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Gang Prevention: How to Make the "Front End" of Your Anti-Gang Effort Work

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I. Introduction

Most people agree with the basic concept that if young people are prevented from joining gangs or if the violence associated with gangs can be stopped, great strides toward accomplishing shared public safety goals will be made. Agreement on this concept, however, is still a long way from having the will, resources, or ability to implement prevention programs that show results. Some people may be skeptical about the feasibility of effective gang prevention, thus, they do not have the will. A few may think too narrowly about gang prevention and the assets that relate to it, thus, they feel there are no resources. Others may have the will and the resources, but they overlook

the best practices in implementing gang prevention and related activities.

Gang prevention is challenging work. There have been many advances, however, in knowledge and practice, that greatly increase the ability to be successful. U.S. Attorneys' offices can be highly effective leaders in local anti-gang initiatives that incorporate prevention. Federal prosecutors have a clear vested interest in gang prevention and provide a vital link between knowledge and resources at the federal level, and action at the local level. The purpose of this article is to provide federal prosecutors with a firm knowledge of the foundations for gang prevention that are required to get results from the front end of local anti-gang initiatives. Successful gang prevention is based on the proper balance of (1) attractive alternatives to gangs, (2) effective support systems for young people, and (3) accountability of young people to their parents, schools, and communities. Discussed below are the principles of effective gang prevention, a framework for implementing them within a community-based anti-gang initiative, and information about resources to assist in these efforts.

II. Foundations of effective gang prevention

Gang prevention is an effort to change the life trajectory of a young person who is otherwise likely to join a gang. Young people who join gangs are exercising a choice. The decision to join a gang is usually not made under extreme duress, though there are pressures placed on adolescents in this area. In fact, young people frequently see gangs as an attractive choice or a solution to their problems. From a practical perspective, gang prevention must address the needs and desires that underlie these choices in order to be effective. There are several sources of information on what young people want and what they need that have direct relevance to gang prevention. The first source of information on this topic comes from what we know about normal adolescent development.

A. Normal adolescent development

It is not a coincidence that the onset of adolescence overlaps with the average age for joining a gang (twelve to fourteen years old). The central developmental challenge of adolescence is described by psychologist Erik Erickson as "identity vs. role confusion." ERIK ERICKSON, CHILDHOOD AND SOCIETY 150 (Penguin Books 1993). In short, all adolescents are trying to figure out who they are as they move toward adulthood. It is not uncommon for them to "try on" different identities during this time. This is a normal process that is harmless for most youth, but can also lead to risky and illegal behaviors.

The heightened importance of peer groups, and what psychologists call "egocentrism," are two other key developmental characteristics of adolescence. As children turn into adolescents, their focus of social attention and approval shifts from adults to their peers. During this time, adolescents become increasingly egocentric—meaning that they perceive the world as revolving around them—and they are deficient in the ability to accept other perspectives. Egocentrism has a number of consequences. For example, otherwise neutral events are more likely seen as personal slights, perceived injustices are often blown out of proportion, and the ability to empathize with others is underdeveloped. Taken together and applied in the context of a community with high levels of gang activity, normal adolescent development can result in very dangerous outcomes. Consider the common adolescent experience of being embarrassed or humiliated in front of a group of peers. This situation is difficult for any adolescent, but it can become deadly in the context of gang involvement. Gangs have access to illegal guns and norms that support violence as an appropriate method for resolving conflict. Many in local law enforcement are well aware of how frequently gang violence stems from seemingly minor "beefs" between adolescents.

B. Why young people join gangs

Gang researchers Scott Decker and Barrik Van Winkle describe forces that "pull" and "push" young people into gangs. *See*, SCOTT H. DECKER & BARRIK VAN WINKLE, LIFE IN THE GANG: FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND VIOLENCE (Cambridge University Press 1996). If you ask current or former gang members, they are likely to describe the "pulls." That is, they will describe those attractive features of gang membership and the gang lifestyle that typically include respect, excitement, social opportunities, protection, and money. Respect in the context of gang membership translates more directly into

intimidation or fear. Everyone wishes to be treated with respect, but gang membership offers young people a shortcut to earning respect. Excitement in the gang refers to risky behaviors, illegal activity, and generally upending the societal norms that define appropriate and inappropriate behavior, for example, parties where alcohol, drugs, and members of the opposite sex are readily available. The desire for protection among young people sometimes strikes a chord of compassion in adults. Some are tempted to ask, "Could it be that young people are really safer in gangs?" The answer is no. Despite myths to the contrary, gangs do not protect their members. Gang members are more likely to become victims because they embrace a lifestyle in which their own violence begets more violence. Finally, although some gangs and gang members make large sums of money through drug distribution or other criminal enterprises, many gangs lack the organizational sophistication to carry out these operations and, those that do, tend to concentrate most of the profits in the hands of a few people at the top. Thus, gang members often suggest motivations for joining gangs that seem like rational needs and desires. Gangs do not deliver on these promises, however, and the fun and excitement that are delivered lead to hazardous and destructive behaviors that can be fatal or life altering.

