Summarizing Interventions to Prevent Gang Membership

Executive Summary: *CHANGING COURSE*

Intervention and suppression efforts by law enforcement are not sufficient to solve the youth gang problem in the U.S. To realize a significant and lasting reduction in youth gang activity, those who make decisions about how limited resources are allocated — as well as practitioners like teachers and police officers, community service providers and health care workers — must understand what the evidence shows about *preventing* young people from joining a gang in the first place.

The gang problem in the United States peaked in the late 1990s. Although it started to decline after that, the youth gang problem increased from 2001 to 2005 and has remained stubbornly persistent over the past decade. Here are the facts:

- One in three local law enforcement agencies in 2010 reported youth gang problems in their jurisdiction.[1]

- In a 2010 national survey, 45 percent of high school students and 35 percent of middle schoolers said that there were gangs — or students who considered themselves part of a gang — in their school.[2]

- Nearly one in 12 young people said they belonged to a gang at some point during their teenage years.[3]

The challenge is how we can reduce gang-joining during a time of substantially limited national, state and local budgets. To help meet this challenge, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) formed a partnership to publish a book, *Changing Course: Preventing Gang Membership*. This executive summary highlights the book's chapters, which were written by some of the nation's top criminal justice and public health researchers.

The Consequences of Gang Membership

The consequences of gangs — and the burden they place on the law enforcement and health systems in our communities — are significant. Homicide is the second leading cause of death for American adolescents and young adults, accounting for an average of 13 deaths every day among 15- to 24-year-olds.[4] However, the number of violent deaths tells only part of the story. More than 700,000 young people are treated in emergency departments in the U.S. for assault-related injuries every year.[4]

Although kids in gangs are far more likely than kids not involved in gangs to be both victims and perpetrators of violence,[5, 6] the risks go far beyond crime and violence. Gang-involved youth are more likely to engage in substance abuse and high-risk sexual behavior and to experience a wide range of potentially long-term health and social consequences, including school dropout, teen parenthood, family problems and unstable employment.[7]

Why Prevention?

The large majority of youth who join a gang do so at a very early age: between 11 and 15 years old, with the peak years between 13 and 15.[8] Therefore, early prevention is key. However, local, state and federal budgets in many arenas — including public health, criminal justice, education and community services — are currently addressing the *aftermath* of gang-joining on individual youth and their families, schools and communities.

Fortunately, we know that many early prevention programs are effective *and* provide taxpayers with significantly more benefits than costs. Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman, for example, has written about the economic benefits of targeting high-risk children before they start kindergarten.[9] Researchers at the Washington State Institute for Public Policy have done cost-benefit analyses of prevention programs that show significant effects on a range of outcomes, including crime, educational attainment, substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, teen pregnancy and public assistance.[10] Many programs have substantial returns that far exceed the costs. Hence, the focus of *Changing Course* is on the early prevention of gang-joining.

How Big Is the Problem?

In the first chapter of *Changing Course*, James C. ("Buddy") Howell discusses the magnitude of the gangs problem in the U.S. and why preventing kids from joining gangs is so important.

"At the individual level," Dr. Howell writes, "youth who join a gang develop an increased propensity for violence and, in turn, are more likely to be victims of violence. In addition, the likelihood of favorable life-course outcomes is significantly reduced. Communities are also negatively affected by gangs, particularly in terms of quality of life, crime, victimization and the economic costs."

Howell discusses how gang involvement encourages more active participation in delinquency, drug use, drug trafficking and violence — all of which, in turn, may result in arrest, conviction and incarceration.[11, 12] Gang involvement also tends to bring disorder to the life course in a cumulative pattern of negative outcomes, including school dropout, teen parenthood and unstable employment.[5, 13]

With respect to community decline and other costs, Howell reports that large cities have seen consistently high or increasing levels of gang-related homicides in recent years.[14] He also discusses other impacts on communities, including losses in property values, neighborhood businesses and tax revenue; weakened informal social control mechanisms; and an exodus of families from gang-ridden neighborhoods.[15]

The cost of crime to Americans has been estimated at $655 billion each year[16] and, over the course of his or her lifetime, a high-rate criminal offender can impose an estimated $4.2–7.2 million in costs on society.[17, 18] Howell notes, however, that the costs are relatively low during the *early* years of the life of a chronic offender (defined as six or more police contacts by age 26) — about $3,000 by age 10.[17] This, he argues, highlights the cost benefits of early prevention efforts that focus on youth in high-risk settings before problem behaviors develop.

