

GANGS AMONG LATINOS IN THE U.S.

The Issue

It is estimated that in 2011 there were about 1.4 million gang members in the United States, a 40% increase from 2009.¹ Gangs are primarily comprised of adolescents under 18 (41%) and Latinos (50%).² The high rates of Latinos involved in gang activity is a result of various contributing factors such as low attainment of education, the environment in which they live, poverty, and culture. Considering that Latinos are the largest minority group in the U.S., it is important to better address these risk factors to effectively reduce this disparity among the Latino population.

Risk Factors

In the U.S., 1 in 4 Latinos live in a household with an income below of the federal poverty level. In 2013, 5.7 million Latinos younger than 18 lived in poverty, which represented 35.4% of all poor young population and implies the highest proportion by race/ethnic group. In addition, among the resident population aged 25 and older, only 37.5% of Latinos have at least some college or a two-year degree, compared to 42.6% of non-Hispanic blacks, 63.2% of non-Latino whites, and 70.9% of Asian descendent. Resident Latinos ages 18 to 24 represented 16.9% of overall enrollment in 2-4 year colleges (34.3% of college-aged Latinos were enrolled); while for the resident Latinos ages 25 and older represented 13.9% of overall enrollment in 2-4 year colleges (4.6% of this population was enrolled).³

Neighborhoods at-risk, in which many Latinos live, play a pivotal role in gang activity. Violent neighborhood conditions create an environment conducive to engaging in this activity, particularly among youth, who may consider gang involvement as a viable option for protection. This is especially of concern considering that due to lack of resources, recent migrants more commonly move into neighborhoods with prominent gang activity in both rural and urban areas. In both areas, population rates for Latinos and gang affiliations have been rising in the U.S.⁴ Gang involvement often leads to other risky and illegal behavior. It has been shown that gang-involved Latino adolescents are at high risk for drug use and start using at a younger age than their non-Latino counterparts.⁵⁽⁸⁾

The likelihood of being incarcerated varies over race and sex: for every 10 incarcerated white men, there are 64 black men and 26 hispanic men. Whereas for every 10 white incarcerated women, there are 29 black women and 15 hispanic women. The ratios of incarcerated men per woman by race are 2.9 for whites, 13.3 for hispanics, and 16.7 for blacks.⁶

Definition of Gangs

U.S. Department of Justice defines gang as “an association of three or more individuals [whose] purpose, in part, is to engage in criminal activity and the association uses violence or intimidation to further its criminal objectives.” Overall, street gangs are open about their activities, with two of their main aims being violence and defending their social spaces: “Large national street gangs pose the greatest threat because they smuggle, produce, transport, and distribute large quantities of illicit drugs throughout the country and are extremely violent”. There are spatial and locational characteristics that constitute a direct risk for the population: most of the gangs are street gangs (88%) and 54% the most violent/problematic street gangs are neighborhood-based.⁷ Even though gang affiliations range through social structures and races, minority gangs remain at the top of the list as the largest and the most active in the country, with notable examples being Latino gangs MS-13 and Latin Kings, and the African-American Crips.⁸

Latino Gang Involvement

Research has shown that Latino gangs often supply emotional support and financial protection, characteristics that are lacking in many of their members’ households.⁵ Even though Latino gangs began as small organizations that were highly disorganized, the 1980s saw the systemization of gang involvement in this population and an increase in members ages from 14-20 to 12-40 years old. The networks grew from a group of boys who shared a culture, customs, and language, to groups that have identifying symbols and colors, bestow monikers on their members, and practice initializing rituals,⁹ notably:

- Imprisonment and committing crimes gains intra-gang credibility and accounts for the spread of gang influence in the community.
- Being stabbed or shot in gang fights gives members “veteran” status, and these gang members begin to recruit new members and train them in gang-related criminal activities.

Transnational crime organizations are directly linked to US-based gangs: Los Zetas (Mexico) are connected to gangs such as: ALKQN, Bandidos MC, Bloods, La Raza XIV, Latin Kings or Mara Salvatrucha MS-13; whereas Cartel del Golfo (Mexico) is also related to ALKQN, Bloods, MS-13 as well as to Chicano Brothers or Raza Unida.⁷

Characteristics of Female Involvement

Females often assist male gang members in the following ways^{7,10}:

- Carry drugs and weapons and provide safe houses for contraband;

- Engage in prostitution;
- Engage in drug sales, vandalism, and credit card and identity theft.

Latina gangs are starting to evolve exclusive of the traditionally male-dominated Latino gangs. While the number of all-female gangs remains low, the role of women in gangs is evolving. Women are taking more active roles and gathering intelligence from other gangs.⁹

Addictions among Gang Members

- Gang membership facilitates drug use in those individuals who were already abusing drugs before becoming a member, and the vast majority of gang members in general use drugs.¹¹
- Drug use among high at-risk individuals is 15 years old for marijuana and 19 years old for cocaine, for alcohol the age is much younger at 12 years old—this substance is usually introduced by a family member.¹¹
- Drug using behavior among Latino gangs has its origins in the 1980s cocaine and crack trade.¹¹ Gang members continue to have significant involvement in the production and distribution of illicit drugs.¹

Conclusion

When analyzing the factors that contribute to gang activity, key points become prominent. First, these individuals have low educational achievement. Second, these individuals have traditionally come from poor, disenfranchised communities of color. While looking for a network of support and protection they join groups whose culture is one of violence. Gangs have provided support to youth in areas where they have found none. This support has extended both emotionally and economically. Involvement in gang activity leads to further at-risk situations and behavior. Taking all of this into consideration, it becomes important for us to look at what alternatives can be offered to youth—alternatives that will provide similar support networks and opportunities so they do not feel the need to join this dangerous way of life.

Public Policy Recommendations

1. Invest resources in alternative rehabilitation programs for youth that focus beyond legal system punishment (e.g. jail time, probation).
2. Create programs for at-risk youth in low income communities to offer support networks not found through the traditional education system or outreach programs.
3. Evaluate the impact of these programs.
4. Fund collaborative research that includes law enforcement, community members, schools, and youth in order to offer comprehensive solutions for the youth.

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