The forces that "push" young people into gangs have been verified by numerous longitudinal research studies that examine the conditions early in life that are related to an increased probability of gang membership in later years. Researchers have identified dozens of these conditions, called risk factors, that fall into five general categories or life domains. Researchers James "Buddy" Howell and Arlen Egley of the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC) recently summarized the five domains of risk factors for gang membership.

- Community or neighborhood risk factors—such as access to drugs, availability of illegal firearms, and the local crime rate.

- Family risk factors—such as sibling antisocial behavior, low parental control, and family poverty.

- School risk factors—such as low academic aspirations, low school attachment, and learning disabilities.

- Peer group risk factors—such as association with delinquent peers and/or aggressive peers.

- Individual risk factors—such as aggression or fighting, conduct disorders, and antisocial beliefs.

J.C. Howell & A. Egley, *Moving Risk Factors Into Developmental Theories of Gang Membership*, 3 J. YOUTH VIOLENCE AND JUV. JUST. 334-54 (2005).

The more risk factors in the life of a young person, the greater the probability for joining a gang. A study of Seattle youth found that those with seven or more risk factors at age ten to twelve were thirteen times more likely to join a gang than those with no risk factors. KARL G. HILL, CHRISTINA LUI, AND J. DAVID HAWKINS, DEP'T OF JUSTICE, EARLY PRECURSORS OF GANG MEMBERSHIP: A STUDY OF SEATTLE YOUTH (2001). This cumulative effect of risk factors is very important to gang prevention and intervention. No one risk factor rises clearly above the rest, and different configurations of risk factors are likely to be present in different communities and for different individuals. Thus, gang prevention and intervention efforts must be poised to identify those risk factors that are at play, determine which are most amenable to change, and target those with effective services at the community, family, or individual level.

In summary, there are a variety of things that young people want and need that have direct relevance to gang prevention. Adolescents need opportunities to explore their identity and the healthy paths to adulthood. They need to do this with their peers in a social setting that is safe. They want to have fun and excitement. They want to be respected. They want access to money. Indeed, many who work with and have studied at-risk youth find that they would be content simply to have improved access to meaningful employment. They have a wide variety of needs and personal challenges that fall into the five risk-factor domains related to their community, school, family, peers, and personal issues. The needs and desires of youth can point the way to alternatives that can compete with the features of gangs that attract them. These needs and desires also help us understand what is required for effective support systems. Superior gang prevention efforts blend effective support systems with attractive alternatives to gangs, and target these services to adolescents who are most at risk for gang involvement.

III. Community-based anti-gang initiatives

A. Gangs and crime in the community

It is frequently said that no two gangs are alike. Even gangs that share the same name may have very different structures, group dynamics, membership characteristics, and offending patterns. Likewise, no two communities are exactly alike, as local leaders and community members are quick to point out. The best anti-gang initiatives are tailored to meet local needs and challenges, but benefit from broader-based research and best practices. On the front end of these initiatives are concerted efforts to understand how local gang characteristics and dynamics interact with a range of social forces that are also local and community-based (for example, demographic trends, housing, employment, historical events, law enforcement practices, and others). Before tackling the local issues, there is value in considering a general framework for the ways that gangs affect communities.

Figure 1, on page 53, provides a general sense of how gangs relate to illegal activity and population in a community with gang problems. Group 1, at the top of the triangle, represents serious, chronic, and violent offenders that are a relatively small portion of the population, but are responsible for a disproportionately large share of illegal activity. Group 2 consists of gang-involved youth and associates who make up a relatively larger share of the population, are responsible for significant levels of illegal activity, but are not necessarily in the highest offending category. Members of this group typically range in age from twelve to twenty-four years. Group 3 is made up of the seven to fourteen-year-old youth who have already displayed early signs of delinquency and risk for gang membership, but are not yet gang-involved. They will not all go into gangs, but they are the likely pool of candidates for gang membership in the near future. Group 4 represents everyone else living in a community where gangs are present.

