Gang Prevention Programs in Greater Los Angeles

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Biography
Jaclynn received her Bachelor of Arts in Criminology from the University of Florida in 2003. Her seven-year career in the Department of Defense began with three years in the U.S. Air Force as a budget programmer and human resources specialist.

ABSTRACT

This brief examines two gang activity prevention programs in Los Angeles: Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) and Summer Night Lights (SNL). Prevention programs, when successful, can have a great return on investment for a city. School districts and police departments in Los Angeles have long relied on GREAT, a school-based program, to deter youth from joining gangs. However, gang membership and violence remain constant, and future federal grants for GREAT are uncertain due to recent Congressional budget cuts. In its first three years, SNL’s community-based strategy yielded positive results as a viable crime prevention program for at-risk youth.

PROBLEM

Los Angeles is the undisputed gang capital of California; seventy-five percent of California’s total gang-related homicides can be attributed to gangs that call Los Angeles home (Dunworth T., Hayeslip, Lyons, & Denver, 2010). The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) estimates gangs commit a disproportionate amount of violent crime: 40 percent of all robberies, 40 percent of all aggravated assaults, and 80 percent of all homicides are classified as gang-related in the city (Crime Mapping and COMPSTAT, 2010). The city surmises that there are approximately 400 gangs with 41,000 active gang members within its limits (Gang Reduction: Investing in Our
Youth). Countywide, that number grows to roughly 1,000 gangs with 88,000 active members (Serjeant, 2007).

Such high rates of gang membership and related violent crime have serious negative consequences regarding public safety, costs to society, and social equity. Unfortunately, gang members are not the only victims of gang violence; innocent bystanders are often the targets of robberies, violent assaults, and even homicides, which can be accidental or committed with the intention of ruling a gang’s turf through intimidation and fear. For example, in LAPD’s Southeast Division, the risk of violent attack for everyday citizens is 1 in 51, which is eight times higher than areas of the city with lower violent crime rates and fewer gang members (Rice, 2007). Additionally, the fiscal costs to taxpayers are high at an estimated $1.1 billion each year. Each gang arrest costs $36,828, imprisonment of an adult for one year costs $43,150, and detainment of a juvenile offender costs $71,700 per year (Golden & Siegel, 2011). Finally, social equity is a concern because crime rates in poor communities with primarily minority populations continue to surge despite the overall decline in countywide crime rates (Crime Mapping and COMPSTAT, 2010).

**CONTEXT**

Authorities traditionally employ four methods to combat gang activity: prevention, intervention, suppression, and re-entry activities (Best Practices to Address Community Gang Problems, 2010). The most economically efficient of these is prevention since it aims to stop gang membership and violence before it starts (Best Practices to Address Community Gang Problems, 2010). When prevention programs succeed, the high costs of supplemental police officers in gang task forces, medical bills of victims, legal proceedings, court backlogs, and incarceration of offenders can be avoided. Plus, the social benefit to a community that does not live in fear of
crime is substantial. Prevention program participants, taxpayers, the government, and potential crime victims are direct beneficiaries of a wide range of economic benefits, including improved health, increased educational achievement, higher earnings, and lower taxes (Welsh, 2003). Cost benefit analysis of prevention programs shows that juvenile programs have the most consistent economic returns, with social benefits as high as $20 for every dollar spent (Aos, Phipps, Barnoski, & Lieb, 2001). As such, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has identified the need for “critical prevention, intervention and youth development services” (Gang Reduction Strategy, 2007).

Effective prevention strategies must implement services that are age appropriate and focus on eliminating the motives youth have for joining gangs. It is widely agreed that gang recruitment begins at age 10, so prevention strategies must target an age range much younger than the typical criminal gang member (Gang Reduction and Youth Development Newton GRYD Needs Assessment Final Report, 2010). The most common motivations youth report for joining a gang are the following: family, friends, neighborhood, protection, power, respect, boredom, monetary gain, and/or to attract girlfriends/boyfriends (Gang Reduction and Youth Development Watts/Southeast GRYD Needs Assessment Final Report, 2010). While most youth likely share these goals, delinquent youth see gang membership as the easiest or only realistic means of achieving them (Merton, 1938). Efficacious prevention strategies will enlighten youth to the existence of legitimate means to realize their goals and teach them to take advantage of legal avenues for success.

