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Youth Involvement in Street Gangs: Obstacles of Leaving Street Gangs

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OBSTACLES OF LEAVING STREET GANGS

Youth Involvement in Street Gangs: Obstacles of Leaving Street Gangs

Edvaldo Do Rosario Lopes Ferreira

Merrimack College

2021

MERRIMACK COLLEGE

CAPSTONE PAPER SIGNATURE PAGE

CAPSTONE SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF EDUCATION

IN

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

CAPSTONE TITLE: Youth Involvement in Street Gangs: Obstacles of Leaving Street Gangs

AUTHOR: Edvaldo Do Rosario Lopes Ferreira

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OF MASTER OF EDUCATION IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.

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DATE

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Abstract

Even though there seems to be a good number of youth programs that focus on youth street gang prevention, there is a shortage of programs that offer opportunities so youth can leave street gangs and promote a street gang-free lifestyle (Young & Gonzalez, 2013). The workshop, *Obstacles of Leaving Street Gangs*, intended to engage local community residents and organizations who do youth programming in a meaningful discussion about street gangs and the obstacles to leave and also share personal stories of people who have successfully left street gangs. This workshop also meant to share resources that help with these obstacles. It was found that even though every participant who responded to the post-workshop survey has some level of higher education (Bachelors, Masters, trade school training, and Associates), and some of them (42.9%) even work in organizations that deal with street gangs, they still have a lot to learn about street gangs and how they work. This workshop also highlighted the importance of storytelling for social justice workshops like this one because they seem to help humanize street gang members and help the participants empathize with them.

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Youth Involvement in Street Gangs: Obstacles of Leaving Street Gangs

Gangs function as a socializing institution when other institutions fail. Gangs become a problem in the community when they engage in violent and criminal activities. Violence and criminal activities are what separates Street Gangs from a regular group of friends (U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, 1998). The consequences of youth gang membership extend beyond the risk for crime and violence. Gang-involved youth are more likely to engage in substance abuse and high-risk sexual behavior and to experience a wide range of potentially long-term health and social consequences, including school dropout, teen parenthood, family problems and unstable employment (Ritter et al., 2019). Joining a gang is a complex process that involves both individual volition and social influences; therefore, it is difficult to imagine that a single prevention effort for preventing gang membership would be effective for all at-risk youth across the array of social contexts (Ritter et al., 2019).

Without a clear understanding of why and how youth gangs form, preventing their formation is a complex and challenging task. Gangs emerge, grow, dissolve, and disappear for reasons that are scantily understood. This lack of understanding impedes efforts to prevent gang emergence, disrupt existing gangs, and divert youth from them. Youth join street gangs for various reasons. Gangs provide a certain degree of order, solidarity, excitement, and sometimes economic gain for their members. There is a big focus on sense of community as well. These youth tend to be outcasts who barely get opportunities to succeed and usually come from a broken home. There are always exceptions, however youth stay in gangs because they provide them with the sense of belonging, respect, and/or opportunities that they did not get (Howell, 2000). According to the 2019 gang assessment database in Boston, the police are tracking approximately 160 gangs in the Boston area, however only about 30 of these gangs are actively

tied to violence in the city. It is estimated that there are 5,300 individuals tied to these gangs in Boston, with 53% of them (2,800) listed as active members (Dooling, 2019). This shows the need for second chance opportunities. In other words, programs that help ex-gang members who are inactive and looking for opportunities to leave the gang lifestyle. The database also showed that the overwhelming majority of street gang members are people of color (Black and Hispanic). Out of active gang members, two-thirds (66.4%) are Black, non-Hispanic-Latino and almost one-quarter (23.8%) are Hispanic-Latino; and of the members in the Boston database, 99% were male. Minorities representing 90.6% of Boston Police's Gang Database (Dooling, 2019). Shining a light on who community programs that focus on youth gang prevention should pay more attention to.

What we see in many communities, is that parents are not engaged in their children's lives because they are either too busy or do not know what to do. According to the Cape Verdean Association of Boston, many Cape Verdean parents in Boston lack the language, technological skills, and knowledge to be actively present in their children's life. Strong family structure is essential in a child learning the skills to be a successful person. Poor family structure and the lack of strong relationship building skills can definitely lead a child to seeking involvement in gangs. In many cases, youth who lack family bonds look for the "brotherhood" and association a gang can provide. Youth seek gang involvement in order to fill the void of their absent, healthy family life. Further, communities like Dorchester, which has been identified by police as one of the top five hot spots for youth violence in Boston, have historically been without a public voice that reflects the size and opinions of the population. Even if parents and residents want to do something, they often feel powerless to do so. As a result, the community has been victimized by violence and social inequities on an uninterrupted basis.

The purpose of this project is to do a workshop in the Greater Boston community with policymakers, leaders of youth-serving organizations, concerned residents, and B-11 Police officers to engage in a discussion about the obstacles of leaving street gangs.

Literature Review

Start your literature review here. Again, always used double spacing and make sure you are addressing core concepts and at least one theory that applies to your research. You may use sub-headers for your literature review if it helps. When you do this, please use the following format: left-align, italics, bold.

Definition of Gangs

The collection of what constitutes a gang can be somewhat broad. For instance, some jurisdictions reject the presence of gangs while others portray less-serious forms of adolescent law-violating groups as gangs (Miller, 1992). Naber and colleagues in their article, state that the type of definition used can impact estimations of gang prevalence in schools (Naber et al, 2006). There are multiple factors that can be included in defining gangs. These include age, gender, organizational structure, criminal activity, symbolic labeling, and community response. The definition of gang as stated by a variety of authors:

“A gang is an organized social system that is both quasiprivate and quasisecretive and whose size and goals have necessitated that social interaction be governed by a leadership structure that has defined roles; where the authority associated with these roles has been legitimized to the extent that social codes are operational to regulate the behavior of both leadership and rank and file; that plans and provides not only for the social and economic services of its members but also for its own maintenance as an organization; that pursues

such goals irrespective of whether the action is legal; and lacks a bureaucracy” (Jankowski, 1991).