These four groups clearly relate to four basic strategies for combating gangs. Members of Group 1 are candidates for targeted enforcement and prosecution because of their high level of involvement in crime and the low probability that other strategies will reduce their criminal

behavior. Effective enforcement and prosecution targeted at this small group of individuals will reduce community crime because each individual in this group is responsible for committing a large number of crimes. These individuals represent perhaps as little as 7 or 8 percent of offenders, but may account for 40 or 50 percent of all crime. Members of Group 2 are candidates for gang intervention, members of Group 3 are candidates for secondary prevention, and members of Group 4 are recipients of primary prevention services. With the exclusion of targeted enforcement (which is well-covered in other portions of this Bulletin), each of these strategies is discussed in turn as they relate to groups identified in Figure 1.

B. Gang intervention

Gang intervention includes a balance of services and opportunities with supervision and accountability (namely, "carrot and stick") that is tailored to the circumstances of individual gang-involved or high-risk youth. Gang members and associates typically engage in elevated levels of violence, property crimes, weapons violations, and drug offenses relative to their nongang-involved peers. They are also more likely to be exposed to numerous risk factors in the five domains already discussed. Beyond that, there are few simple ways to characterize them.

- They may or may not be in school.
- They may or may not be employed.
- They may or may not be on probation or otherwise in the juvenile or criminal justice system.

Effective gang intervention requires coordinated partnerships of agencies and service providers that use information-sharing across agency types (police, juvenile courts, schools, prosecution, community agencies) to facilitate targeting and outreach to gang-involved youth and their families, a system of graduated sanctions, and effective case management. Partners in gang intervention often include law enforcement, courts, probation offices, social services, employment services, schools, community groups, faith-based groups, and others. The basic intervention message to gang-involved youth can be summed up as follows: "We are working together to reduce violence and gang activity in our community. We are aware of your gang involvement and are concerned about illegal
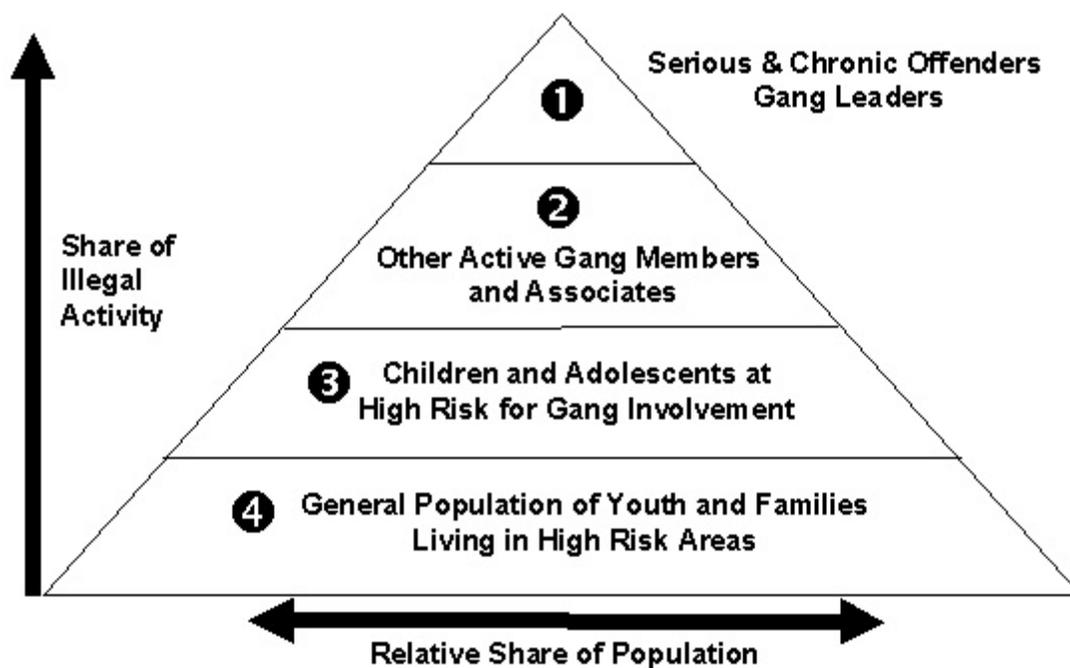
Figure 1

activities and the safety threat you pose to yourself and others. We are offering alternatives to the gang lifestyle in the form of social services, job opportunities, and educational opportunities. Whether you pursue these alternatives or not, you will be held accountable if you continue to pose a threat to community safety."

