U.S. Hispanic/Latino Street Gangs
A Guide for Addiction Professionals

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July 19, 2012
Behavioral Health is Essential To Health

Prevention Works

Treatment is Effective

People Recover
Definition of a Gang

The definition of a street youth gang has been characterized as a identifiable group of youngsters who:

(a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others

(b) recognize themselves as an street identifiable group (almost invariably with a group name)

(Reference: Klein 1971; Klein and Maxson 2006)
Definition of a Gang

(c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or law enforcement agencies.

(Reference: Klein 1971; Klein and Maxson 2006)
Identifying Street Gangs

- Identifying gang members on the street can be challenging.
- Law enforcement, educational institutions, and social service agencies and others use varying characteristics in defining and identifying gangs and gang members.
- Hispanic/Latino youth often are mistaken for gang members.
- For Hispanic/Latino youth, this creates an atmosphere of fear and intimidation.

![Figure 9.5](chart.png)

*Figure 9.5* Questioned by Police in the Past Year?
(\% of Latino youths questioned by police for any reason)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Latino Youths, by Generation</th>
<th>22</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third and higher</td>
<td>25</td>
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Notes: "Youths" refers to 16- to 25-year-olds. First generation refers to persons born outside the 50 states or the District of Columbia, including those born in Puerto Rico. Second generation refers to persons born in the U.S. with at least one first-generation parent. Third and higher generations refers to persons born in the U.S. with both parents born in the U.S.

Source: Pew Hispanic Center, 2009 National Survey of Latinos
Racial and Ethnic Group Gangs

- Most gangs tend to be racially and ethnically homogenous

- Ethnic minority gangs emerge in communities with high unemployment, poverty, welfare dependency, single headed households and other socioeconomic characteristics.

- Hispanic/Latino racial and ethnic group gangs reflect differences in region, economic situation, social status, immigration status, generations and cultural characteristics.

(Reference: Starbuck, Howell, & Lindquist, 2001)
Overview of Hispanic/Latino Gangs

One of the most important dimensions in considering the different types of Hispanic/Latino gangs is ethnicity.

**Mexican American Gangs**
- Southwest/Border region
- Multi-generational “cholo” family based
- Neighborhood/Territorial based networks

**Puerto Rican Gangs**
- Northeastern / Midwest region
- Urban areas experienced de-industrialization
- Circular Migration (Mainland – Island)

**Central American Gangs**
- Southwest (LA, Houston) / East Coast
- Multiethnic Urban/Suburban regions
- Transnational Activity
Differences in Hispanic Street Gangs

- Stereotypical images and stories abound in the public media.

- Street gangs engage in fighting for various reasons such as territory, prestige, honor, and females. Their violence may largely be related to expressive reasons.

- Drug gangs are characterized by their engagement in drug dealing and trafficking. Their violence is basically related to instrumental functions such as enforcement of market advantages and the collection of debts.
Understanding Variations in Hispanic/Latino Gangs

According to Valdez (2006) gangs vary in their composition on five key characteristics:

- Illegal Activities
- Violent Behavior
- Drug Use Patterns
- Adult Influences
- Gang Organization
Typology of Hispanic/Latino Gangs

On the basis of these dimensions a four-fold typology of Hispanic/Latino gangs is proposed:

- Criminal Adult Dependent
- Criminal Non-Adult Dependent
- Transitional
- Barrio Territorial
Traditionally, youth street gang and the prison gang have been quite separate entities.

Street gang members are perceived as too emotional and undisciplined to warrant recruitment by a prison gang until they were incarcerated.

Even when incarcerated, street gang members tended to sustain their identification with their gangs and even resist prison gangs by keeping true to their geographical loyalties and animosities.
Prison Gangs and Hispanic/Latino Street Gangs

- As more and more gang members are incarcerated the traditional relationships between prison and youth street gangs is changing.

- The alliance of youth street gangs and prison gangs is exacerbated by formerly incarcerated Hispanic/Latinos returning to their communities.
Hispanic Gang Members Demographics

**Gender:** Hispanic gang members, as with other ethnic groups, are predominantly males. The percentage of youth self-identifying as gang members who are female has been reported to range from 8 to 38 percent.

