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NATIONAL GANG CENTER Comprehensive Gang Model

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Narration Text for Why Youth Join Gangs Video

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Section 1: Introduction to Pushes and Pulls

Why do youth join gangs? In this presentation, you will be introduced to researchers, practitioners who will share their perspectives on the gang issue, and young people who were previously involved in gangs. They will provide you with the opportunity to learn about research regarding gang joining, as well as firsthand insights into the behaviors and the circumstances that you might observe when interacting with youth who are at high risk of joining a gang.

Understanding the reasons behind a youth's decision to join a gang can help us design and implement more successful gang prevention and intervention strategies. Research suggests that joining a gang is a complex decision that involves multiple negative conditions that “push” youth into gangs, as well as perceived positive opportunities that “pull” youth into gangs.

These pushes and pulls are called risk factors. Risk factors are “the characteristics, variables, or hazards that, if present for a given individual, make it more likely that this individual will join a gang.” As an analogy, you are probably familiar with risk factors for heart disease such as smoking, lack of exercise, a family history of heart disease, and obesity. The more risk factors an individual has, the greater the odds of developing heart disease.

In gang prevention and intervention research, many diverse studies have identified risk factors that may increase a young person's level of risk to engage in delinquent behavior, or more seriously, to join a gang. These risk factors fall into five domains: individual, family, school, peer, and

community.

Researchers have learned that an accumulation of risk factors in multiple domains greatly increases the risk of gang joining. Youth who experience risk factors across all domains are forty times more likely to join a gang than those with risk in just one domain.

Now that you are more familiar with the concept of risk factors, we will discuss risk factors in each domain.

Section 2: Individual Risk Factors

Risk factors in the individual domain include problem behavior, antisocial beliefs and values, and negative life events such as the death of a parent, school suspension, or victimization in the home or community. Let's talk about each of these specific risk factors in greater detail.

Problem behavior in the early years of a child's life includes impulsivity, aggressiveness, and reactivity, and it is a strong predictor of gang membership. During adolescence, a youth's behavior may gradually escalate into delinquency. What kind of problem behavior might be observed with youth who are at risk for gang involvement?

In these videos, Raúl, Karlo, and Dustin describe some of their early problem behaviors.

Youth who are more at risk for joining a gang may justify or make excuses for behaviors such as stealing, cheating, breaking the rules, or causing harm to other people, especially if they benefit from these actions. These beliefs may be validated and reinforced when youth join a gang.

In these videos, Dustin, Raúl, and Marion describe the attitudes and reasoning behind their behaviors during elementary school and through adolescence.

Negative life events that can be risk factors for youth include being suspended or expelled from school, serious injury or illness, and disruption in the family caused by death, divorce, incarceration of a parent, or a change in caregiver.

Victimization is also a risk factor for gang involvement, since it lessens a young person's sense of personal safety and security, particularly when the victimization occurs at home. Youth who are victims of abuse or neglect, or who are victimized outside the home, are more vulnerable to future gang joining. For girls, the experience of sexual abuse or exploitation may increase their risk of future gang membership.

In these videos, Karlo, Raúl, and Iris describe negative life events that had long-term effects on their lives.

Section 3: Family Risk Factors

Negative life events that might change the life course of a young person, such as those discussed under the individual domain, can also result in long-term disruption to the family structure, causing the child to experience risk factors in the family domain. Children may move from one home to another, experience changes in caregivers, or even lose contact with a parent, lessening the child's feelings of safety and stability. Youth who lose a parent because of death, incarceration, or divorce are often profoundly affected by this loss, even many years later.

In these videos, you will have the opportunity to learn more about family disruptions from Marion, Dustin, and Raúl.

In addition to specific life events disrupting family structure, inconsistent and disengaged parenting can also present a risk for youth. Parents who fail to provide clear and consistent rules and consequences for behavior, who lack or are inconsistent with emotional support, and who provide little or no supervision or interest in their child's activities contribute to conditions for a youth to become involved in negative and risky behaviors. Young people who spend large amounts of unsupervised time, particularly with delinquent peers, are more at risk for gang involvement.

For children, lack of consistent support and discipline by parents can be interpreted as a lack of caring, making these children more vulnerable to gang involvement. In these videos, Iris and Karlo describe issues with their parents that played a role in their later involvement in gangs.

Section 4: School Risk Factors

Youth who are experiencing risk factors as described in the individual and family domains may also experience problems at school. Risk factors in the school domain include poor school performance, low academic aspirations, low school attachment, a negative school environment, and multiple suspensions. Students who are labeled as special-needs students or slow learners can be more vulnerable to these risk factors. These students also tend to experience more overall behavior problems at school, which can lead to a decreased bond to the school and ultimately, expulsion.

