

Multidisciplinary Gang Intervention Teams

by Michelle Arciaga

Introduction

Gang membership is again on the rise in many communities and with it, corresponding levels of crime and violence. Professionals dealing with gangs are seeking alternatives to traditional “hook ‘em and book ‘em” approaches. Some communities are implementing multidisciplinary teams to intervene with gang members and implement targeted suppression strategies. These teams involve agency personnel from different fields who share information, develop individualized intervention plans for gang-involved youth and young adults, and collaborate on a variety of strategies. These teams can increase the effectiveness of individual agency efforts, reduce duplication of services, increase access to needed services, and ensure that gang members are held accountable for their actions.

This bulletin overviews lessons learned during the implementation of team-based approaches such as the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s Comprehensive Gang Model and Gang Reduction Program in cities around the United States.

Goals of Team-Based Gang Intervention

At the core of team-based intervention are the following key issues:

- Each gang member is a unique individual who joined the gang for unique reasons and who needs an individualized response.
- Each gang member affects (and is affected by) multiple domains such as family, neighborhood, school, and peers.
- Gang members often experience uncoordinated multiple-agency involvement and are high-end users of services.
- Gang members frequently encounter barriers to needed services.

These fundamental issues about gang intervention are research-based and underlie the majority of the work performed in team-based intervention. In general, research suggests that a relatively small number of gang members are responsible for the majority of gang-

related crime and violence in the community. In most cases, this core group of gang members becomes the focus of the team’s efforts. Because gang members often receive services simultaneously from multiple agencies, the team facilitates information-sharing and collaboration among these agencies. In many instances, gang members have had negative experiences dealing with the very agencies that are designed to offer assistance. The team-based approach helps ensure that all agencies working with these clients have a common goal and shared strategies for each client.

Short-term goals for the team include:

- Creating individualized case management plans for gang members participating in the program.
- Engaging gang members in direct services to address their specific needs.
- Working together to dismantle or surmount barriers to crucial services.
- Holding gang members accountable for negative behaviors.

The team deals with gang-involved clients as individuals, addressing their individual circumstances and sharing information across professional boundaries. The team identifies each client’s specific goals to hook the client into receiving services, while simultaneously addressing social deficits and negative behaviors on which the client may be reluctant to work. Additionally, the team works to identify and eliminate barriers that might keep the client from accessing needed services.

Long-term goals for the team include:

- Assisting gang members in transitioning out of the gang lifestyle.
- Improving the effectiveness of agencies serving gang-involved clients.
- Reducing overall gang-related crime in the community.

This team approach helps gang-involved clients leave gangs and facilitates changes within the community. As a result of increased collaboration and shared information from the team process, participating agencies can improve their effectiveness and avoid duplication of services. But the team also seeks to achieve a much

larger goal. By identifying and providing concentrated services to those within the gang culture, the team seeks to improve the quality of life for all residents of the community, thus reducing gang crime and improving community safety. Ultimately, the goal is to create systemic and communitywide change that will reduce overall gang involvement and criminality.

Laying the Foundation

The first step in creating the infrastructure for the team is to identify agencies that are involved in serving or interacting with gang members and gain their participation. These agencies include law enforcement, education/schools, probation and/or parole officials, the courts (juvenile and adult), prosecutors, social service agencies, youth-serving agencies, and grassroots community agencies. Each of these partners plays a crucial role in working with gang-involved clients. Without their participation, the team's ability to address gang-involved clients will be hampered. The leaders of these key agencies must be convened to ascertain their willingness to assign staff members to the multidisciplinary team. The leaders should also remain involved in a policy-making capacity as the "executive committee." Through memoranda of understanding, they may wish to formally commit in writing to their roles, along with the types of participation they will provide.

