

Forum: Youth Assembly

Issue: Preventing gang participation among youth

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INTRODUCTION

During the past decades, there has been a significant increase of cases in which the youth engage in delinquent behavior in many countries. Specifically, youngsters make the decision to join the younger generation and, moreover, many questions have been raised upon this topic. One of them is the question of why adolescents decide to join gangs. Various factors play a considerable role in the decision adolescents make, seeing that teens have a different mentality depending on how they were raised and the region they live in. One possible explanation could be that younger generations join gangs for a more stable income, for respect, and even for fun. In case an adolescent already engages in a behavior which could be considered criminal, the teen meets people with similar behavioral patterns in a gang or a criminal organization. Thus, it is highly likely that this person will continue to conduct such activities if they find like-minded people who consider such actions normal. Although such activities may seem fun for many, gangs are correctly considered very dangerous due to their potential criminal activities.

For instance, one of the most violent gangs in Los Angeles is the 18th Street Gang. The criminal organization is often called “Children’s army” due to the fact that the recruits are very young, visiting middle or even elementary school. The gang engages in many illegal activities, such as human trafficking, kidnapping, murder and other criminal offences. It is very concerning that young children engage in delinquent behavior. Through recruiting new members still visiting school, the gang probably tries to manipulate children into seeing such a lifestyle as normal and legal. Furthermore, at least one person in Los Angeles gets assaulted by a 18th Street Gang member daily. The people who are committing these felonies are adolescents and such actions will have a long-lasting effect on their social life. Especially members who participate in very violent gangs, such as the 18th Street Gang, will probably have long-term health consequences as well because of the physically demanding and dangerous activities they participate in.

It is very important to understand that the youth is the victim in such situations. Many enter a gang from a significantly young age and thus get manipulated into believing that being in a gang is something beneficial to them. Many teenagers glamourize the lifestyle of gangs without

being fully informed, and thus, the key to this situation is raising awareness so that the youth can understand the situation they find themselves in. It is very important that the prevention of this situation happens, considering that through tackling the issue efficiently, the percentage of young people joining gangs decrease. Not only will there be fewer cases of teenagers involved in criminal organizations, but teenagers will also be more protected, because gangs are highly linked with rivalries, which could lead to various deaths and injuries. Because of the aforementioned reasons, immediate action must be taken.

DEFINITION OF KEY-TERMS

Gang¹

A group of people who engage in criminal and delinquent activities, without paying any mind to the legislation as well as the danger they are putting both themselves and others in.

Delinquent behavior²

A criminal act which is usually committed by a person who does not follow society's civil legislations concerning the safety and well-being of citizens.

Felony³

A crime where the common law has been disobeyed and puts other civilians in danger, thus the punishment is more severe. In this case, many gangs conduct felonies such as murder, trafficking and robberies.

Extremism⁴

A political view or idea which seems radical and unjustified, and specifically not accepted by many people because it is considered unreasonable.

Human Trafficking⁵

¹ "Gang", Merriam Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gang>

² "Delinquent Behavior, its characteristics and determining factors:", *European Scientific Journal* April 2015, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/328024893.pdf>

³ "Felony", Merriam Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/felony>

⁴ "Extremist", *Cambridge Dictionary*: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/extremist>

⁵ "Human Trafficking", *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/human-trafficking.html>

An activity where a human being is transported without their consent and usually through violence, as a way for the offender gain profit. In this case, many gangs are linked with human trafficking systems and thus engage in such activity, which is considered illegal and criminal.

Juvenile Justice⁶

The legislations which are applied to people who are under the age of 18 and cannot be trialed as an adult or held as responsible for criminal activities. Adolescents involved in gangs who get arrested undergo trials according to juvenile justice law, since they are minors.

Migrant⁷

A person who moves away from their own country or from their own town for various personal reasons, including financial or political ones.

Immigrant⁸

A person who moves to another country permanently. More than often, immigrants face discriminations because of their heritage and thus, they join gangs in order to protect themselves.