C. Secondary prevention

Secondary prevention refers to programs and services that are directed toward youth who have already displayed early signs of problem behavior and are at high-risk for gang involvement. This is the group that rises to the top of the prevention priority list for many people because they are most likely to face the choice of whether or not to join the gang in the near future. This is the group that most needs the three basic elements of effective gang prevention.

- Attractive alternatives. Attractive alternatives divert time and attention from the gang lifestyle by providing healthy and accessible venues for fun, excitement, and social interaction. These are safe venues to learn and practice healthy forms of gaining and showing respect.

- Effective support systems. Effective support systems are necessary to address specific social, emotional, and psychological needs and challenges faced by adolescents in general, and high-risk adolescents in particular.

- Accountability. Accountability is required to demonstrate and enforce clear expectations for appropriate behavior. Inappropriate behaviors in the context of prevention programs frequently do not rise to the level of illegal activity. Consequently, enforcing clear standards may take the form of withholding access to the most attractive features of program participation. In cases where behaviors are more serious, clear and appropriate sanctions beyond the program should be readily available.

D. Primary prevention

Primary prevention refers to services and supports that reach the entire population in communities with high crime or gang activity. These efforts typically address needs or risk factors in a way that is available to all youth and families, or supports the community as a whole. Delivery of these services may flow through units

of government, local schools, community organizations, or faith-based organizations. Examples include public awareness campaigns, one-stop centers that improve access to public services, school-based life skills programs, community clean up and lighting projects, and community organizing. Such a broad range of activities does not strike some people as having much bearing on gang prevention but, in fact, gangs thrive in areas that appear to be forgotten or overlooked. When there is clear evidence that residents care about their community, gangs begin to lose their foothold.

IV. A framework for implementing multiple anti-gang strategies

The strongest community-based anti-gang initiatives will combine four strategies—enforcement, intervention, secondary prevention, and primary prevention—to maximize the impact across the individuals in all four groups represented in Figure 1. Each strategy helps the others in important ways. For example, enforcement and intervention efforts interface with many of the high-risk youth who are perfect candidates for secondary prevention services, such as the younger siblings of active gang members. Appropriate referral mechanisms take advantage of these contacts to channel high-risk youth into appropriate prevention services. Also, the work of prevention practitioners may be hindered by local gang dynamics and activity that directly affect their younger clients and their families. An enforcement response may be necessary before prevention efforts can take hold. Implementing and coordinating multiple anti-gang strategies in a community is very challenging work, but the hard-earned lessons of communities across the country that have done this can save others from making costly and time-consuming mistakes. These lessons highlight the importance of partnerships, leadership, assessment, and planning.

A. Partnerships and leadership

United States Attorneys' offices (USAOs) are in an excellent position to exercise broader leadership in gang prevention and community-based anti-gang initiatives. Their leadership in Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) provides an excellent foundation for the gang prevention activities described thus far. Effective

partnerships, however, are critical to the success of any such efforts. Such partnerships will include members from different sectors, professions, and walks of life, particularly when gang prevention and intervention are part of the mix. Participants come to the table with different perspectives and knowledge of the issues. Although any partnership is well-advised to work quickly toward meaningful accomplishments, it is also important to give the group time to build a common framework for approaching the central challenge. Community members frequently have a very different perspective on gangs than law enforcement and educators and social service providers may have still different perspectives. An open, but focused discussion on defining the terms gang, gang member, and gang-related incident will help participants share their perspectives, clarify their thinking, and reach a common starting point. Statutory definitions of these terms that relate to prosecution practices are fair game for this discussion, but the discussion can be more far-reaching in the context of a multistrategy, community-based initiative.

Structurally, the partnership should have at least two tiers. The leadership team sets the direction of the initiative, steers resources, and sets and modifies policies and practices. This team must include key leaders from each of the participating agencies, as these leaders can send a powerful signal about the importance of the initiative, as well as commit resources. The operational teams directly implement activities and services for youth, families, and other community members, in a variety of settings. Effective operational teams are important for each strategy, but they are absolutely essential in order for gang intervention and secondary prevention strategies to meet the wide-ranging needs of high-risk youth. Thus, an anti-gang initiative may end up with several operational teams carrying out components of the overall effort and reporting back to the leadership team.