**Age:** The trend on age distribution among gangs has been changing from 1996 through 2000. In 1996 there was an even split in gangs between juveniles (i.e., under 18) and young adults (over 18). By 1999, the percentage of young adults had risen to 63 percent. For Hispanic gangs, these distributions seem to be similar.
Hispanic Gang Members Demographics

**Urban versus Suburb:** Hispanic/Latino gangs have been largely an urban phenomenon until recently; are now spreading from larger cities to suburban areas at seemingly the same proportion as the national averages.

**Migration:** The increasing migration of Hispanic gang members that follow the pathways. The general Hispanic/Latino population in the U.S. is also changing the traditional concentration of Hispanic gangs in specific regions of the country.

*(Reference: Vigil, 2001)*
Social Profile of Hispanic Gang Members

**Criminal Behavior:** Gang members, in contrast to other delinquent youth, engage in exceptionally high levels of criminally-related behavior. Gang members report participation in various other criminal activities including drug selling and dealing, burglary, auto theft, car-jacking, robbery, fencing, and weapon sales.

**Drug Use:** Gang members engage in exceptionally high levels of lifetime and current use of illicit drugs compared to other youth.

*(Reference: Valdez, 2003)*
Social Profile of Hispanic Gang Members

**School Dropout:** School dropout rates among gang members are disproportionately high when compared to other youth. These rates are a direct consequence of the “precocious transitions” - untimely and disorderly life course transitions.
Social Profile of Hispanic Gang Members

Street-Oriented Family: Certain family characteristics such as involvement in illegal activities, drug use in household, incarceration histories, and neglected parental supervision among Hispanic/Latinos are an integral part of the social profile of gang members. This is understandable in light of the strong cultural influence of *familismo* on Hispanic/Latino identity and orientation.
Social Profile of Hispanic Gang Members

Cholo Identity: In James D. Vigil’s classic groundbreaking study in the Mexican American barrios of Los Angeles he demonstrates how a youth’s self-identity is inextricably tied up with the gang. The gang provides the youth with the basic psychological ingredients for self-identification and becomes an ego ideal. Toughness and other street values are reinforced by characteristic psychological traits such as the lack of empathy.

(Reference: Vigil, 1988)
Young Females and Male Gang Members

While males are typically self-identified gang members, females are distinct in that they are integrated into gang life through various affiliations, other than being a gang member (Valdez, 2007).

- Some distinct types of women associated with gangs are:
  
  - Girlfriends (wives, sweethearts)
  - Good Girls (sisters, relatives, childhood friends)
  - Relatives (sisters, cousins)
  - Hood Rats (party girls, sluts, bad girls)
Gangs in Your Community

The following are community characteristics associated with the emergence of gangs in Hispanic/Latino neighborhoods:

- Poverty
- Unemployment
- Residential Patterns
- Immigration
Who is Likely to Join a Gang?

- There is no single explanation as to why Hispanic/Latino adolescents join gangs or why some adolescents do not join.
- Multiple factors are continually interacting with each other to exert influence on an individual’s susceptibility for gang involvement.
- Features that promote participation in youth gangs are known as risk factors that may increase the probability of an adolescent joining a gang.
Who is Likely to Join a Gang?

- Gang membership is associated with prestige or status among friends, excitement, and personal economic advantages.

- In marginal communities joining a gang provides them with a sense of protection and identity.
Who is Likely to Join a Gang?

Risk factors associated with adolescents joining Hispanic/Latino gangs are organized into five categories adapted from the ecological framework:

- Individual
- Family
- Peer
- School
- Community Influence

Individual Level Risk Factors

Prior Delinquency
- Early onset of delinquency including theft, burglary, fighting and destruction of property.

Alcohol/Drug Use
- Early onset of substance use including alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, heroin, etc.

Antisocial Problem Behaviors
- History of aggression, violence, depression, rebelliousness, early risky sexual behavior and other risk taking behaviors.

