

**Gang Summit Conference
Toronto
March 25, 2010**

A Comprehensive, Community-Wide Approach to the Youth-Gang Problem

Irving A. Spergel

I'm very pleased to be at the Gang Summit—a conference of highly dedicated and experienced workers dealing with the complicated youth-gang problem. I appreciate President Chettleburgh's invitation to speak, and his most generous—and, I'm afraid, overly-flattering—descriptions of me. My claim to fame may be that I have been around a very long time—as a street worker, project developer, teacher and researcher—trying to deal effectively with the youth-gang problem.

For me, the gang problem is comprised of two key elements: what youth-gang members do, and what social institutions or organizations do or do not do. Both of these complex components are usefully addressed in the Comprehensive, Community-Wide Approach to Gang Prevention, Intervention and Suppression Program model. Such programs were developed and tested in Little Village, Chicago, Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, Mesa and Tucson, Arizona, Riverside, California and San Antonio, Texas. Each of these six outreach programs lasted four, five, or more years. The model is now a primary initiative of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Copyright©2010 by Irving A. Spergel

What I would like to do in the next 40 or 45 minutes is:

1. briefly describe key elements of the comprehensive model;
2. alert you to some of the challenges of model implementation which might be useful in Canada's approach to its emerging and chronic youth-gang problems;
3. and, finally, provide you with some recent research-evaluation findings of the six programs mentioned above.

The Model

The comprehensive gang-program model consists of three interrelated components:

program elements

strategies

implementation principles

Program Elements

Such a program needs to comprise a steering committee, lead-agency management, and an interagency street team including youth-outreach workers, law enforcement and probation, with the support of other justice-system, grassroots, social-agency, school, business, church, employment and training, and local key governmental personnel.

The Steering Committee has to engage the leadership of the community—including the mayor’s office, police and probation departments, other public agencies, local schools, grassroots and community-based organizations—in a comprehensive effort consisting of gang-problem recognition and assessment, strategy development, targeting the right youth, acquisition of resources, program implementation, and ongoing moral and political support for the program. Front-line collaboration of the staffs of these organizations must be developed by the lead agency, in collaboration with the steering committee.

Lead-Agency Management. A lead agency needs to be selected. Sometimes it could be a law-enforcement agency. The function of the lead agency is to develop and coordinate the various elements of the program in order to achieve the purposes of the model. Success depends on the lead agency’s degree of commitment to the approach, which consists of outreach and broad, well-balanced social services and community participation—as well as suppression that emphasizes graduated social control—targeted to delinquent and highly-at-risk gang youth. There needs to be special attention to those youth who are violent or potentially violent, as well as those gang youth engaged in drug use-and-selling, and other serious criminal activities.

An Interagency Street Team needs to be developed, comprising direct-service personnel (police, probation, outreach youth workers—including former gang influentials—backed by school personnel and community organizers, treatment workers and parole officers) in collaborative interaction with each other in the identification and contact of targeted gangs and gang youth for the purposes of prevention, intervention and control of youth-gang antisocial behaviors. The team should be in community-based, outreach communication with gang

members, their families, and local neighborhood groups and residents. It operates during day-time hours, and especially during evenings, late-night hours, on weekends and during crisis periods.

The outreach youth worker(s) on the team has an important role to play. His distinctive asset is that he still knows active gang youth in the neighborhood, and is sensitive to their needs and problems—in individual, local gang-structural, and cultural terms. Indigenous, former-gang-member outreach youth workers can provide ready access to youth-gang members and their families, define the gang problem, and relate to families and established local-community sectors. They may not know how best to utilize existing institutional resources to assist gang youth with their problems, or sometimes even how best to control gang-youth delinquent behaviors. A professional, trained outreach youth worker should also be part of the team, to guide and assist with access to established agency resources.

