

AGENDA

SPECIAL ISSUE

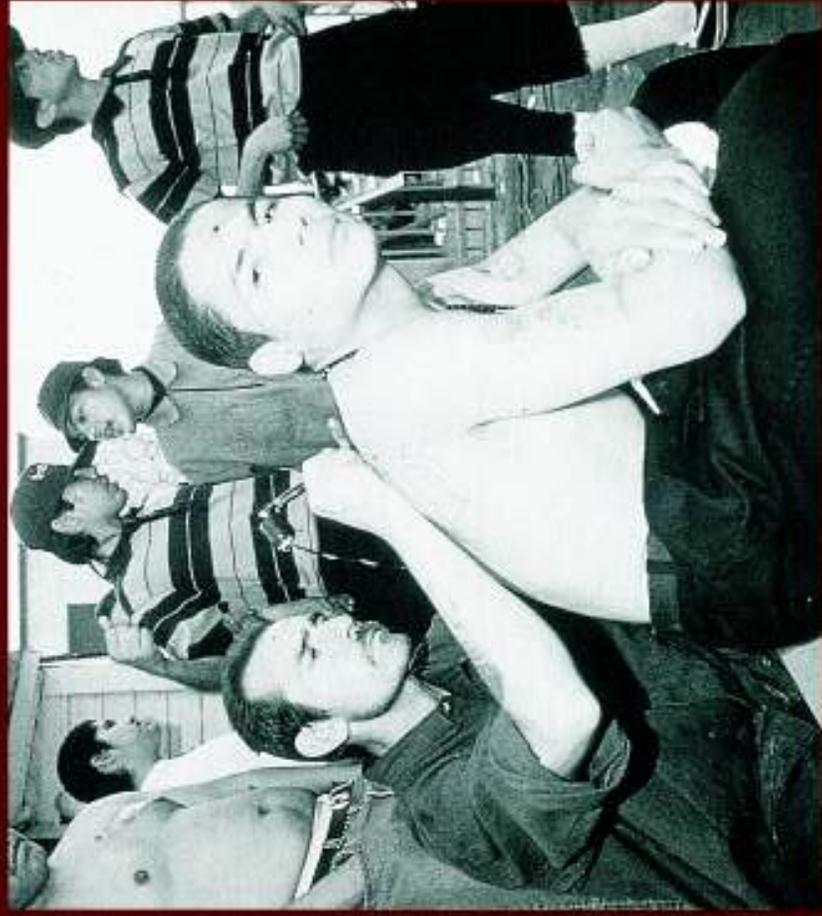
The Alternative Magazine of Critical Issues

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GANG VIOLENCE:
Solutions from Within

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Great photo courtesy of David Davis, Director of Making the Right Connections — a Los Angeles-based organization that grants for community development. Located on gang (over)kill. The photograph, "The Public Square," was taken in a large hall at an outdoor activity after completing a project document by the apartment building residents. The subject of the cover story, "The Public Square," an eighteen-year old member of the "Public Square" community, was killed by a police officer shortly after the photo was taken.

Founded in 1991, the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise (NCNE) is a nonprofit, nonprofit, nonprofit, nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting low-income neighborhoods and developing and implementing solutions to the problems affecting their communities. In addition to help low-income people achieve economic, cultural, and social well-being through the application of individual and community resources, NCNE approaches social and economic problems by developing and supporting innovative community development projects. The Center develops and implements community group and grassroots initiatives to enhance, sustain, and strengthen low-income people's cultural, economic, and social policy recommendations.

Our AGENDA



Robert L. Woodson, Sr.

conventional strategies they have adopted, and they continue to lob basketballs and social programs over our nation's chain-link fences, in hopes that recreational programs and case-management will somehow one day miraculously produce results.

The second reason for the failure to acknowledge the strides that grassroots initiatives have made in reducing youth crime and gang violence is that nearly all successful cases harkening from a value-laden foundation of spirit and faith. To the experts, talk about the spiritual is considered to be naive, unsophisticated, and dangerous. They seem to believe that Americans have more to fear from religious scripture than they do from a gun.

Yet, hundreds of neighborhood leaders who have been able to produce substantive and enduring change in their young people have done so only by catalyzing an internal transformation, a conversion, or — in the words of the prodigal son — by "calling the youths to themselves." As will be clear in the following testimonies of those who have been able to turn away from a life of gang violence, a spiritual element was a fundamental factor in their liberation. This doesn't necessarily mean affiliation with religion, but a belief in something larger that gives meaning to their lives and a vision of their potential beyond that which their circumstances seem to dictate.

If our nation is to learn from these living models of success, we must be willing to suspend our reliance on credentials and our fear of solutions that involve more than external props. We must open our minds to the wisdom of those who recount their stories in this issue of AGENDA.

The extent of rampant youth crime and gang activity throughout the country cannot be exaggerated. In our nation's capital alone, there were 947 shootings last year. Of 415 murders and 532 casualties, 115 victims were juveniles, and many more were just in their late teens or barely into their twenties. The violence has become so common that it has lost its news-worthiness and is buried now on the back pages of newspapers. It has been categorized by many professionals as an "intractable" problem.

What has not been acknowledged is the fact that solutions do exist. From the streets of South Central Los Angeles to the housing projects of Hartford, Connecticut, dedicated neighborhood activists have been able to touch the hearts of active gang members and to bring alive their own deeply buried dreams for their lives and their children. Through perseverance, willingness to take risks, and heart-felt concern, these grassroots leaders have been able to succeed in recruiting a generation that professionals, journalists, and academics had long ago declared to be beyond hope. Yet the transformations they have caused in the lives of young people remain under a veil of silence.

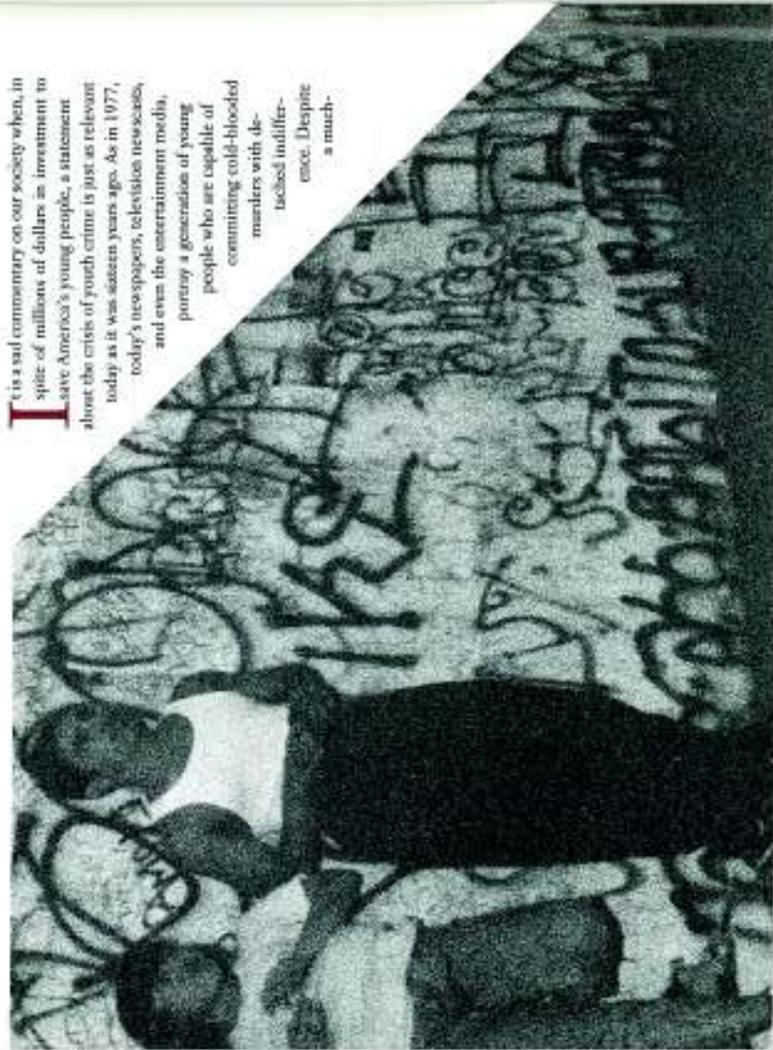
I believe there are two reasons for the black-out regarding these victories. The first is a pervasive elitism under which the podium is open only to those who hold the requisite degrees and credentials. The ideas of grassroots people, regardless of their potential, are discounted, and their experience, no matter how instructive it may be, is ignored. Policy makers, trained specialists, and academics do not dare to open their doors to those outside of their domain. Regardless of the crises that exist within inner-cities throughout the country, they will not venture from the

Gang Violence:

by Robert L. Woodson, Jr.

A new, more remorseless, mutant juvenile seems to have been born and there is no more terrifying figure in America today.
—*Time Magazine* 7/11/77

It is a sad commentary on our society when, in spite of millions of dollars in investment to save America's young people, a statement about the crisis of youth crime is just as relevant today as it was sixteen years ago. As in 1977, today's newspapers, television newscasts, and even the entertainment media, portray a generation of young people who are capable of committing cold-blooded murders with detached indifference. Despite a much-



A National Epidemic

heralded truce between the two largest youth gangs in south-central Los Angeles, the Crips and Bloods, in these neighborhoods has continued unabated. Recently, an elementary school in east Palo Alto, California, shocked the nation when it announced plans to offer burial insurance to the parents of its students who were at risk of being gunned down.

Although discussion of youth violence has centered, for the most part, on gangs, the problem extends beyond actual gang membership. Researcher Walter Miller estimates that the number of law-violating youth groups in the nation may be fifty times that of what would be officially termed as "gangs." For example, Washington D.C., dubbed the Murder Capital of the nation because of its rampant homicide rate, is not considered to have a "gang problem". Yet, changing the label of the problem provokes little solace to the parents of the 451 young people under the age of 21 who have been murdered in the District within the past five years. In 1990, the greatest number of those arrested for murder were between 18 and 20 years old.

Whether or not our nation's capital has a gang problem, it clearly has a crisis of youth violence and organized youth crime which officials have chosen to label as "gangs." Crews may

not exhibit every characteristic of gangs, but to some extent, this is part of an intentional strategy. For example, according to a recent report on the District of Columbia's Crew Problem issued by West Virginia University, a "nameless entrepreneurial criminal organization," which "engages in major illegal money-making ventures" has been dubbed by the prosecutor's office as the "Committee." This organization has been described as "highly successful and 'unreported' in its processing, packaging, and marketing of crack cocaine" but has intentionally opted to go without a catchy name, special jackets, or colored bandannas (all typical of gangs) in order to avoid police detection.

Whether the label of "crew" or "gang" is used, the fact remains that the District has been plagued by organizations such as that run by 24-year-old Rayful Edmond who was arrested in April 1989 for drug trafficking, along with fifteen others, including his mother and eight other relatives. This organization was allegedly linked to both the Crips and Bloods of Los Angeles as well as a Columbian cartel, and it incorporated approximately 150 operators.

Youth Gangs: No Longer "West Side Story"

The "runners" of leather-jacketed gangs of the fifties who fought with bare fists, chains, and switch blades in territorial disputes seem tame in

graffiti functions to both claim turf and signal communications among gang members.

comparison to the scale, intensity, and the frightening indifference of today's gang violence. Children as young as twelve tote semi-automatic weapons. Grade-school students, so numbed by continual borings of street gunfire no longer even bend to a natural impulse to take cover during drive-by shootings and stand, unflinching, in a hail of fire.

The scales have risen as the notion of gang "war" has taken on new meaning—a claim to a portion of a lucrative drug market. A trail of twenty homicides during a five-month period were attributed to a turf battle between two factions of one drug trafficking organization in Washington, D.C. Gang members often finance weapons purchases by selling drugs, most commonly, crack and cocaine.

One gun dealer told a Los Angeles TV reporter that in 1987 he sold 1,000 AK47 semi-automatic assault rifles in one month. Clearly, the street gangs of the nineties are more violent, more heavily armed—and, tragically, younger—than those of previous years.

Today's gangs locally dominate entire communities, often controlling everything from schools and public parks to legitimate businesses and housing projects. Although the images of gang violence are usually associated with black low-income neighborhoods, the lure of membership has recently begun to penetrate beyond the boundaries of the ghetto and into middle-income suburbs.

As the death toll mounts, it is crucial that we find an effective strategy to restore order to our communities and reclaim our children. An important aspect of such a strategy will be strengthening the support system of the family and emphasizing parental responsibilities—encouraging and enabling parents to take a more active role in their children's lives. In addition, other support structures within the community have proven to be effective in deterring youth from joining gangs or in redirecting gang activity. The programs of such grassroots organizations should

be acknowledged and supported both in terms of policy and funding. Tragically, however, there are hard-core delinquents that are beyond the reach of even these programs. Out of concern for the security of the community, those young people must be taken off the streets.

A Brief History

The roots of today's youth gangs can be traced back for decades. At the turn of the century, Hispanic gangs could be found in the barrios of Southern California, claiming and protecting their turf. Leon Wickins, founder of a crisis center in South-Central Los Angeles, the Family Help Line, describes how minority groups that settled in our nation's major cities banded together for camaraderie and protection. For many young people, this translated into gang membership. In Philadelphia, Sister Fatima Farah, founder of a group house for gang members, The House of Umoja, describes a similar phenomenon that occurred in the black community in the 1930s and 1940s when blacks from the rural South migrated to Northern cities and formed "hanging groups" in the neighborhoods in which they settled.¹ These associations evolved, in time, into modern day street gangs.

In the 1950s, increased concern about gang activity resulted in a series of studies by sociologists and criminologists, and a stepped-up campaign of law enforcement. By the 1960s, a bevy of social programs, combined with increased police activity was thought to have alleviated the menace of youth gangs. However, as sociologist Walter Miller pointed out in a 1976 report to the Office of Juvenile Justice, although gangs may have taken a lower profile for a period of time, they remained active and their membership was unabated. In short, while the social scientists, journalists, and law enforcement experts were relegating youth gangs to the pages of history books, youth gangs were, in fact, thriving.² In the mid-1970s and 1980s, youth gangs re-emerged on the scene with a vengeance.