“A gang has the following characteristics: a denotable group consisting primarily of males who are committed to delinquent (including criminal) behavior or values and call forth a consistent negative response from the community such that the community comes to see them as qualitatively different from other groups” (Klein, 1995).

“A gang is a group of individuals who have symbols of membership, permanence, and criminal involvement. A gang member is a person who acknowledges membership in the gang and is regarded as a gang member by other members” (Howell, 2010).

“A gang is a well-defined group of youths between 10 and 22 years old” (Huff, 1998).

Notwithstanding the lack of agreement, certain features frequently show in the definitions, such as formal organizational structure (not a syndicate); identifiable leadership; identified territory; recurrent interaction; and engaging in serious or violent behavior (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2014).

Attractions to Gangs

One of the factors that influence youth’s decision to join a street gang is attraction. These include, in the order of descending importance, protection, fun, respect, financial opportunity, influence from a friend, and pop culture (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Howell, 2010). Street gangs are tempting to youth because they are often associated with social actions youth are

attracted to like parties, hanging out, music, drugs, and prospects to socialize with the opposite sex. Street gangs attract youth because it meets a youth's social needs (Esbensen et al., 1999). Youth also join because of the safety they believe the gang provides, economic reasons, such as selling drugs or making money, for joining a gang and influence from family members who already are part of the gang (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Howell, 2010). Pop culture also portrays street gangs to appear very appealing. The "hip" lifestyle and sensational portrayals of street gangs and their members in movies and tv shows have a significant influence, particularly on more susceptible youth (Howell, 2010). The popularity of street gang culture in today's movies, music, and clothing marketing has served to interconnect gang culture with the general youth subculture (Howell, 2010).

Street gang membership comprises of a gradual adoption of subcultural norms. The code of the street or the beliefs of the gang are implanted in youth from a very young age and is a process that happens over time impacting their beliefs and influencing their behaviors (Mitchell et al., 2016). Gangs' code and culture are strongly linked to forming alliances, following to belief systems, and engaging in risky behaviors like collective illegal and violent behaviors (Mitchell et al., 2016). Even though collective violence and illegal activities are usual gang activities, the relationships and support the gang provides is vital to its members (Mitchell et al., 2016).

The previous sentence serves as a transition to how gangs have the hallmarks of a community. For example, Diego Vigil suggests in his article, that gang membership in some cases may be a consequence of the struggles immigrant youth may experience in dealing with life in a new culture, joined with incompetent parenting and schooling. The language, cultural, and economic barriers they face leave them with few options or resources to better their lives. When confronted with hardship, they pursue a place where they are not marginalized. That place

is usually in street gangs. Street gang life satisfies these youth's need for family and community by filling the void that inadequate family care and schooling leave (Vigil, 2002; Howell, 2010). Sense of community is the degree to which members of the community feel membership or sense of belonging in their community. Sense of community is characterized by attachment and interdependence to fellow community members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Characteristics offered by gangs are the same as important characteristics of community. Gangs offer youth membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs (as discussed above) and shared emotional connection. Gang affiliation provides youth with all these characteristics they have been searching, satisfying their needs, plus, allows them to be a part of a smaller and more homy community instead of a society that marginalizes them (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). McMillan and Chavis portrayed this perfectly in their article showing how the gangs satisfies each category of sense of community. They state that "youth gang is a community generally considered to be composed of alienated individuals" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). They continue that its formation and maintenance depend on the members' shared experience of estrangement from traditional social systems and on the security (emotional and physical) that membership provides (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Gangs form territorial and symbolic boundaries. The way the gang dresses, their symbols, and initiation rituals are foundations for the integration and bonding of members as they differentiate gangs from others. Gangs also put a lot of pressure on members to conform, and gang's rank and triumphs increase the members' bonding even more (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The culture to which youth conform depend immensely on the needs and shared values met by the gang. McMillan and Chavis also point out that youth gangs offer members influence over the environment that is not obtainable to them as individuals, and this resembles college fraternities (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Development of youth also plays a part. Studies show that “belonging to a peer group plays an identification role and becomes a need for young people” (Leibovich et al., 2018). A big part of human behavior has to do with the impressions and assessments that others have of us. Relationships with peers have a significant impact on the emotional well-being of adolescents, and the extent of the relationships is not limited to their families or school context (Leibovich et al., 2018). This “need to belong” can attract youth toward gangs if they fail to find other peer groups to satisfy this belonging need.

Risk Factors

Another factor that influences youth’s decision to join a street gang is risk factors. Studies have categorized risk factors into five categories. These are individual, peer, family, school, and community (O'Brien, et al, 2013). Individual risk factors include negative life events, low self-esteem, delinquent beliefs, attitudes towards the future internalizing behaviors (anxiety, withdrawal), nondelinquent problem behaviors (externalizing behaviors), violence involvement, general delinquency involvement, and limited involvement in conventional activities (O'Brien, et al, 2013). These individual factors can be addressed at home with the family, at school, and in youth programs. Peer risk factors include characteristics of peer networks, affective dimension of networks, association with delinquent peers, commitment to delinquent peers, and association with aggressive peers (O'Brien, et al, 2013). Family risk factors include poor parental supervision, poor parental monitoring, parenting style/hostile, family environment, low attachment to parents/family, sibling antisocial behavior, family structure, and family deviance (O'Brien, et al, 2013). School risk factors include low commitment to school/low educational aspirations, low school attachment, academic achievement, unsafe school environment (O'Brien, et al, 2013). And lastly, community risk factors include criminogenic

neighborhood indicators (e.g., drug use, youth in trouble), neighborhood residents in poverty, and availability of firearms (O'Brien, et al, 2013).