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The reasons why youth decide to join gangs

In order to fully tackle the topic, one must understand why the youth participates in gangs. Apart from the fact that youth decide to join for respect, money, protection or a stable income, there are many other possible explanations. It is highly likely that one person is in a friend group in which they feel left out. In case one of the members is already in a gang, that person will probably join as well in an attempt to become accepted and more likeable by the others^[DP1]. In other words, one may be manipulated unknowingly by having made such a decision, attempting to

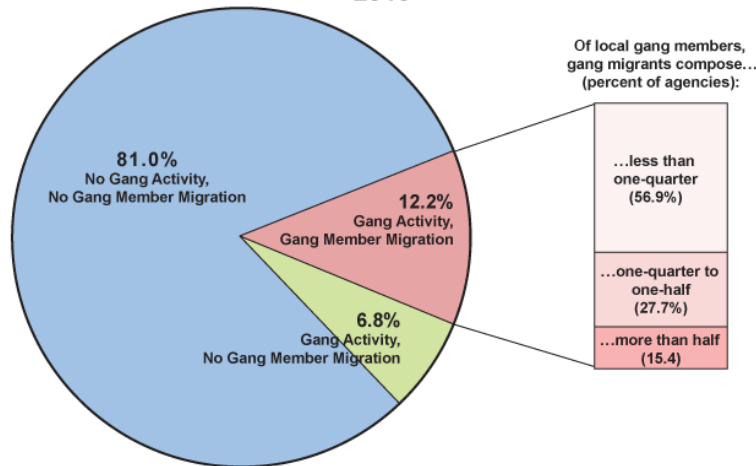
⁶ "Juvenile Justice", *Legal Information Institute*: https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/juvenile_justice

⁷ "Who is a migrant?", *International Organisation for Migration*: <https://www.iom.int/who-is-a-migrant>

⁸ "Explainer: Who is an immigrant?", *Migrant Policy Institute*: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/content/explainer-who-immigrant>

finally be included and not being an outcast. Furthermore, another key factor is safety. The older generations already feel unsafe in their own communities because of the high criminality in many places. Seeing so many incidents happen, the older generation doesn't trust other citizens easily and is very considerate of their actions, in order to remain safe and protect themselves and their family. By joining a gang, one may feel safe and protected, since one has the ability to control what's ⁹happening in the area and has the ability to prevent people from discriminating against others.

Gang Member Migration Problems in Nonmetropolitan Areas, 2010



Demographic showing that double the amount of gang members are immigrants.

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Stereotypes also play a considerable role in this decision. The younger generation has witnessed many incidents of injustice and it is likely that their family has experienced severe difficulties. According to many researchers¹⁰, most adolescents who join gangs come from a family of migrants. Specifically, in 2006, New York Graphic Society disputed the fact that 32% of members in gangs are Hispanic, whereas 11% is Caucasian, showing the impact

of stereotypes in the situation. Families of migrants have been discriminated against a lot, especially in the past decades, and thus, it has become very hard to survive as a migrant in many countries. Because of this circumstance, many young people join gangs in order to protect themselves and their family, or to have a stable income which would be very useful in their household. Apart from that, those adolescents join criminal activities as a way to be included in a group without being inferior, but on the other hand being respected and accepted. Therefore, society is also at fault for this situation. Such stereotypes are developed through racism, and it is a necessity that the issue of racism against migrants and immigrants is tackled.

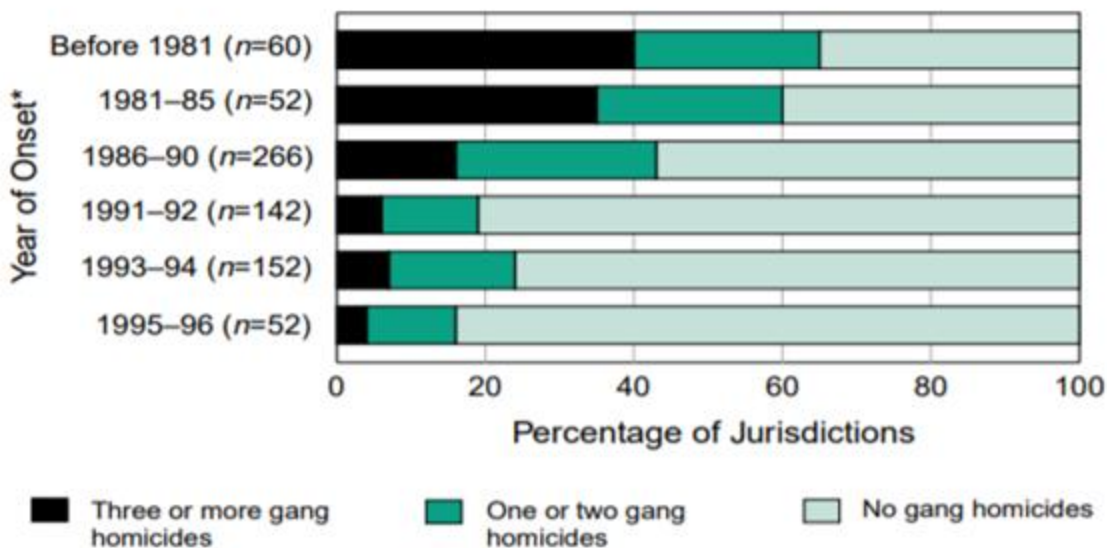
⁹ "National Youth Gang Survey Analysis: Gang Member Migration." National Gang Center, nationalgangcenter.ojp.gov/survey-analysis/gang-member-migration.