Throughout the 1980s, violent juvenile youth gangs became more active largely because of the lucrative drug trade and the availability of weapons. According to Commander Lorne Kramer of the Los Angeles Police Department, drug pushers took in an estimated \$150 billion in 1987 alone. Kramer went on to state that he knew of at least four gangs in Los Angeles that took in over \$1 million a week.³

Efforts to even approximate the scale of gang activity on a national basis have been hampered by the lack of universally accepted definition of what constitutes a youth gang. There are, therefore, no national estimates of youth gang participation and other demographic data. The following profiles of gang activity in Los Angeles and Chicago, will, however, yield valuable information about the scope of the problem in these cities.

A Case Study: Los Angeles ("Lebanon, USA")

Los Angeles has, by far, the largest gang problem in the United States. According to the L.A. County Sheriff's Department, Los Angeles County has over 850 gangs with an estimated membership of 80,000 to 100,000. Los Angeles's two largest gangs, the "Crips" and the "Bloods", have membership in excess of 24,000 youths, or about 25 percent of the county's black population between the ages of 15 and 24.⁴

The genesis of the two gangs is shrouded in myth and legend, but it has been alleged that the Crips formed in the mid-seventies as an outgrowth from the Black Panthers. Other gangs began signing them-

A young gang member from South Central Los Angeles.



during that year still mounted to 387. In the following year, a second series of sweeps was initiated, yet gang-related deaths rose 59% in the City and 100% in the County from what they had been in 1987.⁵ In 1988, 554 people lost their lives in gang violence.

One obstacle to quantifying black gang activity in Los Angeles County is the loose organizational structure of the two major gangs. For example, the Crips gang is not one unified organization, but is actually comprised of 160 separate gangs called "sets" with a combined membership of 14,000. In fact, fighting between Crip sets accounted for one-third to one-half of

all gang related killings in Los Angeles. The Bloods, on the other hand, have 100 "sets" with a combined total of 10,000 members, but violence between the sets is limited and their main targets are Crips.⁶

The hatred between the two gangs is so intense that it is manifest in symbolic extremes in their daily activities. Crips refuse to use the word "he" which they affiliate with the letter "B" of the Bloods. They thus translate the phrase "They will be here tomorrow" to "They will be here tomorrow." On the other hand, Bloods refrain from wearing British Knights tennis shoes because the BK emblem on the shoe has been taken to mean Blood Killer.

Community workers as well as gang members report that most gang violence today is not organized under a central command as it often was four decades ago, but rather, it is sporadic and impulsive. One gang member or a small group of members may decide to shoot up a rival gang's neighborhood without the consent or knowledge of other members of their set. It is questionable whether such actions should be considered as gang activity or individual acts of violence.

When a drug deal goes bad, a retaliatory drive-by shooting may target any resident of a neighborhood and is not necessarily limited to the offending gang members. As Doc, a Crip gang member whose brother was shot to death in a phone booth warned, "My brother didn't know who done it to him, so I ain't gonna care who I do it to. I'm just gonna get whoever is around at a certain time . . . that's who I'm just gonna get. If I can get somebody, it be off my back. I feel better about it." Doc later drove to a rival gang's neighborhood and fired his gun at whoever happened to be on the street at the time.⁸ He does not know if he killed anyone — nor does he seem to care. Gang members consider the murder of innocent bystanders simply as casualties of war.

Bullets from street warfare pierced the headboard of this girl's bed as she slept.



A Problem of All Races and Ethnic Groups

Gang violence is by no means limited to the black community of Los Angeles. In fact, it has been stated by criminologists that black gangs have patterned themselves after the Hispanic gangs, especially with regard to the use of hand signals and graffiti. The Hispanic community has a longer history of gang activity than any other ethnic group in L.A. county, dating back to the turn of the century. Hispanic gangs tend to be more territorial and less concerned with monetary gain than other ethnic gangs. "Hispanic gangs are not into monetary gain as they are into proving they are machismo and defending what they see as their neighborhood," states Sgt. Wes McBride of the LASD. "During the 1970s when Hispanic gang violence was at its peak, community workers were successful in redirecting the focus of gangs to the Hispanic pride movement that was prevalent at the time. This helped to some extent to quell the tide of violence. However, gang activity is still a fact of life in many east Los Angeles barrios."

In addition to black and Hispanic gangs, Los Angeles police are now forced to deal with a new and more worrisome problem — the rise of Asian youth gangs. Police report that Asian gangs will soon rival the "Crips" and "Bloods" in terms of drug activity and violence. A number of these gangs have direct ties to powerful Asian heroin organizations and are developing into major narcotic organizations with the potential for extreme violence.¹⁰ Youths from war-torn Asian countries arrive in America already proficient in the use of weapons. Many have lost family members in the wars of Southeast Asia and according to Day Ngyan, director of the Vietnamese Community Group, "The single greatest strength we have, culturally speaking, is our family unit, and for many of these kids, it simply is not there."¹¹

Yet another aspect of gang activity has been noted by police who report that white suburban youths are now joining gangs in increasing numbers. Officials in the Los Angeles County Sher-

iff's department report that although the number of white gang members is hard to determine they estimate it to be approximately 1,200.¹² Leon Watkins explains that the "Crips" are using white youths to sell and transport cocaine because they are not as likely to be stopped by police. A number of white youths who have not been admitted into a gang have established their own sets in their schools and communities.¹³ The suburbanites admit that they are baffled by the rise of gangs among middle class whites. Many cite decreasing parental supervision and the breakdown of the traditional family unit as contributing factors to suburban gang activity.¹⁴

White suburban youths are now joining gangs in increasing numbers.

Los Angeles' gang problem has taken a massive toll, both in terms of lives that have been lost and money that has been spent. The Los Angeles Police Department budgets approximately \$10 million a year for salaries and support services for the 191 sworn officers employed in its gang activities and C.R.A.S.H. (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums) units. The Sheriff's Department spends \$4.6 million annually for its 64-member Operative Safe Streets unit. In addition, the County Probation Department budgets \$2.3 million yearly for a 51-member specialized gang supervision program. In just one year, the District Attorney's office spent \$1.8 million prosecuting 970 defendants in 342 cases — a majority of which were homicides. In total, the state of Criminal Justice Planning Department funds 22 separate prosecutorial and community-based and-gang programs in L.A. County, through which half of its \$4.6 million statewide budget was allocated in Los Angeles this year. Authorities report that the yearly cost for housing each prisoner at the L.A. county jail, not including court costs, is \$11,000.00. The number of gang members that have been incarcerated is staggering. Presently, more than 700 members of the Bloods and Crips are housed in isolated quarters at the jail.¹⁵

In an intense effort to reduce the gang problem, proposals are currently pending in the state

legislature to outlaw membership in violent gangs, allow police wiretaps, and provide as much as \$100 million for increased law enforcement and gang counseling services.¹⁴

A Case Study: Chicago

In 1988, the Chicago Police Gangs Crime Unit estimated that 125 street gangs and factions of major gangs operate in the city, involving more than 12,000 youths.¹⁵ As is the case in most major

Gang violence is not limited to cities such as Los Angeles and Chicago. It is spreading throughout the nation like a virus.

cities, young people are joining gangs in Chicago at an earlier age than ever before. According to Robert Martin, director of the Chicago Intervention Network, in 1984 the average age of a gang member was 15 years; in 1988 it was as young as 13½.¹⁶ Most of the gang population in Chicago is black and Hispanic, and located in the depressed areas of the inner city.

The two major antagonists in Chicago's gang drama are the "Black Gangster Disciples" and the "Vice Lords." Like the black gangs of Los Angeles, the Disciples belong to the much larger organization called "Folks," an alliance of white, black, and Hispanic gangs, and the Vice Lords belong to the "People," an alliance of Mexican-American, Puerto Rican and black gangs. The Vice Lords and Disciples each have affiliate gangs spread throughout the city. The gangs continually vie for control of turf in the city's immense system of public housing projects and a respective share of the "crack" trade.

The Chicago gangs have penetrated the city so deeply that they have become accepted as part of the social fabric of a number of the neighborhoods. In spite of the dangers and social devastation the gangs have wrought, their power is respected to the extent that it has been tapped by low-bidding members of the community. In the Rockwell Gardens public housing complex, residents searched in vain for a security force for a

neighborhood picnic they were organizing. When they heard that neither security guards nor police would provide security for event, members of the Disciples approached the residents and offered their services as a security force.

In a shocking contrast of the realities of Chicago's inner city, children danced and played around a resident who was dressed in a clown suit and parents sat eating and drinking at tables in the complex's court yard under the somber, watchful eyes of three armed gang members.

Gangs were to play an even more prominent role in the third annual Players Picnic that was held in Don Ryan Park, which was attended by a crowd of more than 2,000, residents of Robert Taylor Homes, the city's largest public housing project, who were given invitations. The massive event was a good-will gesture sponsored by Chicago gang leaders and the city's top drug dealers who treated their guests to free food and drinks, live music, and a car show featuring their own BMWs, Rolls Royces, and Mercedes.

There are a number of other activities through which gang leaders have attempted to ingratiate themselves to residents of the low-income neighborhoods in which they do business. At the Cabrini-Green public housing complex, one gang leader gives the children in the development 1,000 pairs of sneakers each summer. At Ogden Courts public housing complex, gang leaders distribute money to elderly residents and hand out dollar bills to the children. In some cases, gangs have performed repair work to apartments in the aftermath of disasters.¹⁷

All of these token acts of charity, however, can do little to make up for the sense of fear that the residents of these communities must live in under the shadow of gang violence and drug trafficking. Residents often witness savage beatings and killings and at times their apartments are overtaken by gang members who use their units as a base for crack sales. It is not uncommon for their windows to be broken by stray bullets, and many residents put their children to sleep on the floor or in even in the bathtub to protect them from gun fire.

To combat gang violence, police and public housing authorities have conducted sweeps through buildings that are known to be controlled by gangs. Public housing officials have also begun a program that issues residents I.D. cards that they must use to enter the buildings, and armed security guards ensure that all guests leave by 12 a.m.

In addition to protecting their families from the dangers of an environment of rampant violence, many parents also face the tragedy of losing their own children to the lure of gangs. When one father objected to his son's involvement with a gang, two members of the Disciples appeared at his door and told him to "mind his business" then beat him, breaking his arm.¹⁸ For the most part, gangs do not have to actively recruit members. Youths seeking a sense of identity and belonging that they do not get at home, and those who long to be respected, are attracted to gangs. In addition, gangs offer material benefits to their young members, sometimes providing shelter and pocket money for those who are on the street.

Robert Martin told a story of how gangs entered into the life of one teenager whose mother had died. Though no family members reached out to him, members of the gang accompanied him to the funeral and stayed with him afterwards. The young man proclaimed that the gang was now his only family and that he would protect it with his life.¹⁹

Professionals have attributed the attraction of gangs to a number of societal and personal factors, and young people give a variety of reasons for joining a gang. "B-Boone," a member of the Bloods, told researchers, "My mother wanted me to be to be 'Blood' cause you die on these streets with no colors and 'Blood' be best."²⁰ David Stewart, a former gang member, gives an explanation

which includes the commonly cited need for respect and friendship: "I didn't want to sit in the house and be neglected, and not be one of the fellows. I like just having that kind of respect — having certain people scared of you."²¹ Many professionals stress the negative impact of a broken home and have theorized that young people who come from single-parent households are more likely to participate in gangs or to engage in delinquent behavior. Some feel gangs — for better or worse — provide a sense of male identity for their fatherless members, and statistics show that youth gangs are in fact more numerous, better established, and more likely to engage in serious crime in those neighborhoods with high proportion of one-parent families, particularly those without fathers.²²

In general, there is a consensus among researchers that other variables interact with family variables to produce the youth gang problem. Sherwood Williams, a deputy police chief in Chicago, stated that "gangs breed in an environment where basic social institutions — the family,



Gang members proudly boast of their girlfriends.

schools, and community organizations — are not as strong . . .⁴¹

Crisis: Gang Violence Is Spreading

Gang violence is not limited to cities such as Los Angeles and Chicago. It is spreading throughout the nation like a virus, infecting small cities and towns that were once thought to be immune. Gangs in search of greater profits and new markets for their drug sales are attracted to smaller cities in which the price of cocaine is inflated. The presence of members of Los Angeles gangs has been reported in Phoenix, Kansas City, Denver, and Tucson, where they have established cocaine businesses and recruited members. A national survey of police departments in large cities (populations over 200,000) has revealed that only three out of 78 do not report a gang, crew, or posse problem. Seventy-two

(90%) of the seventy-eight identified their most critical problems as gang problems.⁴²

According to the Office Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), Los Angeles gangs have been reported in 49 cities in 30 states. Walter Miller, former director of the National Youth Gang Survey, a project sponsored by the Justice Department and the Harvard Law School, believes that Los Angeles and Chicago are the points of origin of most of the gang-related activity that cities throughout the nation are now experiencing. Mr. Miller noted that graffiti containing the symbols of the Vice Lords and the Disciples, which are Chicago gangs, have appeared on walls in cities as distant as Memphis, Tenn. and Canton, Miss.⁴³

Experts report that gangs often spread when gang members move with their families to other cities. The gang member takes his gang affiliation with him and starts a new gang where his family settles. The spread of gang activity is also attributed to the worsening conditions of the nation's urban areas which make inter-city communities more conducive to gang activity. Edward Pleines, the commander of the Gang Crimes unit of the Chicago Police Dept. states that, "The important thing to remember is that in order for that seed to take hold it has to have fertile ground. The root causes of gangs are societal. They are one-parent families, no-parent families, and a rising high-school dropout rate."⁴⁴

Solutions: What Can be Done?

Clearly, as a society we are failing our children if all we can offer in response to a violent environment is burial insurance. However, despite the fact that gang violence is a growing problem, in a number

For today's youths, gang membership is survival.



of communities throughout the nation effective programs have been established to counter this epidemic. Many of these programs have been established by low-income people, who commit themselves to save the children of their communities. Input from these grassroots leaders who have won success working with the youth of their neighborhoods is essential to the formulation of an effective national anti-gang strategy.