Information sharing is a major issue at the operational level. Professionals in this area are well acquainted with proper standards and practices for sharing information on juveniles. Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1232g. Likewise, law enforcement professionals are aware of confidentiality requirements pertaining to intelligence records and crime incidents. Criminal Intelligence Systems Operating Policies, 28 C.F.R. Part 23.

Information must also flow freely, however, between the operational and leadership levels of an anti-gang initiative. Through direct involvement with these youth and their families, operational level personnel can identify the challenges and obstacles encountered, and communicate them to those who are most able to affect necessary changes.

Creating a community partnership on youth violence or gangs is not always necessary because there may already be an existing group that can be set to the purpose. In some areas, leaders are spread very thin because they are involved in so many partnerships. Building on an existing partnership shows a recognition of the prior work of potential partners and an appreciation for their tight schedules. Even so, starting a partnership is the easy part, maintaining it is much harder. Partnerships that come together in response to high-profile incidents too frequently lead to short-term responses and fall apart due to lack of focus and direction.

B. Assessment and planning

A good way to maintain a community partnership is to collect data to help prioritize issues and specify goals and objectives that clearly define the scope and focus of the initiative. This has emerged as one of the most important lessons in more than ten years of implementing and studying multi-strategy anti-gang initiatives supported by the Department of Justice's (Department) Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). The same lesson has been drawn from PSN. Careful assessment and planning lead to success and keep partnerships together because they maximize the utility of existing resources, improve targeting of anti-gang activities to geographic areas, improve targeting of services to individuals, and provide a baseline from which program performance can be measured. Further, a detailed plan based on assessment data is critical to securing most forms of outside funding. The NYGC has developed a manual on assessing community gang problems that is available on its Web site http://www.iir.com/nygc/. Two of the most important features of a high quality gang problem assessment, as they relate to prevention and intervention, are described below.

- Gang-related crime incident data must be available. There are different ways to define a gang-related crime, but however it is defined, there is great value in being able to measure the who, what, when, where, how, and why, of gang-related offenses. From a gang prevention standpoint, it is very important to know to what extent gang offenses are occurring in and around school grounds on weekdays during the school year. What proportion of aggravated assaults are gang-related? What is the age range of gang offenders and victims of gang offenses? This is just the beginning of the kinds of questions that have local importance. The problem is that many jurisdictions do not maintain gang crime incident data, or they do a poor job of maintaining these data. Gang intelligence information, while valuable to gang prevention and intervention for other reasons, does not substitute for gang incident data. For example, gang intelligence data may indicate what gangs are active in the area, who their members are, their symbols, their rivalries, their age range, and their size. Only gang incident data, however, will tell you that 40 percent of gang-related aggravated assaults are occurring on weekdays, between the hours of 2:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m., within a half mile of three local schools. Having this kind of information increases the probability of implementing successful gang prevention, intervention, and enforcement strategies, because it allows leaders and operational personnel to target their resources and services in a way that is tailored to the local gang problem.

- Gang prevention and intervention activities rely on a network of community resources. One agency or organization can not effectively meet the many needs of high-risk and gang-involved youth. It is often necessary to inventory community resources because many communities lack any central directory of services and service providers that might be most beneficial to gang prevention and intervention. A community resource inventory should include such information as the types of services delivered, eligibility criteria, ability to accept new clients, and experience working with high-risk populations. The online Community Guide to Helping America's Youth allows users to register for a password-protected account for storing and mapping community resource inventory data.

This Guide is available at http://www.helpingamericasyouth.gov/.

V. Gang prevention resources

The discussion of gang prevention resources must be divided into informational resources and funding resources. In both cases, however, a common guiding principle applies: do not get hung up on the word gang. The risk factors that are root causes for joining gangs overlap considerably with the risk factors for delinquency and violence more generally. On the information side, there are a host of programs that do not claim to be gang prevention programs, but have demonstrated their effectiveness in addressing one or more of these common risk factors. These programs might be very valuable components within the framework of a multi-strategy, anti-gang initiative.

A. Information resources

There are several reasons why this article does not name a single specific gang prevention or intervention program. Widely popular programs with extensive funding support sometimes show little or no results. Other programs die for lack of funding only to see evaluation reports a year later that show the program was working. Program replication hinges on the quality of program design and the quality of implementation. There is reason to believe that the quality of implementation is the more important of these two. Mark Lipsey is a researcher at Vanderbilt University who has studied hundreds of juvenile justice and delinquency prevention program evaluations using sophisticated statistical techniques called meta-analysis. He found that programs with the highest quality designs, that were well implemented, achieved the best overall success. The programs with the *lowest* quality designs that were *well* implemented, however, performed just as well as those programs with the *highest* quality designs that were *poorly* implemented. Hence, the focus of this article has centered on quality implementation. Nevertheless, program design cannot be overlooked. Mark W. Lipsey, *What Can You Build with Thousands of Bricks? Musings on the Cumulation of Knowledge in Program Evaluation*, 76 NEW DIRECTIONS FOR EVALUATION 7 (1997).

