
Approach to Gang Prevention and Intervention in Fort Worth, Texas¹

Presenter:

Richard Zavala,² Director

Background

In 1991 a task force of city officials and community leaders undertook a study of ways to reduce juvenile crime in Fort Worth. The report concluded that a holistic effort was required involving law enforcement agencies, the business community, religious institutions, educational institutions, government, the media, and nonprofit organizations. In order to be successful, prevention, intervention, and enforcement efforts were needed (see Exhibit 25A).

In fiscal year 1992 Fort Worth implemented a crime initiative called *Code Blue* based on recommendations from the task force report. To attack crime, \$3.2 million was provided, 82% of which went to law enforcement initiatives. Of the total, \$101,000 was allocated for late-night basketball on Saturday nights during the summer only. During the summer of 1992, over 8,000 young people participated in that program, with 7,200 and 8,200 participating in 1993 and 1994 respectively.

The results of the midnight basketball initiative were impressive. Based on crime statistics provided by the police department, in those areas where the midnight basketball program was provided, crime dropped 28% within a one-mile radius of community center program sites. As a comparison, at five other community centers where these programs did not exist, crime rose an average of 39%.

In the summer of 1993, the police, human services, and recreation departments put together a

crime package that totalled \$4 million, of which \$2.7 million was requested for late-night programs year-round in the community. As testimony to the results that had been achieved through programs to date, the council approved a total of \$1.5 million for all the programs in the package, with 87% of that funding going to prevention (quite a turn around from the percentage allocations just two years earlier).

The police chief commented:

I think there is a lot of strength and advantage to having three or four city departments involved in this whole process. I think we've proven, with a lot of examples over the years, that we can't arrest our way out of social problems.

The mayor noted that taxpayers are better off in the long run with a broad approach:

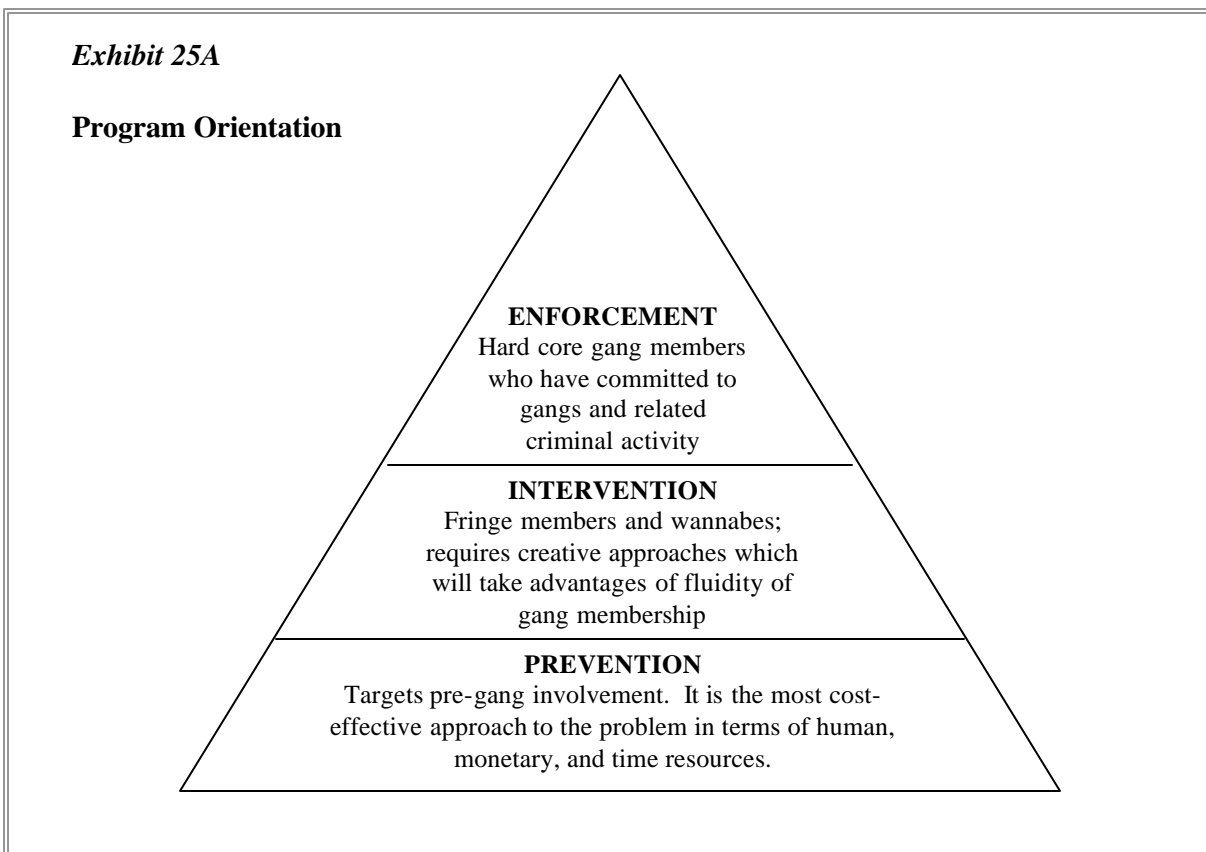
To try and change a lifestyle is not impossible, but it's very difficult. I compare it to smoking and what we've done with lung cancer. We didn't get there because we perfected surgery. We got there because we educated people into prevention.