Currently, the Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD) categorizes the aforementioned objectives as “Primary Prevention,” which intend to increase community resiliency to risk factors associated with gang membership and violence holistically (Dunworth,
Hayeslip, & Denver, 2011). The following are specific goals, which will be utilized to evaluate the suitability of proposed prevention initiatives:

- Directed at youth of at-risk age (10-18 years old)
- Youth given viable alternatives for success other than gang membership (e.g. education, job skills, etc.)
- Cost effectiveness
- Political feasibility for implementation and sustainment
- Improved community perceptions of safety
- Improved perceptions of trust and credibility between police and the community
- Improved levels of trust and shared values/identity among residents of the community
- Improved communication and collaboration among community service providers
- Reduced gang-related crime rates and/or gang membership

**PREVENTION ALTERNATIVES**

This section will give a brief overview of two popular gang prevention programs in Los Angeles, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of each. For comparative evaluation using the specific criteria outlined above, please see the Criteria-Alternative Matrix located in the Appendix.

**Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT)**

*Overview*

GREAT is a school-based curricula taught by a law enforcement officer to middle school-aged children. The program consists of 13 lessons aimed at teaching life skills in order to prevent delinquency (GREAT Program Overview: Yearly Budget Reports). Skill-building centers around communication, ability to refuse or resist peer pressure, conflict resolution, and anger
management (Ferguson & Palumbo, 1995). First implemented in Phoenix in 1991, GREAT quickly became a nationwide gang and violence prevention program. It is currently administered by the Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance (DOJ-BJA) as a matching grant program. Local organizations such as police departments or school districts are eligible to request funding, but the grant recipient must budget at least 10% of the program’s proposed total cost; DOJ-BJA will cover the remaining 90% (GREAT Program Overview: Yearly Budget Reports).

Participation in the Greater Los Angeles area has varied significantly from year to year and by organization (see Table 1 for details). This data only demonstrates the federally dispersed portion of the funds for each local program; it does not include funds budgeted to the programs by the local organizations themselves. The data is provided to highlight the scope of each local program. The grants vary from $7,612 to the Compton Unified School District in 2004 to $250,000 to the City of Los Angeles in 2006 (GREAT Program Overview: Yearly Budget Reports). Data on the number of students served by each local program were unavailable.

Table 1: G.R.E.A.T. Local Grant Awards for Greater Los Angeles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
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<td>$745,790</td>
<td>$208,870</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$322,263</td>
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**Compiled from US Department of Justice-Bureau of Justice Assistance (GREAT Program Overview: Yearly Budget Reports)**
Advantages of GREAT

GREAT is often implemented with high levels of fidelity. Studies show that the majority of local programs are implemented as the program is designed (Esbensen, Matsuda, Petersen, & Taylor, 2011). Evaluations of the officers who teach the classes, even those with minimal classroom experience, are significantly positive. However, instruction is found to be most effective when teachers, who are familiar with the students’ personalities, play an active role in assisting the police officer to manage the class (Esbensen, Matsuda, Petersen, & Taylor, 2011). Regardless of the level of collaboration, most programs operate with sufficient fidelity to reasonably attribute any outcome effects to the program (Esbensen, Matsuda, Petersen, & Taylor, 2011).

Students develop more positive feelings towards police officers. GREAT is often criticized for utilizing the authoritative figure of a police officer to merely disseminate information to students with too much formality (Esbensen, Matsuda, Petersen, & Taylor, 2011). However, analyses demonstrate that the interpersonal relationships constructed between law enforcement officers and students elevate students’ opinions of police and formulate a foundation of trust (Ferguson & Palumbo, 1995).

GREAT positively influences student attitudes. Students who were surveyed before and after completing the curriculum showed a slightly increased ability to resist peer pressure to join a gang (Ferguson & Palumbo, 1995). Despite the fact that the increase is minimal, these findings are positive considering the program’s mission.

Disadvantages of GREAT

Students do not always agree with the message presented. Some students hold beliefs that gangs are not all bad (Ferguson & Palumbo, 1995). They see a positive side to gang membership and recognize gangs can sometimes offer protection, a sense of identity, and purpose that school and
family environments may lack. Experts conjecture a portion of youth make a calculated decision to join a gang because it improves their chances of obtaining valuable resources in a constrained environment (Ferguson & Palumbo, 1995). In this case, any anti-gang program that does not provide alternative, legitimate means to achievement will have limited impact on behavior modification.

*Effect on changing actual behavior is negligible.* While slight positive effects on students’ attitudes are evident, GREAT has not exhibited any actual effect on gang-related behavior. Surveys indicate no impact on the percentage of students who claim they or their friends are gang members after completing the program (Ferguson & Palumbo, 1995).