The Response of Law Enforcement Agencies and the Judicial System

Until now, the primary response to youth crime has been a strong police presence. Police efforts have been hampered by a juvenile justice system that lacks accountability and by a reluctance of witnesses to come forward to testify against gang members.

Captain Raymond Gant, Commander of the Juvenile Operations in Los Angeles described the situation in his jurisdiction: "I firmly believe that the juvenile justice system in California and in the rest of the country is totally ineffective. The only youngster who is concerned or afraid . . . of the juvenile justice system is the youngster who has never experienced it."⁴⁵

New York City, which presently does not have a large gang problem but does have a serious youth crime problem, is an example of juvenile justice gone awry. In 1988, the incarceration rate for convicted juvenile offenders was 59 percent, which means 4 out of every 10 juveniles convicted of rape, murder, and attack with a gun or knife were not taken off the streets.

In 1985, James Payne, New York City's Chief Corporation Counsel, undertook the first systematic attempt to investigate the decisions made in Family Court. "What we found for the first three-month period we looked at was that forty-four percent of kids found to have committed a serious felony — homicide, robbery, rape, sodomy, sexual abuse — were placed in institutions. Of the non-serious cases — larceny, robbery without violence — fifty-eight percent were

placed. So the less violent kids get placed, and the more violent ones go right back on the streets."⁴⁶

In spite of the fact that the juvenile justice system has provided a revolving door for even violent offenders, the increase in crime in the nation has resulted in a prison system that is strained beyond its capacity. In 1981, there were 1,445 juveniles in adult jails. In 1983, that number had increased to 4,000 according to Dept. of Justice estimates. Juveniles were also sent to detention centers in increased numbers. In 1977, there were 4,804 juveniles confined to detention centers; the number jumped to 21,027 in 1982.⁴⁷ In an effort to reduce the strain on prisons and detention facilities, a movement is currently underway towards using community-based facilities wherever possible.⁴⁸

Clearly, if juveniles are to be held accountable for violent offenses and if society is to be ensured of at least minimal protection, violent offenders must be taken off the streets. In order to accomplish this, a strategy must be devised to promote cooperation between various law enforcement agencies. In the words of Michael Gravelin, head of hard-core gang division of the Los Angeles District Attorney's office, "The only way we can beat gang violence is through intense cooperation among all the agencies that deal with gangs."⁴⁹

Los Angeles has created an interagency task force to deal with youth violence. This task force, in turn, developed a Gang Reporting, Evaluation, and Tracking System to help law enforcement officials track gang members and it is developing a directory of agencies and services to help communities deal with gang problems.⁵¹

The Role of the Federal Government

The federal government should take the lead in promoting and supporting community-based solutions to the problem of youth crime. A com-

munications systems should be developed through which information gathered by academic research and federal, state, and local law enforcement organizations could be distributed to local law enforcement and community organizations that are working on the front line. Policies should be adopted to ensure that activities of the federal government do not derail the efforts of community organizations and other entities working on a more local level, including law enforcement and state agencies.

Programs that have proven effective in deterring young people from gang affiliation and in re-directing the energies of gang members exhibit the following characteristics:

- 1) They have originated from the local level rather than the traditional top-down approach of the federal government.
- 2) They involve cooperation between state agencies, local law enforcement and community groups.
- 3) They utilize both hard and soft measures, removing dangerous individuals from the community and providing preventative and

support services to deter young people from gang activity.

The federal government could also provide a national resource bank which would offer information about what local communities can do to combat gang violence and highlighting models of successful community-based programs.

Community-based programs: models of effectiveness.

Youth programs that have been instituted by grassroots leaders within low-income communities have proven successful in redirecting young people, even where professionally designed programs have been fruitless. These community-based programs have been effective because their founders have a firsthand knowledge of the daily lives of the youths they work with as well as a personal commitment to salvage their lives. Their consistent support, and the sense of responsibility they elicit from the youths they work with, are keys to their success. According to Rita Kramer, author of a study regarding the causes of serious juvenile delinquency

"[Encouraging community response to community problems solves many more of the problems than are specifically being addressed. The bonds created by mutual responsibility are what is most missing in the communities where youth crime is highest."⁴¹

One example of a neighborhood program that has effectively reduced gang violence is Chicago-based "Mothers Against Gangs."



If provided with a positive alternative, youths can lead the life of gangs.

Mothers Against Gangs: Chicago, IL.

Mothers Against Gangs was launched in 1986 as a victims' advocacy and support group for mothers and families of children that were killed in gang violence. Its founder, Frances Sandrola experienced the triple loss of her son, Arthur, who was murdered in 1985 by a gang member who mistook his fringe jacket for a rival gang's colors.

Mrs. Sandrola raises a clarion call to mothers of young people in the inner city, proclaiming "Thousands and thousands of mothers have lost their children. My son was not the first to be murdered by a street gang. . . . We must take on our responsibility and duty as parents. Together, a community that takes a stand and says 'We will not tolerate gangs in our community,' and local police who say, 'Neither will we,' can make a difference."⁴²

In the course of its development, Mothers Against Gangs expanded its membership to include, in addition to the mothers of murdered children, parents of those who are currently active in gangs. Ms. Sandrola explains, "I realized that mothers had to stop feeling helpless and hopeless and take a position. It was their responsibility to tell their sons that, although they love them, they cannot support their conduct and register their disapproval by refusing to cook, iron, wash, and give monetary support to their sons if they continue their gang activity."

With regard to its role in supporting the mother of victims, the organization sends representatives to accompany the women in court to ensure that their rights are observed. The organization has lobbied for tougher sentencing and has publicly criticized judges for setting bonds for gang members that were arrested for murder. Largely because of Mrs. Sandrola's own efforts,

the 19-year-old who killed her son was sentenced to 15 years in prison. She explains her conviction, declaring "Our goal is to raise the consciousness of the community. It is our duty and responsibility to ensure that gang violence is treated as a priority in the courts, in legislation, and in the schools. We cannot rest content with Band-Aid solutions." Mothers Against Gangs, with more than 700 members, has now expanded to a second chapter in Aurora, Ill.

Ms. Sandrola's program is but one example of a grassroots effort that has been effective in stemming the rise in gang violence and youth crime. Though it is important to note that communities are not homogeneous, and the best tactic for reducing gang violence may vary from community to community, this program incorporates elements that will be part of any effective strategy. In successful programs, those who suffer the problem play a critical role in designing and implementing the solution, and each program demands that its participants clearly understand and fulfill their own portion of responsibility.⁴³



Javier Ortega Martinez, whose photo appears on the cover of this magazine, was killed in gang violence.

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All photos courtesy of David Drees, Director of Making the Right Connections, a Los Angeles-based enrichment program for elementary school children which focuses on gang prevention.



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Youth Crime: An Alternative Approach

by Robert L. Wisdom, Sr.

Youths on the stage of juvenile justice find themselves assigned roles in a morality play in which the best parts are reserved for others. It stands to reason that they commonly assume a posture of defiance — through dissenting, resistant, subversion, and manipulation of

all sorts — in response to "treatments," even treatment administered with the best of intentions.

To some extent, traditional formal programs for delinquents fail in their attempts at "child saving" because of the way they are structured and staffed. The professionalism of workers, the artificiality of worker-client relations, and the disruption of the youth's primary ties to kin and peers inhibit the chance of development or change, especially among youths from inner city, urban worlds — those of marginal socioeconomic or minority status, those who live in the inner city, the culturally deprived, and the socially alienated.

These children have been labeled as hardcore delinquents, statistically responsible for a disproportionate share of the nation's crime index. Although it is assumed that their rehabilitation is critical to community revitalization, they have less reason and ability as a group to make the large leap required to achieve or identify with the middle-class norms that are extolled by the system. They have little incentive to invest themselves honestly in relationships with professionals that they intuitively sense to be artificial.

This article was adapted from a chapter of *A Summary to Life* by Robert L. Wisdom, Sr., with permission from the American Enterprise Institute.



"Gony," former member of therips.

The Neighborhood as the Basis for Change

Hard-core delinquents and inner-city youths who have been calloused by their life experiences may indeed fall beyond the reach of professional rehabilitation programs, as some professionals themselves suggest. However, this does not mean that their lives cannot be salvaged. Many of those whom the system had categorized as incorrigible have accomplished literal transformations through indigenous inner-city programs which were managed by nonprofessional volunteers from their neighborhoods. These programs represent the extension of their legitimate primary relationships and allow the cooperation and authentic mutual influences, resulting in the development of the community as well as the individual.

The importance of primary bonding in the process of personal change and development must be stressed. Socialization and development are influenced by contact with other socialized beings. Though uniformity to traditional norms may not be total, the desire to be with people in gratifying ways leads the individual to compromise. The gratification that comes from initial relationships with others and a nascent sense of emotional and practical interdependence increases the individual's willingness to modify his actions in a group-approved direction. In this process, the family and peer groups are fundamental influences. Behavior patterns transmitted to individuals through these groups are consistent with the total matrix of social and cultural conditions to which the norms of the group adapt.

Any group of people with similar circumstances and a similar degree of access to culturally desirable rewards and activities will express their common needs and attitudes in similar life-styles. In the anonymity and pluralism of urban life, people who share a common response to their life chances will find each other; they will tend to interact primarily with one another and to relate

force the attitudes and patterns of behavior that typify their group.

Changing deviant behavior, therefore, necessitates changing, or moving from, the environment that promotes deviance. Several options exist through which this might be accomplished:

- (1) changing the social and economic conditions of the deviant's home place;
- (2) introducing him to a new place with an expanded matrix of possibilities for his life;
- (3) removing the individual from the support group that reinforces his deviant behavior;
- (4) supplying him with a new social group whose values and attitudes will promote behavior that will correspond to the new matrix of opportunities (usually corresponding to "middle-class" standards); and, finally,

- (5) facilitating his acceptance of the new group as a primary group with which he identifies — that which offers meaningful and gratifying responses to his behavior and thereby influences the way in which he adapts to society's structure.

Absent a dramatic conversion due to the appeal of a charismatic personality, at least several of these actions must be taken if an individual is to successfully reconstruct his or her deviant life-style.

The difficulty lies in the fact that such changes are not easy to accomplish and that each type of change is met with some degree of resistance. The questionable effectiveness of juvenile justice programs that were designed to deter and reform delinquent behavior attests to this fact.

Options 1 and 2 require extensive and intensive reconstruction of social conditions which promote criminal activity, such as that attempted in urban renewal programs and projects of the war on poverty. Those who would initiate change must work within the social and economic structure that undergirds the entire society. They can-

Many have accomplished literal transformations through indigenous inner-city programs.

not, for example, dismantle capitalism or arbitrarily redistribute people into less occupied sections of the country. Rather, they are confined to dealing piecemeal with one aspect after another of the social problems that are continuously generated by factors which influence the community, such as urban concentration, economic marginality, cultural pluralism, and relative social powerlessness.

Vocational training and efforts to keep



"A.J." — ac-martinez/et. Clips

young people in school are tactics that would be included under option 2. This strategy is based on the assumption that if an individual could be better prepared to compete for the opportunities afforded by society, his life chances would be improved. Unfortunately, however, though education is a necessary element in improving the possibilities of a person's life, it is not, in itself, sufficient to ensure progress. Many other factors affect the possibility of upward mobility, including the willingness of an individual himself to

break off many of the emotional and cultural relationships that had shaped his life to that point. Other factors which affect an individual's economic progress are racism, union priorities, and the general condition of the nation's economy — its capacity to absorb a cohort of newly trained workers. Because all these factors are in play, many people who have faithfully completed a regimen of training have still been unable to grasp the first rung of the ladder to upward mobility.

The approach of the juvenile justice system traditionally incorporates strategies 3 and 4 in its attempts to modify the deviant behavior of young people. It is not extremely difficult to remove young people from an environment that supports deviant behavior and to surround them with a new group of peers. The challenge lies in inculcating in such artificially constructed peer groups a "reformed" set of values and in producing an internal change by which the relationships within such groups would become primary and the young people — in a situation of subordination and forced propinquity — would honestly commit themselves to those relationships and willingly begin a process of self-transformation.

The likelihood that a youth will genuinely reorientate his learned patterns of behavior to the influence of a new group and new norms will vary directly with the degree to which the new group resembles (or is, in fact, composed of) people who are already familiar to the individual and with whom the individual can readily find things in common. Those to whom he will have a natural attraction — people from his own neighborhood, and people of the same social, cultural, and economic circumstances — will be much more likely to be given ear to his personal feelings and thoughts than would professional counselors who represent a different social category in terms of educational level and cultural orientations. Those people who are already familiar from the youth's neighborhood will be even more readily accepted and trusted than those who are from similar but unfamiliar environments.

Indigenous Community Resources

In many inner-city neighborhoods, residents share a common social and cultural identity and, thus, have the potential to function as true communities. These neighborhoods are much more than the aggregates of social problems and social disorganization that statistical analyses portray them to be. On the contrary, urban neighborhoods have strong potential for coordinated action and, in numerous cases, inner-city residents have come together in joint efforts to solve problems that they share and to pursue common interests. They are consciously aware of the life chances that they share in common and they accept their portiones of responsibility to advance the common good.

A common problem of many urban neighborhoods is juvenile delinquency, and often the harmful psychological and economic consequences of maledicta mischief, gang violence, and youth crime lie at the root of numerous other social problems that plague these communities. Therefore, in cases where inner-city communities have been able to establish appropriate values-based primary groups for their children, various other problems of the neighborhood have also been alleviated.

The formation of healthy primary bonds of relationship is key both to individual transformation and community revitalization. Community-based primary groups — more readily accepted than those constructed within juvenile justice programs — have the potential to take on the functions that have been traditionally assumed by families. They can perform the role of mediator between the neighborhood and its youths. In this capacity, numerous community-based organizations have been able to engender enduring changes in young people — many of whom had been considered incorrigible by conventional juvenile justice programs.

Without doubt, much remains to be done to design an effective strategy of rehabilitation and deterrence for young people. The basic issue of control must be addressed, and this has become

an urgent matter. Clearly, the results of existing Justice Department approaches have been discouraging. In particular, the failure of the system to help urban minority children of low socioeconomic status. The single most important advance that the juvenile justice enterprise could make would be to devise an effective way to keep these young people on the right side of the law and to reclaim those who have committed offenses.