Once the key agencies have convened to create the multidisciplinary team, they must come to consensus on the team's planned goals and mission. A logical starting point is to engage in some type of assessment to determine the level, extent, and impact of gangs in the community. Because gang members tend to have a wide range of impacts at home, in school, in the neighborhood, and with peers, it is important to ensure that issues that may be connected to gang involvement in the community are identified. These might include language barriers, a history of low educational attainment in the community, a high percentage of single-parent homes, two-parent homes made up of the working poor, a high level of substance abuse, availability of drugs and weapons, and many other possible issues. It is recommended that prior to implementing gang programs, communities conduct a comprehensive assessment of local gang problems. An excellent guide for this process is "Addressing Community Gang Problems," from the National Youth Gang Center online at <http://www.iir.com/nygc/acgp/default.htm>.

The executive committee should develop goals for the team to accomplish and, based on these goals, develop criteria for the types of clients that will be served by the team. These criteria should be used to screen and target gang members to receive services. A guide to planning for and implementing this team approach, including program goals and screening criteria, can be found in "Planning for Implementation," from the

National Youth Gang Center online at <http://www.iir.com/nygc/acgp/implementation.htm>.

Sample screening criteria might include:

- Age/race/ethnicity
- Gender
- Social factors (gang members from the same family, history of school problems, etc.)
- Threshold level of criminal history
- Specific gang affiliation
- Place of residence

For instance, the target population for this team-based approach might be 15- to 24-year-olds, residing in a particular section of town, affiliated with X, Y, or Z gangs, with a history of weapons possession.

To ensure that the team's efforts accomplish the greatest effect, the team should strictly adhere to these criteria, and ongoing crime and client data should be collected and analyzed to determine whether adjustments should be made to the screening criteria.

Once the goals and criteria for the team have been established, the executive committee can begin to create the team itself.

Structuring the Multidisciplinary Team

Once the foundation for the team has been laid, it is important that key agencies begin appointing representatives to serve on the team and meet on a regular basis (weekly or biweekly). These representatives need to serve on the team long enough to cement relationships (i.e., a minimum of two years) and to enable individual representatives to gain expertise in working together. A typical multidisciplinary team is illustrated below:



Selecting Team Members

Ideally, key agencies should select team members who:

- Have experience in working with high-risk and gang-involved youth. This is one of the most important criteria in selecting team members. The emphasis for the team (as discussed in this bulletin) is on active gang members. Potential team members who would prefer to work with youth representing little or no risk are probably not appropriate.
- Are willing, interested, and able to work within a team setting.
- Are open to new ways of collaborating and interacting with different disciplines to achieve a common mission.
- Are committed to providing intervention options to youth and to holding youth accountable for negative and/or dangerous behaviors.

Because of the key roles they play, personnel assigned from law enforcement and outreach agencies must have specific qualifications. Law enforcement team members should:

- Be familiar with gang dynamics and activities in the target area.
- Have a plan to interact and maintain liaison with other police department units/members who interact with gang members or their families.
- Be willing to work with other disciplines and respect what each discipline brings to the team's activities with clients.
- Understand and value intervention efforts; complementary role with suppression.
- Understand the long-term benefits of collaborative teamwork.

If outreach workers are utilized on the team, they should:

- Be familiar with the target population. Ideally, the outreach worker(s) will share a common ethnicity with clients. If the majority of clients are likely to have language barriers (based on assessment data), the outreach worker(s) should be bilingual.
- Be familiar with the community/neighborhoods targeted for team-based gang intervention.
- Be comfortable working with gang members and communicating with them in uncontrolled settings in the community.
- Be willing to serve as role models for clients, modeling prosocial behaviors in their own lives and being law-abiding and ethical.
- Demonstrate maturity and common sense, since

they will be thrust into potentially dangerous and explosive situations.

- Be willing to work with the team to address and hold clients accountable for negative behaviors through verbal counseling and by supporting other agency sanctions.
- Always share information when it involves a possible threat to the safety of the client, the community, or other team members.