Childhood Trauma
- History of childhood maltreatment or abuse including sexual, physical and emotional.
Family Level Risk Factors

**Family Structure Instability/Disorganization**
- Family structure (single vs. two parent households) instability or disorganization characterized by divorce and lack of adult pro-social role models

**“Cholo” Family**
- Multigenerational familial involvement in gangs, substance use, illegal activities, arrests and incarceration

**Problematic Parent/Child Relationships:**
- Poor affective relationships, parent/child conflict, inconsistent discipline, and low parental supervision; often aggravated in Hispanic/Latino immigrant families with children being socialized in the U.S.
Peer Level Risk Factors

Negative Peer Influences

• Association with peers involved in antisocial behavior including school truancy, gang activity, substance use, and delinquent behavior.

Street Socialization

• History of early association to deviant non-family member subcultures (i.e., adult criminals, drug sellers, thieves, etc.).

Peer Network

• Primary interaction with delinquent peers versus conventional friends.
School Level Risk Factors

- **Lack of School Commitment**
  - Evidence of adolescent showing no interest in school and/or lack of educational aspiration.

- **Problematic Behavior at School**
  - Patterns of truancy, fighting, teacher conflict and other antisocial behavior during school.

- **Academic Failure**
  - Evidence of failing academic subject matters as demonstrated by grades.
### Community Level Risk Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Disorganization</th>
<th>Lack of Social Capital</th>
<th>Social Isolation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presence of high crime and violence rates, established drug market, poverty, and other underclass characteristics.</td>
<td>Absence of community cohesion in the form of social control and trust by members of the community and respective institutions (i.e., church, community based agencies).</td>
<td>Poor communities that are relatively similar in immigrant status and social class (i.e., income, job status). Often middle class minorities have moved outside the barrio.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Warning Signs of Gang Membership

No single indicator of gang involvement in adolescents but rather a multiplicity of warning signs. Potential warnings signs:

- Increased conflict with family members (i.e., curfew violation, lack of communication)
- Changes in behavior
- Changes in attitudes about school
- Discipline problems at school including lower grades
- Changes in style of dress
- Suspected drug and alcohol use
- Increase in material possessions and cash
What Strategy Works Best to Address Gang Problems?

- The current consensus of informed opinion holds that there is no single strategy or easy solution for Hispanic/Latino gang problems.
- A promising approach is to think of different strategies that can be combined in meaningful ways.
- Drug using behavior and the attachment to the gang can be significantly reduced by evidenced based and culturally relevant interventions.
What Strategy Works Best to Address Gang Problems?

- Comprehensive community mobilization strategies involving the participation of broad-based community coalitions ranging from the police and prosecutors to street outreach workers.

- In order to be effective strategies needs to offer enhanced options to incarceration and probation; including employment-training programs in either after care or alternative sentencing forms as well as integrated substance abuse and mental health services.
Spectrum of Youth Street Gangs

(Criminal Zone)

(Criminal Gang)

(Drift Zone)

(Traditional Gang)

(Normal Zone)

(Delinquent Youths)

(Troublesome Youths)

(Mildly Deviant Youths)

(Normal Youths)

(Source: Kaplan et al., 2010).
Youth drug gangs are often enmeshed in dynamic drug markets and are forced to interact with adult and prison gangs that have control of this business.

(Reference: Valdez 2005).
Working with Gangs

- Encompasses various approaches in conducting outreach with gangs.

- Before going into the field and contacting youth, individuals need to be aware of several important factors that will assist in developing positive relationships with these adolescents.

- Attention needs to be given to specifying gang member status and gang organizational types.
Ineffective attempts of working with gang members comes from:

- Lack of distance leading to an unconscious reinforcement of gang behaviors.
- Having too far a distance leading to a loss of perspective on the needs of the gang members.
- This form of incompetence is often tied to a lack of cultural relevance and sensitivity.
Competencies to Work with Hispanic/Latino Gangs

- Basic understanding of cultural prerequisites such as *familismo*, *Respeto* and *colectivismo* is necessary, but also more refined sensitivity is required.

- An appreciation of local idioms and mores tied to Hispanic/Latino subcultures is necessary—and ability to be non-judgmental.

- Skills related to negotiation, conflict resolution and mediation between gangs, their members, families, schools, and community agencies are essential.
Skills and Approaches to Working with Gangs

Acquiring Extensive Information on Gangs

- First step is to broaden the base of prior knowledge by learning as much as possible regarding the types of members, cliques, and ranges of gang activities.