¹⁰ C.Howell, James. "(PDF) Gang Prevention: An Overview of Research and Programs", *OJJDP*, December 2010, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/231116.pdf>, cited from: Esbensen, F.-A., Peterson, D., Taylor, T.J., and Freng, A. 2010. *Youth Violence: Sex and Race Differences in Offending, Victimization, and Gang Membership*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

The risk factors of joining a gang

It is no secret that many gangs choose to emit a message through violence or commit crimes as a way of revenge. When joining a gang, an adolescent is immediately put into danger. One may develop many long-term health problems in the future, considering how physically demanding activities in such organizations are. It is possible that one might get injured and therefore, this injury will have an impact on the rest of his life. One can understand that by joining a gang, a person risks their own life. Many youngsters have died tragically because of gang violence. In many cases, as for instance an incident of 1991, in which a teenager was shot in a drive-by accidentally, led to the creation of the G.R.A.S.P. (Gang Resistance and Support Project). Thus, teens who join such organizations are more prone to losing their lives. By exposing adolescents to such violent environments, there are dramatic changes in their behavior. It is easily understandable that teens will become more distant or more violent, since they would be adapting to the lifestyle of gangs, which is based on violence.

Furthermore, many students who decide to join a gang, are highly likely to drop out of school as well. This could lead to a considerable percentage of the youth being illiterate or not fully educated, which does not benefit the progression of society. Something that needs to be pointed out is the fact that by joining criminal organizations, youngsters find themselves in an environment where many illegal activities take place, such as human and drug trafficking, robberies, and murders. In case the youth engage in such activities, then the mentality of a teen changes as well. Disputing the fact that teens are more prone to manipulation, by engaging in delinquent behavior, they will start to consider such a lifestyle as right, and thus will start to normalize the lifestyle of gang members, which of course is a direct effect of mental illiteracy.

Figure 2: Gang-Related Homicides, by Year of Gang Problem Onset, 1998 Survey

* Because 1998 survey respondents were not asked when their gang problems began, the classification of 1998 respondents by onset category is based on 1996 responses to the year-of-onset question.

Figure 1: 1998 Survey on Homicides associated with Gangs¹¹

In the abovementioned survey, one can understand the issue of gang crimes during the past decades. Especially before the 1980s, gangs engaged in highly criminal behavior and thus, many citizens were killed tragically. The numbers have decreased since the specific decade, but gang violence must still be prevented. It is widely known that many gangs engage in trafficking activities and thus are linked with such systems. Many people are still murdered from violent gangs, who usually manage to escape from such situations, meaning justice is not served in those situations. In Los Angeles, where gang activity is very high, people get attacked by members of such criminal organizations daily. Many of these citizens get murdered as well, leading to dramatic deaths. Many projects have been set into motion for action to be taken. Since the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights protects all people from being killed or their life being taken abruptly in article 6, through such actions, this right is violated. Seeing that human rights are being violated, gang felonies, especially human trafficking, and murders, must decrease.

The impact of gangs on adolescents, communities and later life

¹¹ "Modern-Day Youth Gangs", OJJDP (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/191524.pdf>

As far as the adolescent joining a gang is concerned, there are many consequences following this action. Not only is the youngster most likely to get involved in drug use, but they will very likely engage in even other criminal activities as well. Furthermore, there is a high probability that the youngster will continue to commit more serious crimes in the future, thus the person will be breaching more and more legislations as time progresses.

Even if a youngster leaves a gang, it is likely that they will continue to engage in criminal behaviour, however it will be significantly less than before. Since the adolescent has already conducted juvenile delinquency, it is very unlikely that the person will stop. This will have a long-lasting effect in their adulthood, since one will not have a clear criminal record and thus, it will be harder to follow a specific career path, disputing the fact that most jobs require clear criminal records. Moreover, the adolescent will probably have to face health problems in the future, considering the high the physical demand in criminal organizations is, especially while registering the fact that injuries obtained whilst conducting gang activities are often detrimental.

