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Getting inside the gang mentality

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As gang influence spreads into suburban and rural areas, school counselors increasingly find themselves the first line of defense

By Jim Paterson

In a suburban high school cafeteria, a kid with an oversized white T-shirt and an easy smile is getting a lot of attention. It's readily apparent that the other students at the lunch table defer to him. As the school counselor, you ask around and find out this student is newly entrenched in gang life.

He was just talking to an honor roll student, attempting to recruit him and asking him to bring another friend along to meet after school. Near them is a girl who hangs out with the group at the lunch table. Her sister recently joined a gang and has invited her to join as well. Their 9-year-old brother has also been recruited.

Steering clear of the table is a kid who missed three days of school the prior week because he wanted to avoid being bothered by this group. Sitting at the next table is a kid dressed conspicuously. He is wearing a polo shirt buttoned at the top, well-creased pants and a bandana. He sports a pen-and-ink tattoo on his fingers. Despite his appearance, he's not really a member of a gang, but he soon could be -- as could any of the other students described in this scenario.

This cast of characters might not appear in every school cafeteria, but increasingly, gangs are broadening their reach from traditionally urban environments into suburban and even rural settings. This phenomenon offers a growing challenge to school counselors, who must find their roles -- and limits -- in working with each individual student influenced by gang culture.

"Since the nineties, the numbers (of gang members) have more than doubled," says Kara Ieva, an American Counseling Association member and assistant professor at Rowan University in Glassboro, N.J., who has researched, written about and spoken widely on the topic. "Gang activity is spreading into colleges and the military as members age. Gangs are increasingly involving more girls and younger children. There are 9-year-olds being recruited because they have more years ahead of them when they won't be charged (for crimes) as an adult, and there are now kids who grew up in gangs raising kids (of their own) who are involved." Gangs are steadily moving into suburban and rural areas, she says, because they believe law enforcement is less sophisticated there; these areas also offer gangs plenty of prospects for new recruits.

According to the U.S. Justice Department National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC), the number of gang members increased by 200,000 from 2005 to late 2008; it now estimates there are more than 1 million gang members. Perhaps as significant, the NGIC says the number of suburban schools reporting gang activity increased 17 percent, while reports of gang activity in rural schools rose 33 percent. Gang-related incidents nationwide doubled from 1990 to 2005, according to Ieva.

What this all means is that gang activity is reaching into many schools -- and school counselors are "the first line of defense," says Ieva. "They are in a position to help in several ways -- by educating everyone from the

staff and parents to the students, helping to establish structures for handling the problem and then helping kids who need it."

Experts contend that many of the standard approaches routinely used by school counselors can work well in reaching students influenced by gang culture. But at the same time, these experts caution, working with gang members may stretch the limits of school counselors' skills, forcing them to confront new ethical questions and to reach beyond their traditional roles.

The starting point

Donald Kodluboy, a psychologist who retired from Minnesota public schools after 30 years, has studied and written about gangs and now consults on the topic. He says counselors and schools should offer a structured, consistent and even-toned approach in their handling of any situation involving gangs. "While a school should recognize there are reasons for gang behavior, there will be no excuses or exceptions for any gang-related activity," he says.

He emphasizes that the school should focus on positive behavior and avoid romanticizing or drawing excessive attention to gang members. There is a danger, he explains, in creating a mystique about gang members by singling them out for attention. Therefore, they should be given special notice only when they have conventional success. "Never let an instance of gang representation go unchallenged, but try to do so privately and one student at a time," Kodluboy says. "Always counter erroneous messages about gang life with the truth, and do so calmly -- with facts."

Kodluboy and other experts say educational efforts, beginning in elementary school, should be truthful without involving scare tactics or romanticizing gang activity. He is wary of having former gang members tell their stories if they haven't gone on to be successful in other ways. Unless they provide a clear, attractive alternative, he explains, they might end up glamorizing the gang lifestyle. In addition, he says, true-life stories often aren't enough to dissuade students from the lure of gang life. Educational efforts must "still be followed by the hard daily work of prevention and intervention," Kodluboy says.