It is extremely important that reputable individuals and agencies serve in the outreach role. These individuals must have no current gang ties, current gang involvement, or other types of recent criminal involvement.

Formalize Information-Sharing Protocols

Prior to accepting clients, the team members must formalize protocols for information sharing at the team level. Because specific agency staff may be restricted in the types of information they can share, it is important that team members know and understand these limits. In some cases, the executive committee may require team members to sign confidentiality waivers detailing the types of information that will be shared, along with the ways that confidential client information will be safeguarded. These parameters can also be set through a memorandum of understanding determined at the executive committee level.

First Steps With Clients

Referral/Screening

As discussed earlier, the screening criteria are set by the executive committee, based on the goals of the key agencies. When the team is getting started, it is important that team members create a protocol for screening and assessing new clients. Which agencies will be making referrals? Will a referral form be created? If so, what client information will it include? How will referring agencies be made aware of the screening criteria? How will the team utilize the screening criteria in selecting appropriate clients? It is recommended that referring agencies present information about prospective clients to the team, outlining how each client meets the screening criteria. The team members can then come to consensus about whether a client is suitable for the program.

Client Consent

Because the information shared across agency boundaries in this type of team-based intervention approach may be sensitive and potentially damaging to a client, it is important for team members to ensure that they can legally serve the client. The client himself (if he is of age), his parent/guardian, and/or a state-appointed legal guardian must consent to the sharing of the client's information and to the provision of services by the team.

Needs Assessment

Finally, someone within the team must take responsibility for assessing the client's needs before the team develops a case management plan and then for reporting on the client's needs to the group. The following factors need to be assessed before delivering services to the client:

- The client's future goals, abilities, talents, and desires.
- Family situation and structure.
- Gang involvement of family members.
- Other family issues that may affect the client's gang involvement.
- Criminal history.
- Gang history (and gang affiliation).
- School history, including special issues such as learning disabilities or a history of behavioral problems.
- Gang climate in the client's neighborhood.
- Substance abuse or mental health issues.
- History of abuse or neglect.
- Client's employment history and skill levels.
- Special circumstances, such as a client who is a teen parent.
- Agencies that are currently serving the client.
- Possible safety issues involving the client.
- Current needs assessments from any of the team agencies.
- Court requirements such as community service hours and restitution.

Some of these factors may have played a role in the client's decision to join a gang and may become an impetus that can motivate or assist him in transitioning out of gangs. It is important that the team focus on each of these areas, as needed, when developing a plan to intervene with the client.

Case Management of Gang-Involved Client

The client has been identified as appropriate for services and has consented to participate. A needs assessment has been conducted. What should the team do next?

Creating an Intervention Plan

The client's case information from the needs assessment is shared with team members during regularly scheduled meetings. The team members discuss possible methods of addressing the client's core needs and then come to consensus on the prioritization of these efforts.

Areas to consider:

- Is the family supportive of the youth's efforts to change, or are they contributing to the client's difficulties? Are the siblings or parents gang-involved? What actions are needed from the family? What support services may be required to assist the family in addressing the youth's gang involvement and any related issues?
- Is the client currently attending school? What type of educational setting is most appropriate for this client? What educational services are available in the area? What are possible pros and cons of each of these options? Which activities will the team pursue with this client?
- Does the client have untreated substance abuse or mental health issues? What services does the client need? What methods can be used to motivate the client to participate in programming?
- Is the client court-involved? Does he have pending charges? Does he have gang-specific conditions of probation or parole? Could some aspects of the intervention plan be court-ordered? What role can probation or parole play in holding the client accountable for following through with intervention activities? What role can the team play in helping the client comply with court-ordered requirements?
- Is the client engaged in ongoing criminal activity? Does he pose a threat to the community? How will this be addressed?
- Does the client wish to seek employment? If so, what type? Does the client have any unaddressed issues that will hinder work success? What will the team do to address employment prospects for the client?