Theoretical Foundation

While there is not a clear and comprehensive definition that clarifies what street gangs are, there are many theories that try to guide empirical work and provide synthesis in explaining why people become members of street gangs (Wood & Alleyne, 2010). The theory of social disorganization, the theory of cultural transmission, and the theory of differential association are some of the most influential theoretical suggestions of involvement in crime, and they hold a lot of value in explaining gang membership (Wood & Alleyne, 2010).

Theory of Social Disorganization. With this theory, Thrasher argues that economic destabilization supplies social disorganization, which leads to the collapse of conventional social institutions like schools, church, and mainly, the family (Thrasher, 1927). He argues that these institutions have failed to hold youth's interest and abandons them or actually forces them onto the street (Thrasher, 1927). "The gradual erosion of conventional establishments meant they were weakened and unable to satisfy the needs of the people such that they gradually lost the ability to control the behavior of the area's populace" (Thrasher, 1927). This theory validates how community members and institutions fail to come together to share values or solve problems. As a result, gangs may provide a space of shared values and problem-solving when the community lacks any. Therefore, this social disorganization can push youth towards gangs to satisfy their needs. Thrasher adds as an example, that one of the reasons social institutions fail to satisfy the needs of the youth, is because so many people living in disorganized areas are immigrants. He goes on to say that immigrant parents are incapable of helping their children adapt to a new culture because the lack of familiarity with local customs. Moreover, the lack of

support from recognized social institutions such as schools fail to counterbalance this parental ignorance (Thrasher, 1927; Wood & Alleyne, 2010). In their turn, youth look to compensate this lack of support by looking somewhere else, and they usually find this sense of fitting in in gangs. This theory also shines a light to the issue that when recognized social institutions fail to offer better or other opportunities to youth, they will continue to frequent gangs.

Theory of Cultural Transmission. Shaw and McKay further developed Thrasher's concepts by arguing that socially disorganized neighborhoods culturally transmit criminal traditions which are as transmissible as any other cultural elements (Shaw & McKay, 1942). This theory argues that people learn from their community. They argue that children from families who live in poor inner-cities have low levels of functional authority, submit to delinquent behavior once they are exposed to it (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Consequently, expanding on Thrasher, the gang becomes the mechanism for learning community culture. Gangs become their own communities and set a cultural framework that youth can engage with in the absence of one in their own community. They also argue that in such a cultural climate, gang membership develops into a substitute to inadequate legitimate conventions. When institutions like family, school, church and government all fail to effectively provide for the youth, youth will look toward groups like gangs which offer a social support system in socially disorganized communities (Papachristos & Kirk, 2006). Shaw and McKay, by observing that middle-class youth who not exposed to delinquent traditions and are adequately controlled by parents in a stable environment do not engage in violent behaviors, they concluded that it is the environment and not the ethnic identity of the individual that determines involvement in crime (Shaw & McKay, 1942).

Theory of Differential Association. Differential association argues that criminal behavior is learned, and the major share of learning originates from inside important personal groups (Sutherland & Cressey, 1960). Exposure to behaviors of members of the personal group impacts the behaviors of the individual. This theory also mentions the importance of example and tutelage in the ability of youth to learn skills, and this can be applied to learning criminality (Sutherland & Cressey, 1960). Sutherland blames gangs for the principal part of criminal learning process. This theory looks not only to the environment for explanations of criminal behavior, but it considered the transmission and development of psychological concepts such as attitudes and beliefs about crime. By drawing on psychological social learning processes, the theory proposes that crime is learned through the development of beliefs that crime is acceptable in some situations. Gangs provide youth with positive reinforcement of criminal involvement like approval of members, and financial gains. Also, the imitation of the criminal behavior of other people, especially they are valued individuals (Wood & Alleyne, 2010). All of these theories put together, really put emphasis on strengthening the community. Youth may be attracted to gangs because they lack a viable and strong community that collectively shares values and culture. In the absence of this source of information and culture from their regular community, youth create their own (i.e., gangs) which then become their “community”. From this created community (i.e., gangs), they look to compensate lack of support, set a cultural framework that youth can engage with in the absence of one, and learn values from members.

Prevention and Intervention Programs

According to the research, gang programs can be classified generally into three categories: prevention, intervention, and suppression. In general, prevention strategies keep youths from joining gangs, while intervention strategies seek to reduce the criminal activities of

gangs by pulling youths away from gangs. These strategies typically include community organization, early childhood programs, school-based interventions, and afterschool programs (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2014).

A lot of these programs are designed to address the risk factors for gang membership by providing protective factors to strengthen a youth's resilience toward gang involvement. The greater the number of risk factors to which youths are exposed, the greater their risk of joining a street gang. Once a youth enters a street gang, the nature of street gangs and their involvement in serious crime and violence produces many additional risk factors for that individual (Thornberry, 1998). Longitudinal studies of adolescents in multiple sites (Seattle, WA and Rochester, NY) have identified the causal risk factors for gang membership within each domain (Thornberry 1998; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2014).

In addition to identifying risk factors to address prevention and intervention programs, developers and community leaders need to consider the timing of the programming. Because youths who join gangs tend to possess a great need for belonging at about age 13, join 6 months after this great need sets in, and have criminal records by the time they turn 14 (Huff, 1998). Research indicates that programs have a window of opportunity for when effective prevention is best used. This underscores the need for effective gang resistance education programs and other primary and secondary prevention and intervention initiatives directed at preteens, especially those prone to delinquent and violent behavior (Huff, 1998; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2014).

