

PROJECT RATIONALE

4REAL: A Juvenile Gang Prevention Program

Prepared

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Abstract

Gangs are a present danger in many major cities across the United States with their illegal activities causing harm to individual members and society. Gangs are formed as a result of underlying systemic and social issues such as disparities in education and socio-economic opportunities. Young children and adolescents living in high-crime areas and those who interact with gang members are also at the highest risk of joining these groups.

One method of reducing gang enrollment involves utilizing a community-based program that aims to discourage youths from joining gangs. This project rationale presents a community-based program called 4REAL (Resiliency, Empowerment, Advocacy, Leadership) that aims to prevent the recruitment of youth to gangs. 4REAL consists of three essential programs: SWERV (Self-Worth Empowering Resilient Vehicles), KEYS (Knowledge Empowering Youth & Success), and RAMSES (Research and Methods Sustaining Engagement Security). The three programs work in tandem to help guide at-risk youth in navigating the challenges and factors that could lead them to join a gang. The project rationale is based on Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective (1978) and utilizes autoethnography for its method.

Keywords: Gang prevention, youth, nonprofit, community-based programs, autoethnography.

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Introduction

Klein et al. (2001) define a gang as "any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity" (p. 10). Gangs represent a major threat to the well-being of society, with a significant portion of homicides in the United States linked to these groups (Howell & Griffiths, 2018; Shute, 2008). For example, McDaniel (2012) points out that between 2000 and 2006 youth gangs were responsible for 20 % of all homicides in the 88 largest U.S. cities. The community is the most negatively affected by gangs with statistics indicating a 15% upsurge in gang membership in the United States from 2006 to 2012 (Hughes, 2013).

One approach to countering the challenges posed by these organizations entails preventing affiliations with and formations of gangs (Howell & Griffiths, 2018). Considering gangs are perceived to be a consequence of underlying systemic and social issues such as disparities in education and socio-economic opportunities, it is relatively difficult to address this issue. Teenagers¹ often join such cohorts in a bid to escape common challenges and connect with their peers with the perspective of creating an identity. Individuals from separated families are more likely to become involved in gangs (Bouchard & Spindler, 2010). Participants in gangs tend to lose access to crucial influences in education as most of them end up terminating their schooling objectives (Pyrooz, 2010). Thus, gangs represent a deep-rooted societal problem that culminates in an increase in criminal activities and a decrease in connection with society.

Gangs pose a serious danger to society as they influence negatively the safety, health, and prosperity of a community. The presence of a gang in a community reduces the overall safety of its members by exposing them to the associated negative vices as well as promoting violence.

¹ For the purpose of this rationale the terms youth, teenagers, adolescents, young persons, young children, and juveniles are used interchangeably and refer to individuals ages 12 through 20.

These individuals are a threat to the society with their activities increasing the risk of violence, delinquent behavior, incarceration, and death (Howell & Griffiths, 2018). Furthermore, these organizations contribute to the sufferings and negative life experiences of the young children who are incentivized to join because of the negative conditions in their home, school, faith, and other environments.

Despite their notoriety, gangs are often misunderstood in society. Gangs often constitute young children and adolescents who join as a result of their environment rather than as a deficit of their morality. Most of the arguments against gangs and subsequent interventions fail to consider gangs as a socio-economic problem and instead seem to argue against the issue of gangs from a moral standpoint. Although there are members of gangs who have criminal and delinquent leanings, a majority of them join gangs to get a sense of belonging (Hamel et al., 2010). Children denied access to close family and peer support are at an increased risk of joining gangs to gain the same level of camaraderie (Hamel et al., 2010). Understanding the main reasons leading to young children becoming involved in gangs could serve to improve intervention measures to minimize recruitment and retention of teenagers by such cohorts.

One method of reducing gang enrollment involves utilizing a community-based program that aims to discourage youths from joining gangs. The rationale of this intervention would be to improve early outreach to at-risk groups and neighborhoods. A community-based program would also be ideal in helping researchers understand the gang and important aspects that attract young members. The community is better placed to understand the factors that draw these young recruits into the rank and file of these gangs. The community-based program would also improve accessibility to at-risk young adolescents who are likely to enroll into a gang (Osman & Wood,

2018). Since members of the program are locals, it will be easier to identify those who need help and successfully engage them in the program.

A community-based program is also beneficial because of the strong influence that one's environment has on youths' decision to join a gang. According to a study conducted by Gilman et al. (2014) the three main predictors of youth joining gangs include residing with a gang member, living in a high-crime neighborhood, and associating with people who have antisocial behavior and actions. These three factors are associated with one's environment and the community can play a significant role in making meaningful interventions that would reduce the number of children joining such organizations.

The community-based approach to tackling the issue of gang recruitment amongst the youth is also strongly influenced by the role that a diverse environment and personal traits play in the problem. Gang cohesiveness, the popularity of individual members, and its reputation in criminal activities are additional factors that determine the workings of a gang and its propensity to attract new recruits (Gilman et al., 2014). Cohesive gangs are better organized, have less conflict, and will lead to less violence on its members or rivals (Hughes, 2013). On the other hand, less cohesive gangs are more prone to violence since disagreements within the unit are more common (Hughes, 2013). The community-based program detailed in this rationale can help in gathering this vital information on gangs within the neighborhood.