Lastly, citizens in the community will be even more scared of becoming a victim of these gangs and thus, trust will lack even more in society. Many people decide to avoid certain areas because they belong to gangs, and seeing the current acceleration rate of gangs, there is a high probability of many residual neighborhoods becoming dangerous.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

USA (United States of America)

Disputing the fact that gang participation is still an ongoing issue in the US, the country has made many attempts in order to combat it. It is widely known that during the past decades, the number of gangs has increased in many states, thus leading to higher criminal activity in those places. Many projects have been designed to resolve this issue, for instance the Gang Resistance Prevention and Training Program (G.R.E.A.T). This project specifically aims to educate students on youth delinquency and violence before they are prone to join gangs and other criminal organizations. The country investigates gangs with criminal activity through third-party organizations. Through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), which is an organ of the U.S. Department of Justice, the USA takes action and aims to inform students concerning the specific issue.^[DP2]

Canada

Canada is also a country in which there are many gangs actively engaging in criminal behavior. Through the National Crime Prevention Center (NCPC), the country has funded programs which aim to help teenagers who are engaged with criminal activities. [DP3] These organizations specifically aim to decrease the number of young adults joining gangs by educating them further or motivate them form a better future. Furthermore, Canada has conducted many studies concerning this topic to fully and extensively understand this issue. Third-party organizations are evaluating the current situation in Canada and thus, they are helping the NCPC with implementing more effective measures when needed. Lastly, the country has brought light to many facts which are useful for understanding youth gang prevention, such as studies in changes of behavior and attitude when an adolescent joins a gang.

Guatemala

Guatemala is one of the countries with the highest rate of homicides in Latin America. Gangs are highly responsible for these cases. Seeing that there hadn't been an effective attempt to combat the issue yet, the President of the country, Jimmy Morales, made the decision to create nine groups consisting of soldiers, which have the responsibility to protect citizens. These groups have the task of securing the safety of all citizens. Contrary to the demands of the public for strict anti-gang policies, the country has not created strict legislations. Although the situation in the country is beginning to improve, illegal activities such as human trafficking are still taking place, whereas gangs are also still engaging in criminal behavior, but not to such a great extent as before.

El Salvador

In El Salvador, local gang problems are increasing dramatically. However, the country has taken many measures in order to combat the issue. In 2008, some members of the MS-13 gang, which is a violent gang based in Latin America, were arrested, but still had contact with other members of the gang in order to organize assassinations. Along with Guatemala, El Salvador has the highest homicide rate for adolescents under the age of 20. A significant part of these homicides is due to the violence of gangs. The government specifically designed a gang truce in 2012, in order to decrease these percentages. Therefore, one can understand that the situation in El Salvador is crucial and although actions such as arrests of gangs members are taking place, more effective action needs to be taken.

Honduras

Honduras is a country in which human trafficking is one of the most crucial problems in the region. Many children and women lose their lives dramatically due to sex and human trafficking. Such trafficking systems are usually regulated by gangs and other criminal organizations. Moreover, poverty a great issue in Honduras, and thus many people turn to gangs and other groups in order to earn more money for themselves and their families. In order to combat this issue, heavy anti-gang policies have been implemented in Honduras and other countries dealing with similar problems. These policies are called *mano dura*^[DP4] which are translated as “firm hand”, due to how heavy and strict they are.

Italy

In Italy, although the youth are socially protected, street gangs are a serious problem. Especially in northern cities like Milan and Genoa, studies have been conducted in order to fully understand the situation. Gang culture is associated with the youth and thus, social workers and other members of the younger generations have designed programs in order to tackle the issue in the region. Every municipality of the country offers prevention programs for youth with delinquent behavior, which is Italy’s attempt to decrease gang participation, especially amongst youth.

