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**The Truancy and Gang Connection:
Reflections from the Mayor's Anti-Gang Office
Houston, TX**

National Center for School Engagement

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303 E. 17th Avenue, Suite 400 Denver, CO 80203
303/837-8466**

www.schoolengagement.org

**The Truancy and Gang Connection: Reflections from the
Mayor's Anti-Gang Office, Houston, TX**

By Victor M. Gonzalez, Jr. – Director of Program Services

Twenty-two years of work with juvenile delinquents, 17 years of providing gang outreach services, and four years as Director of Program Services for the Mayor's Anti-Gang Office has taught me much about the needs of children and their families. Our office has developed many truancy pilot projects; we have learned that a combination of early intervention, family involvement, cooperation with the court, and frequent referrals to outside services are essential to a successful program. We have also learned that when schools take proactive measures and police become involved, much good work can be done to curb truancy. This essay is intended to provide a better understanding of how gang involvement, family dysfunction and drug use combine to create school attendance problems. It is important to recognize the early signs of trouble and to develop proactive interventions. Empowering youth and families to do better is a critical part of this process; it takes their work as well to prevent truancy.

How Gangs in the Community Affect Student Attendance and Attachment

When gangs are part of a community, children are exposed early to drug use, violence, and other negative influences. This early exposure can be detrimental to the life of a young person. Even preschool age children, four and five years old, are exposed to many negative things in their environment when gangs are present, putting them at a higher risk for gang involvement themselves.

Communities with large numbers of dysfunctional families often have high rates of gang activity. Parents who have poor communication skills, past gang involvement, poor parenting skills, domestic violence issues and/or drug problems contribute to the challenges of very young children. This ultimately makes it difficult for young children to get a good start in school. In addition, when families do not value the importance of an education, commitment to school may not be emphasized. Also, when parents have limited educational attainment, children are often not prepared for school.

Children from problematic families develop inappropriate behavior before they even get to school. It is common for these children to be physically and verbally aggressive towards other students because of poor role modeling in their communities or families. Ill prepared students do not enjoy their school experience and have school related problems early in life. Early on, children exposed to gang-related activity in the home have difficulty understanding structure in the classroom. Teachers typically try to redirect problem behavior, but these interventions can be perceived so negatively by these children that they can develop an intense dislike for teachers and the school environment. Ultimately, children do not want to return to the classroom.

Addressing gang behavior in elementary school is crucial to preventing gang involvement. If there is a gang presence in elementary and middle school, aggressive

behavior or delayed learning can become more ingrained. At-risk children are sometimes made fun of due to their disciplinary problems. This spurs additional aggressive behavior toward fellow students. The combination of feeling unaccepted by students, teachers and principals leads to school disengagement and the need to seek a group that will accept them. Hence, affiliation with a gang can help meet their needs. In some cases, students do not actively seek out gang affiliation but are bullied into the lifestyle. Some are recruited or sought after in elementary school by older members to continue to build the numbers in the gang.

The gang lifestyle creates a mindset of loyalty, pride and love for young students who are disengaged from school. When bonds are created among gang members, gangs replace school and family. A child will do whatever his/her new friends want him/her to do. The pressure to join the gang officially becomes impossible to resist. The initiation process has life altering implications. New gang members follow all rules provided by the gang and feel obligated to do everything with the gang. This bond is extremely difficult to break, and is a major obstacle to re-engaging students in school.

The transition to middle school from elementary school brings its own set of social problems. Many students in 6th grade who do not have healthy self-esteem and do not feel they are a part of the school will continue to associate with the gang and consider initiation. They will experiment with gang-related behavior, such as graffiti, fighting, bullying, gang dress, gang talk and practicing gang hand signs. Drive-bys, guns, drug usage, sex, and violence will become part of life for this young person. Gangs meet regularly, and gang activity occurs daily. When a student decides to join a gang, academics cease to be important. School becomes the last thing on a young gang member's mind.

If a middle school gang member considers trying to re-engage in school, it is likely the aspiration will be short lived. Once he/she falls far behind academically, it becomes clear to the gang member that it is too late and there is no need to attend school at all. However, it is not uncommon to meet students who are 16 and in the 8th grade who are still trying to pass and get to high school. Nevertheless, many will seek dropping out, but fear truancy laws and court fines. The court process can be beneficial, especially in the 6th grade, given the student's ignorance of the municipal court system. Early intervention is recommended at this point to deter further truancy.

The transition to high school can be difficult if a student gets involved in a gang during 9th grade. School attendance is the first thing affected by gang membership. Many students between the ages of 14 and 16 increase their gang activity as they attempt to create a name for themselves within the gang, on the streets, and with the rival gangs. It is not uncommon for gang members to skip classes yet remain on school grounds. Dedicated gang members are expected to actively recruit, fight or sell drugs on campus as much as possible.

Many gang members meet before school to get high and discuss campus gang activity. After using drugs in the morning, many decide to skip classes and just "hang out" all day,

which increases the number of days they miss school. Sometimes gang members will not go to school if rivals are present. Eventually skipping school becomes a habit. Absences lead to disengagement from school, which whittles away the motivation to complete school assignments. The combination of poor attendance and incomplete homework ensures failing grades and retention. The prospect of high school graduation fades with every “F” a student receives.

Even if gang members do not fail their classes, school administrators tolerate gang members only minimally. When school staff cannot understand or deal effectively with the gang mentality, they apply zero tolerance rules and quickly expel most active gang members.

Gang activity affects non-members as well. Many students will not want to go to school if fights occur regularly on campus and if getting to school is too dangerous.