In view of the fact that traditional approaches have been of only doubtful and limited effectiveness — and, even then, only when dealing with lesser offenders — any alternative strategies that have produced positive effects are worthy of attention and support.

Community Response to Youth Violence

In a major departure from conventional strategies of punitive-deterrence, child welfare, or mental health approaches, a strategy which utilizes indigenous community resources has emerged as an effective alternative approach for dealing with youth crime. As sociologist Max Weber has pointed out, the key to understanding the dynamics of a social problem lies in the motives, self-perception and values of its agents. Effective strategies to change deviant behavior must be based on an awareness of these contextual, "internal" factors which are most readily understood by members of the communities in which the problems occur. In sum, the chances for successful resolution of social problems are greater when those directly affected by the problems are called upon to design and implement their solutions.

Over the past decade, the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise has identified numerous programs throughout the nation in which community residents have rallied indigenous re-

source to effectively combat youth crime and violence. The effectiveness of these neighborhood projects — yet to be measured by controlled research — is impressive. The success of such programs is attested to by the personal testimony of young people whose lives have been transformed in spite of the fact that professionals had previously labeled them as incorrigible, hard-core delinquents. It is also supported by the testimony of the community leaders who have coordinated these programs and neighbors whose lives and property have become measurably more secure, and also by the response of welfare agents, the courts, and other juvenile justice professionals who have begun to refer their new clients to these neighborhood groups.

The institution of the family has been society's most basic support system.

Youths who were once anathema to community stability are now acting as protectors of their neighborhoods. These remarkable successes are based on principles of youth development associated with a strong sense of "family" which bind together adult role models and young people.

Within the same neighborhoods and communities where young people sought validation for their deviant behavior there exist natural human resources that, if properly tapped, can be effective in rehabilitating the youths' behavior and redirecting their energy. In essence, a community suffers an acute breakdown, the "body's" resources are called to restore health. The supportive elements of a community function as antitoxins which comprise a virtual immune system to ward off breakdown.

For example, during the riots of the mid-1960s in Baltimore and Memphis, violence was escalated for four days by the actions of both the police and the community. However, peace and calm were restored in three hours, when a handful of community leaders courageously came forward and were able to persuade the police and National Guard to withdraw long enough for them to calm the rioters and convince them to

cease their violent activity. Unfortunately, the unique power of indigenous leadership was forgotten when programs were later designed to address the complaints that had been raised by the neighborhood residents. Ignoring the insights of grassroots leaders, government planners and professionals continued to rely on their conventional social service delivery systems and conditions in the inner-city were not essentially improved.

Community-based approaches to solving neighborhood crime are of particular, critical importance, given the young age of the majority of offenders. Statistics show that the majority of high-risk offenders are no more than eighteen to twenty years old, with a growing trend in which even younger children are committing serious crimes against persons and property. Treatment of such young offenders seems most appropriate within their own communities, where persons already significant to them and intimate with them can be mobilized to provide the control and support that is crucial to their reform. In these cases, the most effective role of outside assistance would be to aid, not to direct, the efforts of families and community members to reclaim their children.

When outside professional help is non-intrusive and is limited to offering supportive assistance and programs are totally conceived and operated by community groups, the neighborhood youth have become an integral part of both identifying and solving the problems. They become co-creators of activities that meet their needs for acceptance and recognition while giving positive reinforcement to socially approved behavior.

This model for a program of juvenile rehabilitation assumes that young offenders' needs extend far beyond the provision of jobs, education, and housing. Strong, healthy social values and respect for self and for the value of human life are often incompletely developed in many inner-city youths and, certainly, in delinquents. Programs that are established to control the delinquent and criminal behavior of young peo-

ple must begin with strategies to repair and restore the social attitudes of those youths. The strong support of parents and community members is critical to the success of such programs, especially in efforts to encourage good work habits and good personal behavior.

The Surrogate Family and Youth Development

Fundamentally, the institutions of the family has been society's most basic support system for the development of healthy, productive individuals, oriented to appropriate social values and capable of sustained, socially appropriate behavior. Under normal conditions, the natural family is the first and primary source of ethical, moral, and spiritual values in every individual. An extensive literature in social science gives evidence that in cases of a family's incapacity or failure to meet the developmental needs of its members, a course of personality breakdown results.

In the absence of an intact, functioning family, young people from troubled neighborhoods — deprived of an appropriate socializing milieu — often turn to street-corner peer groups as sources of their values, and as models of approved behavior. In numerous cases throughout the world, the success of community outreach programs working with members of violent youth gangs has been based on grassroots leaders' recognition of the fundamental need that young people have for a sense of family, or extended family.

In each case, a group structure incorporating family-like roles has been introduced by local leaders working with youth, and this surrogate family has provided the youths with effective primary social relations. Making use of already existing group ties, a positively oriented reference group composed of volunteers from the community has been substituted for the dysfunctional natural families and the street corner associations of violent, crime-oriented peers. These substitute families have not sought to discredit natural fami-



"Boo" — Rolling 30s gangster, Cincy

lies in any way, but rather to support and augment them through efforts to create an environment conducive to the reorientation of troubled youth. In essence, they comprise a community-based version of the extended family.

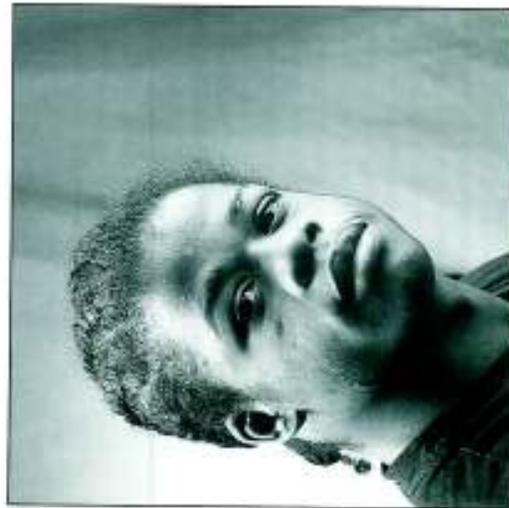
The Role of the Extended Family in the Black Community

Sociologist Niara Sudarkas observes that although in the model of traditional nuclear families household and family are often synonymous, among the black population a model of the extended family is more common in which family and household are not necessarily equated. Without implying any functional disorganization, Sudarkas writes: "Families cut across household divisions, and in many instances single households are only part of larger family structures. One of the important implications of this fact is that census data collected for individual house-

holds cannot be taken as the most important source of information on black family organization.⁴⁷ Sudarkas further contends that "Among blacks, households centered around consanguineous relatives have as much legitimacy as family units as do households centered around conjugal unions."⁴⁸

Robert Hill, director of the Institute for Urban Research at Morgan State University, confirms and augments this analysis. In a study of informal adoption among black families, Hill finds:

Almost three million children, almost half of whom are black, currently live in households of relatives, while millions more reside with relatives for shorter periods of time as a means of providing low-cost day care services for working parents. . . . One of the key functions performed by the black extended family is the informal adoption and foster care of children by grandparents, aunts and uncles and other kin.⁴⁹



"Ricky" — Blood member

The widespread acceptance of this form of family living among American blacks gives evidence of the need for the adaptive function that it serves. Researcher John H. Scanzoni reports "Partly because of structural conditions largely beyond their control, black persons face difficulties that are enormous in functioning in the white world. Similarly, the difficulties blacks face are enormous in maintaining a dominant-type conjugal family pattern."⁵⁰

Elmer Martin, also commenting on the cultural development of black extended families, found that the members are bound together by numerous ties of mutual obligation within which all the important functions of ideal conjugal families can be realized. The black extended family network can successfully provide family members with an important sense of family solidarity and identity, allocating scarce family resources for the care of dependent family members, bestowing status and esteem on one another, defining the boundaries of deviant and immoral behavior and teaching basic survival skills for dealing with hostile environments that may typically confront such "families."⁵¹ Robert Hill makes a similar comment in his monograph *The Strengths of Black Families*:

"Black families that have been extensively subjected to racial segregation and discrimination often characteristically show 1) strong kinship bonds, 2) strong work orientations, 3) adaptability of family roles, 4) strong achievement orientation and 5) strong religious and spiritual orientations."⁵²

The substitution of an extended-family group for the nuclear, conjugal family is clearly a widespread adaptive response among American blacks in the wake of their socioeconomic position. Although the existence of functionally inadequate families may be among the factors that lead youths into criminal careers, the model of caring networks of people, associated as if they were true families, is firmly established inner-city black populations. The structure of an extended surrogate family can provide the basis of youth

programs that can function as an effective alternative to conventional juvenile justice approaches.

The conscious and deliberate family structure of numerous community-based youth-development projects is providing effective, active support for the young people involved and, located within the neighborhoods they serve, they are situated to make maximum use of indigenous human and material resources. The group provides a vehicle through which its participants can relate to the larger community structure and become actively involved in community revitalization.

Membership in a supportive "family" unit, positively coordinated with community values and institutions, takes on strategic importance for youths who have experienced only the alienation and dangers of having to contend alone in a highly demanding, often hostile, social milieu. In family-like associations, they acquire a new identity as they participate in the group's endeavors and struggles. This experience is reinforced through the mutual assistance that members of these fraternal extended families offer to one another.

If incomplete socialization is a major source of the problem of youth crime, a fundamental element of the solution to the problem will be to restore an experience of the moral base and mutual bonds of family life.

Conclusion

Despite the evidence that "get tough" deterrence and child welfare and mental health strategies are not reaching a significant population of troubled youth, the errors have relied on these approaches to control violent youth crime, mostly after adjudication. In recent years, even prevention strategies have been channeled through the firmly established systems of professional youth service bureaus. The incidence of recidivism and the impact of violent crime in inner-city communities have remained, for the most part, unaffected by these programs.

A more effective approach to problems of juvenile delinquency lies in a structure which closely resembles that of the most basic institution of human society — the family. Strategies that rely on resources and programs that are external to the environment of those who are served may not be equipped to address the basic root of the problem and are, therefore, destined to fail. Unfortunately, as ill-conceived conventional strategies continuously fail to produce the desired results, the problem of youth crime is being labeled as an "intractable" societal problem.

The family, neighborhood, and community-based organizations are mediating structures, which provide a vehicle for the delivery of youth services that has the potential to benefit the entire society. If the potential of these indigenous resources is to be fully realized, there must be an objective, outcome-based, reevaluation of the fundamental orientation of public policy. The input and participation of those who live within afflicted neighborhoods will be key to the design of effective solutions to their problems. In fact, the answers to a many of the problems that plague inner-city communities already exist within the neighborhoods themselves and within their indigenous institutions, both formal and informal. Successful community-based programs must be supported and used as models that can be adapted in neighborhoods throughout the nation. Those who have earned the title of "experts" through a track record of success should inform and direct the design of policy dealing with the problems that they have addressed.

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1. In a recent private discussion of the point with me, Dr. Peter Berger made the following comment: "There are basically two approaches to the study of human social life. One can study 'hard facts', such as those embodied in statistics. In this case we are studying society as a phenomenon outside the consciousness of individuals. Or we can

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All photos in this article are of former gang members now active in a community-based program, Open Door Youth Gang Alternatives, directed by Reverend Leon Kelly (right) in Denver, Colorado. Photographs are published courtesy of Dan Sidor Photography, Denver, Colorado.



Awakening their Dreams

by Leon Watkins

For the past twenty years, Leon Watkins has consumed himself in working with hundreds of young gang members in South Central Los Angeles who had been trapped in a cycle of violence and punishment. Giving guidance and support wherever he could — from street corners to his bare-bulb makeshift office — Watkins has found his way into the hearts of men these who had spent more than three quarters of their lives involved with gangs and criminal activities. He has catalyzed a transformation in many of those that the system had long ago designated as irredeemable. In the insightful essay, he describes the guidelines of his strategy.¹

Before you come into a young person's life demanding that he or she change, you must understand the vital role that gang membership plays in their lives. It fills a need for identity. It gives a sense of belonging, and it fills what has been a spiritual void in their lives. They have heard the words that have called them to a traditional kind of spirituality and religion, but many times they have not seen those words embodied by those who speak them. Sometimes they have witnessed a blatant hypocrisy between the words and deeds of those who demanded that they change, and so they have rejected their call and chose gang membership, instead, as their own version of "religion."

In many ways, the lifestyle within a gang mimics that of a religion. Gang members have a symbolic dress, they have a respected hierarchy of authority, they have their rituals, and their initiation ceremonies.

For a person to come in and try to talk one-on-one with these kids, telling them that the gang is no-good, would be like telling someone who is Christian or Catholic to renounce what he believes in. To come to these youths in this way is an insult to them.



Leon Watkins

You have to recognize the value that the gang has in the eyes of these young people, and you have to give their reality its due respect. Many gang members would literally rather die than to renounce this life, because this is the only place in their entire lives where they have found respect. It is the only culture that has embraced them. They have been rejected by the larger society. Here, young people who have been abused in their own homes have found a place to go where someone will not only accept them, but respect them — where it is possible for them to achieve a rank of accomplishment. You cannot walk in and tell them to drop what they have found.

If you don't recognize the entirety of what you are dealing with, you will never be able to talk to these people or to understand what this lifestyle means to them. When gangs recruit their members they are actually converting them to a type of religion.

Many gang members had been raised in Christian

¹For a description of Leon's activities see AGENDA vol. 2, No. 1, p. 19, "Family Helpline."

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lanes. Then, why is it that they weight out something else to give their lives meaning? Is there something wrong with Jesus? No, but there is something wrong with those who talked about Him. They were not living the values they espoused and so their words could not be trusted. Young people quickly become disillusioned and angry when they see older people say one thing in church but live their lives in an entirely different way. The kids are turned off, they seek out another culture that will fulfil their spiritual needs. They willingly take an oath and go through whatever rituals are demanded to enter a realm where they can "belong" and feel that they are somebody.