This rationale is presented in three sections. First, it will give a rundown of literature and findings on gang enrollment among the youth. This background review will look at the main factors contributing to young people joining gangs. The approach to establishing contributing factors will be holistic to address the socio-economic and personal reasons that drive a young person to join a gang. Second, the harmful impact of gangs will be highlighted. Third, some main

preventive measures proposed in earlier studies will be discussed. Fourth, the use of autoethnography will be used to offer personal, sociocultural, and lived experience that served the design of the program, 4REAL. Finally, the program 4REAL will be introduced, focusing on its three program areas: SWERV (Self-Worth Empowering Resilient Vehicles), KEYS (Knowledge Empowering Youth & Success), and RAMSES (Research and Methods Sustaining Engagement Security).

Contributors to Joining a Gang

Seven interrelated factors make young people join gangs. One factor is living with a gang member. Young children who reside with gang members are more likely to join since they are exposed to the life through their proxy (Klein et al., 2000). Often times, young people join these gangs to get a sense of belonging with these peers. These gang members could be their siblings, cousins, or any other close family member who influences the decision of the young person early in their life. A second factor is associating with peers who display antisocial actions and beliefs (Gilman et al, 2014). Peer influence, therefore, is a contributing factor to the decision taken by the youth to join gangs. Young people have an influence on their peers' behavior, ambitions, and choices (Gilman et al, 2014).

In line with peer influence, a third factor emerges from a community-based analysis of gangs that reveals that prestigious gang members also fuel the desire for young children to join gangs (Hughes, 2013). Young recruits are drawn to prestigious gang members whose embeddedness in the structure of the gang is seen to glorify delinquent actions and behavior (Hughes, 2013). In some areas, gang leaders who live relatively lavish lifestyles are seen as role models for the young children raised in the area. In areas where opportunities for the young are few, such as in low-income and high-crime neighborhoods, prominent gang members serve as an

example for an alternative way out of their current situation (similar to the impact of famous athletes and pop-culture icons/entertainers).

A fourth factor is living in a high-crime neighborhood (Pyrooz et al., 2010). Gangs are more common in areas that are considered less safe and desirable. These are poor neighborhoods where social amenities are not as easily available. Such communities lack a strong social support system that would guide the young to make better life decisions. These neighborhoods are breeding grounds for gang formation since the young join these gangs to gain a sense of control, safety, and camaraderie in the difficult environment. Living in a high-crime area leads to more people joining gangs, which in turn leads to more crime, thereby creating a vicious cycle in these neighborhoods.

A fifth factor that contributes to more youth joining gangs is the prevailing socioeconomic status of the individual youth (Pyrooz et al., 2010). Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are at an increased risk of being drawn into joining gangs due in part to the absence of role models who represent achievable lifestyle alternatives. Many of their communities even lack teachers and shop owners who look like them. Gangs present a chance of some sort of financial security for these young children raised in poor circumstances.

The internal structure of a gang is a sixth factor that plays a role in attracting new young recruits. Hughes (2013) made the connection between the internal structure of gangs and the propensity to engage in violence. Hughes looked at the relationship that exists between the internal structure and organization of gangs and the delinquency and aggressiveness of its members. In less structured gangs, members are more prone to acts of delinquency, ensuing gang violence and a more detrimental impact on the community at large. On the other hand, well-structured gangs are less prone to gang violence since a clear structure and respected hierarchy

exists and activities done by members are determined and communicated clearly (Bouchard & Spindler, 2010). Gangs with well-organized internal structures, therefore, are more likely to recruit new members. Adolescents are drawn to gangs that are well structured and organized while being less likely to be drawn into poorly organized gangs with unclear and disorganized internal structures.

A seventh factor suggests that young people who lack good mentors are also more likely to join gangs (Taylor et al., 2007). Having good role models in the community and school is a critical component in deterring young individuals from joining gangs. Strong social institutions like schools and religious institutions present adolescents with the structure and social support to reduce their risk of joining a gang. In the absence of these social support structures, young people are attracted to gangs because they offer an alternative structure that makes members feel like they belong with others. Poor or inadequate social structures and support, therefore, is a contributing factor to the increasing number of young people joining gangs.

In many cases, the decision to join a gang is not only a singular one mentioned above but rather many factors in combination. Young people living in poor and crime-ridden communities are more likely to join an organized gang. Low socioeconomic status is associated with a depreciated access to strong social institutions like good schools, community centers, and religious institutions that would have served to deter young children from joining gangs.

Disruptions of Gangs

Gangs are linked to a host of social ills and harm. Gang enrollment and the activities of gangs pose a serious danger to the security of a community (Pyrooz et al., 2010). Members of a community where gangs operate live in fear of harm befalling them or their businesses. The presence of a gang in the community additionally compromises the integrity of the society and

hinders prosperity within an area. High-crime areas with gangs have fewer employment opportunities for its members and increases the likelihood that poverty and homelessness can increase as a result (Pyrooz et al., 2010). Overall, society loses out when its young members are recruited into gangs through reduced safety, prosperity, and lowered social values.