Suppression programs use the full force of the law. Generally, through a combination of policing, prosecution, and incarceration, they deter the criminal activities of entire gangs, dissolve gangs, and remove individual gang members from gangs (Howell, 2000). Characteristic

suppression programs include street sweeps, school-based law enforcement programs that use surveillance and buy–bust operations, civil procedures that use gang membership to define arrest for conspiracy, prosecution programs, and special gang probation and parole caseloads with high levels of surveillance and more stringent revocation rules for gang members (Klein, 2004; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2014).

What all these programs fail to acknowledge or include is a replacement for community. These programs focus on the individual or the family, often times trying to create personal incentives for leaving but never recognize the benefit of the “gang community.” As research shows, youth may be attracted to gangs because they lack a viable and strong community that collectively shares values and culture (Wood & Alleyne, 2010). If youth are seeking community and finding it within these gangs, then taking it away without something to replace it can have detrimental effects on the youth. It will either drive youth to return or will leave youth without a community, which can lead to other serious socio-emotional and development issues. Most of these gang programs in place are motivated by educating youth on the dangers of gang membership instead of offering them an alternative. Therefore, to address the void of the sense of community that youth are searching, gang programs have to focus on delivering secure and beneficial alternatives. Besides prevention, this method will also benefit youth who want to leave the gang lifestyle and provide them with alternatives that meet their needs, so they do not have to go back to gangs.

Current Project Impact on Youth and Community

The research suggests that most government and private programs for gang prevention have been left unevaluated, and the few evaluated programs have either failed to decrease gang violence or have actually increased it (Sherman et al, 1998). Moreover, gang prevention

programs have ignored the most likely causes of the recent growth of gangs like lack of a viable and strong community that collectively shares values and culture. This workshop will work with community institutions, leaders of nonprofits that are youth-serving organizations, middle-school and high school teachers, and B-11 Police officers to explain how gangs create a community, and in this created community (i.e., gangs), youth look to compensate lack of support, set a cultural framework they can engage with in the absence of one. Gang affiliation provides youth with the sense of community they have been searching, satisfying their needs. Therefore, to address the void of the sense of community that youth are searching, gang programs have to focus on delivering secure and beneficial alternatives. This will provide better alternatives for youth who want to leave the gang lifestyle. Research found that, the extensive economic disturbances of families resulting from the lack of legitimate job opportunities, steamed by social disorganization and neighborhood-level conditions. The desperateness experienced people living in these communities lead to a denial of ordinary or conventional society, creating a community (i.e., gangs) of its own by those who live according to the code of the street (Mitchell, et al, 2016).

Project Plan

The workshop, Obstacles of leaving street gangs, intends to engage local community residents and organizations with youth programing in a meaningful discussion about street gangs and the obstacles to leave. This workshop also intends to share personal stories of people who have successfully left street-gangs and share resources. There is a good number of youth programing that focus on youth street gang prevention, but little is being done to help youth get out of street gangs and get their life back on track (Young & Gonzalez, 2013). This workshop will raise awareness of this fact and share resources that can help youth in this situation.

Situation Statement

Without a clear understanding of why and how youth gangs form, preventing their formation is a complex and challenging task. Gangs emerge, grow, dissolve, and disappear for reasons that are scantily understood. This lack of understanding impedes efforts to prevent gang emergence, disrupt existing gangs, and divert youth from them. Youth join street gangs for various reasons. Gangs provide a certain degree of order, solidarity, excitement, and sometimes economic gain for their members. There is a big focus on sense of community as well. These youth tend to be outcasts who barely get opportunities to succeed and usually come from a broken home. There are always exceptions, however youth stay in gangs because they provide them with the sense of belonging, respect, and/or opportunities that they did not get (Howell, 2000).

It is difficult to imagine that a single effort for preventing gang membership would be effective for all at-risk youth across the array of social contexts (Simon et al, 2013). In addition, even though there seems to be a good number of youth programming that focus on youth street gang prevention, there is a shortage of programs that offer opportunities to youth who have left street gangs and promote a street gang free lifestyle (Young & Gonzalez, 2013). Street gang programs have ignored the most likely causes of the recent growth of gangs like lack of a viable and strong community that collectively shares values and culture (Young & Gonzalez, 2013).

Define Your Goals

- Discuss the evidence on community violence, including gang information from actual gang members and City of Boston Trauma Response team workers.
- Share experiences and knowledge on obstacles of leaving street gangs.

- Explain how gangs create a community, and in this created community, youth look to compensate lack of support, set a cultural framework they can engage with in the absence of one.
- To address the void of the sense of community that youth are searching, gang programs have to focus on delivering secure and beneficial alternatives.
- Discuss and share ideas that programs that promote a gang free lifestyle must address.
- Express the importance of safeguarding and promoting a violence-free lifestyle and recognize the lack of programs and resources that do such.
- Predict challenges youth programs may encounter when addressing violence
- Propose that organizations that have youth programs focused on gang prevention or gang-free lifestyle promotion and policy makers, increase focus on:
 - Academic achievement
 - Employability
 - Community connection
 - Financial Opportunities
- Make policymakers and practitioners engage in a new way of thinking about street gang involvement focus on local factors, Intersectionality, and theories of cultural transmission, social disorganization, and differential association

Target Audience and Stakeholders

- Policymakers
- Leaders of youth-serving organizations
 - Youth Development programs with an intentional focus on violence prevention.