If you know this — and understand it and respect it — you have some foundation on which you can begin to talk to these kids. A level of communication can be established in which they can hear what you have to say. Some people just come in and criticize the gangs and tell the kids how bad it is to be in a gang. What are they offering as an alternative? What are they telling those kids that they can do if they leave their gangs? These kids already know what society considers to be right or wrong. What we fail to understand is the far-reaching impact of despair. How can you measure the pain a person feels when he is hurt and cut out from society? How do you measure that pain? Truly, these young people are hurt when they see that there is no one in this world who loves them or cares for them. Everybody wants to feel that there is some place where he belongs. Even an animal wants to be petted now and then. What about these young people? They want to belong. They want to be cared for.

When there is no credible alternative, when they have seen other lifestyles filled with hypocrisy, all young people are susceptible to the call of the gang. Recruitment begins in the elementary schools and it knows no racial or economic boundaries. Even a young boy sitting in the chair can be drawn to affiliate with this culture. All the kids know about it. It is always there, pulling them, and the first time they get into a person cracks they will enter into that culture. They may grow up in a safe way in it until they are forty and even fifty years old. If they change after that, it is really too late. If we are going to help the young people to change, we have to understand what their needs are and how the gangs fill those needs.

I try to get to the most practical level. I work with an individual until he can verbalize his own personal goal. I try to uncover what his own dream for his life is. I very seldom talk about negative things when I talk with them about what they are doing. We both already know that. I don't want to dwell on the bad things that they have done. I focus on the positive. "What do you want to do to be a productive member of society — someone who can operate in society?" I work with the premise that deep inside they have a vision for what they could be, and I work to pull out what they have inside and to make them aware of the intelligence and talent they possess.

With one individual who had been involved with gangs since he was just eleven years old, it took many meetings to tap that dream. But it turned out that he had a simple hope, to be able to one day drive a diesel truck. Today, he is driving a truck all over this country.

There is something that each individual wants to do, a dream he can relate to. I just try to reach that point in their hearts. There is really no big secret to what I do. Although the gang fulfills a general need for young people, gang members are individuals and most of them really want to be able to be accepted by the larger society. They don't enjoy a life in which they have to constantly be looking over their shoulders, fearing with the dawn of each day that this may be the day they will be killed. You have to tap what is inside them and awaken their goals.

Tragically, there are some that can no longer be reached. They are too far into it. Their goals can no longer be brought to life. They have no ambitions, everything has been engulfed by their "religion," and they will live and die with it. That's it. But many more young people really want you to find out that they have something inside them.

You have to focus on that and play it hard. At first they may come to you wanting to talk about some problem they have, some trouble they are in. But I will not dwell on that. I know that everyone wants to have a sense of self-worth, especially those who have children. They want their children to feel that their father is worth something. I give the message, "You are not just a nothing so that you have to go with people you don't really want to be with, or do what you really don't want to do, just to be accepted. You are worth something." I talk with them and respect them, as I would

respect any other human being. Who is to say, though, we don't approve of what they do, that had we lived under the same circumstances, we would not have done the same things? We have no right to disrespect them. In the larger society even liars and thieves are given some element of respect. I keep that foremost in my mind — that I must respect them and that I am dealing with a form of religion in which many of its converts are clinging to a delusion. I say to show them how this whole scenario could end up unless they change. I show them that as they become engulfed in this cause they are sacrificing their own individuality.

Dealing with kids in gangs is not a nine-to-five job. You have to really get into it. You can't just slide in for a hazardous study and declare that you are a gang expert. You have to put your time into it and you have to put yourself

into it. You cannot approach the problem with any pre-conceived ideas. Many would-be experts emerge shocked, saying "Wow, these kids are so young!" or "I didn't think that girls did this kind of thing!" You've got to come in with an open mind and understand that the hurt and pain that these kids go through is universal. You find it in all walks of life; it is not limited to poor single mothers and their families.

A hurt is a hurt. In most cases, I can sense that these young people are in pain, deep pain. That pain turns into anger and it erupts in situations where they lash out and begin killing each other. A cycle of violence begins. You have to get through all of this, and get down to the individual. You have to get him to the point where he can look at himself and the overall picture. He has to come to believe that he has a future and that he is worth something. That is all I do.

Family Helpline



The Family Helpline is a 24-hour Hotline which serves more than 11,000 clients annually.

This innovative community-based network is always on call to link problems to solutions!

- **RESOURCE POOL**—Offers links to housing and employment opportunities and emergency services for food and clothing.
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In Their Own Words

In the following interviews, former gang members from a variety of locations and economic backgrounds describe their gang involvement and the factors that contributed to their turn-arounds.

Steve Holter, Hartford, CT



Steve Holter was the leader of the largest gang in Hartford, CT, called The Magnificent Twenties. In the 1970s the gang's membership peaked at over 600, and even established entities in the neighborhood such as schools and community associations were intimidated by the gang's activities.

Steve's turn-around occurred over two stages. First, as the Twenties' leader, he was able to change the direction of the organization's activities, turning from violence and crime to projects of community service. Secondly, he moved us from gang membership to entrepreneurship and I currently sit as president of a thriving, reputable construction firm, Ralph & Huber Home Builders, Inc.

I grew up in a housing project where participating in a gang was the norm. Gang membership was a way of life in the neighborhood and it gave us a sense of belonging and of having a group of people that we could consider as our family — people who would be there for us all the time.

When we initially started our organization, "The Magnificent Twenties," there were just a few members — myself and a few close friends — but the gang filled a vacuum and it grew quickly throughout the 1970s to a membership of well over 600. When a Magnificent Twenties Junior Division sprang up, there were nearly 1,000 gang

affiliates. Inevitably, as we expanded, violence erupted as we confronted a rival gang. The Hartforders. When an attempt was made on my life, the situation was on the brink of erupting into full-blown warfare. As the situation heated up, Carl Hartschick stepped in and tried to convince our gangs to agree to talk with each other and to stop the violence.

Carl is a neighborhood leader who had worked since the 1960s with a community development association in a low-income neighborhood that was adjacent to the central business district of Hartford, the South Arsenal Neighborhood Development Corporation (SAND). At the time, he was serving as the group's youth coordinator. He grew up in my neighborhood and he knew my family since I was a kid.

Carl was one person who was right out there on the front line and he wasn't afraid to go into the middle of the trouble. So he was out there trying to talk with us and trying to communicate. He was the unofficial mayor of the community. People in the neighborhood knew that he was sincere and that he had a natural concern and love for them. They came to love and respect him because they knew that what he was about was right.

Still, Carl's first attempts to get our gangs together was not successful and, in fact, he nearly lost his life when he and a small group of the Twenties were surrounded by about 200 members of the warning gang. But he persisted. He knew that, when a situation was that tense, solutions don't happen overnight, and he was willing to keep working until we would sit down together to talk with the other gang. That attitude helped him to work for change in the long run. He knew that he was working towards an end result that would be the beginning of a change for some of our lives.

In time, he was able to bring us together at the table. When we were able to talk about our differences, we found out that a lot of our fights had been the results of rumors that didn't have any basis in reality. We began to realize the seriousness of the situation, and, finally, we reached a truce.

Carl could recognize that there was a lot of potential in the well-coordinated leadership of our organization, and he felt that we could be turned around in a positive direction. As we began to change our course of action it had a ripple effect on the younger brothers who, even in elementary school, were imitating us.

We began trying to raise some money by establishing a couple of discos. Carl convinced us that we could make more money by inviting people from around the area to come, so we invited gangs from other areas. We set a rule that everyone had to check their weapons at the door. We tagged the guns, knives, and sticks that were checked at the door so that they could be returned. We enforced our own rules. There was no liquor, no swearing, and no smoking, and if someone came in drunk he could get a refund but he had to leave.

On Halloween, we gave a party for the younger brothers, and for Thanksgiving we gave turkeys to needy families. But our movement in a positive direction was not immediately recognized or rewarded. At the beginning of our turn-around, the only support we received was from a few local community leaders — Carl and another person named John Wilson. No city or state program was there to promote what we were trying to do. We no longer got the media coverage we had when we were involved in violent activity, and, in the beginning, the community did not trust us. At the time, the neighborhood residents were sponsoring a Youth Day. We asked to set up a table at the event, but the group organizing the event refused to give us permission. Even though this group did not want us to work with them, we gave them \$250 — the first, and only, donation they received in that event. Gradually, we won their trust.

In the course of that transition, there was strong leadership in the gang and the members felt accountable to me. Because the change began with the leadership, from the top down, we began a redirection almost overnight. Our structure re-

As we began to change our course of action it had a ripple effect on the younger brothers.

mined the same. That sense of belonging and sense of family and bonding remained in tact.

I believe that the majority of gang members want a different way of life than violence and murder, but certain conditions in our community make us react against them. This is not to justify what gangs do, but just to acknowledge that conditions such as unemployment, lack of housing, and poor education can pressure young people to react.

After our turn-around, agencies involved with juvenile crime began to work directly with the Magnificent Twenties and brought us in to city and state organizations. Though we may have been more noteworthy when we were into typical gang activity, we began to receive recognition again when people saw a decrease in vandalism, car thefts, and gang banging.

A Second Generation of Gangs

Now, throughout Hartford, a new generation of gangs has emerged. They pose a different kind of problem, because they aren't organized, like old gangs were, under one leader. Instead, there are groups of ten in one place, 40 in another, and 60 in another. These smaller groups are accountable to different leaders, but their leadership might change from one day to the next. There is no central leadership that the members look to for direction. The situation is volatile. When so many people are making decisions, someone's mood could determine what is going to happen on any particular day.

Because today's gangs lack a solid and stable leadership structure, it is harder to bring about restoration and change through them. You can no longer nurse the membership by getting one or two leaders to change. You have to work with each member, which means you will be dealing with all sorts of different personalities. It is harder now to nip the violence in the bud.

Today, in my efforts to reach out to the young people in the neighborhood, I can understand a purpose for the time in my life when I was going nowhere, involved in violence. I know

An experience of rafting or camping could give them an opportunity to look at their lives and to begin to follow a productive course. The bottom line in the inner city is that you either live right or you will die a horrible death. That is the choice that young people are making every day. There are members of the original Magnificent Twenties who chose not to change, and they are not alive today.

My own transformation was made possible through the guidance I got from John and Carl — people who lived by the values and standards they talked about. I personally have witnessed a situation in which Carl had the integrity to put his principles above his impulse to retaliate. His own leader had been paralyzed as a result of a beating and, from his hospital bed pleaded with Carl to take revenge. I was with him and I could see him being torn between his commitment to end the violence and his urge to take revenge. I told him that if he wanted to retaliate I would stand with him but that, if that was what he decided to do, everything he had taught us would lose its meaning. He did not take revenge.

This incident was a powerful lesson for me. I learned that a real teacher is one who has the humility to receive as well as the knowledge to give. I feel that our relationship has been a gift to both of us. He has witnessed my own growth and development.

But, through mentors like Carl and John gave us the information and the tools we would need to make a change, there was still something missing, deep down inside. For me, the real turning point was a change within myself, a spiritual change.

I didn't really find total peace until I found God, and then I began to realize that there was a greater purpose in life than the things I was involved in. Unless God is in the midst of it, solutions are just temporary quick fixes. If change is to be real and have longevity, there must be a spiritual basis for it — a belief in something bigger than ourselves that will make us begin to feel different in our lives. Individuals such as John and Carl brought me to the bridge, but the spiritual act, going over the bridge, was something that I had to do myself. I saw others who had been with me at that time, making that same change.

In fact, it was a brush with death that constituted to my own internal change. As a result of gang violence, I was seriously injured and was facing the prospect of death. Even if I made it through, there was a possibility that I would never walk again. For the first time in my life, I was truly scared. I came face to face with reality. That is what led to my spiritual conversion.

I know that if we want to we can always find someone or something to blame for our problems. But if we are going to cure them we've got to look in the mirror. We have to be willing to honestly look at ourselves and make a conscious decision to make a change in our lives. With the support of the Carl Hardicks and Bob Woodsons of the world, coupled with our own spiritual base and belief in something larger than ourselves, we will be able to direct our lives on a positive and productive course.

There are many young people who know nothing of the world beyond the local street corner.

To learn about gang-prevention activities in your area or to offer your support for these efforts, call NCNE at (202) 331-1103

Raymond Greer, Los Angeles, CA



Raymond Greer was a founding member of the Crips and on the street had been referred to as "OG" (Original Gangster). He is currently heading a mentoring/mentoring program to serve the practical, emotional, and spiritual needs of young people in their transition from gang life.

As I was growing up, I experienced both mental and physical abuse at home. When I was just nine months old my mother was killed by a stray bullet on Central Avenue in South Central L.A. I lived with my father who was an alcoholic and a compulsive gambler. I would wake up for school and his friends would be in the living room, playing cards, shooting dice and drinking. When I came back in the afternoon they were still at it. No one recognized that I was even there.

When I was out on the streets I would see people driving Cadillacs and Mercedes. They gave me more attention than I was getting at home, and I responded. I first got involved with

an old gang called The Businessmen. I became a Baby Businessman at the age of fourteen.

I later was attracted to the Black Panthers who were active in South Central. They seemed to be concerned with what was happening in the community. They would go out and talk with the parents and connect them to a breakfast club they had started to feed kids in the neighborhood. Everyone knew that if you were hungry, you could always go by Bay-Bay's house (a lady who was connected to the Panthers) and you would get something to eat.

But there was another side to the group. As I became involved in the Panthers, I was introduced to heavier drugs. In fact, we would start our mornings with a joint and drinking this dark mix they called "poshber piss." In the early seventies, the Newton Street Division of the Panthers teamed up with a number of other groups and we ended up in a shoot-out with the police which received nationwide media attention. Three or four people were killed. From that point on, I was a police target. At one time, I was nearly run over by a patrol car. Once, I was crossing a street with a group of people against a blinking Don't Walk signal. The police singled me out, pulled their guns and took me in. One thing led to another, and I felt bitter about the whole community. I heard that a new gang was getting together at a project called Avalon Gardens and I decided to get involved. That was the beginning of the Crips.

Actually, the gang had begun with the name "the Crips," but there was a misprint in a newspaper story about us, labeling us the "Crips," and we decided to go along with it. At this time the "Bloods" didn't exist, everyone was united in the same gang. But then fighting broke out, supposedly about a girl. The gang split and the Bloods emerged, and we got involved with robbing, drug trafficking and gambling.