On a personal level, the youth who join gangs are exposed to a myriad of risks. A majority of new recruits are young children making them the most at-risk group in a community. The young children recruited into these gangs are at risk of adopting and amplifying criminal behavior (Osman & Wood, 2018). Gangs tend to reinforce and encourage delinquent and violent behavior of its members to a point whereby even the lowest-rank members still display a higher than average tendency to engage in these acts. Young gang members have been shown to be more aggressive and disruptive compared with those who are not part of a gang (Bouchard & Spindler, 2010). In addition to worsening the vices and negative behavior of young members, gangs also have the potential of keeping members away from possible rehabilitation.

In addition to amplifying the criminal tendencies and delinquent behavior of young recruits, joining a gang also subjects the young to a higher degree of physical and mental abuse than when they were not part of the gang. Taylor et al. (2007) looked at the typical experience of an adolescent recruit into a street gang. As members of a gang, young people are in an environment with evils that exposes them to physical violence and mental harm. These young recruits are more likely to be abused or physically assaulted as members of a gang compared to non-members as well as compared to those deemed defenseless against criminal activities (Taylor et al., 2007). Young recruits report experiencing violence and victimization within a year of joining the gang (Taylor et al., 2007). Overall, young members of a gang face more violence on average compared with all other groups of people in society. The saddest part of this statistic

is that a majority of gang members are children and adolescents who have to face increasingly high levels of violence and abuse. It is important to note that these young children and adolescents come from a background of socio-economic struggle, personal struggles, and/or family abuse or neglect. In the setup of a gang, these issues are further amplified by the level of victimization and violence that these young recruits will face as members.

Gang involvement along with its causative factors also leads to further excluding these young children from society. Members of gangs are less likely to secure reliable employment, have dysfunctional relationships with family members and friends, and are more likely to be affected by drugs, abuse, and poverty (Osman & Wood, 2018). These issues are also attributed to factors surrounding individuals that drive them to join gangs like poor access to education, socio-economic struggles, and fewer opportunities to experience self-realization (Moore et al., 2020). The youth who join these gangs are already facing an uphill task of gaining an equal footing in society and gang enrollment further isolates them from these opportunities that would improve the trajectory of their lives. The majority of gang members is less likely to complete formal education or proceed to higher learning institutions compared to youth who avoid gang enrollment (Moore et al., 2020). As a result, many children and adolescents who join gangs at an early age will have a lower lifetime earning potential compared to their counterparts due to the difference in educational attainment (Moore et al., 2020). Gang members who are caught engaging in criminal activities and are convicted have an even lower chance of securing meaningful employment over the long term (Moore et al., 2020). The isolation caused by enrolling in a gang often makes it hard for members to leave the gang since it becomes difficult to reintegrate back into society and make meaningful contributions.

Overall, the disruption caused by young people enrolled in gangs is felt at both the community and the individual levels. The community faces increased insecurity and lives in fear of the atrocities and vices committed by these groups. Prosperity in the community is also negatively affected by the activities of gangs in the neighborhood. The neighborhoods with gang activities fail to draw in much interest from investors and businesses leading to an overall decline of employment opportunities in these communities. Other disruptions caused by young children joining gangs include amplifying their own tendency for violence and delinquent behavior being in an environment that reinforces these vices and bad habits. The young recruits are also more likely to face victimization and experience social isolation that keep them in a life of crime (Taylor et al., 2007). These disruptions are major, and if left unchecked, could lead to a self-perpetuating and never-ending spiral in society. It is, therefore, vital that a community-based program be implemented to intervene so that fewer at-risk youths are drawn into the criminal life of gangs and for the community to thrive as a whole rather than be left to rot.

Main Preventive Factors

Intervention measures for reducing the number of young people joining gangs need to address both the systemic and individual issues facing these young children. The initial step to remedy the issue is to come up with an effective community assessment approach (Shute, 2008). The community is best placed in understanding the specific factors that lead to a rise in gang activities and enrollment in their neighborhood. Community members are best situated to describe the youth gangs in the area, their location, identity, and at-risk youths who are likely to join since the members of these gangs are not strangers but part of the society. Since each community is unique, they must initiate a process of defining its data collection and strategic plan. In the approach, the community can define the youth gangs along a set list of criteria. The

shared identity could be linked to a name, color, or symbols. The members of the group should also identify themselves as members of a gang and be recognized publicly as such. For the group to be called a youth gang, it must have some semblance of structure and internal organization. Finally, the group should be engaged in nefarious and elevated levels of crime to be considered a gang (Howell & Griffiths, 2018).

After identifying and classifying the youth gangs in the area, the community assessment team including community members such as, but not limited to, parents, teachers, police officers, and youth, should establish who is involved in the gang's criminal activities, what crimes they commit, when they do these acts, where they operate from, and the reasons for their existence. A suitable community-based program that would establish these facts by collecting and analyzing data from gang members would be most useful. The program ought to collect data on neighborhoods that are at an increased risk of suffering from the negative impact of gang activities, schools, and other institutions where the gangs are active, as well as places that are considered hot spots like malls where gang members frequent. The program can also determine the presence of violent gangs and their dangerous offenders.