The evidence, says Howell, is that the most successful anti-gang initiatives are communitywide in scope, have broad community involvement in planning and delivery, and employ integrated outreach support and services. He concludes with words of hope: "[C]ommunities that organize and mobilize themselves using a data-driven strategy can direct their resources toward effectively preventing gang formation and its associated criminal activity."

The Attractions of Gangs

Carl S. Taylor and Pamela R. Smith argue that policymakers and practitioners must understand that, to some kids, the positive aspects of being in a gang seem to outweigh the potentially life-destroying consequences. In their chapter in *Changing Course,* Dr. Taylor and Ms. Smith discuss:

Economics

Today's economic reality can often leave teenagers out of the labor market — and the promise of material reward is a significant attraction for kids who join gangs.[19–22] For many young people who feel disconnected from the American Dream, say Taylor and Smith, the economic opportunities of gang membership offer an acceptable alternative to a low-wage job in the legitimate employment arena.[19, 23, 24]

A Support System and Sense of Belonging

Youth who feel marginalized, rejected or ignored in the family, school or church may join a gang to fill a need for support.[22] Some youth join a gang for a sense of belonging, viewing the gang as a substitute or auxiliary family.[20, 22, 25]

"I was in the gang," said Yusuf Shakur, now the director of Detroit's Urban Youth Leadership Group, whom Taylor and Smith interviewed for *Changing Course.* "What lured me was … there was guys who made me feel like I was something special. They were my brothers; they looked out for me. If you want change, you have to compete with that fact."

Relationships With Family and Friends

For some, the appeal is that a friend or family member is already in the gang.[6, 22] Youth who have older family members who are in a gang may feel particularly motivated to join.

Protection

There is incontrovertible evidence that kids in a gang are more likely to be exposed to violence than kids who do not belong to a gang. However, that truth does not resonate with many kids who join a gang, believing that it protects them from violence in school or the community. Some youth also seek the protection of a gang because of problems at home.[20] Girls who experience physical or sexual abuse at home may believe that being in a gang offers them protection.[26]

Status

For at-risk adolescents, gangs can be seen as a way to increase their status among peers. For these youth, joining a gang can also be regarded as a way to get respect, freedom and independence — all self-empowerment factors that may be missing from their lives.

Outlaw Mentality

Many kids — not only those at risk for gang membership — rebel against traditional societal values. For some, running with an organization of gangsters, hoodlums, thugs or banditos seems to be taking a stand against society. Taylor and Smith argue that it is important to understand the image of an "outlaw culture" during the cognitive development stage of adolescence.

The Nexus of Public Safety and Public Health

Public health and public safety workers who respond to gang problems know that after-the-fact efforts are not enough. An emergency department doctor who treats gang-related gunshot wounds or a police officer who must tell a mother that her son has been killed in a drive-by shooting is likely to stress the need for prevention — and the complementary roles that public health and law enforcement must play — in stopping violence before it starts.

As a joint NIJ-CDC publication, *Changing Course* exemplifies the nexus of public safety and public health. In the book's conclusion, the two federal research agencies extend an invitation to policymakers and practitioners to engage in a new way of thinking about the intersection of public health and public safety and leveraging resources. Indeed, the need to think more broadly about gang-joining is one of the reasons CDC and NIJ brought together diverse perspectives — from public health and law enforcement, and from researchers and practitioners.

The Role of Public Health

Gang membership has traditionally been viewed from a public safety — rather than a public health — perspective. In *Changing Course,* however, Tamara M. Haegerich and her co-authors, James Mercy and Billie Weiss, say that looking at the issue solely through the public safety lens fails to leverage the extensive expertise of our nation's public health professionals, who understand the impact on the health of an individual gang member *and* on the health of a community.

Based on a cross-disciplinary principle that puts everybody — medical and mental health, criminal justice, education and social services — at the table, the public health approach uses four steps:

- Describe and monitor the problem.
- Identify the risk and protective factors.
- Develop and evaluate prevention strategies.
- Ensure widespread implementation.

Although the public health model is ideal for developing programs to help prevent kids from joining gangs, it does not come without challenges. One is that, in many respects, the idea of "prevention" is not understood or highly valued by our society. Community leaders are strongly invested in strategies that focus on holding perpetrators accountable and that supposedly yield immediate results, as described by Dr. Haegerich and her colleagues. Preventing gang violence through reductions in gang membership will require a long-term investment in research, program development and evaluation, they write.

Public health can contribute to the development of definitions, data elements and data systems that can help the nation understand the magnitude of gang-joining and violence. Indeed, the public health approach to monitoring trends, researching risk and protective factors, evaluating interventions, and supporting the dissemination and implementation of evidence-based strategies is an important complement to law enforcement. However, as Haegerich and her co-authors write, communities often lack a comprehensive gang-joining prevention strategy that includes public health departments and public health professionals.

