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Critical Steps

Prevention.

Intervention.

Suppression.

They're the three things that need to happen in order to combat the issue of gang violence in cities, and unless they work in tandem, the problem may not go away.

That's according to Connecticut-based gang expert Lisa Taylor-Austin, who holds a Masters degree in counselling, and has spent years studying gang activity through talking not just to fellow experts, but to the ones at the centre of the issue - the gang members themselves.

The prevention aspect includes finding out why kids are getting into gangs in the first place and keeping that from happening.

The Intervention step involves speaking to youths in gangs in an effort to understand why they're doing what they're doing.

And the suppression is left to law enforcement - making arrests, and getting the criminal element off the streets.

"If you only focus on any one of those three things, the rest are out of balance and you're not going to find a resolution to the problem," she tells **Pulse24.com** "When you have suppression only, what tends to happen is, it's successful in the short term.

"People get arrested, they're incarcerated, and therefore the gang activity on the street diminishes. However, those people eventually get released, some of them have younger brothers or sisters who pick up the cause for them. It temporarily reduces the problem, but doesn't address it.

"When you have prevention only, you're working with younger kids and nothing's being done to address the actual gangbanging that's happening on the streets."

In learning how to prevent gang activity, Taylor-Austin says there are a number of questions communities have to ask themselves. Among them:

Who are the gang members?

Monday, August 8, 2005

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If they're mostly youths, why are they choosing to join?

Are there other options available to them, like jobs for example?

Are they joining because it's a socially-acceptable thing to do in their neighbourhood, or is it due to more personal reasons, like problems at home?

When the answers to those questions are determined, Taylor-Austin says everyone from the affected communities should come together to help solve the problem.

The issue of fear is a real one, she concedes, but one that can be overcome.

"People in the neighbourhood have that fear because their perception, whether it's accurate or inaccurate, is that the gang members have more control of the neighbourhood than authorities do," she maintains. "What should happen is that people in an authority position, a mayor, community activist, or church spokesperson, should meet with the community to find out what their ideas are. We need to listen more."

Taylor-Austin also recommends getting over the assumption that gang members themselves have nothing to bring to the table.

"Most of the youths I've counselled wished their lives were different, and they don't know how to get from point A to point B," she says. "They want to change their lives, but they don't know how. For many of them, their situation is contributing to why they're gang-involved. It might be family dysfunction, it might be the neighbourhood they live in."

The failure to communicate, she feels, leads to a rift between authorities and the people involved.

"I think (gang members) would be more amenable to talking if law enforcement was not there, but it doesn't have to be that difficult," she concludes.

"They're left out of the solution, and I don't know why that is. I think part of it is a fear some professionals have of involving them in the process. That's a big piece of it.

"In counselling kids who are gang members, it seems they really like and enjoy being part of a group, but for the most part they don't enjoy the gangbanging and the fighting that comes out of it."

Some cities, including Chicago and Los Angeles, have held gang summits, which Taylor-Austin also recommends.

She says either a community forum can bring in speakers to discuss the problem, or the summit can be a place for

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rival factions to come together in an attempt to resolve their differences.



Click here for a live feed from Pulse24

Taylor-Austin's website: www.gangcolors.com

August 5, 2005

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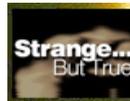
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