Another possible solution for deterring young people from joining gangs is increasing the opportunities and social support available for at-risk youth. A bulk of young people joining gangs do so because of lack of options, a need for belonging, and poor access to opportunities (Hamel et al., 2010). Children growing up in impoverished neighborhoods lack access to quality education and the opportunities that quality education presents for bettering their lives (Moore et al., 2020). To counter the growing number of new gang members, it is crucial that these shortcomings be addressed. One key intervention is improving access to quality education, specific training, and employment programs that would help these youth to access opportunities

beyond those offered by joining a gang. Accessing training and education will help in the long-term eradication of gangs since young children enrolled in a dedicated education facility are unlikely to join gangs (Moore et al., 2020).

Initiating school-based prevention programs can help deter the youth from joining gangs; such prevention programs are deemed primary since they target the general population (Hamel et al. 2010; Pyrooz et al., 2010). Schools provide the ideal common ground to reach a large number of youths effectively. Even though a rise in the number of home-schooled children has been noted in recent years, a majority of children still participates in the American public education system (Moore et al, 2020). The school, therefore, is an ideal location to initiate delinquency prevention programs. The average urban middle school has 14 different programs addressing social ills such as delinquency, violence, drug use, and gang membership (Moore et al, 2020). A well-organized and effective intervention program for preventing the youth from joining gangs would provide students with the necessary social tools to resist the temptation to join. The program can offer tools through well-structured training sessions where youth can be taught valuable skills like conflict resolution and cultural sensitivity. As well, information on the negative aspects of joining a gang could be presented and a broader range of occupations and employment opportunities than what is known and visible to them within their communities could be introduced (Moore et al, 2020).

Secondary prevention measures entail similar interventions but for targeted individuals with the highest risk of joining a gang (Hamel et al. 2010; Pyrooz et al., 2010). Secondary prevention looks to alter the minds of those young people who are strongly considering joining a gang and are at the highest risk. These youth could be living in an impoverished section of the country or in a place where they interact with gang members regularly. Secondary prevention

interventions look to engage these youth through structured educational, recreational, and life skills initiatives. The aim of these secondary prevention strategies is to improve the communication, problem solving, conflict-resolution, and decision-making skills of the participants. The program tries to alter the attitudes and perceptions of those most at risk of joining these gangs. The 4REAL program that anchors this rationale meets the criteria of being considered a secondary intervention measure because it is specifically targeted towards the youth who are at the highest risk.

Tertiary measures are targeted towards young people already enrolled in gangs (Hamel et al. 2010; Pyrooz et al., 2010). These measures are taken to help reform those who engage in criminal activities and to put an end to the chain of recruitment that occurs for these groups. With tertiary measures, the targeted individual is already part of a criminal enterprise and effective strategies for these people include training, remanding in a detention center, and rehabilitation.

Contextualizing the Process

This research is based on my belief that the young people who are drawn into gangs are driven to the decision because of individual and contextual circumstances, and perhaps the perceived absence of alternatives, rather than a lack of proper morals. Many people are quick to condemn members of gangs who engage in crime without first interrogating the factors that promote these groups and push these children into a life of crime. If more people looked at the issue of children enrolling in gangs as a failure of society rather than as a flaw in the character of the individual, then solutions can be formulated to reduce the incidence. In this research, a program is proposed to help in the prevention of gang enrollment amongst the youth by looking at the issue from a standpoint that does not seek to place guilt or blame on the morality of these young children.

The theoretical choice of the program is based on Vygotsky's sociocultural framework that considered the environment in which a subject can be studied (Vasileva & Balyasnikova, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). The environment and specific circumstances surrounding an individual are key factors in determining their mental, psychological, and social state (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Holzman, 2009; Lobman & Perone, 2018). This framework was adopted because Vygotsky was convinced that the existing psychology of the individual was insufficient in understanding a phenomenon that is as complex and unique as the human brain. Concentrating on the sciences of sociology and anthropology alone is also not sufficient in understanding how human beings relate in society without considering other disciplines and social factors.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is suitable for analyzing factors leading to youth gang enrollment and produce substantive solutions that will see fewer young people join gangs (1978). The issue of gang enrollment, much like envisioned in Vygotsky's sociocultural framework, is caused by a myriad of factors that cannot be looked at through only one lens. The aim is to use a holistic vision to understand the problems facing these young children so that effective solutions can be sought and practiced.

This gang prevention program is also based on dialectical logic in which new opportunities are created from a change of a situation or object to another, different type. Therefore, any situation or object can be considered a fragment of a structure in the space of opportunities (Belolutsкая, et al., 2013). In relating to the program and in accordance with dialectical logic, each object that is studied is considered part of a whole. In much the same case, the program will look at the specific and unique characteristics of each participating youth and use those findings as a representation of a larger whole. The understanding behind this dialectical approach is that it will involve the analysis of the processes surrounding an individual. One of

the main factors that was considered during the creation of this program and selection of its approach was that it places emphasis on the lived experiences of young people who have joined gangs in their neighborhoods. One method for exploring lived experiences is autoethnography. What this method is and how it was used to create this youth gang prevention program will be discussed in what follows.

About Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a research method where the researcher places themselves at the center of the sociocultural analysis. Autoethnography is not merely an act of self-review and indulgence but rather a way of systematically analyzing one's personal experience to understand the cultural connotations surrounding the events (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Emerson et al. (2011) describe autoethnography as an approach in research and writing that seeks to analyze systematically (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) to get a better understanding of the cultural (*ethno*) experience. This approach is suitable in research that seeks to overcome the canonical means of conducting research by giving scientific studies a political, socially just, and conscious characteristic.