Criminal Justice Participation. Police (especially from the gang unit) as well as juvenile and adult probation and a variety of back-up personnel must understand the nature and scope of youth-gang crime in the target area, and participate appropriately in street-team efforts. While police and probation are especially concerned with the day-to-day social control and suppression of activities of targeted youth, who are both delinquent and gang-involved, they must be careful not to label as gang members those youth in the socially marginal sectors of the community who are not at high risk for gang involvement, or not engaged in gang-related delinquency. Judicial authority, prosecution, detention and other justice-system elements must protect the community, and also support the street team, primarily through graduated sanctions that facilitate the youth's social development and rehabilitation.

Police and probation administrators must encourage, and require, street-team officers to provide and exchange information and advice to their units of criminal justice, as well as collaborate with other members of the street team—especially the outreach youth workers—in an integrated social-control and social-development approach, particularly in respect to delinquent or criminal gang youth. The police have a special responsibility to address the youth-gang problem in a balanced and rational a way, with due regard for long-term as well as short-term youth-developmental effects and relationships with the local community, including sensitivity to racial/ethnic issues, family problems and concerns, political, cultural and economic pressures, and conflicting local-community grassroots interests.

Grassroots and Local Agency Involvement

The grassroots and local-community organizations must be involved. They comprise family, neighborhood groups, block clubs, local political associations and governmental agencies, citizen groups, churches, and other local organizations whose members tend to live in and interact on a sustained basis with residents, including gang youth. Established agencies may often implement program policies (affecting the lives of the local residents) which are based primarily on the values and interests of the middle-class community or the power structure of the city at large. Established agencies usually control access to social, economic, political, educational and job resources. Local grassroots organizations in gang-problem communities may be more likely to focus on the expressed needs of their lower-class, minority, marginalized populations. A gang-problem part of a community is often characterized not only by lack of resources, but by insufficient connection, interdependence and cooperative relationships between

established agencies and grassroots organizations. A substantial number of youth, especially adolescent gang males, do not have access to social capital (i.e., established social/institutional relationships) in such communities; and such connections have to be made.

Social Services. The street team provides front-line, initial contacts and social services to gang-involved and gang-at-risk youth. The outreach youth worker and other team members, including the police, probation, the school teacher or disciplinarian, the neighborhood organizer and treatment worker, as well as lead-agency staff—with the aid of steering-committee members—are collectively responsible for the assessment of needs, planning of intervention, and support. Targeted program youth may require crisis intervention, referral for school, employment, alcohol- and drug-use problems, personal-development issues, and gang-related crises, as well as prevention and control of violence and gang-related issues. Families of targeted youth, including younger at-risk siblings, may need assistance with education, health care, counseling, family dysfunction, and unemployment, immigration, racism and other problems which directly and indirectly affect gang youth.

School Participation. Principals, teachers, and disciplinarians of public, parochial, and alternative schools are key components of the comprehensive program. Schools, already overwhelmed with a range of educational, resource and social problems, often are reluctant to deal with the gang problem other than to transfer, suspend, or expel troublesome gang youth. The street team should participate as directly as possible in the life of the school, and assist school staff in addressing gang-related issues, including better targeting of gang youth for special educational opportunities and support. The steering committee and lead-agency administration

may have to urge changes in school administrative policy, e.g., modification of extreme or unrealistic “zero-tolerance” practices that further alienate gang-involved and at-risk youth from accepting and contributing to a positive school environment and educational experience.

Special tutorial assistance and collaborative arrangements with social agencies, and therapeutic and job-development programs may assist gang youth to remain in school, and make better use of educational opportunities. If the youth is referred to an alternative school, a high-quality educational program, ideally with therapeutic orientation and effective controls, should be provided. Outreach youth workers have a special responsibility both to help program youth make the best possible use of available learning and training opportunities, and to assist school staff to better understand and deal with pressures on program youth from gang-related situations and crises arising both inside and outside the school.

Employment and Training. Obtaining a job is critical to the transition of the target adolescent youth and young adult from the gang to a legitimate and personally satisfying adult role. Getting and holding a full-time job indicates that older gang youth no longer need the gang, nor have the time and motivation to associate with gang members and participate in gang activities. Job and work-skills training provide a legitimate and satisfying basis for leaving the gang. Education and job development can be integrated through creative arrangements between schools, businesses and industry.