For me, initially the gang provided the attention I wasn't getting at home. That's why I turned to the streets. I started out dealing drugs and ended up on my own best customer. I didn't know

that I was going to get involved so heavily with them. Eventually, I ended up in Skid Row. I had just snipped caring. I didn't want to deal with my family any more.

In time, I got into some serious trouble. I was arrested for armed robbery. A friend urged me to join a re-hab program called Bridge Back to avoid being sent to jail. I was afraid of being sent to jail and what that could mean, and I was relieved when the judge sent me to the program instead.

I stayed clean for a few years, but later got involved with "speed" and really lost control. A friend gave me a joint that was laced with something called Black Beauty. The newspapers ran a story about a sick man in Englewood who went berserk and attacked a police cruiser, hospitalizing three of the four policemen who were on the scene. That man was me. They did a "Booby King" on me and took me in.

The judge that presided over my hearing was known on the streets as the "Santa Claus judge" who was famous for the light sentences he gave. In fact, he really had a love for the people and felt that if they just had another chance they could make it. I broke down and told the truth about my drug addiction. During that time, I was shooting heroin, cocaine and staples — a drug prescribed for hyperactive children and alcoholics.

I was sentenced to six months probation and six months in the county jail, which was later commuted to further treatment at Bridge Back. After treatment, I really believed that I had beaten my drug habit. I thought I had the strength to stay clean and even to get other friends off dope and out of the streets. But I was wrong, and when I went back to drugs it was worse than ever. I was on Skid Row, it had gotten to the point where I would just spontaneously rob people. I wouldn't plan a robbery, but if someone looked like he had money, I considered it my money. I am not bragging about this period of my life. I am just telling about it to say that I am glad that God gave me another chance and that it is truly a blessing that I am still alive.

A turning point for me was a confrontation

with the police in which I nearly lost my life. To this day, I have no idea where the police came from, but they caught me in the middle of a robbery. When I started to run, they pulled their guns and said that they would shoot if I took just five more steps. I had previous experience with the LAPD and I knew that it wasn't a matter of five steps. I knew if I took just one step they would shoot, so I snipped and was arrested.

Because I was caught before I took anything off the guy, I denied that it had been a robbery. I had said that the guy was harassing my girlfriend, that I was just retaliating. As I was sitting in jail, wondering what was going to happen, I told God, "Get me out of this and I'll never do this again." I felt really tense — ready to explode. And then another guy started taunting me, calling me a punk. I was ready to go after him, but five other guys tried to stop me saying, "Man, don't do it. You're just here for a minute. Your case isn't serious like this guy's."

Then, from inside, a voice came to me, repeating, "The truth shall set you free." Finally, I went to the jail phone and called the attorney who was representing me. I wanted to tell him what really happened, but his secretary answered the phone saying that he wasn't in the office. Then my mind became a battle ground. Part of me was saying, "See, he's not there, so you don't have to tell him the truth. Just hope those witnesses don't come and the police don't show up in court. The secretary was still on the phone, asking what I wanted to tell him. The other part of my mind took over and I blurted "Look, tell him I want to talk with him before we go to court. I want to tell him what really happened."

I was still in the middle of this inner battle when we arrived in court that Tuesday. The attorney approached me and asked about the phone call. I started to talk, asking, "Are the witnesses here? Are the police here?" But then that voice came again, "The truth shall set you

From inside, a voice came to me, repeating, "The truth shall set you free!"

free." He looked me straight in the eye and I felt like his eyes were glancing through me. I confessed, "Look, man, I need to rob him. My arrest report says I didn't have anything on me, but that's because I didn't get the chance. I was high. Maybe I can get a diversion." But my attorney wasn't encouraging. "No, man, this judge is not giving any diversions. This is a hanging judge. But I'll go in there and see what I can do."

My lawyer was in with the judge for about ten minutes, but it seemed like forever. I really felt that it was all in God's hands. I was preparing for anything. I had known guys who had gotten 30, 40, and 50 years in this court for armed robbery. The door opened and the judge came out. "Raymond Greer?" "Yes." "Your case is dismissed." "I couldn't believe it. 'Oh man, don't play with me like that.' And he repeated, 'Your case is dismissed.'" I remembered what that voice had said in jail, "The truth shall set you free," and I was sick and tired of my whole way of life.

One more incident made me decide, clearly, that I wanted to turn my life around. A close friend, who had been there at the beginning of the Crips, was going to a family reunion. When I talked to his people later, I learned that a person that some of us had once plotted to kill was actually his cousin. In the end, that was the final thing that made me decide to leave the gang.

Throughout all of this, one person who had consistently offered his support was Leon Watkins, who lived in the neighborhood and had committed himself to working to stop the violence. I first met him when I was a baby Businessman, and he was always trying to get me out of the gang — "Man, you need to stop what you are doing." Leon would always come by, come by, and come by. He was always there, a positive force in my turns around. Leon was one of the most real people on the street. He was not motivated by money. He knew where the kids in the gang were coming from and you could feel that when you talked to him. With Leon, you felt that this brother knew the game and knew what's up, but you also felt love. There have been times when I have seen Leon just hang his head and ask, "What

is it going to take for all these brothers and sisters to understand that this ain't the way?"

When you are on the street you can tell who is real and who is fake. Leon wasn't out there for brownie points. He couldn't work in the offices of conventional gang services. He felt called to go out and deal with the people on the street. People from the gang services would just drive through the neighborhood and tell us from their cars what we should or shouldn't be doing. Leon was different. He would get out of his car and go out into the neighborhood. On some occasions, he would pass out a few dollars to the kids to stop them from robbing or stealing ladies' purses. He would tell you where you might be able to get a job, and where you could get help. If he couldn't help you in an area where you needed help, he would tell you where to go. He offered a network. Other people wanted you to look up to them and they wanted to be rewarded for your successes. Leon wasn't like that. What he has, he passes on.

I know that leaving a gang isn't always a simple thing to do. There is more activity out there than just the street warfare between the Crips and the Bloods. Some gangsters are interested only in dealing drugs. Their organizations are affiliated with Mafia organizations that have a direct connection with overseas drug shipments. They live by their own rules. When things get hot for them, they approach the Crips and sometimes the Bloods who they use as pawns in their drug trade. Some of the gang members are hired just to give protection to the "dope man." But when they get in too deep and know too much, the Mafia sees them as a threat. They know that if they are arrested they could turn state's evidence on them. Then the killing begins. When you hook up with the Mafia and you get too much information, that's when it gets really hard to get out.

I am trying to develop a program to help kids move away from gangs called Motivation Focus, which is supported by Ameri-Can and Leon Watkins's Family Helpline. Through my program, I prioritize the needs that young people have and then work toward meeting them, step-by-step.

The first are the basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter. If kids are addicted to drugs or alcohol, they will also need a detox program to stop their substance abuse. But then there are inner needs that must be addressed — the desire for self-esteem, peace of mind, self-expression and self-determination. And there are social needs for friendship, love, and family relationships. After we work at repairing the bridges these young people have destroyed with their families, we start working on their success. These goals have to be worthwhile, obtainable, and measurable. Not everyone will achieve the same level of success. Each person is dealt with as an individual. A big mistake we have made in treating all the Bloods and Crips as a group. We need to deal with them individually.

The answer is not simply jobs or money, when people lack basic life skills. In dealing with addicts, the first step is to get them past a stage of denial. But you can't help people who just don't care. You can't help any one until they decide they want to change. We must look for those who are reaching out and really want help.

A lot of kids don't plan to get involved with violent crime. But they are influenced by the gangster culture, which idolizes old time gangsters such as Ma Barker, Machine Gun Kelly, Baby-face Nelson, and Al Capone. They are attracted by the gangster status, and reality doesn't settle in until they are on the other side of the gun or behind bars doing hard time. Those who just got involved with gangs because of certain circumstances in their lives are the ones who can either come out of their experience positively or negatively. Many of them have a lot of inner fear, as I did. If we can give them a substitute for what they find in gangs, and if the right people are reaching out to them, they can be turned around. If they can be changed, it would be an asset to their neighborhoods and to the country.

There is an old saying that gang members don't die, they just multiply. That is the truth. I've actually seen some mothers and dads pumping that gang mentality into their children, putting earrings in their ears when they are two years

old, and taking them to the rings when they are just five and six, teaching them how to shoot and telling them to use their guns when they feel that something is about to come down. We need to get in contact with these parents.

And this is not limited to low-income families. Since I have been clean and sober and working with gang members I have had the opportunity to work with children of the rich and famous. And they are suffering as much as children in the inner cities from not having enough attention in the home. Inner city gangs have made alliances with kids from the suburbs who deliver their drugs for them. Drugs have no preference among the rich or poor, they will destroy you regardless of your wealth or poverty and regardless of what color you are. Violence has no prejudice, and death has no preference in choosing its victims.

But we have to do more than talk about these problems, we have to do something about them. Some people do not want to discuss this. Recently there was a televised "town meeting" at a local church. The hand-picked audience included people who did not live in the community and they literally booed out people from the community who came to testify. People who live in the neighborhood know what is happening. The day before the LA riots, a group of Crips and Bloods went down to city hall. We knew what was about to happen, but they didn't want to hear what we had to say. Just like in the town meeting they did not value our opinions. They don't believe that we could rehabilitate ourselves, and they think we will never change. But who knows more about gang violence and how to stop it than gang members? And who can earn the trust of the young people more than those who have been in their world?

I have been through what they are living with. Drugs can make you insane — afraid to live and afraid to die — but always hungry for more. When people on the street hear about someone who died from an overdose, the first question

they ask is "Where did they get their crack or PCP?" They think, "He might have had a heart attack because of these drugs, but I won't use that much. Who was his source?" I was like them. I just wanted to go into another world to get away from the pain. But the relief that drugs offer can only be temporary, and then your pain is worse than before.

I know that others can change because I have changed. But it will take people from within the community to show them how.

No one has a monopoly on the solution. I realize that I have my own part to play in this life and that I am just one player in an entire orchestra. I have worked with thousands of kids. Some who had been taught up in gang violence have now earned their black belts and have won national tournaments. I feel that there are no boundaries to where I can work. It doesn't make a difference if we are dealing with kids in Japan or Kuwait. If they are facing the same problems, they have the same needs.



Jamie Rozinski, a teen who was recruited by the Crips in Denver, Colorado, joined with his best friend in "beating down rival gang members with bats, tire irons, and whatever we could get our hands on." The following day, his younger brother and sister were gunned down in retaliation. While in counseling with the Open Door Youth Gang Alternatives, Jamie wrote the following poem to deal with his pain. He dedicated the poem to all these kids here for their lives in gang violence.

Drugs and Gang Sadness

by Jamie Rozinski

This is for the children that by drug and street war,

This is for the mother who weeps for her child whose life was no more.

To change the system that helps all the more

To uplift the people that were down before

To be free of gangs and drugs — no more

Now my life is dedicated to youths to stay off drugs
and out of gangs all the more.

And this is something worth dying for.

Kelly Eldred, Denver, Colorado



Courtesy of Peter DeBru Photography, Denver, Colorado

the gang used me to transport drugs and guns. Today, many gang members are very young. My boyfriend was fifteen. Some of the guys in gangs who are now in their twenties first joined when they were nine and ten years old.

When I was growing up, my father was an alcoholic and would sometimes get violent. I loved him, though, and always thought he could change. Then my parents divorced, and my mother married a man that I just couldn't get along with at first. After three years of their marriage I went to live with my father in Michigan, but later moved back to Denver with my mother and her husband. It wasn't any better than. I looked in other places for love, and I thought I had found it with my boyfriend.

During this time, my mother had no idea that I was hanging out with the gang. She did suspect that I was doing drugs, though. I followed a typical pattern of behavior that kids take on when they get involved with drugs or gangs. They harbor against the persons who had been their main support in the past — a parent, or grandpa, or aunt or uncle. They just don't want to deal with those relationships anymore. They want to be with their "homies" on the street. That is their life now and that is their "family." When the Crips from Los Angeles recruited kids from Denver, they literally changed their whole mindset. It was as if they were conversed.

At that time, the initiation rite for many of the Denver kids was to assault someone by beating him with golf clubs. That's when the Crips first made the news in Denver — when the media reported a "vicious golf-club murder." Another form of initiation was just allowing yourself to be beat down. The gang members would circle the person who wanted to join the gang and begin to beat him. If he survived, he would be part of the gang. Some didn't survive. Some ended up in the hospital, but they were willing to take that risk.

For girls, gang initiation was different. To become a member, a girl had to have sex with every person in the set during one evening. This

Kelly first became affiliated with the Crips in Denver, Colorado, at the age of seventeen. As she told explain below, because she was among them in this young set she pursued a drivers license, her favorite was to transport drugs and guns. Scanned by the tragedy of the death of a twelve-year-old, Kelly ended her gang affiliation. Kelly currently works as an administrator of the Aurora branch of Open Door Youth Gang Alternatives, a diversion program for at-risk youth, and she is the proud and loving mother of a five-month old son.

Though people usually associate the Crips and Bloods with Los Angeles and other bigger cities, the Denver area has nearly 80 sets of Crips and 20 sets of Bloods, as well as a number of Hispanic gangs and skin-heads. While I was in school, I met members of the Crips, and was attracted to one who became my boyfriend. I really felt that I loved him and I trusted that he loved me and I would do anything for him. Because I was seventeen and had my driver's license,

could mean having sex with as many as twenty-five guys.

For the most part, I stayed away from the streets, and I didn't participate in any initiation ritual. Because I was white, they didn't know if they could trust me, so I never became an official member of the gang. But they used me to do various things for them.

One of my friends in the gang had a kid brother who was twelve years old and always hung out with us. Then, one day, I learned that he had been shot. When I found out that it was my boyfriend who had killed him, I was shattered. I knew I had to leave the gang — to cut away from all of it. I remembered seeing advertisements for a program called Open Door, Youth Gang Alternatives run by Reverend Leon Kelly in Denver.