Autoethnography can take on one of three forms: descriptive, analytical, or confessional (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Descriptive autoethnography is self-affirmative and relates one's experience with the positive sociocultural aspect being studied. Analytical autoethnography is more interpretive while confessional is self-critical. As one writes an autoethnography, it is critical that they do not focus excessively on themselves but rather view the event in relation to others. The point is to go beyond narration and include aspects of analysis and cultural interpretation of the situation.

The process for composing my autoethnography began in May 2020 with twice a week writing on the reflections of my life. The process also included talks with family members as well as Dr. Perone, my mentor, and ended in October 2020. Based on this process I decided to utilize descriptive and confessional autoethnography in formulating the program and guiding the research because of my lived experience with teen gang recruitment. Growing up in the crime-ridden and poor Bed-Stuy section of Brooklyn I was a member of a gang. Later on, in life, my son would also fall into the same pitfall and get involved in a gang. My lived experience is a powerful testament of the many factors that drive young children into joining gangs. Therefore, autoethnography would be the most appropriate approach to relating the cultural context that drives young and naïve youths to join gangs and the subsequent negative effects it has on society and the individual.

Autoethnography presents several advantages as a research approach in qualitative studies. One major benefit is that it offers the reader access to the private world of the authors and provides invaluable data that cannot be captured in more traditional study designs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The readers of this study will get insight into the life of someone who was driven to join a gang to get a sense of belonging in a rough neighborhood. The reader will experience the joys and pains that I underwent via my story. Another advantage of autoethnography was the ease of collecting data. Since the approach is about relating one's personal experience, data collection only required recollection of personal events making data collection speedy and cheap. This advantage, however, is also one of its limitations with the danger of limiting the analysis to the individual level rather than seeing it from a wider cultural context.

Adding autoethnography to this rationale also adds value by eliciting reflection and empathy from other people. By reading a cultural and social account of an event, people become

more aware of realities that they may have not been exposed to before. In this rationale, the focus is on methods of reducing the recruitment of youth into gangs. A majority of the public tends to view these young children as nothing more than delinquents and a menace to society because of the dangerous and illegal activities of these gangs. However, through the narrative set in this research, readers will have a deeper insight into the lives of these young children and the environmental and cultural circumstances that lead them to join gangs and a life of crime. I will explain the circumstances that led me to join a gang at the young age of 13 and the effect it had on my life, society, and my present circumstances. Readers will get to understand what it is like for a majority of underprivileged and at-risk youths who join gangs not only for financial reasons but also to get a sense of belonging and structure in their lives. The use of first-person narrative immerses the reader into the world of the author, and they get to understand the context in which recruitment into gangs occurs. Autoethnography is an effective approach in ensuring that readers get an idea of the lives and times of these young children growing up in rough neighborhoods.

Autoethnography also allows me to write my first-person account so that my voice and story are heard. Autoethnography is an emancipatory discourse that gives a voice to the voiceless and allows them to represent themselves (Emerson et al., 2011). My passion for helping young children avoid the pitfalls of gangs stems from amplifying the voices of these disadvantaged youths. Young individuals most at risk of getting involved in a gang often lack the platform to explain the reasons and circumstances that led them to joining these gangs. Society often shuns these individuals who have less access to education and opportunities to improve their lives. The autoethnographic approach employed in this rationale will help narrate these issues via my story.

Autoethnography

At the age of thirteen I was kicked out of my mother's house. I grew up in the Sumner houses in Bed-Stuy, a subsection of Brooklyn. Growing up in Bed-Stuy in the late 1980s and early 1990s was difficult. The neighborhood was still in the grasp of the crack pandemic: gang banging, prostitution, robbery, and other criminal activities were our norm. I ended up moving in with my older brother Jeraude who was six years my senior. Jeraude was my father's first son from a previous relationship. My brother did his best to teach me how to survive in his own sense. The first thing I remember him telling me is all we have is each other and the life that I was used to is about to change. He said something along the lines of these are the streets and the streets eat the weak. One of the first things my brother did was introduce me to his click/set/crew whatever you would like to call it. He was a member of a set of Bloods known as Gangsta Killa Bloods or GKB for short. It was here that I was introduced to gang life and gang culture. I was jumped in at the age of thirteen to GKB and became an official member of the set. Here I learned to fight and make crack. The selling of crack was how I survived and maintained my basic needs. It was how we provided for ourselves and were able to buy the clothes we wore and the food we ate. GKB became my family. They were the ones who provided me a sense of security, belonging, and structure. Regardless of how we were portrayed in the neighborhood, they gave me what I was missing when I left my mother's home. This became my lifestyle for the next 5 years.