China

After some amendments in the economy in the 1970s, youth gangs and criminal organizations have dramatically increased. Because the research on gangs in China is limited due to its government, recognizing patterns of behavior and obtaining evidence in order to prevent gang participation is difficult to happen. Thus, with almost no active studies on the topic, making approaches to the issue especially tough, gangs in China are still a concerningly large issue.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

DATE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENT
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1987	The Juvenile Gang Suppression and Intervention Research and Development Program is conducted in the US, becoming the first national evaluation of efforts to combat the issue.
1991	G.R.A.S.P. (Gang Rescue and Support Project) is established
1990-2000	A dramatic increase of youth-gang problems.
2009	A 7% increase in youth conducting crimes is showed through a Hamilton Police Service (HPS) Report in Canada
9 December 2015	Resolution 2250 of the United Nations Security Council is established, in order to tackle the issue of gangs, security, and peace.
30-31 October 2017	An expert meeting for Social Policies and Social Issues is called in Rome, Italy, in order to tackle the issue of youth participating in extremist groups in Somalia.
2 March 2020	Report of the Secretary General concerning the topic of "Youth and peace and security" which tackles the issue of youth in the community is published.

14 July 2020	Resolution 2235 of the United Nations Security Council is created in accordance with Resolution 2250. The Resolution aims to tackle the issue of youth security.[DP1]
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RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

Advanced Report “Youth Peace and Security”¹²

From 30-31 October 2017, an Expert Group Meeting was organized in Rome, Italy, in order to provide innovative solutions for the safety of the younger generations. Throughout the meeting, many challenges which are highly associated with youth, such as injustice, were tackled, in order to cover the topic from all aspects. Furthermore, all experts aimed to promote positive conflict prevention as a measure to ensure the security of peace. Through this report^[DP1], social problems, which the youth face, are tackled. For instance, the situation of youth in Somalia was discussed, because many young citizens engaged in extremist organizations. One of the measures suggested was to create safe spaces for youngsters, in order for them to speak up about such problems.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2535 (2020)¹³

The resolution 2535 of the United Nations Security Council, which was established in 2020, focuses on youth, security, and peace. Specifically, clause 4 urges that the youth is protected in case an “armed conflict” takes place. Furthermore, the clause suggests that adolescents will be protected from sexual violence or violence based on gender, like for instance human trafficking.

¹² United Nations. “ (PDF) Youth, Peace, and Security: Social Issues and Social Policies”, *Welcome to the United Nations*, 2017, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2017/12/Advance-Report-EGM-Youth-Peace-and-Security.pdf>

¹³ - United Nations Security Council. “(PDF) S/RES/2535(2020) - E - S/RES/2535/(2020)”, *ESubscription to United Nations Documents*, 2020, [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2535\(2020\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2535(2020))

The fifth clause suggests to all Member States that a safe space should be created for the youth, in order for every youngster to be recognized, independently from their ethnic background. The clause also urges that adolescent should be supported and protected in case an incident of violence takes place. Lastly, the clause recommends that adolescents are questioned and carefully examined after they witness a violent act, to ensure their well-being and their safety.

The resolution is in accordance with The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 of 2015, which also aims to tackle the issue of youth and security of peace. It is highlighted in both documents that youth need to be protected from violence. Many gangs usually engage in armed fights and thus, it is the government's responsibility to secure the safety of all youngsters. Furthermore, all adolescents need to be recognized and not discriminated against because of their ethnic background. Knowing that stereotypes about people with different ethnicities have already developed in our community, it is a necessity to decrease them.

These two clauses thoroughly explain that youngsters need to be protected from conflicts of various natures and need to be thoroughly questioned in case they witness such an incident, to fully establish the protection of adolescents.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015)¹⁴

The UNSC Resolution 2250, established in 2015, tackles the issue of youth, peace, and security by covering the aspect of protection and prevention. Specifically, the resolution suggests that policies should be created, in order to positively influence youth into participating in local projects, which would assist the social development of the region. Furthermore, clause 12 supports that education should be qualitative in all Member States, to fully educate adolescents.

Considering these clauses, creating policies, which could have a positive influence on youngsters, would lead to positive consequences. Youth would have the chance to actively participate in the development of the society, thus being in control of what is happening. Through this, young adults would ensure their safety and thus, there wouldn't be a need to join criminal organizations.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

The G.R.E.A.T. (Gang Resistance Education And Training) Program

¹⁴ United Nations Security Council. "(PDF) S/RES/2250/(2015) - E - S/RES/2250(2015)", *ESubscription to United Nations Documents*, 2015, [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2250\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2250(2015))

The G.R.E.A.T Program is a project which was specifically designed for classroom curricula for schools. It aims to educate students before they reach their teenage years, during which they are more prone to engage in criminal behavior or join gangs. The project is widely known across Central America and the US, where many officers visit schools in order to inform children. The goal of the program is to prevent youth delinquency and violence through educating thoroughly. Furthermore, the program wishes to improve the relationship of law enforcement officers and the community, knowing that this relationship has become worse through many incidents. In other words, the program's goal is to achieve a trusting relationship between the youth and the law enforcement officers.