The program was geared toward kids who were leaving gangs and to those who refused to join and who needed a support group when they received threats from the gang's recruiters. I called the number they had listed for phone-in

counseling. From that point, I participated in some support sessions and became more and more involved with the program — first in their dance troupe, then in a drama group and a speech club. I was fortunate because it was easy for me to make a clean break with the gang. My neighborhood was actually within Blood territory, so it was easy to disassociate with the Crips. With Open Door, I found a new sense of belonging — this time with positive reinforcement instead of negative peer pressure.

Within the last few months, Open Door opened an Aurora branch, which I am helping to staff — handling the switch board and calls that come in from kids who need help. I bring my five-month-old son with me to the office, and he has become the official mascot for Open Door. Everybody has "adopted" him, and that's so important to me. I know that he will have the support he needs when he is growing up. And he will know that there are other alternatives for his life than the gangs.

Michael Ward, Los Angeles, California



Michael Ward, at age eleven, was one of the founders of the Crip gang. That was the beginning of a gang affiliation that was to last more than thirty years, and the end was a life of violence, crime, and drugs. Michael, a twenty-seven-year-old member of the inner-city, has survived in his last thirteen. He has experienced a number of life-changing incidents and has made friendships with mentors that were crucial to his recovery from a life of violence. Currently, he serves as a driver for Tuesday's Child, a relief service for AIDS victims. He hopes to one day bring his message to the youth who are attracted to gangs — "Don't join your life. Think of your future. Trust what you see in."

I grew up in the neighborhood with a group of little kids, and we became part of an older gang. They called us the "Baby Avengers" and they ordered us to do some of their work for them. We started to refuse to do what they told us to do, and after a few confrontations, we de-

veloped that we might as well start our own thing. I was about ten or eleven at the time. We told them that we would do what we wanted to do. And so, one of our group emerged as the leader and the nine of us broke off to found our own gang. This was the beginning of the Crips, the gang that would become the strongest and most powerful in California's history.

The Attraction of Gangs:

For me, the gang was like a family — closer than even your own brothers or sisters. There were things you could talk about with your best friend in the gang that you couldn't even discuss with your family. And there was a love that you could not find at home. Even for gang members whose families were together, there was still something missing that only the gang could provide. There is a closeness, a trust. You can talk to your "home boy" about things you wouldn't talk to anyone else about, and you would know that your secrets wouldn't go any further. It will stay right there between the two of you. That bond could never be broken. If it meant your death you would never betray that trust. You became part of each other when you have that closeness. Even though the gang may get involved in activities that were against the law, and though our daily life was violent, you knew that there was at least one person who would never hurt you and who would always stand by you.

At times the violence would take its toll. Many did not survive. If it was a close friend, you just tried to bear the pain, and you felt that you had to go on living for that person. You tell yourself, "He may be gone, but what he gave me, I still have." You feel that you have something else to live for now.

The saying goes, "Only the strong survive." You try to be as strong as possible — for the sake of everyone connected with you, including your family who may not have anything to do with the gang. In both a mental and physical thing. We used to lift weights, box, and take karate instruc-

tion to build up our bodies. And I would work to strengthen my mind. I studied a lot.

Turning Around

A number of things that happened early on contributed to my finally going in a different direction. In 1973 I was shot up — real bad. I lost the use of my leg and I wasn't able to walk. I felt like I was losing my mind. I just felt like I had to hold on, and at that time I promised God that if He could give me the use of my legs again and make me function normally, I would try to do what I could to help gang members find a better way of life. It took me years to make good on that promise, but once you make a promise to God He will not let you go back on your word.

There was a time in my life that I truly felt I was indestructible. I would taunt a person who held a gun on me, "Shoot me, punk, pull the trigger!" or I would grab the gun and hold it to his head, "How does this feel?" Maybe the Lord succeeded that — "I've got to watch this guy here. If he can do this now, if I got him on my side we could work wonders!"

After I was shot, I used my recuperation time to re-build, physically, mentally, and spiritually. We spread the rumor that I had died, and I went into hibernation and gradually got my body back in shape, working out, lifting weights, doing karate and kung fu again. I also did a lot of reading — and praying — during that time. I read books about black history, political books, and books on geography. It gave me a vision of something beyond my own life. Inside, I could feel that there was something better than what I'm going through — beyond what I was doing. When I read the Bible, I became interested in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. I started reading about that region, studying and trying to find out more about it. That is when I discovered Islam as a religion. That gave me a new vision of myself. It made me look deeper into my heart and to seek out what I was here for, what my purpose was. Discovering the closeness that exists between

man and God meant a lot to me. It made me think differently about myself.

In spite of being a legendary gang figure, I always was pretty much a loner. I didn't like crowds and I didn't like a lot of people around me. So when I was going through all of this, I shared the things I was finding out with just one friend.

I wanted to learn more and more, and to see things for myself. I started going to different parts of town, even going to different cities, watching how people worked, observing them and seeing how they lived. I knew in my heart that there was something better for me. I could see people living it.

While all this was going on, part of me did not want to make the change and my relationship with people outside the gangs who had reached out to me — Len Watkins and Rosie Grewer — gave me important support. They kept trying to contact me. They never gave up on me. They accepted me and cared about me. Outside of my family and the gang, I had never experienced that. They gave me chances over and over again. They kept boosting me up. "You are not a stupid person. There are things you could do if you just redirect your energy and change your way of thought and the pattern of your lifestyle."

They connected me with jobs and people in high places. They opened doors so that I could see that I could accomplish other things if I would change my life. At first, I did not completely trust their motivation. I thought they just wanted recognition for stopping my gang involvement. But then I could just sense that their concern was real. They were always there. Even when I got in trouble, they were there to help me through it.

Later, we worked together to contact with other kids, and to find jobs for them. The kids looked up to me as a gang leader, but I would tell them, "Man, you don't want to be like me. I have been through so much hell. You don't want to go through what I have been through." And I would have a good feeling inside. When you help someone, you get a feeling that nothing in this world can replace. I liked that sensation. Although I was

not completely out of gang life, there were certain standards and principles I upheld and I would confront kids who were violating them — especially if I saw them bothering older people, or handicapped people. "Don't bother those people. If you pick on someone pick on someone, who's equal, who can fight back." I always thought about my family. When I defended an older woman, or a handicapped person I felt like I was protecting the people in my family who were old or sick.

Today, I am working with an organization called Tuesday's Child, which helps families of AIDS victims. There is a real family atmosphere and I feel that I can talk to anybody. It took me a while, but I made good on that promise I made to God.

As you get older, you know that things have in change. You get tired of going to funerals, watching your friends get shot up and killed, hearing your friends' families crying and grieving. It gets to you. After a point, no human being in his right mind can take that.

I've made it this far. When I was in prison, I talked to a lot of home boys. They'd say, "Man, you are old!" But I'd say, "Yeah, and you'd better pray to God that you can make it to this age. You are 18 and 19 and to you I seem old!"

All of the original members who are not dead or in prison are settled down. Even the ones who are in prison have mellowed out. They have understood. "Even though this is my life, I can't keep doing what I was doing. I've got to change myself." They have felt that goodness inside themselves.

When you are banging and doing what's wrong, you really don't like yourself, and at one time or another it'll get to you. You may be in the shower, or cooking, or just sitting in your car and realize, will stop you in the face and you will realize, "Man, this ain't going nowhere." There comes a time when you've got to accept responsibility for your life. You know "This isn't it. Hanging out on the corner, in the back alleys, in the houses or at the school yard ain't accomplishing anything."

Once you find yourself and what is really inside you, that's when change takes place. I began to sense this when I was eighteen, but I was hard-headed and stubborn and I just kept banging. As I got older, and was constantly going to jail, I could see that I was going nowhere. I couldn't touch my woman, kiss my kid, or talk to my family except by the jail phone. In prison, when you are separated from the ones you love and need to be with, it is a hard slap in the face. God put his hand on my shoulder and I could see my life. I could see my friends die around me, and myself, getting shot up a number of times, and being in car crashes and accidents. I told myself, "Man, you are going to get yourself put in a box. You are going to be non-existent. Everything else will continue to go on but you won't be involved in it."

Some day I would like to have just a few minutes of television time. I would have a screen playing behind me showing of what it is like to be in jail, showing people behind liquor stores, wanting their fathers.

Young people need an education, and they need love. We've got to start with the families

first and reach the kids when they are five and six years old, teaching them that there is something better for their lives, giving them something to look forward to. We can't wait until they are fifteen and sixteen to begin working with them. I can speak from experience. I know what it is to be in jail, and I know how it feels to walk down the streets and have no one want to be around you.

Kids have to understand that there is something good on the other side of the fence. They have to experience what it is like not to have to constantly look over your shoulder, checking your doors and checking for your pistol.

When you wake up in the morning and say to yourself, somebody loves me, that feels good. It feels good when you waking thought is not "Where's my pistol?" but instead thinking about what you will accomplish that day. It feels good to look out the window and, instead of checking to see if the police are out there, you see that the sun is shining.

That's all you need: To wake up in the morning and smell that good breakfast being cooked, or to look over there and see the person you love and feel, "This is what I've got to live for."



Director, Rev. Leon Kelly
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"Open Door" has developed a program that is fail-proof both at gang prevention and at showing current gang members alternate paths for their lives. Our program includes:

- **PREVENTION** — helps to curb gang-related violence and gang recruitment in the Denver Metro Area
- **CRISIS INTERVENTION** — is on-call to offer assistance to officials responsible for the safety and security of Denver communities
- **MEDIATION** — defuses tension by offering neutral territory where members from rival gangs can come together and learn more about each other.

"Every life we touch is a step closer to the solution."

In the Eye of the Storm



Gary Clark

Gary Clark grew up in a home that was literally around the corner from the birth place of one of the nation's most notorious gangs, the Crips. His



Clark often returns to his former elementary school to speak with the children.

friends were among the founders of that gang, yet Gary himself never became involved. In their reminiscences, former gang members recount that they recognized and respected the fact that a different standard of behavior was required within the walls of the Clark home.

Today, Gary and his wife enjoy a household of seven children. Nearly five years ago, Gary was promoted to the rank of Captain in the City of Los Angeles Fire Department which he has served for the last thirteen years.

In this exclusive interview, Capt. Clark will talk about the factors that allowed him to grow up unscathed in a neighborhood that was riddled with drug and alcohol abuse and gang violence.

NCNE: What factors influenced your course of life — a life that was so dramatically different from your childhood friends?

Clark: I think that there were two or three elements that were most important. First and foremost is the role my parents played — the direction they set for us and the way they raised us. I was the oldest of four kids (two boys and two girls) and I now see that my parents were always pushing us in a positive direction.

They made sure that we received a good education, and that we took care of business as far as studying and doing our homework is concerned. They also got us involved in positive activities within the community and at home. Each of us was responsible for specific chores.

I could see that they lived up to the same standards they set for us. Mom was involved in the PTA and was elected as its president, so the teachers knew my mom. All this helped me to excel in school, and my accomplishments in school propelled much of my life. My mother also made sure that we attended Sunday School every Sunday at our neighborhood church.

NCNE: Growing up, did you feel the lure of gang membership? Was there pressure for young people to join?

Clark: The situation is different now from when I was growing up. The Crips was formed at about the time that I was in junior high school. It is not like today where children in elementary school are being exposed to gangs. The gang's presence wasn't every where then as it is now, but, if you were not actively involved in any positive community activity and were just out there hanging around, the opportunity would present itself and you would probably get involved.

I had the fortune of being involved in positive activities — sports and Little League baseball — and that involvement carried over when I went to junior high school. I was also involved in church activities. I was always busy.

NCNE: Did your younger brothers and sisters follow the same pattern?

Clark: None of my siblings got involved in any gang activity. Today they would all be considered successful people. I think that both those factors had to work together — positive community activity and a stable home setting. Either of those elements alone would not be enough to keep them from gang activity. There are guys out there who had what would be called good stable home settings but they still got involved in gangs.

I will emphasize, again, the importance of offering constructive activities that the kids can get involved in. Kids are going to be doing something, and they will take what is available to them. If there is nothing positive to do, there are a whole lot of negative things they can get involved in.

NCNE: Has gang activity changed from when you were young?

Clark: The situation today is totally different from when I was growing up. There is much more pressure to join a gang. Today, if you are not a gang member, they will beat you up every day. They'll jump you every day until you either leave or become a gang member. Then they will push the newest gang members directing them to rob a liquor store or snatch a nurse — or be the trigger man in a drive-by. When you are getting beat up by five or ten guys every day when you are coming home from school, that is a lot of pressure.

When the Crips were formed, as a protection against an older gang called the Avareses, the major activity was taking guys' leather coats, watches, and other possessions, but guns and knives were not so prevalent. For the most part, it was a matter of fireworks. Then, the bad guys — the ones to fear — were those who were lifting weights and getting strong. Today, anybody can be "bad" because everybody is carrying an Uzi. The little, scrappiest guy can be the toughest guy. If he has the quickest trigger, he is going to win.

I think that, to some extent, the movie industry contributed to an increase in gang-related violence by glorifying gang activity and by demonizing the public and society regarding the value of life. Another factor is the fact that there are limited opportunities for young black men to come up.

I was in fourth grade when I started my first job — selling the *Seaweed* newspaper — one of the local black weekly papers. I started out with twenty papers going door

to door selling them. I built my runs up to 150 customers. There was another thing that kept me busy.

I feel that it is important for young black men to believe that it is possible to succeed. When I see somebody I've known on the street I will make a point of talking with them. The guys at my station told me about this, saying "Man, you know everybody in the world," when I say "Stop here. I know this person." I know that there is a lack of positive images in the black community. I try to go back to my elementary school a couple times a year for career day. I talk with the kids about my job and what a career is all about. I



Clark's wife, Crystal (center), surrounded by their seven children.

tell them that if they want to succeed in any profession they pursue they have to listen to their teachers and they have to listen to their parents — and they have to stay away from gangs and drugs. Fire-fighting is an exciting career in the eyes of the kids, so we always get a pretty good reception in the school.

Also, when I am in the neighborhood of someone I know, I will stop by and say hi. When I do that, I am doing two things: I am saying hi to someone I haven't seen in a while, but I am also presenting a positive image in the community. People will see me stop at a house and they will ask "Who's that?" Then someone will recognize me and say, "Oh yeah, that's Gary. He was a kid in the neighborhood. Now he is a captain." That gives people hope.