The youth worker and the job developer should be closely related to each other in motivating the gang youth to participate in training programs and obtain a job, and in sustaining him on the job once employed. Neighborhood residents, former gang members, and the youth’s family may also be sources of information about hiring opportunities, aid in referrals for jobs,

and pressure youth to stay in the job market. Wives and steady girlfriends also play an important part in urging the gang youth to obtain and stay on the job. The lead agency and steering committee may have to advocate for the provision of special government support for financial incentives to enable employers to hire gang youth.

Strategies

The comprehensive gang-program model is multi-faceted, involving multi-layered interacting strategies of the steering committee, the lead agency, and the outreach team, addressed to individual youth, family members, gang peers, law enforcement, social agencies, business and labor organizations, schools, faith-based organizations, local government leaders, funding agencies, grassroots groups, and higher-education organizations. The program should be based on causal theory, research findings, and prior practice experience. The gang problem is systemic. It is usually a response to rapid social change and population movement, lack of social-development opportunities, poverty, institutional racism—and sometimes the presence of criminal organizations and available opportunities for illicit activities—in marginal communities. It is also a function of the fragmentation and inadequacy of existing agency approaches to the evolving or developed gang problem within, and especially across, multiple organizations.

I would like briefly to emphasize **program process**, and discuss five core, interacting **strategies** related to the structure I have proposed.

Community Mobilization

The steering committee and lead agency must, at some level, involve key established organizations in advising on problem-definition, problem analysis, proposed policies, action planning, and program measures to be undertaken. This is not an easy process to carry out. The lead agency, along with the steering committee, must develop and maintain interagency and community-group communication, and facilitate cooperative relationships. The lead agency takes special responsibility for aiding agency administrators and community-group leaders to bridge organizational boundaries, overcome social distance, resolve inter-organizational conflicts, and get the steering committee to take collective ownership of the comprehensive program initiative, with support from local government leaders. A great deal of persistence and sensitivity to the interactions of different neighborhood cultures, varied community-group interests and conflicts, and the needs of gang youth are required. Moral and financial support from outside of the neighborhood and the city is also essential.

Social Intervention

Social services should focus simultaneously on serving the interests and needs of targeted youth and their families, protecting community citizens (including other gang youth) from threat and injury, enforcing the law, and, increasingly, assuring the linkage of youth to social, treatment, educational and employment opportunities. The street team—especially the youth outreach workers, but also to some extent the team police—must reach out to gang youth (and youth highly at risk for gang involvement) in their local contexts, providing appropriate prevention, intervention and socialized-control services. Different targeted youth should be provided with different patterns and dosages of prevention activities, social control, intervention

services, and opportunities—usually in highly-coordinated fashion. Coordinated street-team skill is required in the appropriate use of group and community structures and gang-situational processes, particularly at times of crisis, when violent and serious criminal behavior has occurred, or is likely to occur. Worker relationships and activities, and agency events and structures which contribute to youth participating in the gang life should be avoided.

Provision of Social Opportunities

The members of the steering committee need to provide sustained access to opportunity systems in their own and in other organizations that can mainstream program youth into legitimate society. In the course of providing and sustaining opportunities, appropriate arrangements have to be made to avoid segregating gang youth. The street team (especially the outreach youth worker) can often mediate relationships with and modify exclusionary policies and practices of agency staff, so that target youth can make better use of educational and training programs and find jobs. Social-control and social-support tactics may have to be carefully integrated in this process. In addition, the steering committee and lead agency must take responsibility for urging and facilitating legislation, and inducing businesses, industries, and government agencies to provide improved access to education, training and job opportunities for lower-income and minority youth (including gang youth)—and especially **not** excluding youth who may already have criminal records.