Working with others

Rather than reacting after their schools are faced with gang activity, Ieva recommends that school counselors pursue a pre-emptive connection with law enforcement officials, who may already have an effective task force or well-tested approaches in place for addressing youth gangs. "If you know about a potential problem, have a student who wants to get out or have a student who doesn't want to be initiated, you will need to be talking to police, and you want to make sure you know what that will involve," she says.

Counselors should also collaborate with the school's administration to develop a plan for addressing gang activity, as well as to educate teachers about how to identify gang activity and handle gang members.

According to Kenneth Trump, a school security expert who has been featured on national news shows concerning gangs, schools are too often reluctant to identify the problem. "The condition that makes the school environment most ripe for gang activity is denial," he says, noting that schools are concerned about their image. "Gangs thrive on anonymity, denial and lack of awareness by school personnel."

Even when schools acknowledge gang presence, they "tend to downplay it and underestimate the extent of the problem," says Trump, president of the consulting firm National School Safety and Security Services (schoolsecurity.org). Counselors can play an important role by carefully encouraging their schools to practice more open and accurate disclosure of gang activity. However, like Kodluboy, Trump cautions that school officials should also avoid overstating the issue, thus creating unfounded fear or giving gangs undeserved attention.

Does counseling make a difference?

Lisa Taylor-Austin, a school counselor and ACA member, has worked with gangs for more than 20 years and served as an expert witness in legal actions involving gang members for 13 years. She is wary of traditional

anti-gang programs and suggests that energy in schools be devoted instead to "pro-youth" efforts that tap into the skills of affected students to potentially redirect them.

Taylor-Austin also finds that counseling techniques from William Glasser and Albert Ellis work well with gang members and those they influence. This means focusing on the client's current behavior, forming ways to change, finding other options and planning to meet needs constructively. Counselors should help both gang members and recruits uncover self-destructive beliefs and irrational thinking that leads to bad choices, she says.

Most important, however, is for school counselors to develop caring relationships with gang members and those affected by their affiliation, Taylor-Austin says. "When clients feel comfortable, they can cry, laugh and share openly with the counselor. That is important."

Counselors should also avoid being judgmental and check their attitudes about gangs. "Gang members don't need to be told that gang-banging is bad," Taylor-Austin contends. "Rather than have their beliefs challenged, they need to learn new ways to meet their needs."

Working effectively with gang members requires an open mind and an understanding of the gang culture, she says. "Read what you can on the subject, and don't be afraid to ask your client to explain things," she says, adding that counselors who want to work with this population must be knowledgeable about their world and gain their trust -- a requirement mentioned by several experts. "Gang members trust very few people, and the school counselor will be constantly tested," Taylor-Austin says.

Daya Singh Sandhu, a senior Fulbright research scholar and former chairperson of the University of Louisville Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology, agrees. He has published extensively in the area of school violence and gang-related problems and says the issue is a complex one for school counselors to address. Those gang members who reject school, including its curricular and extracurricular activities, and their communities are in the process of becoming "antisocial personalities if not helped through early counseling interventions," says Sandhu, who adds that signs of these behaviors often begin in elementary school.

Sandhu, president of the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development, a division of ACA, believes integrative counseling or psychotherapy that "looks beyond and across the confines of single-school approaches" works best with gang members. He also highly recommends cognitive approaches and use of Ellis' rational emotive behavior therapy.

"Students involved in gangs are very difficult clients who come to counseling involuntarily and resent counselors for their intrusions," he says. "They have little or no motivation to change. They have developed a failure identity and suffer from deep pain of hopelessness and helplessness. Counselors must practice patience, persistence and perseverance to work with these clients who belong to a different subculture and have very unique needs. These clients need long-term psychotherapy rather than short-term counseling."

Ieva says most of the basics of counseling still apply when working with students affiliated with a gang, including establishing a caring relationship, listening, being nonjudgmental and dealing with clients from their perspective. In addition, she says, traditional school counseling goals, such as assuring the student is in a position both socially and emotionally to learn, are also applicable.

Counselors should also encourage gang members to finish pursuing traditional educational opportunities, Ieva says. These opportunities can provide a necessary alternative to students influenced in some way by gang activity, or at least provide one point of support to those who become entrenched in gang life. "They need to get their high school diploma," she says. "We are equipping them with tools and planting seeds in many cases. That's the most we can do."