- Youth and young adult programs that fill current needs in violence prevention, intervention, or response services
- Middle-school and High school teachers
- B-11 Police officers
- Active and ex-street gang members
- Concerned community members

Crafting a Clear Message

A single effort for preventing street gang membership or getting youth to leave street gangs is not effective for all at-risk youth across the array of social contexts. First, we have to discover the local factors for youth involvement in youth gangs and provide prevention, intervention, and enforcement programs that conflict those factors and give teens better options. Youth also have to be aware of the resources they have in their disposal. We cannot expect teens to not join street gangs or to leave street gangs without offering them better financial, social, and cultural options. Gangs create a community, and in this created community (i.e., gangs), youth look to compensate lack of support, set a cultural framework they can engage with in the absence of one. To address the void of the sense of community that youth are searching, street gang programs have to focus on delivering secure and beneficial alternatives and address the right obstacles.

Incentives for Engagement

Stakeholder: Organizations with youth programing; Incentive: It will provide support for agencies and community members to come together to discuss and develop plans to address issues of gang violence and to increase their capacity to deal with the issues of gang violence (obstacles of leaving). It will provide networking opportunities for agencies and organizations; It

will assist organizations to deliver services to fill identified gaps in services by educating them on local factors for youth street gang involvement, how intersectionality, and theories of cultural transmission, social disorganization, and differential association impact youth street gang involvement.

Stakeholder: Organizations that have youth programming, concerned residents, active and ex-street gang members, Policymakers, B-11 Police officers; Middle-school and High school teachers; Incentive: It will provide a place for information on resources, strategies, services, best practices and funding to prevent, intervene in and suppress gang violence; Discuss action plans and strategies directed toward a gang-free lifestyle promotion; It will identify needs and gaps current local youth programs that focus on violence intervention; It will raise awareness on the obstacles of leaving street gangs and what issues need to be tackled.

Identify Outreach Methods

My fellowship site (The Cape Verdean Association of Boston) has a youth program and has a large network of partners and connections. I will design a flyer and share it with the vast network of organizations and partners that focus on youth programming. I will personally invite people who I have met working there who I think would benefit from the forum. I will also share this flyer on social media and have people RSVP if they want to participate.

Invited guests will include leaders from non-profits such as Family Nurturing Center, Project Right, Violence Intervention & Prevention (VIP), Dorchester Bay, Teen Center at Saint Peter's, Boston Centers for Youth & Families (BCYF), Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative's (DSNI), Cape Verdean Association of Boston. It will also include police officers from Boston Police Department C-11, and schoolteachers from Jeremiah Burke High School and Madison Park High School.

Responsibilities Chart

NAME	ORGANIZATION OR AFFILIATION	RESPONSIBILITIES	CONTACT INFORMATION
Edvaldo Ferreira	Merrimack College/Cape Verdean Association of Boston (CVAB)	Facilitator	edvaldolopesferreira@gmail.com; 857-216-7236
Tony Galvao	President of My Brother's Keeper 617	First Panelist	zmrodrigues84@gmail.com
Jose "Zee" Rodrigues	1/6 Founder of My Brother's Keeper 617	Second Panelist	info@mbk617.org

Tools/Measure to Assess Progress

Two panelists booked; Collected questions for the panelists; Collected data from group activities; Post-workshop evaluation surveys; Observations during and after the workshop.

Implementation Timeline

March 2021	3/30: Obstacles of Leaving Street Gangs Workshop
April 2021	4/21: Full capstone draft due 4/30: Submit final capstone paper for publication

Logical Framework

Problem Analysis	
<i>Effect(s) of the Problem</i>	Street gang programs are ignoring the most likely causes of the recent growth of gangs like lack of a viable and strong community that collectively shares values and culture that allows for youth to leave street gangs.
<i>Problem Statement</i>	Street gang programs have to focus on delivering secure and beneficial alternatives, to fill the void of the sense of community that youth are searching for, incentivizing them to leave street gangs.
<i>Cause 1</i>	Lack of better financial, social, and cultural options
<i>Cause 2</i>	Social Institutions failing to provide a sense of community and belonging

<i>Long-Term Outcome(s)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce the number of youths who are members of street gangs
<i>Intermediate Outcome</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the number of gang programs that focus on delivering secure and beneficial alternatives to street gang membership
<i>Short-term Outcome 1</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gang programs recognizing the importance of safeguarding and promoting a violence-free lifestyle and recognizing the lack of programs and resources that do such.
<i>Short-term Outcome 2</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gang programs switch focus to academic achievement, employability, community connection, and financial opportunities

<i>Short-Term Outcome:</i> Gang programs recognizing the importance of safeguarding and promoting a violence-free lifestyle and recognizing the lack of programs and resources that do such.		
Output(s) for Short-Term Outcome	Activities for identified Outputs	Inputs for identified Outputs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observations during workshop 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panelists
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-Workshop Survey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Storytelling/Experience sharing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshop

Methodology

The workshop, Obstacles of leaving street gangs, intends to engage local community residents and organizations who do youth programming in a meaningful discussion about street gangs and the obstacles to leave. This workshop also intends to share personal stories of people who have successfully left street gang and share resources.

Participants

The workshop was open to any resident of the greater Roxbury and Dorchester area of Boston, MA. Participants were recruited through various local community agencies, with a focus on targeting community members who are interested in gang reduction, current and former gang members, police and law enforcement, and local community leadership.

The workshop utilized two panelists from the community. The first panelist was Tony Galvao, who is the President of My Brother's Keeper 617 (MBK617), and the second panelist was Jose Elisio Rodrigues, one of the founders of MBK617.