At this time in my life, I was pretty much engulfed in the streets from selling drugs to other illegal activities. GKB, their codes, and their values became a way of life. All things GKB were entrenched in me. This was law and everything else was wrong. You were either with us or you were against us and there was no in between. At this point in my life, there was nothing you

could tell me about my set that could have made me think differently. It was at the age of 17 I found out that I was going to be a father. The girl I was seeing had become pregnant with twins. It was here that I began to see myself drift a little bit from my set for I had it in my head that I wanted to be a better father than my biological father. I wanted to be able to provide for my children and give them better opportunities than what I had. My twins were born June 13th, 1998 at 6:53 am. This is a day I will never forget for it was a day of joy and celebration. I remember those who I genuinely cared for and looked up to, members of my set, coming to the hospital to come visit my sons and me. A few months later, I turned 18 and shortly afterward I was arrested for possession of a controlled substance with the intent to distribute. A sentence back then that carried a minimum of ten years in the state penitentiary.

Throughout the time I was going to court, I began to see a shift in the way I moved and carried myself amongst my peers. I was a father and began to distance myself but not fully from my set and their actions. I still sold drugs because that was my source of income to provide for my family, but I did not partake in other illegal activities as much anymore. On one of my court visits, I recall being brought into what is called chambers. It is where you, your lawyer, the prosecutors, and the judge all sit in a room alone together. Here I was offered the opportunity to continue with the court proceedings and look at a ten-year sentence or they were willing to give me the opportunity to join the military and give me something that was called a suspended sentence. This meant that if I joined the military and did not get in trouble for the next two years my case would be dismissed and would not go on my record. I chose the latter option as I wanted to be a part of my children's life and I did not want to be portrayed as one of those dead-beat dads or fathers who is always in and out of the system. That week I went to an army-recruiting

center and took the necessary steps to enlist in the United States Army. The following year, March of 1999, I shipped off for boot camp.

At this point, I had been in the military about ten years now and, most of the people I considered family, my former GKB members, were either dead or incarcerated. I recall going home to visit my brother. While sitting in my brother's living room (my brother still residing in the projects) I remember a few GKB members I grew up with showing up: Lyrical, Razor, and Stone. As Lil Chris (my son) played Samurai Showdown with Stone on the Neo Geo (video game system) Lyrical and Razor began to talk about the old times and the stuff we used to do when we were younger. They glorified our actions and went on to tell my son JoJo how his father was once a big-time drug dealer. They also talked about other illegal activities we were involved in. As the stories progressed my son began to say things like wow that is cool. He listened to the stories and looked as if he was proud and admired the lifestyle. It was when this began to happen, I ended the conversation and pulled Jojo to the side and talked with him. I let him know that I was not proud of the person I was back then and that my actions were because I was young and naïve with no guidance and trying to survive life. I had no positive structure. I told him there was nothing to glorify about having to sell drugs to survive and that he was blessed to have all that he and his brother could ask for or desire. I explained to him that my decisions ended up getting me in a lot of trouble and that I was fortunate to have someone instead of locking me up give me the opportunity to do right for myself as well as my children. I also told him how ashamed I was of the person I was back then and that being a father and being given the opportunity to do something other than gang bang and sell drugs helped make me a better person as well as a better father. It provided me with a means to let my children not grow

up in the toxic environment I grew up in and provided me with a means to give them better opportunities than the ones I had when I was their age.

Fast forward a few years later the year is 2014 and I have relocated to Washington State. Chris and JoJo, both teenagers now, are in high school. They are going through the motions of being teenagers. Chris is semi rebellious but not like his brother. I am beginning to find cigarettes in JoJo's clothes. We are beginning to bump heads more. His favorite line to throw in my face has become what happened to you, you used to be cool when you were younger, and now you are a lame. The crowd JoJo tends to keep around him begins to remind me of the crew I use to run with when I was younger. I am beginning to see the similarities of when I was younger: the attitude, the colors of the clothes I would wear. I recall having a conversation with him and sitting him down and asking him what it is he is missing in his life. His answer was he wanted to be with his mother for a while. I recall this being a tough decision for me but knowing he wanted to see her and me not wanting to keep his mother out of his life I agreed to send him to see her in Alabama. I recall as if it were yesterday, February 2, 2014. The Seattle Seahawks had just won the Super Bowl and I received a phone call from the Alabama Sheriff's department. JoJo had been gone going on about a month I was informed my son was arrested and being held on a charge of 1st degree murder. I flew down to Alabama the next day and had come to find out from his mother that JoJo was defiant with her and she did not know how to tell me. He was out of her house for over a week and was running with a group of Bloods out there. It came to my knowledge as the investigation began to unfold and things began to come to light that my son was selling marijuana and using weed as well as drinking and doing other drugs. He had become a member of a set of Bloods while he was with his mother. The murder was a botched-up drug deal gone wrong. They had met with a white juvenile and attempted to sell him

some fake weed. When the white juvenile realized it was not weed, he demanded his money back and JoJo and he got into a physical altercation. When JoJo's co-defendant saw what was happening he pulled out a 9 mm pistol and shot the boy twice in the chest. My son was charged with 1st degree murder and charged as an adult. At the age of 15 he was sentenced to 25 years in a state penitentiary.

After my son was sentenced as an adult in the penal system, I thought to myself that something needed to be done. I did not want to see another family lose a loved one to such senseless violence nor did I want to see a family have to say goodbye to a loved one due to incarceration. I had decided to come up with a program that would help individuals who were in my situation growing up to be able to have other opportunities available to them as well as the resources to achieve their goals.