The intervention plan should address all relevant issues, be documented, and be reviewed and/or updated on a regular basis (every 30 to 90 days depending upon the client's situation).

Take into account the client's current capacity

When creating an individualized case management plan, the team should take the client's current capacity into consideration and address issues on a prioritized, step-by-step basis that proceeds in a logical fashion. For instance, if the client has serious substance abuse issues but states that one of his priorities is to gain employment, the team must work with the client's drug abuse before placing him in a job. Similarly, if the youth has behavioral issues that have kept him chronically in trouble at school, the team must address these issues before mainstreaming the client into a school setting. Safety must be the top priority. If the client is engaged in ongoing dangerous criminal activity, the focus of the team must shift to suppression, and the team's law enforcement members should take the lead in addressing

the client's activities. It is to no one's benefit, including the client's, to leave a client at large in the community if he poses a threat to himself and others.

Assign responsibility for follow-up to members of the team

One of the key benefits of the team-based approach to intervention is that it divides the caseload of clients who are often heavy consumers of services and heavily involved in the criminal justice system, and who have frequent contacts with law enforcement. Each team member plays a specific role in ensuring that the client is able to access services through the agency and that the team is kept apprised of the client's progress (or lack thereof). For instance, school representatives might ensure that the client is assessed for learning disabilities if team members suspect a problem. The school representatives are also responsible for reporting to the team on the client's progress, attendance, and any behavioral issues. The same holds true for other agencies. Law enforcement team members should share information on gang activity and trends in the community, as well as criminal activities of targeted clients. Law enforcement officers also interact with clients in the community, not only to arrest them for criminal offenses and to enforce criminal statutes but also to provide positive feedback when possible.

Team members must be prepared to play multiple roles. They must encourage the client's positive efforts while simultaneously holding the client accountable for negative behaviors and protecting the community and the client himself from harm. They must share vital information with agencies that are affected by both the client's positive progress and negative behaviors.

Specific Roles Played by Team Members

Each member of the team brings to the table specific skills, access to information, resources for clients, and other professional attributes. The following components of a team-based gang intervention reflect the roles team members play.

Education

- Ensure client access to educational services.
- Perform educational evaluations as needed.
- Create individual educational plans as mandated by the district.
- Provide feedback on intervention plans.
- Make recommendations for appropriate educational placements.
- Leverage services provided by schools, including counseling or mental health, as needed.
- Provide the team with information on clients' performance, attendance, and behavior.

- Hold clients accountable to required standards of behavior in the school setting.
- Facilitate school access by outreach workers.

Law Enforcement

- Report to the team on gang climate and trends affecting the area and/or clients being served.
- Provide input on issues that may affect intervention with clients (e.g., safety risk, association with known gang members, suspected drug-trafficking, witness/victim/perpetrator in a violent crime).
- Provide information on criminal involvement by current clients.
- Brief the team on safety issues.
- Share information with key partners regarding gang incidents that may spawn retaliations or other safety risks.
- Hold clients accountable in the community, assessing appropriate responses depending on the level and severity of each client's behavior.
- Provide clients with positive feedback regarding their positive efforts.

Probation/Parole

- Recommend/enforce conditions of probation that take clients' gang affiliations into consideration.
- Access services available through the justice system to address clients' needs (e.g., substance abuse assessment and treatment).
- Provide feedback on intervention plans.
- Work in conjunction with law enforcement to conduct home visits and/or hold clients accountable to the conditions of probation/parole.
- Share information on each client's court status with the rest of the team.
- Hold clients accountable for accomplishing educational/employment goals.

Social Services

- Provide a link to services for program clients.
- Conduct assessments (mental health/substance abuse) as needed.
- Provide feedback on intervention plans.
- Access services to address family issues (counseling, crisis management, abuse/neglect issues, and parental skills training).
- Hold clients accountable for completing services.
- Share information on clients' progress with the team.