Suppression/Social Control

At the same time, the street team must hold gang youth accountable for their behavior. This is integral to a comprehensive approach to the youth-gang problem. Highly-targeted sweeps, interdictions, warnings, and/or arrests by police team members may be called for and are appropriate when gang youth are about to engage in (or are actually engaged in) criminal acts. The specific nature of suppression/social control must be based not only on the offense or violation of the law, but on understanding the gang youth's behavior in his social context; and also on respect for youth, the scope of particular agency mission, and on discretion in the sensitive and balanced use of suppression tactics—with focus on gang youth involved in, or about to be involved in delinquent behavior. Information-sharing among all team members is required, especially about potential or actual serious violent criminal acts by gang members. Suppression/social control involves outreach youth workers making sure that gang youth show up for required probation, parole and court appearances. It may involve the street team organizing neighbors to support the program, patrol their neighborhoods, and encouraging them to report criminal acts to the police. Members of the street team must also facilitate the protection and defense of gang youth from false accusation, arrest and prosecution, illegal harassment, and/or brutal treatment by law-enforcement personnel who are not members of the street team.

A substantial time period—as much as six months—may be required for street-team members to mutually understand and respect each other's different functions, and come to work together in effective fashion. A key operational consensus first develops based on the issue of preventing and controlling gang and gang-member violence. The regular presence and interaction of street-team members at their staff meetings also facilitates effective collaboration

and relationships. Suppression, along with social intervention, opportunities-provision, and relevant organizational change must come to be viewed as part of interrelated and interdependent community-building and efficient and effective law-enforcement processes focused on reducing gang crime.

Organizational Change and Development

Modified policy and practice underlie the creation and sustaining of the foregoing strategies of the comprehensive gang program. Local-agency and community-wide policies and procedures must be developed, coordinated and/or changed in order to reduce gang crime, while at the same time meeting the social needs of gang youth. Administrative arrangements for special training and close supervision of staff should be established (particularly for youth-outreach and law-enforcement workers) in order that they better understand the nature of the gang problem, and facilitate appropriate changes in policy and practice. Special arrangements for data sharing must evolve within and across agencies, as well as within the street team. For example, not all types of data about youth-gang members and their activities have to be fully shared by street-team members; only those that significantly impact the achievement of key program objectives and goals. Finally, data systems and case-management procedures should be established so that contacts and services provided by members of the street team are documented and monitored by administrative staff, as well as the steering committee, not only for effective targeting and ongoing assessment of program progress, but to periodically measure program quality and outcome effects.

Implementation Principles

The principles that guide the implementation of these strategies are targeting, balancing strategies, intensity of worker efforts, continuity, and commitment to the model.

Targeting

A careful assessment of the gang problem from a street-based as well as an agency-based perspective is necessary to determine which gangs and gang members are at highest risk for, or most involved in, serious crime (including violence and drug selling); where and when the gang offenses are being committed; and what specific gang and community situations and organizational policies and practices are critical to understanding and addressing the specifics of the problem. It is important initially not only to regard the gang problem as systemic, and understand its causes, but to focus on the more serious aspects of the problem at the street level. Hardcore youth, including key gang leaders and influentials, should not only be a critical focus of attention; it may be necessary to develop access through them to other youth highly at risk of gang membership.

Balancing Strategies

Once the specific gang-behavioral problem(s), target area(s), target gang youth, and policies and practices of relevant institutions and agencies are identified, a set of balanced strategies must be considered and operationalized. Different levels of the problem usually exist among gang youth and gangs in the same gang-problem community. Dominance of one particular strategy, e.g., prevention, street intervention or suppression in regard to planning or

program development, may not be appropriate. One single type or set of program services and suppression/control activities may not be suitable in a gang-problem community. Gangs and their members have varying interests and commitments to gang activity, and varying degrees of troublesome personal problems in a gang-crime community over time. Targeting hardcore gang youth or young adults for suppression only, younger gang youth for recreational services only, or “creaming” selected peripheral gang youth for jobs may be ineffective in addressing the varied, complex and interacting characteristics of the gang problem. An appropriate mix, interaction, and dosage of multiple strategies is required for different categories of program youth in a particular community, at different times and in different circumstances.