Materials

The workshop was held online therefore multiple online tools were utilized. The workshop itself took place through Zoom. Kahoot, a game application, was used as an activity to test the participants knowledge of current street gang statistics and facts. The participants also shared their opinions, with the help of the panelists (experts) on problems that programs that promote a street gang free lifestyle have to address. This was done using Google Jamboard. Lastly, the materials and information on the obstacles of leaving street gangs presented by the panelists was also made available to all participants through email. Finally, a post-workshop survey using Google Forms was sent out to all the participants to measure the effectiveness of

the workshop, what they got out of it, and whether or not they would use what they learned in this workshop.

Procedure

The event started at 6:00 PM and the Zoom room was opened 20 minutes before the workshop started. Participants were welcomed in and a brief introduction of the facilitator, the panelists, was done.

To start, participants engaged in a Kahoot game to test their knowledge of street gang statistics and facts. This tested their knowledge about the issue coming into the workshop and got them excited for the panelists' presentation. Afterwards, a brief discussion of the correct answers was done to help debrief the audience on inaccurate ideas about street gangs.

After the game, the two panelists presented on their experiences and knowledge on obstacles of leaving street gangs, as well as highlighting the programs that can help members leave street gangs and live a street gang free life. At the conclusion of the panelists' presentation, there was a questions and answers (Q&A) section where participants could ask questions themselves or submit them anonymously.

Participants were then broken into small groups with the panelists to discuss obstacles they did not know about, obstacles that were not mentioned by the panelists, and ways to overcome these obstacles. They collectively used Google Jamboard to share ideas that these programs that promote a gang free lifestyle must address and shared more resources. There were also observers coordinating and taking notes from the small group discussions for analysis.

The participants were brought back from their small group activity and a short debrief session was held to discuss their efforts. Once done, the facilitator proceeded to close the workshop by thanking the participants and asking them to complete a postworkshop survey.

Results

A total of 25 participants attended the workshop. The participants included individuals who work in an organization that does youth programming (42.9%), concerned residents (35.7%), ex-gang members (14.2%), and neighborhood leaders (7.1%). Almost all participants, 92.9%, reported that they know someone, including themselves, who is or was a member of a street gang.

The participants who responded to the post workshop survey ranged in age from 18-25 years old (28.6%), 26-32 years old (28.6%), 33–50 years old (35.7%), and individuals over the age of 50 (7.1%). Approximately 64.3% (n=9) of the participants were male and 35.7% (n=5) were females. Regarding level of education, 57.1% (n=8) of the participants who responded have a Bachelor's degree, 14.3% (n=2) have an Associate's degree, 7.1% (n=1) have a trade/technical/vocational training certificate, 14.3% (n=2) have Master's degree, and 7.1% (n=1) reported having some college. Lastly, 85.8% (n=12) of the participants were Black/African American or Cabo Verdean, and 14.2% (n=2) were White or Middle Eastern.

Quantitative Analysis from Workshop Game

The Kahoot game was used as an icebreaker and also to test the knowledge of the participants, included facts and statistics about street gangs. Twelve participants engaged in the game activity. The mean score was 40.5%, with the highest score being 71% and the lowest score being 14%. Three participants scored over 50%.

Qualitative Analysis from the Google Jamboard Sessions

Some of the themes that came out of the first group Jamboard session about obstacles of leaving street gangs that were not mentioned or not talked about enough during the panelists'

presentation were stigma, learning new skills, racism, gang extraction (moving to a better neighborhood).

The second Jamboard session was just the participants sharing resources and they shared resources like the Nubian exhibit at MFA, the Book of Proverbs, experienced mentors, MBK617, and organizations who carry the voice of the streets.

Quantitative Analysis from the Post-Workshop Survey

The Post-workshop survey had 14 responses. Of the 14 responses, 12 people rated the workshop a 4 out of 4 (excellent) and 2 people rated it a 3 out of 4 (Good).

Participants were asked if the workshop increased their knowledge of youth gang involvement issues, with 8 stating they agree, while 6 stated they strongly agree.

Participants were asked three questions regarding the relevancy and clarity of the workshop. All participants agreed that the workshop discussed issues they felt were relevant to the community, that issues were presented clearly, and that the discussion were relevant to the topic.

Participants were then asked questions about their potential next steps. 5 agreed that they would share the information with others and 9 strongly agreed while all 14 stated they explore the topic further. With regards to taking direct action, all 14 said they would like to do something about this in their community and said they would like more community education around the topic.

Of the 14 people who responded to the survey, 12 of them (85.7%) responded “Yes” to the question “Would you be interested about learning more about the obstacles of leaving street gangs?” and 2 (14.3%) responded “Maybe.” From the participants, 10 (71.4%) reported that they are “Very likely” to suggest that their community organizations tackle these obstacles in their youth program and 4 (28.6%) reported that they are “Likely.” Also, 9 participants (64.3%) rated

the resources provided by this workshop as “Very good,” and 4 (33.3%) rated them as “Good,” and 1 (7.1%) rated them as “Fair.”

Qualitative Analysis from the Post-Workshop Survey

When answering what parts of this workshop worked really well, participants mentioned the Kahoot game including stats and facts about street gangs (n=5), the presentation from the panelists along with the questions and answers session that followed (n=7), and the small-group discussions about the obstacles of leaving street gangs (n=4).

When asked how this workshop could be improved, the participants mentioned allowing more time for discussions (n=4), having the panelists talk more about their experiences and the experiences of the people they work with (n=4), having more young people participate in the workshop and listening to obstacles directly from them (n=1), and focusing on gang members being released from jail and what type of programs are offered to them (n=1).

Lastly, they were asked to mention some of the obstacles of leaving street gangs they felt were important but were not mentioned in the workshop. They mentioned fear, psychological issues, the importance of meeting the youth where they are, going more in depth about the obstacles, how to find other resources, trauma, how society view them, friends and family.