The G.R.A.S.P. (Gang Rescue and Support Project)

The G.R.A.S. Project was founded in Denver in 1991 after the tragic death of a teen who was shot during a drive-by accidentally. The program helps youngsters who are close to becoming gang members and assists them while they improve their life. What makes this project special is that it is run by ex-gang members, who made the decision to improve their lives and escape this illegal lifestyle. G.R.A.S.P. offers support for adolescents who are involved in youth delinquency, so as to ensure that those teens will have a better future. Moreover, the program offers "Parent Awareness Trainings", in order to educate parents and legal guardians on how to protect their children from dangerous organizations and how to help them in case they are already engaged in such activities.

Juvenile Gang Suppression and Intervention Research and Development Program

The Juvenile Gang Suppression and Intervention Research and Development Program was conducted in 1987 by Dr. Irving Spergel in the US. It was divided into two phases. In the first phase, the researchers designed an organized agency and combatted issues connected to gangs in a group effort. In the second phase, a youth gang program was developed by Spergel and other researchers in an attempt to find additional evidence. Through a national survey, the researchers tried to find methods used in gang programs in US communities. After identifying five key strategies found in most programs, the researchers team created the "OJJP's Comprehensive Gang Model" which, to this day, assists the development of anti-gang organizations.

Community Empowerment and Transformation Project II (COMET II)

The COMET II Project was active in Jamaica from 2013 to 2018. Its aim was to e the safety of the community by strengthening organizations for citizens in the region. Another goal of the program was to make implementations in juvenile justice and to promote youth programs. Furthermore, the program tried to improve practices of the Jamaican communities concerning

gang prevention and tried to increase the feeling of responsibility of the citizens. The program generally tried to combat the issue of gang participation by improving the relationship between authorities and civilians, in order to ensure the feeling of safety which is lacking in many communities nowadays.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Creating safer spaces for youngsters

Due to the age barrier, which sometimes makes communication between younger and older generations confusing and difficult, many youngsters make the decision of not opening up about their concerns or any difficulties they may be facing. By creating a safe place for adolescents to voice their problems, they will have the ability to talk about their activities in criminal organizations and then have people assist them in order to help them, or perhaps not feel the need to join gangs in the first place. This could be achieved by strengthening the relationships between the generations in our society or by educating parents and guardians more about handling delinquent behavior, in order to help children in such situations.

If safe spaces are also created in our communities for gang prevention, youngsters would be able to voice their concerns in a societal scheme. Thus, many adolescents would be able to get help in order to get out of the vicious circle of engaging in criminal organizations and then form a better and more constructed future.

Funding youth organizations for gang prevention

Many young people are founders of organizations, which help other people to ensure their safety and stop their involvement in such activities. By funding and supporting such programs, these organizations will have the opportunity to help even more people, because they will have the capacity to obtain better facilities. Furthermore, more programs can be established from these organizations in case funding is implemented, bearing in mind the financial support programs need. To sum up, funding youth organizations could help teens which are struggling to form a better future after escaping from a gang or they could help youngsters in communities with high criminality rates.

Educating adolescents about the risk factors of criminal organizations

The key to tackling this issue is raising awareness. By educating adolescents on how risky and dangerous joining gangs and other violent groups is, a teenagers form a completed view. Thus, raising awareness through, for instance, visits of specialists in schools or a focused subject which could be established in the school curriculum, could be a first step in order to decrease gang

participation among youth. One could inform the citizens through social media as well, seeing that teenagers nowadays are especially active on social media platforms.

Reinforcing psychological support for youth

Considering that many teens feel uninvolved or less likeable, providing psychological support is a good solution for this problem. By educating youngsters on the importance of voicing their feelings and thoughts, the relationship between adolescents and professionals will strengthen. This way, youngsters will be more comfortable sharing their thoughts and their feelings and there is a high probability that psychologists will be a very effective form of assistance, seeing that they are trained for such situations. Furthermore, psychologists could visit schools as part of classroom curriculum and speak about the feeling of not being included, in order to show to the students that their feelings are valid. By knowing that one's feelings are valid, one is more open to talk about their problems, and therefore, one will find solutions for their problems and will try to make their feelings more positive.

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