

## Youth and Gangs

by Fr. Ramón Domínguez, Y.A.

The upswing of news articles and commentaries on the presence of gangs in our area should concern our parish communities and youth leaders, if for no other reason but to ensure the safety of the youth in our care. A more genuine response to this area of concern is to see what can be done to prevent and/or to reach out to those youth who are on the fringes so that they can see the truth of the love of God and recognize the pain and empty promises offered by the gang lifestyle.

Gangs have existed in the United States for as long as we have been a nation. Gangs have come in different flavors, ethnicities and manifestations. Gangs should not be seen as a Hispanic (or African-American, or other minority group) problem. The typical origin of a gang is a group of culturally isolated or marginalized individuals who decide to band together for mutual protection and support. In the case of gangs, what might have begun as an exercise in self-defense, has been co-opted by criminal elements to provide a circle of protection from the law and a context in which its members can seem to enjoy power and authority over others.

“No one is sure when or why they emerged in the United States. The earliest record of their appearance in the United States may have been as early as 1783, as the American Revolution ended. They may have emerged spontaneously from adolescent play groups or as a collective response to urban conditions in this country. Some suggest they first emerged following the Mexican migration to the Southwest after the Mexican Revolution in 1813. They may have grown out of difficulties Mexican youth encountered with social and cultural adjustment to the American way of life under the extremely poor conditions of the Southwest. Gangs appear to have spread in New England in the early 1800’s as the Industrial Revolution gained momentum in the first large cities in the United States: New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. ... Early in American history, gangs seem to have been most visible and most violent during periods of rapid population shifts.” (*cited from the Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention Bulletin, August 1998*)

In our present day, gangs represent for many disadvantaged or disengaged youth an opportunity to belong, to succeed, in short to “be something”. For those in families with parents who are working multiple jobs with little time at home, or in others where the family is dysfunctional and fragmented, gangs can often represent for these suffering youth an opportunity to a part of a family, and to have people that care for them and will be there for them always...or, at least, that is what they are promised.

Unfortunately, while this may be true at first, young gang members will eventually come to understand that this comes at a price and with an unexpected reality. The price is often a loss of ties and relationships with one’s own family of origin (however imperfect it may be). But more seriously it is a loss of appropriate social interaction and bonding which is replaced by self-centered and at times violent or destructive behaviors. While most gang leaders speak positively about how the gang is united and is a family and that they would put themselves on the line (even to die for each other), more often the reality is such that they will only do this when their self-interests are at risk. If it is not in their self-interest, the gang can easily leave one behind and move on. Gangs are a type of pyramid scheme where those on the bottom only serve those on the top with little return coming down, except for what is necessary to keep them interested (i.e., availability of drugs, alcohol, parties, excitement, sexual opportunities, etc.).

“Research indicates that parents play a pivotal role in keeping young people out of gangs. Negative influences within the family — including domestic violence, child abuse, harsh or inconsistent parenting practices, and/or drug/alcohol abuse by family members — can increase the risk that a youth will join a gang.” (cited from *Parents’ Guide to Gangs*, OJJDP, 2009)

In developing an effective outreach to all types of youth, the Director of Youth Ministry (DYM) must first become attentive to outward signs that can accompany gang involvement. This is an important first step to ensure the safety of other program participants. Secondly, the DYM must engage these youth in conversations and help foster in them an increased awareness of the dangers and risks of the gang life and, more importantly, the tremendous promises and joys that come with living a life rooted in Gospel values.

Many resources exist to assist parents and the DYM in recognizing potential gang related behaviors. No single set of characteristics or behaviors should be taken as “proof” of gang involvement but they should all be taken into consideration. Each action, style, set of clothing, etc. that a young person wears or values is an indicator at least at some level of either something they are or something they aspire to or esteem. When these indicators point away from Christ, it is important to see how we can engage them to encounter Christ in a deep, personal and caring way rather than to be critical and negative of their behaviors. The most effective way to get a young person to change is to love them and to motivate them to see that what you are proposing is indeed what they are longing for.



**Some resources to assist in detecting possible behavioral indicators and other gang culture information include:**

[www.ojjdp.gov](http://www.ojjdp.gov)

(U.S. Dept. of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP))

[www.nationalgangcenter.gov](http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov)

(a site run on behalf of OJJDP)

[www.preventgangsnova.org](http://www.preventgangsnova.org)

(which includes links to individual northern Virginia local governments and more resources)

The gang lifestyle is often a very addictive life. Even youth who come to realize that they want to discontinue, often find it very hard and can relapse back into old patterns, much in the same way that drug/alcohol users fall back into abuse when faced with a tough day or immediate temptations without adequate external support. The most important motivator to prevent gang involvement is a positive parental relationship and ultimately one which brings the young person to live in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Toward this end, relationships are modeled and lived rather than taught and instructed. The young person must first be engaged in a personal relationship with the DYM or other youth leader to come to know Christ through them. Then it is through this relationship that they will feel confident to journey forth into the great joys that await them in the life of grace.

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