**Summer Night Lights (SNL)**

*Overview*

SNL is a community-based prevention program that extends park and recreation center hours throughout the city (Summer Night Lights Program Overview, 2011). A wide range of activities are offered during the extended hours including free meals, recreation activities, and skill-building clinics, all of which are open to all members of the community. SNL runs from July 4th through Labor Day, extending park hours from 7 p.m. to midnight, Wednesday through Saturday, when potential for gang-related violent crime is at its highest (Summer Night Lights Program Overview, 2011). The program’s intention is to target at-risk youth and provide safe, productive alternatives to gang activity, while strengthening the bonds between residents, various community organization leaders, non-profits, faith-based organizations, school officials, and police officers (Dunworth, Hayeslip, & Denver, 2011).

In 2008, SNL began with eight parks, and the program expanded each year to reach a grand total of 32 parks by 2011 (see Table 2 for details). Funding for this initiative is a
combined effort between city budgets and private sector contributions. Half of the 2011 total budget of $6.2 million was comprised of philanthropic donations, while the remaining balance stemmed from federal grants, the city’s general sub-fund, and the Housing Authority (Linthicum, 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2:</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
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<tr>
<td># OF PARKS</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>32</td>
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<td>CITY BUDGET</td>
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<td>PRIVATE FUNDS</td>
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<td>TOTAL BUDGET</td>
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<td>$2,800,000</td>
<td>$2,100,000</td>
<td>$6,200,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source: City Parks Alliance** (Summer Night Lights Overview, 2011)

Advantages of SNL

*Voluntary community program with high rates of participation.* The city estimates that 710,000 people participated in the program and roughly 11,000 people were served meals on average each night (Summer Night Lights Program Overview, 2011). SNL is also attractive to residents and local businesses because an extra 1,000 summer jobs were created in support of the program (Summer Night Lights Program Overview, 2011). Overall, participants’ opinions of SNL were positive; they generally considered the program a constructive outlet for youth that also brought neighbors closer together (Dunworth, Hayeslip, & Denver, 2011).

*Initial qualitative review reported positive responses among key stakeholders.* Program evaluators conducted interviews, focus groups, and surveys of 689 stakeholders to obtain an initial feel for how well the program was received by the community (Dunworth T., Hayeslip, Lyons, & Denver, 2010). Respondents included GRYD program managers, GRYD service providers, LAPD officers, school teachers and officials, community leaders, participatory youth, and their parents. The stakeholders generally agreed that SNL had strong positive impacts on
community perceptions of public safety, increased both gang prevention and intervention services to the whole community, and contributed to the changes in gang violence observed while the program was in effect (Dunworth, Hayeslip, & Denver, 2011).

Disadvantages of SNL

While crime rates decreased in the targeted areas during summer months, there is no evidence to link the results directly to SNL. The city claims SNL caused a 55% reduction in shots fired, 57% reduction in gang-related violence, and 45% reduction in shooting victims in 2010, but there is no proof of causality (Summer Night Lights Program Overview, 2011). It is true that gang-related and violent crime dropped in the areas surrounding SNL parks, however a similar trend was observed in areas throughout the city within the same time period (Dunworth, Hayeslip, & Denver, 2011). This is not to say that SNL did not have a desired effect on violent crime rates, but further empirical evidence is required before such claims can be stated with certainty.

Continuing operation of status quo depends on private funding. SNL is highly regarded as a positive influence on the whole community with synergistic effects that resonate beyond target youth populations. However, the program will not be able to operate at its current level without enduring support from philanthropic donations. In 2010, it was completely reliant on private funding (Summer Night Lights Overview, 2011). Since Los Angeles has a yearly budget to support gang violence reduction, a larger portion of that budget might be allocated to SNL, with private funds supplementing the program rather than sustaining it.

RECOMMENDATION
Gang prevention programs are difficult to rank as “better” or “worse.” Deterring youth from choosing to join a gang is usually the result of a combination of factors. This analysis demonstrated that both the GREAT and SNL programs present advantages and disadvantages. It would be academically irresponsible to conclude one program was “better” than another. However, SNL scores more favorably on six of the nine criteria identified as exemplary when compared to GREAT (see Appendix). By its sheer community-based nature, SNL places at-risk youth in contact with more positive influences and, therefore, represents a better return on investment than the GREAT program.

Additionally, the administrative circumstances surrounding SNL are more favorable than those of GREAT. After more than 20 years of operation, federal funding for GREAT is dwindling. Without concrete evidence that GREAT causes a reduction in the number of youth desiring to join a gang, it is unlikely that funding will ever return to previous levels, even in a more robust economy. SNL, in four years of operation, has proved to be a shining example of private/public partnerships. Most impressively, SNL was conducted in 2010 with only private funding, which proves residents of Los Angeles desire to keep the program active in their community.