These clients will also test counselors with regard to issues surrounding confidentiality and ethics. Questions related to reporting illegal activities or harm to others may come into play, and reporting this information can have severe consequences for gang members and others.

"I believe we must practice our ethical and legal standards while counseling students who are involved in

gangs," Sandhu says. He advises counselors to be direct, open and honest with these students and to spell out the limitations of confidentiality -- namely, that anytime clients pose a danger to themselves or to others, counselors must divulge this information for safety reasons.

"I found these clients appreciated straightforwardness, directness and honesty in counseling and therapeutic relationships. As a commonsense matter, however, a counselor must not promise to these clients what he or she cannot deliver. They are generally highly manipulative. For this reason, a counselor must be very assertive," Sandhu says.

Working with gang members takes persistence and patience, Kodluboy says. "Always remain open to change and growth. Most delinquent youth who succeed at some point had at least one adult who never gave up on them and who always expected and communicated success."

Intervening with students

Here are some ideas for ways school counselors can intervene with different segments of the student population who are touched by gang activity in their schools or communities.

Not involved in a gang: For the average student who doesn't know much about gang activity, truthful information presented simply and with authority works best. Offer a clear portrayal of what gang life is like and how difficult it is to leave once someone is a member, says Kara Ieva.

Within reach: If an innocent student comes to a school counselor and reports being bothered by gang members, parents and probably the police should be contacted, says Lisa Taylor-Austin. Work as a mediator should be left to someone experienced with gangs. Counselors might consider changing the student's class or lunch schedule or helping the student to devise alternative times or routes home to avoid the conflict, Ieva says. Donald Kodluboy recommends developing a safety plan for the student and suggests that clear signs of gang activity may warrant a "threat assessment" protocol that reviews the degree of danger to this student and others.

Wannabes and look-alikes: Sometimes, students who pose as gang members really aren't, Taylor-Austin says. "Point out that if you look and act like a gang member, people will treat you like one. The perceived respect and status will be outweighed by the cons -- being a walking target for rival gangs and being treated as a gang member by the staff and administration." Another risk is that authentic members of the gang might not approve of such mimicry.

Prospect: Ieva says this is the category of student that counselors should focus on most, offering these individuals alternative ways to spend their time and to create a life outside of a gang. Often, gangs serve as a surrogate for youth who lack a healthy family life, so presenting other options that provide a sense of family or community can be helpful in steering these students away from gangs. Assigning a mentor might help, and checking in with the student weekly to remind him or her of alternatives and to help the student explore options can be effective.

Taylor-Austin says students who fall in this category are either being pulled "toward something they perceive as positive -- money, friendship, drugs or status -- or pushed from other issues in their life -- divorce, abuse, difficulty in school or in peer relationships."

Says Ieva, "You have three to six months to help them change their mind." Other experts suggest even less time.

Gang involved and proud of it: Ieva acknowledges that reversing this level of involvement is difficult. Perhaps the best a counselor can do is try to keep these students safe while urging them to get an education that they can put to use as adults. "They will let you know that they can't leave (gang life) and tell you, 'Here's why,'" Ieva says. "It is hard to change that."

Taylor-Austin is wary of "deprogramming" efforts. Instead, she thinks counselors should try to understand these students and listen to them with consideration for their circumstances. "It is not our role to make a judgment about their life," she says. "It takes heart, charisma, intelligence, knowledge of gangs and the rules they follow, along with the ability to advocate for students that everyone within the school system may have

given up on."

"Remember, gang members are people," she continues. "They need counseling and help navigating through life just like the rest of the population. You might help them with other issues (in their life) and plant seeds for alternatives. Many gang members I have worked with are unaware of options that would seem evident to most of us."

Member who wants out: In an ideal situation, law enforcement will have a well-trained task force to handle such situations. Most experts agree it is not something a counselor should try to help the client do independently. "This should be addressed only by those who have extensive experience with gangs," Taylor-Austin says. "Former gang members who have become productive members of society can sometimes help."
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