitate this process by introducing the individual to recreational, educational, social, and faith-based programs.

As part of the desistance planning process, the client (with coaching from the interventionist) can identify adults who will provide ongoing assistance: parents, relatives, teachers, social services providers, and religious leaders. The individual should identify supportive adults in different aspects of his life (neighborhood, home, school, community agencies, probation/parole) who can be available if the individual has a problem or needs to talk. The adults in this support network can assist by being available, providing good advice, and helping as needed. These adults also must be briefed so they clearly understand the possible risks and dangers to this client, and how to respond appropriately.

- ***Strengthen family bonds***

Protective factors that have been found to support substance abuse and antisocial behavior desistance include strong family ties, solid personal and/or marital relationships, and meaningful employment (Hussong et al., 2004). It is likely that these same protective factors also apply to gang desistance, particularly in light of the weight that is given to these factors when former gang members articulate their reasons for leaving the gang (Decker and Pyrooz, 2011). For this reason, interventionists should assess the support for the clients' life changes in their home and interpersonal relationships and intervene where necessary to help address problems. Gang intervention strategies might include reducing/mediating family conflicts; helping clients build their relationships with parents/siblings/family members/significant others; teaching parents of gang members more effective family management skills; assisting clients who are preparing for the birth of a child; helping clients learn effective parenting skills; and providing opportunities for families to spend positive time together. Interventionists also should be prepared to help clients access evidence-based programs designed to strengthen and support family bonds, such as functional family therapy, when necessary.

While the decision to leave a gang may be a sudden one, gang desistance should be viewed as a long-term, gradual process. It took time for the client to become a gang member, and it will take time for him to develop new patterns of behavior, to finish educational and career goals, and to distance himself emotionally from his complex relationship to the gang. There may be potholes, bumps, stops, and starts during the gang desistance journey, and these are no different from any other difficulties faced by individuals who set out to accomplish a goal or change their lives.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, gang interventionists should remain cognizant of the following:

- Effectiveness with clients is increased when leverage points are utilized to help clients recognize that they are ready to leave the gang and live in a different way.
- Interventionists should have a current working knowledge of local gangs and gang dynamics.
- Interventionists should coach clients on interactions with the gang and avoiding safety risks.
- Interventionists should work to establish connections with law enforcement and criminal justice agencies to address issues with client safety.
- Interventionists should establish relationships with agencies that assist with education, tattoo removal, employment, substance abuse, family problems, and other services clients need.
- Gang desistance is a long-term process that involves helping the clients identify and change their self-image, internal scripts, personal behavior, and goals.
- Desistance plans need to be developed and revised as necessary based on a client's current needs
- Interventionists should reach out to parents, family members, and supportive professionals who can encourage and support clients' efforts to change.

Gang affiliation creates wide-ranging negative effects on individuals that can last throughout their lives. These include reduced educational attainment, unemployment or underemployment, poverty, and family crises. All of these effects can escalate over time.

For these reasons, it is particularly important that future research on gang desistance, including identification of factors predictive of success or failure in leaving the gang, be conducted, and that existing research be used to inform and strengthen current gang intervention activities. Achieving success in gang intervention can have a profound effect, not only on that individual, but on his community, peers, family, and children.



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This partnership works to provide professionals in the field of gangs with tools that can be used in a comprehensive range of strategies to respond to street gangs, from prevention and intervention to criminal justice strategies such as suppression, prosecution, and reentry.

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