To maximize the benefit to youth and Los Angeles holistically, the city’s gang prevention budgets should be directed toward the SNL program instead of GREAT. Private funds from foundations should continue to supplement the program, and the city should employ every effort to receive federal funding for SNL. A similar program in Minneapolis, The Youthline Outreach Mentorship Program, run by the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board received a three-year federal grant award of $453,910 from the United States Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board, 2012).
Supplemental funds could enhance the effectiveness of the current 32-park program by intensifying the skill-building aspects of SNL, as well as advertising the program heavily to attract more at-risk youth. Additionally, a portion of the larger budget could support quantitative evaluation to study the relationship between SNL and reductions in violent and gang-related crime.

Finally, the SNL program offers Los Angeles an opportunity to be a model for other cities with major gang problems. Currently, SNL programs are run in the cities of Fresno, California (Youth Engagement Team Fresno, 2012) and Jacksonville, Florida (Summer Night Lights Program, 2012). These programs were started as a result of the positive reception of Los Angeles’ pilot. The City of Chicago, widely renowned as the gang capital of America with its 100,000 gang members (Chicago Gang Violence: By the Numbers, 2012), does not manage a program similar to SNL. They do conduct a summer job program for at-risk youth called One Summer Chicago (City of Chicago Youth Violence Prevention Plan, 2012), and the community-based recreational aspects of SNL would be a perfect complement to Chicago’s current summer initiatives. This is an opportunity for Los Angeles to gain notoriety, as well as collaborate with other cities to produce innovative solutions to complex problems.
References


http://www.ci.la.ca.us/mayor/stellent/groups/electedofficials/@myr_ch_contributor/documents/contributor_web_content/lacity_004912.pdf


### APPENDIX

**Prevention Programs Criteria-Alternative Matrix**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Directed at youth of at-risk age (10-18 years old)</th>
<th>Youth given viable alternatives for success other than gang membership (education, job skills, etc.)</th>
<th>Cost effectiveness (quantitative comparison unavailable due to lack of data)</th>
<th>Political feasibility for implementation and sustainment</th>
<th>Improved community perceptions of safety</th>
<th>Improved perceptions of trust and credibility between the police and the community</th>
<th>Improved community resident levels of trust and shared values/identity with others in the community</th>
<th>Improved communication and collaboration among community Service Providers</th>
<th>Reduced gang-related crime rates and/or gang membership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GREAT</td>
<td>Targets middle school-aged youth (10-14)</td>
<td>Provides conflict resolution, anger management, and refusal skills to resist peer pressure</td>
<td>Contingent upon local program due to variation in class size and how many classes each officer teaches; calculated by dividing local program cost by # of students</td>
<td>Politically popular program at federal and state levels; however, Congressional budget cuts negatively affected grant awards in recent years</td>
<td>Negligible effect on perceptions of public safety</td>
<td>Interpersonal relationships between police officers and students built in the classroom lead to increased levels of trust</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>School officials and law enforcement officers work together</td>
<td>Little to no effect on crime rates and actual gang membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNL</td>
<td>Targets youth aged 10-16 and at-risk young adults (17-20) are hired as &quot;Youth Squad&quot; employees who coordinate local park programs; although program events are open to all members of the community</td>
<td>Recreational sports leagues and clinics with professional athletes, hands-on skill-building activities, art and music classes, job opportunities for young adults</td>
<td>Contingent upon program participation; calculated by dividing total cost by # of attendees; however, benefits community as a whole, not just participants (synergistic effects beyond direct cost-benefits)</td>
<td>Politically popular program fully supported by the Mayor’s Office, private donors, and foundations; opportunities for more public funding as GRYD budget has increased</td>
<td>Stakeholder surveys indicate highly increased perceptions of public safety in SNL communities</td>
<td>Stakeholder surveys indicate increased levels of trust and credibility between the police and community (police provide security for events, as well as participate in athletic leagues)</td>
<td>Stakeholder surveys indicate improved trust levels among residents; breaks down urban isolation; builds neighborhood network of others to rely on (crime rates decrease when neighbors look out for one another)</td>
<td>Various community organization leaders, non-profits, faith-based organizations, school officials, and law enforcement officers work together</td>
<td>Initial results show lower gang-related crime rates in SNL communities; however, lack of causality requires more research and empirical analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Highlighted cells indicate preferable performance on respective criteria.*