Discussion

The workshop, Obstacles of leaving street gangs, intended to engage local community residents and organizations who do youth programming in a meaningful discussion about street gangs and the obstacles to leave. This workshop also intended to share personal stories of people who have successfully left street gang and share resources. My Brother’s Keeper 617 (MBK617) have been doing great work in the community helping out youth involved in street gangs in the

Greater Boston area. They were excited to participate in this workshop and not only share their stories and educate the participants about street gangs, but also learn from them and hear their stories. A lot of resources were shared including a grant that was offered to MBK617 for Violence Intervention from the Boston Public Health Commission so they can continue to serve the community and help the youth in the Greater Boston area.

Participants who attended this workshop really seemed to love the Kahoot game used as an icebreaker at the beginning. Three responses to the post-workshop survey mentioned this activity as an answer to what part of this workshop worked really well. They described the activity as being fun and educational, and that it set the stage for the entire presentation. Considering this activity was included to get people interested and engaged with the presentation, the positive response indicates that an activity like this does indeed pave the way for active learning. This activity was also included to test the knowledge of the participants about street gangs. It included some facts and statistics from the National Gang Center. From the findings section data, we can see that the participants did not do particularly well on this quiz with an average score of 40.5% and only three participants scoring over 50%. The results help us understand that people's knowledge about street gangs might be lacking. They had preconceived notions and were really surprised when presented with actual facts and statistics. This goes to show that even though every participant who responded to the post-workshop survey has some level of higher education (bachelors, masters, trade school training, and associates), and some of them (42.9%) even work in organizations that deal with street gangs, they still have a lot to learn about street gangs and how they work.

Participants were genuinely interested in learning more about the subject as evidenced by 85.7% of them responding that they would be interested in learning more on the post-workshop

survey. It was also evidenced by the discussions where people were asking for this workshop to be repeated, and by the emails I got after the workshop asking for more information about the resources shared and for the workshop recording (it should be noted, the workshop was not recorded).

People responded positively, agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements that the workshop increased their knowledge of youth gang involvement issues, that the issues discussed in this workshop are relevant to their community, that the issues were presented in a clearly matter, that the discussions were relevant for this topic, that they will share information they learned with others, that they will explore this topic further on their own, that they would like to do something like this in their community, and that they would like more community education around topics like this. Even though people responded that were interested in the topic and in learning more, not a lot of participants were actually participating during the workshop. Most of them were just listening and if they did ask questions, they preferred to do so anonymously. After talking to the panelists, we reached the assumption that many of the participants, especially the ones considered active-gang members, did not feel comfortable asking questions themselves or even participating in the discussions. However, three of them reached out to MBK617 after the workshop. They may be a key lesson when teaching on the topic of gangs (or any social justice issue), participants might be engaged in the workshop even if they are not participating. It is important to offer them a way to engage anonymously or provide a way to reach out after the workshop to ask question or express concerns.

Aside from the Kahoot game, people really enjoyed the questions and answers (Q&A) section. The vast majority of the questions were directed to the panelists, who are ex-street gang members themselves, to share their stories and give advice. Eight participants mentioned that

they felt the Q&A session portion of the workshop worked really well. This helps us understand that people really value real life experiences and stories. According to them, it is more believable, exciting, and it engages people more.

In thinking about the process of teaching a social justice topic, specifically street gang related, is that it is a very taboo topic to some people. People who are not very familiar with working with street gangs have their beliefs, which are often inaccurate, about street gangs and usually do not sympathize with them. The discussions identified that listening to ex-gang member's stories, particularly mentioning why they joined this life and what they have been through, helps these people sympathize and begin to change their beliefs.

Limitations of the Study

Though this workshop contained a diverse group of people and representatives of different organizations, there were limitations to it. Giving that the workshop was only two hours long and that there are an extensive number of obstacles of leaving street gang, the panelists were not able to cover all of them. They covered what they considered to be the most important ones for their community. However, each community is different. What might be relevant in one community, might not be relevant in other. Also, because of the time constraint of the presentation the speakers were not able to go as in depth on a specific issue or topic as they might have wished. Therefore, while participants identified on the post-evaluation that the obstacles of leaving street gangs are important to understand, but we did not talk about it enough in the workshop. These obstacles include fear, psychological issues, acceptance in the community, meeting the youth where they are, trauma, how society views them, which are all complex issues and clearly needed more time to explore.

Participants wanted this workshop to bring more people who have been in street gangs to share their stories and give their advice. However, it was very hard to find ex-street gang members willing to share their stories and participate in this workshop.

Lastly, it was very hard to get the participants to respond to the post-workshop evaluation survey. Even though there were 25 participants on Zoom in the workshop, not including the facilitator and panelists, only 14 participants (56%) answered the post-workshop evaluation survey. Multiple email reminders were sent but this did not increase the response rate. In the post-workshop evaluation survey, no one identified themselves as an active gang member or a police officer, even though there were three active gang members and two police officers present at the workshop. It would have been beneficial to get their perspective about what they got out of the workshop.

Implications for Future Studies

Recommendations for future iterations of this workshop are based on observations made during this workshop and suggestions from the participants. Given that the majority of questions asked during the workshop were asking the panelists for their experience, it would be beneficial to dedicate a larger amount of time to Storytelling. This workshop exhibited the importance of storytelling for social justice workshops. For example, consider a sensitive subject like street gangs where people usually have preconceived assumptions about street gang members. Storytelling in these types of social justice workshops seems to help humanize street gang members and help the participants empathize with them.