The federal government recently embarked on an unprecedented task as part of President Bush's Helping America's Youth initiative. All of the youth-serving agencies in the government worked together to establish a single set of criteria for rating the performance of youth-serving programs. The focus of this effort was on program designs that had demonstrated results through evaluation. More than 180 programs that address a wide range of risk factors were identified and have been included in a searchable database on the Community Guide to Helping America's Youth Web site, http://www.helpingamericasyouth.gov/. For each program, the database includes information on the program design, the risk factors that are addressed, the target group, the evaluation design, outcomes, references for further information, and a point of contact. The most obvious use of this database is to identify programs for potential replication. However, it can also be used as a point of comparison for existing local programs that are working to accomplish the same ends.

The NYGC is another valuable resource in support of gang prevention and intervention programs. NYGC has been supporting practitioners, researchers, and policy makers, since 1995 with statistics, publications, training and technical assistance on youth gangs. Its goal is to deliver assistance that can be translated easily into policy and practice. The NYGC Web site (http://www.iir.com/nygc/default.htm) features scores of gang-specific publications in full text and fully downloadable, a database of gang legislation that is easily searchable by state or by topic, and an interactive listserv called GANGINFO that provides practitioners with a forum for sharing ideas.

B. Funding resources

USAOs and their community partners should have some knowledge of the funding sources available through the Department. Gang prevention programs draw on those same resources, but may also draw on funding streams from other departments and agencies, such as Health and Human Services (HHS), Education, Labor, and the Corporation for National and Community Service. Each of these federal departments has Web sites that should be visited periodically to identify federal programs and funding opportunities. For example, within HHS, the Administration for Children and Families has programs and funding to combat child abuse and neglect. The Department of Education has the

office of Safe and Drug Free Schools that provides assistance for drug and violence prevention activities. The Corporation for National and Community Service supports volunteer organizations around the country that serve underprivileged communities and can directly involve youth.

In addition, there are two sources that provide funding information from across federal agencies.

- The Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (CFDA), available at http://www.cfda.gov/.

- Grants.gov, available at http://www.grants.gov/.

CFDA is the best place to find federal government funding streams and grant programs. Grants.gov is a better resource for finding all the specific grant funding opportunities currently open. The Federal Resource Guide for Weed and Seed Communities is another valuable resource that should be familiar to many USAOs. This printable guide provides brief descriptions of federal agencies and programs that can be particularly helpful in community-based, multi-strategy initiatives. *See* Dep't. of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, *Federal Resource Guide for Weed and Seed Communities* (2004), *available at* http://www.ojp. usdoj.gov/ccdo/pub/pdf/WSFedResGuide.pdf. At the state level, much of the funding that could be used for gang prevention flows down from the federal government in the form of formula or block grant funding. The state administering agencies for all of the Office of Justice Programs funding can be easily found by state at http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/state.htm.

Private and company-sponsored foundations should also be considered as potential funding sources. There are many foundations that set general goals of supporting projects that reduce violence, help youth, address conditions of poverty, or simply improve community life. There is no single reference or source of information on private and company-sponsored foundations, but there are a growing number of online directories—some of which are free and some that charge a fee to access. In addition to topical focus, foundations vary in geographic range with some focusing more regionally and some operating at a national level.

VI. Conclusion

The most convincing advocates for the importance of gang prevention are the law enforcement officers and prosecutors who have worked for years arresting gang members. They are so convincing because they can give first-hand accounts of the young people that cycle into the gang lifestyle, become offenders, and become victims. Some die young, some go to prison, and some continue on a ruinous path into adulthood. Soon, their children are old enough to be next in line and the pattern continues. The goal of gang prevention is to interrupt this cycle. Some have viewed this as nothing more than a dream. Others are working hard to make it a reality. Whether that goal is achieved, or not, will depend on the willingness to dedicate time and money to this purpose in a way that will continue to build knowledge and increase the number and quality of gang prevention tools at a community's disposal.

For further information about gang prevention and intervention, contact Phelan Wyrick at 202-353-9254.❖

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