Outreach

In some cases, team-based gang intervention approaches include an outreach component. This role may be played by a contracting agency that is already working at the grassroots level in the community or by outreach personnel working for one of the key agencies. The goal of outreach is to identify and engage clients who may be difficult for mainstream organizations to reach. Outreach workers in this type of team-based approach:

- Work directly with clients in gang-intensive settings to assist them in identifying and accomplishing goals.
- Provide further information on the gang climate in affected neighborhoods and causal relationships/factors.
- Recruit gang-involved individuals.
- Encourage prosocial behavior.
- Assist program clients in accessing services.
- Report to the team on each client's progress, interests, and goals.
- Provide feedback on intervention plans.

Information-Sharing Protocols

Information is shared within the team for specific reasons. First, safety is paramount. All participating team members have an obligation to share information when there is a risk of harm to clients, other team members, or community members. This information should be shared with the knowledge that it will be acted on by team members to protect public safety. Furthermore, clients in these programs must be briefed so they understand that team members have an obligation to report certain types of information. For example, if a team member from a social services agency receives information from a client that members of that client's gang plan to shoot a rival gang, the team member needs to share this information with the team. However, law enforcement team members who receive this information must protect the other team members and the clients. Because law enforcement team members may receive information from grassroots agency personnel or outreach workers, they also must avoid jeopardizing the safety of these workers. Thus, great care should be taken in dealing with such scenarios.

Team members also should understand that information about clients is shared to help clients, not to penalize them. Potentially damaging or embarrassing information about a client must be closely guarded. For instance, a school representative who hears information about a client's family situation should not reveal this information to others at the school who have no reason to receive this information. A school should not use information about a client's gang involvement to justify expelling or excluding the client from school.

Team-based gang intervention personnel must walk a fine line between revealing information that may pose a safety risk to clients, the community as a whole, and other team members, and protecting information that might handicap a client in his efforts to change his lifestyle. Team members also need to be trained in mandatory reporting issues specific to their states or regions.

New members of the intervention team must be briefed prior to serving on the team on the requirements and expectations of other team members. The team may wish to create confidentiality agreements that commit each team member to protecting client information.

Adapting the Team-Based Approach

Team-based gang intervention was originally developed to serve communities heavily affected by gangs and gang-related violence. This approach seems to be most effective if it targets a manageably sized segment of a community with a population of no more than 60,000–80,000. Because of the concentrated, manpower-intensive nature of the services provided by the team, it is generally cost-prohibitive to use this approach for a low-level gang problem.

However, an intervention team can be implemented with minimal additional funds outside an existing agency budget by identifying agencies with personnel who are already serving gang-involved clients. In many cases, communities that have implemented a team-based intervention approach have found that such personnel are especially effective in working with these clients and are able to create a noticeable impact.

The team-based approach can also be implemented on a smaller scale in, for instance, a school setting, using the same model: conducting an assessment, developing screening criteria, and convening personnel from agencies that are already serving students who attend the school. In this case, personnel might meet biweekly to discuss the clients' progress and to develop strategies to address their individual needs.

Further, the team-based intervention approach lends itself to targeted prevention efforts, where prospective clients are screened on the basis of risk factors related to gang-joining (especially cumulative risk factors and risk factors in multiple domains) and targeted for intensive team-based case management. Only the required personnel participating in the team would change; the concept would remain essentially the same. Again, the key is to identify clients who closely fit the mission of the group, whether the goal is to increase school safety or to prevent gang-joining among highly at-risk youths. ■

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Resources

Addressing Community Gang Problems:
<http://www.iir.com/nygc/acgp/>

A Comprehensive Approach to Youth Gangs:
<http://www.iir.com/nygc/PublicationLinks.htm#CAYG>

The Comprehensive Community-Wide Approach to Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression: http://www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojdp/summary_2000_8/comprehensive.html#communitywidePrograms

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