Developing the Program

In addition to reflecting on my life story and the stories of my community, developing the 4REAL program included review of relevant literature on youth gang enrollment with in-depth analysis of factors that make these young children choose to enroll in a gang. The review revealed that the pull factors for young children towards gangs are varied and consist of socioeconomic as well as individual factors. Therefore, to create a program that would effectively reduce the number of new young recruits to gangs it had to involve community members and also take a holistic look at the individual youth and factors that put them at risk of joining a gang. Consideration of all these factors helped in coming up with effective interventions to reduce the incidence.

Considering the fact that a sociocultural framework was adopted, the sample group from which data will be collected must be people linked with the phenomenon of interest. Therefore,

4REAL intervention will focus on at-risk youth groups in Tacoma, WA. Recent work suggests that Tacoma, WA would benefit from such an intervention. Interviews with the youth currently involved in gangs revealed high levels of substance use and trauma exposure, victimization, school suspension, unemployment, homelessness, and lack of services (Tacoma Gang Assessment, 2019). These individuals will offer relevant, timely, and appropriate information for the study since they are the main subjects in and of the study. Using at-risk youth as the main participants of the study also means that the solutions derived after will be more accurate and relevant in helping reduce cases of young children joining criminal gangs.

4REAL is a prevention program implemented in Tacoma/Pierce County in Washington State that aims to empower youth through improving self-awareness, critical analysis, self-reliance, resilience, and leadership. The program is suitable for use in improving the community by ensuring that cooperative support systems exist while fighting against truancy, delinquency, and gang enrollment amongst the youth.

4REAL consists of three essential programs: KEYS, SWERV, and RAMSES. The programs serve to fight delinquency and gang membership amongst the youth. The three programs work in tandem to help guide at-risk youth in navigating through the challenges and factors that could lead them to join a gang. KEYS is an acronym for Knowledge Empowering Youth and Success and is a phase program that formulates a different method of cross-cultural interaction through diverse workshops, critical analysis, insightful research, and customized action plans. The KEYS stage is characterized by 16 workshops that discuss the importance of community, equity, and mutuality while also instilling values of self-discipline, self-awareness, self-reliance, and leadership.

SWERV is an acronym for Self-Worth Empowering Resilient Vessels and is the outreach portion of the program where mentorship is offered to KEYS participants. The SWERV mentors have the duty to assist the KEYS participants to formulate and stick to the set action plan also known as (my) achievement action plan (MAAP). The introduction of mentors at the SWERV stage is critical because the mentors offer youth guidance in recovery, sustainability, and re-entry into the workforce. Mentors also provide a sense of community and belonging, as well as role models and insight into alternative lifestyles and occupations (Lobman & Perone, 2018).

RAMSES, Research and Methods Sustaining Engagement Security, refers to the researchers, including and especially the young people in the program, bridging all the programs within 4REAL through the collection of qualitative data of at-risk participants so that the young researchers are benefiting and building the program (Sabo Flores, 2008). The researchers collect and analyze data on the program's participants and the effectiveness of the program. RAMSES carries out continuous research studies for SWERV and KEYS during and after participation in the program. The process involves identifying limitations that exist in current research and coding the qualitative data collected into measurable quantitative models that will allow for easier definition of outreach efforts for consumers, researchers, mentors, and city authorities.

Program Implementation

The mission statement of 4REAL is to empower the youth by advocating for self-awareness, critical analysis, self-efficacy, resiliency, and leadership. The intervention was implemented in Tacoma as a means of assessing the risk that the youth face through mentorship, diversion, and research. The three programs of emphasis were used to instill skills and practices amongst the youth to fight against juvenile delinquency and enrollment in gangs.

KEYS

KEYS is a diversion program with six phases numbered from 0 to 5 that propose different methods of cross-cultural interaction through diverse workshops, extensive research, deep analysis and customized action plans (MAAP). The six phases will include 16 sessions where discussions will center on the importance of mutuality, community, and equity. The sessions will also emphasize good values such as self-efficacy, discipline, awareness, and advocacy. These values are particularly important for youths at risk of joining gangs since a lack of one or more of the ones stated predisposes them to their reality.

Each participant in KEYS is expected to construct a MAAP. A slew of information sessions is offered by facilitators to ensure that participants are familiar with local resources and bridge programs that will help them set a good MAAP. Formulating one's MAAP empowers the participants to take control of their success by personalizing and prioritizing the use of program resources and bridges. The appropriateness and sufficiency of the MAAPs will be supported by research data that are gathered from the participating at-risk youth (Sabo Flores, 2008).

Afterwards, each provider is contacted and appointments made for KEYS processes in line with the set MAAP. Once a person reaches the fourth phase of the program, they qualify to engage those in phases 1-3 as mentors and guide peers through the workshops and in formulating an appropriate MAAP. The individualized MAAP letters will be reviewed by peers and a community board before one graduates to phase five. At this final phase, participants carry out mentorship and ambassador modeling duties. The whole process takes 12 weeks to complete the transition and aims to reduce the number of youths enrolling into neighborhood gangs.

SWERV

SWERV provides the case management and outreach efforts and mentorship for those who participate in the KEYS process. The mentors at this stage provide guidance to youth who have gone through the 16 workshops that characterize the KEYS stage by offering advocacy and acting as positive role models so that they can achieve their goals of recovery and social reintegration.