Face to Face

with Miguel Rios



Miguel Rios

Miguel Rios, once a leader of the Los Angeles-based 18th Street gang, now directs the United Parents Services of America, (UPSA). The organization, which focuses on gang prevention, employs a strategy of strengthening bonds within the family and community to establish a natural supportive environment for young people. Since its inception in 1991, UPSA has successfully served more than a thousand youths and their families. In this ex-

clusive interview, Miguel recounts the story of his own gang involvement, his turn-around, and the evolution of his community-service efforts.

NCNE: How did you first become involved in gang activity?

Rios: I grew up as an immigrant child in South Central Los Angeles. Not knowing the language or the culture, I just did not fit in with the society. As a kid, you can't understand that, and you try to find your identity. You search inside yourself to see what is wrong. You ask yourself, "Is it something I did — or the way I look?" You look for the answers but you can't find any.

The situation was different within my own neighborhood, though. Families of all colors related to each other. Kids on the block were like family. There was a common bond that linked us together. We were all poor and we were all labeled as "minorities." And we really had nobody else but each other.

When our gang first got together, it was more like a club. When we went into white neighborhoods, we went together. So we established our own little clique of the 18th Street gang. That gang, to this day, is one of the biggest street gangs in Southern California.

Even as the nature of our gang began to change, my mom never picked up on it and didn't notice the way we were dressing and acting. She

just considered the gang members to be my good friends.

NCNE: How was it that your own group became violent?

Rios: Because we were new on the block, other gangs would challenge us. We quickly understood that we had to get a reputation established if we were going to survive — a reputation for toughness and craziness that would get us respected. Being new, everyone wants to poke you to see how "down" for your neighborhood you really are.

Within the gang, we broke off into separate groups, one that did graffiti, one that did the fighting, and one that handled the drug transactions. So the gang had several leaders, including my brother and me.

As a kid growing up in a gang, you don't look at the dangers. You accept it. It's just part of the territory. No one pushed us into it. It was something we were proud of at the time.

I was proud to be a part of the gang because I felt that I was somebody. People feared me, and projecting an image they feared gave me respect. Therefore, in order to hold on to this respect, I had to keep lashing out.

Revenge had been built into my mentality. Someone would do something to your "family" and your first impulse was to go out and avenge it. We would say, "Let's go get them" and then drugs and alcohol would be in the picture, and the next thing we knew we were out there doing it.

This is the whole idea of an army going to war. Kill the enemy. Kill the enemy before the enemy kills you. In street philosophy, that is the norm. Eliminate your enemies, eliminate your biggest threat. We knew that one of two things was going to happen. Either we were going to get killed or we were just going to have to go after our enemies.

NCNE: Did you find it fairly easy to recruit new members?

Rios: I knew just how to recruit. I looked for kids with three basic characteristics — kids that were poor and members of a minority, who could not fit into the society. We would go to the neighborhood parks and we would recruit kids at a very young age, sometimes eight or nine years old. We would talk to them, and listen to them. We would ask how they felt about the situation, and slowly, gradually, we would pull them in.

From first-hand experience, I understood how it felt to have society label you as a minority and tell you that you are destined to become no more than a laborer. I could see both my parents working from 6:00 a.m. till night for next to nothing.

You fall into a sense of desperation and low self-esteem. But the gangs offer you a way to be somebody. If you had no one else, you always had your home boys.

Kids joined gangs then for the same reason they are joining them today. If you look at the nucleus of the gang today and yesterday you will see that they have a lot in common. The same ingredients are there, and the gang problem in L.A. is really nothing new. I mean, where else can you get a reputation? Where else can you feel wanted and loved? In the streets, your friends become your family.

I remember, as a small kid, seeing gangster movies and being real impressed with Edward G. Robinson and how cool it was to be a gangster and to have respect even if you had nothing else. I felt that the only way to impress people was to be feared and I fantasized about being a tough guy. The gang made that fantasy a reality.

NCNE: Why was it that you decided to leave the gang?

Rios: A number of things happened. For one, the violence took its toll on me. I myself was shot a

number of times, and many of my friends died—good friends. I realized that things were happening that I had no control over and that they had permanent consequences. Nearly half my friends in high school were dead or in jail. I lost two brothers to this thing. They are buried thirty feet apart from each other. Being the

youngest in a family of four, losing two people that you have always looked up to is devastating. It takes a lot out of you when you start losing people like that, knowing that they'll never come back and that you'll never see them again. It takes a lot out of the parents of a fellow gang member that their son has been killed. You somehow feel responsible for that.

Because my brother and I were gang leaders, we became targets. People would come to our house, with shotguns, knocking on the door and asking for us. One Sunday afternoon we were in the living room watching TV when someone threw a molotov cocktail on our porch and lit the whole porch on fire.

One night, my mom was nearly killed. My brother and I were not home at 2:00 a.m. like we promised we would be, but a car drove by while we were still out at a party and its gunfire just lit up the house. My mom was looking out the window and blam, blam, blam, bullets were just six inches above her head.

After that, I had a heart-to-heart talk with my dad, and I told them that we had enemies out there. Dad had a real hard time with that, he just kept asking "Why do you have enemies? Why?" Believe me, if we had the money my parents would have moved out. But when you are a low-income family and you are living from pay check to pay checks, struggling to pay last month's rent, that is easier said than done.

I knew in my heart that something had to change, and I knew that things weren't right, but I didn't know how to change. I had insight but no direction.

I was about eighteen years old and I was asking, What have I done with my life?

Then one day, my high school principal called me in. I remember him saying, "You can either lead people out of this or you can go ahead and lead them into destruction. But you take responsibility for what you do." My first reaction was to rebuff him, telling him to go jump in a river. But in my heart I knew that what he was saying was true. Inside a voice was saying, "I'm a leader of a gang, so what? What comes from that—more death and destruction?" I was about eighteen years old and I was asking, What have I done with my life?

During that time, I got to know a Viet Nam vet, and we would talk together about what it was like to see your friends killed. In those talks, I felt the horror and tragedy of what was happening. I told myself, "O.K. It doesn't have to happen." What could I do about it? I knew how to recruit for the negative. Now it was time to recruit for something positive.

NCNE: Once you decided that your life had no change, what steps did you take?

Bios: I had heard about an organization in Los Angeles that was fairly well known for its efforts to stop gang violence. I decided to contact them. At the time Leon Watkins was working with that organization, and he answered my phone call. I can remember that call distinctly. I told him that I was an ex-gang member and that I wanted to do something. He asked "How serious are you?" and asked me to drive down to their offices. I wasn't sure if I really wanted to do that, and felt that the whole thing could just be a waste of time, but I decided to give it a shot.

When I walked into the office, the first person I saw was Leon's assistant, a woman named Beverly Williams. When she looked at me, I felt a love in her eyes that pierced my heart. I could see that she was a truthful person who cared seriously about what she was doing.

Then I met Leon who was sitting behind his

desk. He was a big man and I felt a little scared, but the first words that came out of his mouth were, "What can I do for you." That made a big impression on me. I told him my story and he asked, again, how serious I was about working for a change and how hard I would be willing to work. Leon has a way of just cutting through it all and reaching a point of honesty. This man was not out to play games. He was involved in a day-to-day life struggle. That's how our relationship began.

When I first started working with Leon, since I was bilingual, I worked with the Hispanic brothers. Leon would give my home number as a referral number for families that needed help. Sometimes I would drive out and meet the family and the kids and then report back to Leon. Seeing the home environment and having the chance to talk directly with these kids, I was amazed that in just a ten-minute meeting I could begin to see changes in those kids. I could relate to them and they could relate to me. I started seeing a little bit of myself in these kids. I felt that I had finally found meaning in my life—a purpose for my existence.

At that point, I decided to start my own thing. That same principal who started me thinking about making a change got me a job working on the security staff of the school district, and I started offering my home number as a hot line. Most of my contacts were through the school—the kids and their parents. I started running into kids that I had recruited when they were younger, and I would talk with the gang down in the neighborhood. I was amazed at how they would listen to me. They recognized that I had changed, that I was no longer the same person that they used to know, drinking or smoking pot on the street corner. I tried to get the message across that if I could change they could change. And then I noticed that they were starting to dress differently and they were dropping their street language.

But when I tried to set up this program of my own, I ran into a lot of roadblocks. The people

who were operating the established counseling services were not interested in my success stories. They were more interested in maintaining their head count of clients.

Although I was working every day with the kids and though I had years of experience operating a hot line with Leon, my credentials were questioned when I tried to volunteer at a counseling service. I did not share their philosophy which focused primarily on law enforcement and prisons. I could not buy into their view, "once a gang member always a gang member."

I had seen that a lot of the other established agencies were not really committed to the cause, and that they were becoming involved with the gang problem simply for monetary reasons or political reasons. Even today, when kids answer an ad for crisis counseling the first question they are asked when someone picks up the phone is what kind of insurance they have. I know from my own experience of going through counseling that a person can not win your trust if he is just working from nine to five. What good does it do for him to ask a kid how he is feeling if he is not going to do anything to change his situation? What I needed was simply a male role model around me to guide me—someone to say, "Eley, Miguel, that's not right" and to show me how to do things. I did not need someone to degrade me, analyze me, and label me. It is no wonder that these agencies have a zero success rate!

I felt frustrated when I tried to go it alone, and I decided to get back in touch with Leon and what he was doing, so I called Leon and Beverly. When I told them about what had been happening they offered the encouragement and support I needed to continue and expand my efforts. They even helped me come up with a name for my project—The United Parents Services of America—and that is what we basically are, a group of parents, united.

My program is founded on the belief that gang problems start in the home.

NCNE: Could you describe some of United Parents' activities?

Ross: My program is founded on the belief that gang problems start in the home and they must end in the home. We have seen so much destruction in the family unit in America. I work to re-establish the natural system of support that is offered in the family and in the community.

In the last six weeks, two kids were killed in gang violence in the neighborhood. One was just an innocent bystander (as were half of the 800 victims killed in LA County last year) — just in the wrong place at the wrong time. A group of mothers, all friends from United Parents, got together and went to talk with the mother to help her deal with the pain. It really moved me to see this group of moms unite to cope with this loss. I see my own mom go through this, not just once but twice, so I know how much that kind of support means.

We offer basic support and try to fill the needs of the kids and their families. Sometimes a kid just needs a big brother. There are so many single parents trying to raise families these days. Some kids have never been outside the neighborhood. Just one trip could give them new vision for what their lives could be. A mother may be looking for employment and needs a baby sitter. Members of United Parents will offer that. Someone might need someone to go to the grocery store for them. In general, there is a feeling that we are all responsible for one another.

The organization operates with zero outside funding. I have been very fortunate to find parents who are willing to go the extra mile. All the members of the executive board of United Parents Services live their home numbers as hot lines. If a problem comes to me and I think someone

else might be better equipped to handle it, I'll refer the call to that person.

There is also a role for senior citizens to play. We hook up the kids that do not have parents with grand parents who no longer have kids. They fulfill each others' needs. Retirees have a lifetime of experience, yet this wealth of knowledge is wasted as they sit in rest homes, playing checkers, waiting to die. They could offer the guidance and encouragement that could literally change a young person's life. They could give the love and nurturing that so many kids are being.

We also work with teen fathers. Most of them want to take responsibility, so we encourage them to stay in school, to get their diplomas as stepping stones to higher education. Even kids join in an effort to turn other kids around. They have recruited for the wrong thing, now they are recruiting for something good.

We are basically raising a call for responsible action. Some people sit in front of a television berating all the bad news. Others may feel called to act, but in a situation in which hundreds of kids are dying, they choose to rally to save the whales or save the owls. Others think that the only solution to youth crime is stronger bigger prisons. They consider an entire generation to be a "throw-away" generation — beyond hope. But we know that these kids can be turned around. We have seen it work and we are working to make that happen.

Our youth is our future, and if America is going to have any future, we've got to invest in our young people. We love the kids that nobody has loved. We have faith in these kids and they change. One kid broke down in tears and said, "Thank God, for people like you." That was my reward. I know that if we don't do it, no one will.



Legislative AGENDA

Policy Guidelines

by Robert L. Woodson, Jr.

It is our belief that there are, in fact, many solutions to the problems of youth crime and gang violence. However, they exist not within colleges and universities, government agencies or Capitol Hill, but in America's churches, community and civic associations, and households. Currently, there are hundreds of committed individuals and organizations throughout the nation at the neighborhood level that are achieving levels of success unmatched by the programs designed within the halls of government.

Proponents of federally designed programs themselves admit that their strategies are not working. Yet, undaunted, they have simply begun to document the failures of these programs as a companion to their traditional failure studies of targeted populations. This enterprise of chronicling deficiencies in an expensive one, absorbing millions of research dollars each year. The National Center strongly recommends that the government play a more effective role in tackling the problems of youth crime and gang violence and that one of its priorities should be to create policy that will expand the capacities of neighborhood organizations that have effectively addressed this issue. The following are general guidelines that should guide such policy.

- Nondual and extended families that have successfully raised children in urban areas characterized by a high incidence of crime should be used as principal service providers to at-risk youth. They could also assist other families in coping with stressful conditions.
- Indigenous, community-based institutions serving at-risk populations should play a primary role in the delivery of delinquency prevention services.
- The cultural and ethnic traditions that often represent the cornerstone of the social infrastructure of a neighborhood should be incorporated in the design of neighborhood programs that are established to control and prevent youth crime.
- Policies dealing with status offenders should be distinct from program policies regarding the control and prevention of serious youth crime. Separate legislative categories should be established, and status offenders should be placed in separate, restrictive institutions or de-institutionalized.
- The number of alternative options for behavioral modification should be increased for at-risk youngsters by expanding the capacities of indigenous community based institutions (churches, grassroots organizations, etc.) to address this problem.
- Policy should move away from supporting large-scale criminal justice bureaucracies as the primary agent of reform and service delivery. Otherwise, perverse financial incentives will encourage these institutions (as they currently do) to maintain large caseloads as a justification for continued or increased funding.
- Character education programs should be instituted in juvenile detention facilities that stress community shared values and give training in decision-making processes. Such programs which are currently underway in California have had a demonstrably positive effect on the behavior of their participants.

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