In 1994 the Parks and Community Services Department received \$702,000 for the remaining nine months of the budget year: \$70,000 for youth sports programs, and \$632,000 for late-night programming in five community centers, five nights a week, year-round, until 11 p.m. or midnight, depending on the

¹ Material is taken edited by Witt, P.A., & Crompton, J.L. (Eds.). (1996). *Recreation programs that work for at-risk youth: The challenge of shaping the future*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.

Out of print, used by permission of publisher

² Fort Worth Parks and Community Services Department 4200 S. Freeway, Suite 2200 Fort Worth, TX 76115
Phone: (817) 871-5711



night. For the next budget year, due to the success of the program, the total was annualized to \$739,000.

After one year of operation the program yielded 75,000 units of service which works out to just under \$10 a participant per year, 83¢ a month, or less than a nickel a night. This is considerably better than the \$40,000 plus it costs to incarcerate a juvenile in Texas for a year.

The at-risk effort is centered around the two programs which are described in the following sections.

Year-Round After-school, Evening and Late Night Programs

This initiative is offered at five community Centers: Sycamore, Martin Luther King, Como, Northside and Worth Heights. The hours of operation are on Wednesday and Thursday, 3 p.m. to 11 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 4 p.m. to 12 midnight; and Sunday, 2 p.m. to 10 p.m. Programs operate year-round.

Goals of the programs are:

(1) to provide social, educational, and recreational growth opportunities for youth;

(2) to focus all efforts toward building and enhancing positive self-fulfillment, self-esteem, and well-being for youth;

(3) to provide structured, constructive, and innovative activities in a safe and secure environment during traditional and nontraditional times; and

(4) to maximize collaborations with other public, private and nonprofit agencies, and community groups.

Three leader positions are funded at each site with one program coordinator position funded to oversee the entire project. Security is provided at each center. Police officers involve themselves in the programs, many of them volunteering their time. Activities include: sports and athletics; educational programs such as tutoring, homework assistance, and GED training; recreational programs, such as photography, drama, art and music; programs on social issues such as drug and alcohol awareness, and AIDS education; parenting and job skills training, such as resume writing, employment interviewing, and career planning.

Comin' Up: A Youth Gang Intervention Program

Between 1987 and 1992 the number of gangs in Fort Worth increased from 77 to 211, while gang membership rose from 1,316 to 3,448. The goal of the Youth Gang Intervention Program is to impact positively the lives of youths involved in gangs by providing services and activities to reduce the level of gang violence. In August 1994 the city entered into a contract with the Boys Club of Fort Worth to manage and operate the Comin' Up program. The Parks and Community Services Department serves as the contract monitor and works closely with the Boys Club in the management of the programs. Initially seven sites were funded by a U.S. Department of Justice grant enabling the addition of two more sites. Of the nine sites, six are operated at Parks and Community Services' community centers.

With the assistance of the police department and other organizations and agencies, the program seeks to strategically identify specific gangs that are the greatest source of violence, and to target services for individual gang members that can have the greatest impact on reducing violence by their particular gang. Services are provided directly through the program as well as by a clearly defined network of service providers. A set of principles for dealing with the gang's problem is shown in Exhibit 25B.