Young people who do not enjoy school, who are not interested or engaged in classes or school work, and who do not feel emotionally connected to the school and their teachers are more at risk for gang involvement. Some youth may also experience family issues or behavioral problems that may also lessen their attachment to school, resulting in poor school attendance and performance.

In these videos, Iris, Karlo, and Dustin discuss their lack of attachment to school.

While it may be necessary to expel or suspend a student for negative behavior, school suspension or expulsion is a negative life event that can disrupt a young person's academic performance and

lessen his or her bond to the school. It also can have long-term academic consequences.

In these videos, Karlo, Iris, and Raúl describe being suspended and expelled from school.

Section 5: Peer Risk Factors

Particularly during adolescence, a youth's peer group exerts a strong influence on his or her behavior and attitudes. One of the strongest risk factors for gang membership is having friends who engage in delinquency or have antisocial beliefs.

During the adolescent and teen years, youth are heavily influenced by their peers and frequently imitate each other's beliefs, music, clothing styles, and behavior. Associating with delinquent peers normalizes antisocial beliefs and attitudes, increases a young person's involvement in antisocial behavior, and can detach teens from positive mainstream peers and activities. This association with negative peer groups can also increase a youth's level of risk in the home, school, and individual domains.

In these videos, Dustin, Raúl, and Iris describe their peer influences during their adolescent years.

Section 6: Community Risk Factors

Young people can also be exposed to risk factors within their communities. Community risk factors include poverty and neighborhood disorganization.

While poverty does not cause individuals to join gangs, high levels of poverty in the community can strain institutions such as families, schools, churches, and other organizations that provide support and protection for young people as they grow up.

Neighborhood disorganization is the term used to describe fraying of the social fabric of the community from rapid population shifts and the breakdown of social institutions. Indications of neighborhood disorganization are poor housing, lack of quality schools and recreational facilities, inadequate availability of social services, and a weakened infrastructure. Neighborhood disorganization can also be caused by rapid population shifts into or out of the community, such as those caused by major job losses or gains in a particular industry.

In these neighborhoods, crime rates tend to be higher, and conflicts between residents can be caused by competition for scarce resources, lack of understanding between existing populations and new arrivals, and racial and economic segregation and marginalization.

In these videos, Iris, Marion, and Karlo describe conditions in the neighborhoods where they grew up.

Section 7: How Pushes and Pulls Affect the Decision to Join a Gang

In the previous sections, we learned about the different domains of risk—individual, family, school, peer and community—from Iris, Dustin, Karlo, Raúl, and Marion, who experienced risk factors in several areas of their lives. In this section, we will discuss how pushes and pulls combined to influence the decision to join a gang.

Many adults believe that youth are forced to join gangs, but this is rarely true. The combination of risk factors in multiple domains, experienced over a young person's life, can make the youth more vulnerable to gangs and can affect his or her decisions about gangs and other negative behaviors. Youth who are failing to find safety and success in their homes, schools, neighborhoods, and peer groups may be simultaneously pushed and pulled toward gangs. The gang seems to provide alternatives to these deficits. For many young people, gang membership is seen as a way to obtain safety, protection, fun, respect, support, love, excitement, and access to resources such as money or drugs. Youth also may be pulled into gangs because a close friend or family member is involved in the gang.

In these videos, Dustin, Raúl, Karlo, and Marion describe the combinations of pushes and pulls that led to their decisions to join a gang.

Section 8: Conclusion

This presentation has provided an overview of the factors that may play a role in a youth's decision to join a gang. Gang joining is a complex decision that involves multiple negative conditions that push youth into gangs, as well as perceived positive opportunities that pull youth into gangs.

There are three important points to recognize in consideration of youth and gang involvement:

1. Youth who experience an accumulation of risk factors in multiple domains are the most vulnerable to later gang involvement.
2. Most youth are not forced into gangs. Their decisions to join are based in part on their perceptions of positive opportunities offered by the gang that pull them towards the gang.
3. Joining a gang is not a permanent decision.

Being aware of these risk factors and gang attractions can help you identify youth who would benefit most from prevention and intervention programs and can also help you respond more effectively to their individual needs.

For more information on pushes and pulls, risk factors for gang involvement, and effective gang prevention and intervention programs and strategies, see the [resource page](#) of this presentation, which offers recommendations for further reading.

The young people who participated in this presentation course are all former gang members who are making efforts to build better lives for themselves.

For community members, parents, law enforcement, and social services and education professionals who want to learn about gang joining, associated risk factors, or planning next steps in addressing gang joining, [suggested resources and a bibliography](#) may be found at the end of this video.



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