One other suggestion is one made by two of the participants. They suggested that workshops like this have more young people involved in street gang members participate in the workshop. This is a great recommendation for future iterations of this workshop because

participants would be listening to the obstacles of leaving street gangs directly from them. This would elevate the legitimacy of the workshop and make sure the workshop deals with current and relevant obstacles of leaving street gangs.

Last implication, as evidenced by the aftermath of this workshop, is to make sure there are easy ways for the participants to reach out and the resources shared during the workshop are sent out to the participants after the workshop. Most of the engagement with active street gang members and concern residents happened after the workshop was over. People sent out emails with questions and concerns. It would be beneficial to set up ways people can reach out with questions and concerns they were not comfortable sharing during the workshop, and to make sure these ways of reaching out are communicated multiple times during the workshop.

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Appendix A

Post-Workshop Evaluation Survey

Thank you so much for attending my workshop on “The Obstacles of Leaving Street Gangs.” I am conducting this workshop for my Capstone Project as part of my Master’s in Community Engagement at Merrimack College. Please take a moment to fill out these questions to help me in the research portion of my project. All answers will be confidential and will only be used for data collection purposes. I appreciate you taking the time to support my learning by helping me to gain insights on my workshop.

* Required

Workshop Information

1. Overall, how would you rate this workshop? (Poor, Fair, Good, Excellent) *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Poor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

2. How strongly do you agree with the following statements? *

Check all that apply.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The event increased my knowledge of youth gang involvement issues.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The issues discussed in this workshop are relevant to my community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The issues were presented in a clear matter.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The discussions were relevant for this topic.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I will share the information I learned from the this workshop with others.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I will explore this topic further on my own or with others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would like to do something about this in my community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would like more community education around topics like this	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

3. Would you be interested about learning more about the obstacles of leaving street gangs? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

4. How likely are you to suggest that your organization/community organizations tackle these obstacles in their youth program? (Not at likely, Somewhat likely, Likely, Very likely) *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Not at all likely	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very likely

5. How would you rate the resources provided by this workshop? *

Mark only one oval.

- Very Poor
- Poor
- Fair
- Good
- Very Good

6. What part of this workshop worked really well? *

7. What are some obstacles of leaving street gangs you feel are important, but we failed to mention or did not talk about enough in this workshop? *

8. Other than what you might have stated in the previous question, how could we improve this workshop? *

Personal Information

What is your age? *

Mark only one oval.

- Under 18
- 18-25
- 26-32
- 33-50
- 50+

9. Gender *

Mark only one oval.

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary / non-gender conforming
- Prefer not to say
- Other:

10. How would you identify yourself? *

Mark only one oval.

- Current Gang Member
- Ex-Gang Member
- Street worker
- I work in an organization that does Youth Programing
- Policymaker
- Police Officer
- Concerned Resident
- Other:

11. Do you personally know anyone, including yourself, who is or was a member of a street gang? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

12. Ethnicity (Check all that apply) *

Check all that apply.

- White
- Hispanic / Latinx
- Black / African American
- Native American / American Indian
- Asian
- Middle Eastern / North African
- Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander
- Cape Verdean
- Prefer not to say

Other: _____

13. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? *

Mark only one oval.

- None
- Some high school, no diploma
- High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent
- Some college
- Trade/technical/vocational training
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Professional degree
- Doctorate degree
- Other:

Appendix B

Figure 1. Flyer for Obstacles of Leaving Street gangs Workshop.

 **MERRIMACK COLLEGE**

Obstacles of Leaving Street Gangs:
Raising Awareness and Sharing Resources

*Edvaldo Ferreira's Master's Capstone Project.
Featuring Tony Galvao and Jose "Zee" Elisio Rodrigues, Neighborhood Leaders and founders of MBK617.*

TUESDAY, MARCH 30, 2021
5-6:50 p.m. | Via Zoom

 **MBK** 

"You don't build a community; you inspire people, then people build the community" – Tony Galvao.

Appendix C

Figure 2. Age of the participants who completed the Post-workshop survey.

What is your age?
14 responses

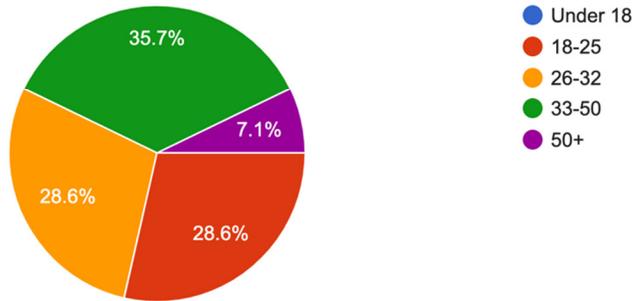


Figure 3. How participants who completed the Post-workshop survey identified themselves.

How would you identify yourself?
14 responses

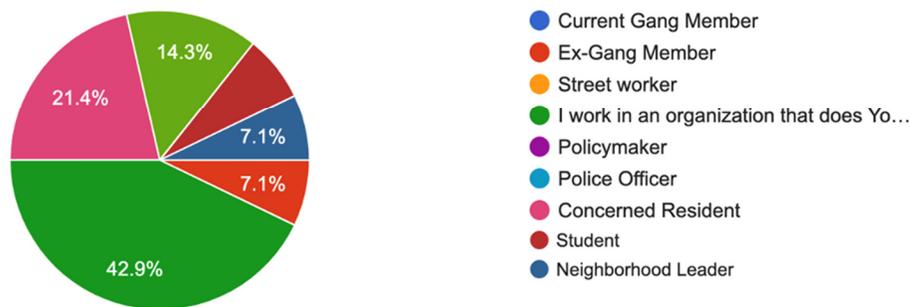


Figure 4. Highest degree or level of school completed by the participants who completed the Post-workshop survey.

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?
14 responses