Program Objectives

(1) To identify gang members in need of services by seeking referrals from the police, schools, juvenile probation, and other relevant agencies and organizations, (e.g., Parks and Community Services, churches).

Action Steps: The project will take referrals directly from agencies or organizations who can identify youth who need the program, as well as receive feedback and information about program participants.

(2) To provide extended services in seven initial targeted areas that will attract 100 gang-involved youth at each site.

Action Steps: Seven area working groups will be developed to identify and target specific gangs and gang members for program participation. Gang affiliation will be verified by the police gang unit. Specific outreach strategies and time frames will be detailed in the action plan to reach targeted youth. Services will be provided late at night and will be interest-based.

(3) To identify and target 25 gang members at each site for more intense case management and service provision.

Action Steps: Twenty-five youth at each program site will be identified and targeted for more intense, expanded services. A needs assessment will be completed for each youth, and additional needs-based services will be provided directly by the program, as well as through referral services.

(4) To assess the needs and interests of each targeted youth, and develop specific plans of action to meet the needs of these youth.

Action Steps: A team including project staff, school officials, parent(s), police and/or probation officials, and any other relevant agency personnel will focus on the youth's needs, and on identifying services to meet those needs. The needs assessment will result in a service plan which can be tracked and routinely updated.

(5) To provide needs-focused services and activities (e.g., academic programming, employability and job development) directly through the project, as well as through a clearly defined network of collaborating organizations and agencies.

Action Steps: Sequential services will be provided so that mastered skills are built-on in a way that enable youth to succeed in school, in the workplace, and in the community at large. Services will begin with life-skills related services (e.g., communication and conflict resolution skills, academics) and progress to job skills and peer mediation skills. Interest-based activities will also be provided to support the needs-based services, including field trips, music, drama, and sports.

(6) To refer family members to appropriate services.

Action Steps: As needs assessments are completed and action plans are drawn up, program staff will identify any special family issues, and identify referral resources to address these family needs. This may range from drug and alcohol counseling to arranging for the academic needs of another family member.

Exhibit 25B**Strategies that Must be Implemented by All Groups and Institutions that Deal with the Gang Problem**

- Sensitivity training for all professional staff and constituents to respect cultural differences and ethnic diversity.
- Development of community-based partnerships to cut bureaucratic red tape and territorial barriers.
- Innovative and nontraditional methods of service and program delivery.
- Education of professional staff and constituents about gangs, their activities, and the related issues of violence, drugs, and weapon possession.
- Long-term commitment to solving the problem.
- Recognizing the value of prevention, and making it a high priority in programming and budgeting.
- Creation of more opportunities for building self-esteem and civic pride in youth.
- Creating and expanding mentoring programs for at-risk youth.
- Facilitating accessibility of services to youth and families who need them.
- Removing graffiti as soon as it appears to tell gangs they are not welcome.
- Commitment of resources (e.g., human, monetary, time) to provide long-term evaluation of prevention and intervention programs.

(7) To establish relationships and respect between youth from different areas and neighborhoods in the city who would otherwise interact negatively or even violently.

Action Steps: As the program progresses and youth from the different gangs are able to interact positively at each program site, intersite activities will be planned. These activities can range from social activities like dances and performances to sports activities and community service activities where youth work together on communitywide projects. The purpose of these activities would be to develop an understanding between youth from different parts of the city about common interests and needs.

(8) To employ 14 program participants (two from each site) to serve as part-time community outreach workers to enhance access to and dialogue with gang-involved youth.

Action Steps: Two youth from each site will be hired part time (25 hours per week) to serve as community outreach workers. These youth will serve as liaisons and promote the program to other youth in their community, and assist in mediating gang-related issues that may arise.

(9) To support the development of truces among rival gangs as issues arise and reduce random gang violence through peer mediation and

project staff involvement.

Action Steps: Program staff and community outreach workers, through their established relationships with gangs, will promote truces between gangs, and mediate disputes when feasible and appropriate. Any mediation work would be done with the knowledge and support of the police department's Gang Unit in order to ensure that city efforts are coordinated.