At this stage, the mentors help the participants of KEYS to create relationships with social institutions. Mentors are also tasked with orienting all the 4REAL programs and carrying out a survey for the needs of and risks facing participants. At this stage, the program also advocates for KEYS participants to gain access to affordable healthcare, food, housing, clothes, and a hygienic environment. The mentors also help the participants to create and follow their MAAP pledges. At this stage, additional workshops can be added with coordination with local academic institutions and community organizations encouraged to reach as wide a section of the population as possible.

SWERV mentors are expected to contact KEYS participants five days of the week after training while the KEYS participants are expected to contact their instructors weekly and log their progress in the same timeframe for RAMSES.

MAAP

MAAP refers to an innovative approach to creating the common action plans used by most providers. The MAAP for this intervention is formulated by the youth as they participate in the KEYS process. MAAP is produced at this point because the participants have taken part in the workshops as well as receiving intensive mentorship in the program.

The process of constructing a MAAP involves five interrelated steps. The first is planning and coordinating with the short-term goals of the program. The second step is resource utilization where the participants correlate the available resources with the required process. Thirdly, prioritizing is the next step in MAAP construction. Prioritization will allow for the creation of a structure with a timeline that is based on the ranking by priority. Fourthly, commitment should be encouraged amongst participants when creating a MAAP since the participant has to get in touch with resources and set up a meeting for review of the MAAP. Fifth and finally, resilience-building is necessary so that the participating young people can take advantage of all available resources to maintain MAAP commitment.

Participants are also expected to write MAAP letters to show their commitment to the peers and community members running the program. The letters contain a description of each of the steps taken to finish the KEYS segment, the participant's expected objectives, and the resources required to achieve those targets. Writing a MAAP letter is the beginning of building self-advocacy for the participants through empowerment, resilience, humility, commitment, self-discipline, and self-efficacy. During the course of creating a MAAP, a participant can RE-MAAP to set new goals, bridges, and resources.

RAMSES

RAMSES is composed of researchers who consist of youth participants, teachers, community volunteers, and the police department. They all play a vital role in bridging SWERVE and KEYS phases by collecting qualitative data such as interview responses from gang members, youth, and community members. The research conducted is continuous during the program and even after participation. The data collected by these researchers can be used in identifying limitations that exist in the program and highlighting measurable outcomes. In

addition, the research will address social and economic issues within the community and create opportunities to address these inequities. The importance of RAMSES is that it allows consumers, mentors, and even city officials to understand the impact of the program on the target population. The information can be used in seeking funding, improving civic engagement to help the participants, and developing and refining program offerings.

Program in Action

The 4REAL program can successfully be implemented to reduce the number of young people joining gangs by instilling positive values that deter joining a gang. During the process, the KEYS participants are expected to create a MAAP that aligns with their individual circumstances, needs, and transformation goals. The KEYS participants get to work with a SWERV mentor who will help them create effective MAAP steps. In addition to KEYS, SWERV and MAAP processes, RAMSES researchers look at qualitative data collected and create reports along with quantitative data for easy interpretation by mentors, researchers, the participating young adolescents who are at risk of joining gangs, and the community at large. During this period, participants under the guidance of their mentors can re-MAAP to adapt to any new information received.

At the end of the 16 sessions of KEYS, participants will continue to be part of the SWERV mentorship program for a set period. The SWERV period is set to ensure that the participants have gained skills that will allow them to self-sustain their newly developed coping and empowering skills. The RAMSES researchers will continue to collect data from the participants for 36 months after the end of SWERV. The prolonged period of data collection gives a clear picture of the long-term impact that the program will have on reducing youth gang enrollment in the area.

Conclusion

The intention of the community-based program, 4REAL, is to minimize the population of youths enrolled in gangs. The program is designed to counter the significant social burden caused by young children and adolescents joining gangs. The number of new gang recruits has been on the rise in the past decade with worries arising over what this phenomenon means for the community and the youth population in general (Hamel et al., 2010). The community is at risk with an increase in new gang members as it results in a decline in security and causes fear in society. Teenagers are at a loss as they involve themselves in criminal activities as they isolate from society and become easy targets of victimization. These gangs seemingly give them the courage to commit violent acts.

To counter this growing problem effectively, it is important for one to understand the causes of the issue. These young children do not join gangs because of their individual poor morals, but due to a host of socioeconomic and contextual issues that make gangs a place where they can get a sense of belonging. Poverty, dysfunctional homes, abuse, and peer influence are some of the major factors contributing to the rise of new gang members' recruit. A community-based approach to dealing with the issue is preferred due to its ability to assume a more personal tactic to tackle the issue. 4REAL has been proposed as a tool for reducing the tendency of youths creating or joining gangs. The participants of the program go through 16 KEYS sessions to learn values followed by a mandatory SWERV mentorship period after 5 weeks. Data are collected and analyzed for 36 weeks after the end of the program under RAMSES to study the impact of the intervention.

4REAL is a program by, for, and with the community. However, it should not exist similarly across communities. I invite communities around the world affected by gangs to be

inspired by and build with this program in ways that serve local needs and issues; in the spirit of Vygotsky (1978, p.65), my community, my mentor, and I invite you to embark on a “search for method” to address gang activity and co-create powerful community and social change.

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