Challenges and Recommendations for Truancy Interventions

Challenges to working with gang members include:

- gang mentality
- lack of student motivation
- school staff labeling gang members as “bad kids”
- weak truancy laws
- lack of consistency in enforcing attendance policies
- insufficient school staff to monitor attendance

With the rise in gang involvement in Houston, and throughout the country, it is important to remember a lot of work remains to be done to address this issue appropriately. Many approaches and strategies have been discussed nationally. However, stakeholders need to dedicate themselves and their services to helping this population succeed in life. We must address the problem of gangs through prevention, intervention and suppression. It will take a collaboration of stakeholders such as social services, schools, businesses, law enforcement, and criminal justice to come together to make an impact on gangs.

School attendance personnel, social workers, school administrators, police, the juvenile court, and community members including businesses must collaborate to address truancy and tackle these challenges.

School attendance personnel need to examine the way attendance is tracked and monitored in order to have an accurate count of days or classes missed.

Social workers need to follow up with students who are just beginning to skip school as well as those who have an excessive number of absences. The longer truancy is not addressed, the more problematic it becomes for both the school and the student. There are many reasons for truancy, and they need to be explored and assessed in order to determine what methods will be effective in re-engaging students.

School administrators need to ensure that there is a mechanism to help students who need differentiated services no matter how severe their attendance problems. Although gang members create the conditions that cause schools to push them out, alternative educational options need to be available for them.

Police should be visible and bring truants back to school. Officers can either dedicate time during the day, or funds can be dedicated for over-time pay, to make home visits to provide warnings and serve citations to parents of truants.

The court can provide creative sanctions, instead of just imposing fines. Many families of truants have issues that have gone unaddressed for long periods of time. The leverage of a judge can help get these families appropriate services.

All stakeholders can work cooperatively to launch truancy awareness campaigns that involve distributing literature and prominently posting truancy and curfew laws. Taking the time to educate students, families, and communities about truancy laws is very important to increasing school attendance.

Business owners must ensure that they do not serve or employ school-aged youth during the school day.

Gang members are harder to help than students who are truant for other reasons. They need specific attention focused on employment, counseling, tattoo removal and educational choices. While success may be limited, depending on the level of gang involvement, attempts to intervene are important because even gang members sometimes try to return to school.

We in the Mayor's Anti-Gang Office have learned from our work with gangs and truants that without information and resources, it is hard to provide the services that our community needs to help gang impacted areas. Conducting assessments is important to determine a base from which to work. Assessments identify a set of problems and set the stage for the kind of difficult discussions necessary to developing cooperative strategies that impact the whole community.

Gangs are a cancer that can take over a community quickly. Therefore, gang activity must be monitored regularly; ignoring gang issues is extremely costly both financially and socially. It creates an unsafe and miserable atmosphere for families. Families who feel there is no hope for any improvement will not be motivated to do what is necessary to raise their children to stay in school or avoid gangs.

The Houston Gang Intervention Effort

The Mayor's Anti-Gang Office currently operates two gang intervention programs. The Gang Reduction Team is responsible for citywide outreach to gang involved youth and is comprised of six members. The team specifically targets 13-24 year-old gang-involved youth from Houston's most active and dangerous gangs. The Gang Free Schools Project is a three-person team that targets Houston's east end. This comprehensive model is designed to reduce gang violence by engaging community stakeholders, police, criminal

justice, schools and gang outreach workers. The model works on five principles - suppression, opportunities provision, community mobilization, social intervention and organizational development and change.

The intervention services both teams offer include:

- Outreach and response to gang involved individuals and those at risk of gang involvement by intervention specialists to provide case management, counseling, mediation, mentoring, and encouragement of lawful use of the criminal justice system.
- Referrals to drug counseling, tattoo removal, job readiness programs, and/or placement in alternative educational programs.
- Gang Incident Response to reduce gang violence in the community, schools and facilities where gang members are present. Mediations are conducted to assist this process.
- Operation of parenting support groups, counseling, and family intervention sessions for the parents of gang involved youth.
- Educational instruction and social skill building targeted at gang involved and at-risk youth.
- Distribution of gang awareness and prevention materials to youth, parents, educators, and the general public during public presentations on gang awareness, intervention and prevention.

Together, these two teams have made an impact in educating the Houston community about dealing with gangs. As a result of their interventions, the teams have helped reduce gang related incidents among some of the most active gang members in Houston.

The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) is an initiative of The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (CFFC). NCSE strives to build a network of key stakeholders who share the belief that improving school attendance and school attachment promotes achievement and school success.



National Center for School Engagement

NCSE was established as a result of more than a decade of educational research about youth out of the educational mainstream conducted by CFFC. The impact of this work has been the development of significant investments of state funds to reduce suspensions expulsions and truancy. Over five years ago, CFFC began working with the OJJDP, US Department of Justice to assist in the planning and implementation of pilot demonstration projects across the country. As projects developed, CFFC became the national evaluator of this five-year truancy demonstration project.

The culmination of ten years of program experience and research has identified truancy and school engagement as the centerpiece of NCSE's work to improve outcomes for youth who are at the greatest risk of school failure and delinquency. We are national leaders in applying research to help communities prevent and reduce truancy.

Author:

Victor M. Gonzalez, Jr., Director of Program Services
Mayor's Anti-Gang Office, Houston, TX

Editors:

Krystina Finlay, Ph.D.
Joanna Zorn Heilbrunn, M.A.

National Center for School Engagement
c/o Colorado Foundation for Families and Children
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Denver, CO 80203
(303) 837-8466
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