Types and Intensity of Worker Contacts and Services

Type and intensity refers to the purpose, amount and frequency of particular worker contacts, and services, and the mix of strategies that need to be carried out for different categories of youth. A balance of strategies, the presence of different types of workers, coordination of worker contacts, and the specific nature of services and controls need to be provided. Intensity also refers to the frequency and length of contact workers have with different types of gang youth. In general, the higher the dosage of worker services/contacts with clearly gang-involved, delinquent youth, the greater the likelihood of the reduction of the youth’s gang-related delinquent activity. On the other hand, lower dosages and the absence of cross-strategy contacts may be better for certain kinds of youth, particularly those with only peripheral gang relationships.

Continuity of Services/Contacts

Gang youth are often distrustful of adult interest, and may develop exploitive relationships with them. It may take a good deal of time for street-team workers to develop a positive, productive (healing and controlling) working relationship with certain troubled and troublesome gang youth. The same worker or the same combination of workers providing services and contacts for a substantial period of time may be influential in determining positive outcome for youth. Continuity of regular, personalized, dependable services and contacts is important, particularly for the more gang-delinquent youth, who may have special needs for social support and control, and for building generalized trusting and civil relationships with adults. An accessible and responsive worker whom the youth trusts respects and needs is critically important.

Commitment

The comprehensive, gang-program model challenges existing agency traditions, procedures, and professional worker norms. The team worker may have to develop nuanced values, and newer knowledge and skills in dealing with gangs, gang youth, types of agencies and community groups he is ordinarily not familiar with. Commitment to the model creates extra work, pressure and even distress for both program administrators and workers during program-transition and gang-crisis periods. Community leadership as well as program-operator commitment to the model's promise and achievement does not come quickly or easily. Steering-committee members and program administrators have to persevere in their commitment to the model, and support of the program during the inevitable frustrations, crises and public-relationship problems that develop.

Research Findings

We still do not know—based on good evidence—what models or approaches to the youth-gang problem—on an outreach, community-wide basis—are effective. There have been few quasi-experimental program evaluations; they are complex, expensive, and very difficult to accomplish.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, our research team at the University of Chicago completed separate evaluations of the comprehensive, community-wide gang prevention, intervention and suppression model for each of the six program sites mentioned above. Three of the sites implemented their programs reasonably well; three of the sites did not. In this first set of evaluations, conducted on a separate-site basis, we matched program and comparison youth only on their pre-program exposure period, arrest records, and demographic information. In our second and current analysis, a more complex set of criteria for matching program and comparison youth is being used, aggregating data from the six sites.

In this brief discussion, I would like to give credit here to my colleague Kwai-Ming Wa, who was mainly responsible for the design and conduct of this second statistical analysis.

In this second analysis, we have selected a propensity-score matching statistical procedure to enable us to more precisely and complexly match program and comparison youth across sites. First, we identified 47 variables derived from three sets of program-youth data: pre-program police arrest records, Time-1 interviews, and Time-1 self-reports of offenses that would meaningfully estimate propensity scores, and which would make program and comparison

youth more equivalent across five of the six sites. The five significant matching factors that resulted from this propensity-scoring procedure were: youth's exposure to different criminal-justice agencies (police, juvenile probation, adult probation, juvenile detention, adult detention, juvenile corrections, adult corrections); pre-program-period total arrests; frequency of illicit drug use; gang-membership status; and youth's perception of the level of non-gang-related crime in his neighborhood. For Little Village youth, where the gang problem was most severe and chronic, factors of youth's pre-program-period total arrests and violence arrests were most significant.

In combining the six samples, we had 900 youth, mainly Latino males, ranging in age categories mostly from 14 to 19 years (but also some younger and some older youth and young adults). Approximately 90% of program and comparison youth self-reported they were either currently or very recently gang members. Our propensity-score-matched large sample was further divided into four samples: a *six-site* youth sample (with Little Village) (N=892); a *five-site* youth sample (without Little Village) (N=614); and a *six-site* (N=626) and *five-site* (N=484) youth sample, each excluding youth who had no arrest records in the pre-program and program period. Only 11.2% (N=98) of youth had no arrests in both periods.