- Step must be initiated by recognizing any prior bias or preconceived opinions about this population.

- These socially marginal groups have “low social visibility” often due to stigmatized or illegal behaviors and as such, are difficult to locate.
Acquiring Extensive Information on Gangs

- Requires identification of gangs, where the target groups congregate, such as public parks, public housing spaces, playgrounds, recreational centers, downtown areas, neighborhood businesses and specific neighborhoods.

- Involved in this process is the establishment of geographical parameters and ranges that will assist in identifying gangs within specific spatial boundaries.
Acquiring Extensive Information on Gangs

- After identification of these areas, community outreach staff need to begin to collect data about distinct community and neighborhood areas. The goal is to identify all existing gangs in a targeted area, the size of membership, organizational structure, and primary activities.

- In establishing alliances with gangs in your community it is important to avoid initial references from institutional representatives, especially law enforcement.
Acquiring Extensive Information on Gangs

- Often individuals identified by law enforcement may not have ever been gang members or who may no longer be affiliated with any gang activity.
- Avoid being perceived as officially affiliated with these institutional representatives.
- However, there is the potential for institutional references to assist unofficially in other ways such as participating as key informants.
Maintaining High Visibility

One important strategy in making contact with gangs in your community is to maintain high visibility:

- Frequenting public hang outs (e.g., convenient stores, parks, street corners) as a participant observer without becoming obtrusive in the behavior of the youth.

- Frequenting public social activities in the community including block parties, church festivals and city sponsored events which gang members attend.
Maintaining High Visibility

- Volunteering time at local community social service agencies in the community.

- Associating with community members recognized and accepted by gang members.
Making Social Contact

Establishing visibility is not enough to make contact with gangs in your community. One must establish social contact. What follows are some suggestions on how to reinforce relations with gang members after initial contact has been made:

- Visiting incarcerated individuals
- Visiting family members
- Providing appropriate referrals for social services, such as GED
- Engaging in mutual recreational activities
Using Community Gatekeepers

It is well established that identifying the proper gatekeeper is essential in gaining entree into the world of hidden populations including gangs. Gatekeepers serve multiple purposes in the process of making contact with gangs:

- Identifying potential sites where gang members hang out
- Facilitating initial contacts with informants and gang members
- Providing initial information on the subject matter
Using Community Gatekeepers

- In dealing with younger gang members, parents play an important gatekeeper role. Contact with them is often facilitated by the provision of services to the family through a social service agency.

- This may be an especially effective tactic used with a highly exclusive Hispanic/Latino community where *familismo* is a dominant characteristic.
Using Community Gatekeepers

- In some cases, community agencies can be effective in gaining entree, particularly if the agency has good rapport and trust with gang members. If an agency has a bad reputation with gang members, using them as gatekeepers can be ineffective.
Using Other Community Gatekeepers

- Having individuals who are indigenous to the local community will provide you with an extensive personal and familial network from which to draw potential gatekeepers.

- It is important to identify gatekeepers from diverse positions in the social structure of the community.
Using Other Community Gatekeepers

- Gang Members
- Personal Contacts
- Relatives of Gang Members
- Previous Clients
Recognize the Signs

- Gangs and gang related activities impact everyone in the community. Gang members communicate in many different ways:
  - Speech is the most obvious; however, gang members also make use of nonverbal methods of exchanging thoughts. Graffiti, hand signs, colors, and tattoos are indicators of gang affiliation.
  - Gang members have their own language, which contains phrases, hand signs, tattoos, markings, and graffiti.
Recognize the Signs

These often overlap. As an outsider, you may not recognize them right away. It is critical you understand the reasons for joining a gang and recognize the signs of gang involvement.

General signs:
- Admits membership
- Change of behavior/defiant behavior
- Grades drop/truancy
- New friends
- Calls from unknown people
- Unexplained money and jewelry
- Slang
- Obsession with colors/sports apparel
- Flashing signs
- Graffiti on books and walls
- Nicknames and street names
- Evidence of drug use

Source: www.njgangfree.org
Thank You