The findings of this second set of analyses were similar to the first set of analyses, but even more positive in support of the comprehensive, community-wide approach. In the multivariate, or General Linear Modeling (GLM) analyses, program youth, compared to equivalent non-served comparison youth, reduced their felony violence arrests by 60% in the inclusive six-site sample; by 46% in the inclusive five-site sample; and, in the six-site sample analysis with only youth who had violence arrests either in the pre-program or program period, by **220%**, or more than twice the reductions for comparison youth. All of these differences were

highly statistically significant. Drug arrests were even more highly significantly reduced by program youth compared to non-served equivalent youth—3.4 times in the inclusive six-site sample. Violence and drug arrests for program youth were reduced, although not significantly, in the less-inclusive five-site sample (only program youth with arrests in the pre-program or program periods). In this five-site sample, property-crime arrests were also reduced significantly, but only by program youth with arrest records.

Program youth with more arrests generally did better in reducing arrests than youth with fewer or no arrests. Older youth, 19 and older, did better than younger youth in reducing violence arrests, but not drug arrests. Females generally did better than males in reducing arrests, except for drug arrests. There was little difference in changes in arrest patterns for youth of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, i.e., Latinos, African-Americans, Caucasians/Asians (although we had very few of the latter group in our samples.) There was also little difference in outcomes for youth who said that they were active gang members (49%), or former gang members (40%) or not gang members (11%). A very significant finding was that youth who were in the program longer did better than those who were in for shorter periods. Aging out of the gang structure and process was hastened significantly by the comprehensive gang-program approach.

Different Strategy Effects

We were also interested in what it was about these programs, particularly the strategies of workers in their contacts with youth, that made for the reduction of arrests during the program period. Workers such as outreach youth workers, case workers, case managers, teachers, and treatment and manpower personnel—preferably together—either emphasized social development

exclusively (i.e., social intervention and provision of opportunities); or they could emphasize interaction with suppression. It could be that one strategy was better than the other, at certain levels or frequencies of contact, at reducing different offenses or arrests for different kinds of program youth.

We found in our current analysis that a strategy of social development alone, at a low or moderate level, was more effective in reducing violence arrests, particularly for younger youth; but a combination (or interaction) of social intervention and suppression was more effective in reducing felony or misdemeanor violence arrests for youth (at different ages and who had prior violence arrests) who were provided with low, moderate, or even high frequencies of worker contacts. On the other hand, the strategy of social development alone was particularly more effective with youth at any age in reducing drug arrests, than was a combination or interaction of social-intervention and suppression strategies.

Also, the interaction of social-development and suppression, particularly at low or moderate (and sometimes high) levels, was effective in reducing property arrests—and total arrests—for older youth between 16 and 19 years of age. Most of these youth had been chronic offenders.

In other words, collaboration of social-development workers, especially with each other, appeared to be more effective in reducing arrests, particularly for younger youth engaged, or about to be engaged in violent behavior. Social-development contacts alone were especially effective in reducing drug-use and drug-selling arrests. However, the interaction of social-development and suppression strategies was more effective with chronic offenders and older youth than were social-development contacts alone, particularly for those youth with pre-program arrests for property crime.

We have not yet explored the differential effects of these strategies for males and females, for youth in the programs for longer and shorter periods, and for gang youth who might engage in a combination of criminal acts. The effectiveness of certain services, the mediating effects of school, jobs and family problems, and gang and peer relationships are yet to be examined. Also to be examined are how different types of agencies relate to each other, and contribute to positive change for gang youth.

Program research on what works with gang youth is complicated and difficult to carry out. Such research is very important, but remains largely unrecognized by policy-makers, program funders and operators, and even by social scientists, including criminal-justice researchers. They have to pay more attention to gang-program research evaluation. Otherwise, our gang-program policies and efforts will continue to be afflicted by myths, politics and wrong decisions; and, consequently, fail to address a problem we can far better prevent and manage than we do today.