"With some notable exceptions," they say, "state and local health departments have been reluctant to tackle the issue of violence prevention, much less gang violence prevention or gang-joining prevention."

This may be due to a variety of factors, such as lack of funding support. As a result, the authors argue, "[T]he prevention system needed to support and sustain successful dissemination and implementation of programs and policies does not presently exist in most locales."

Haegerich and her co-authors call for fundamental operational changes in agencies and systems — as well as coordination of funding streams — to facilitate collaboration across sectors and generate sufficient resources to monitor gang membership and to implement and evaluate prevention strategies.

The Role of Law Enforcement

Scott Decker writes in *Changing Course* that to prevent kids from joining gangs, we must move beyond a "hook 'em and book 'em" mentality. Police, he says, must enhance their traditional role as crime fighters by collaborating — with public health, school, community, and other public- and private-sector partners — on primary, front-end prevention strategies.

Dr. Decker argues that the mandate for police to play a key role in gang prevention is clear. "The police have a vital role in *preventing* youth from joining gangs in the first place," he says. "In fact, they have a true mandate with respect to efforts to prevent gang-joining: It is, quite simply, a part of their job to serve and protect."

Decker describes how gangs disrupt the important socializing power of the very institutions that help young people learn and abide by the appropriate rules of a society: family, school and community. Not only do gang members commit crimes — victimizing innocents and each other — but their presence detracts from a neighborhood's quality of life. Gangs also divert important resources — money, personnel, programs and attention — from other activities that could help create healthier, more productive communities.

Although the police already engage in a considerable number of prevention activities, Decker says that their role in preventing kids from joining gangs could — and should — be enhanced through use of the Scanning, Analyzing, Responding, Assessing (SARA) model. SARA goes beyond the response to 911 calls for service by (1) scanning the environment for crime problems, (2) analyzing problems through multiple sources of information, (3) developing a response, and (4) assessing the effectiveness of the response.

Police can play a crucial role in a community's effort to prevent kids from joining gangs by gathering better knowledge of where gang problems exist and who is vulnerable to membership. Decker writes that, in this regard, patrolling is important — and, because officers are already doing this, it doesn't cost more money. Law enforcement leadership should emphasize, reinforce and reward the prevention aspects of patrolling, Decker says.

The chapter also discusses how crucial police partnerships with other community players are in any gang-prevention initiative. Finally, Decker notes that working in collaboration on efforts to prevent gang-joining increases police legitimacy and credibility, particularly in at-risk communities and among at-risk youth.

"Police legitimacy can be increased through partnerships with community groups and agencies that are trying to reduce the attraction of gangs; when police play a more active, visible role in gang-membership prevention activities, it builds trust and improves community efficacy," he writes.

The bottom line is that neighborhoods and communities with high collective efficacy have a greater ability to regulate the behavior of their juveniles, which, in turn, helps prevent gang-joining.

Understanding the Role of Child Development

The promise of prevention is that most youth — even those most at risk, living in the most distressed urban communities — do *not* join a gang. The question, therefore, is: Why do some?

Every decision we make is influenced by contexts that develop over time, and joining a gang is no different, says Nancy G. Guerra.

"A 13-year-old does not wake up one day and decide out of the blue to join a gang," Dr. Guerra and her colleagues, Carly B. Dierkhising and Pedro R. Payne, write in *Changing Course*. "The decision is a consequence of a particular life environment, behavior and way of thinking that leads a child to adopt the gang lifestyle later on."

Their chapter delves into the individual and family factors in early childhood (ages 0–5) and during the elementary school years (ages 6–12) that increase the risk for gang-joining.

"Gang intervention strategies often focus on adolescents," Guerra and her co-authors write, "but to help prevent youth from joining a gang, it is important that practitioners and policymakers address the developmental needs of youth from birth (or even prenatally) to age 12."

Joining a gang should be understood as part of a life course that begins when a child is born (or before). Important risk factors for children ages 0–5 include hypervigilance to threat, cognitive impairments, insecure attachment to a caregiver and early aggressive behavior.[27–31] For 6- to 12-year-olds, important risk factors include poor school performance and parental monitoring, deficits in social information-processing skills, antisocial beliefs, and negative relationships with peers, including being rejected and victimized by peers.[32–35]

Because the age of 12 (which roughly corresponds with the transition from elementary to middle school) can be a crucial *turning point* where lifestyle decisions are made, it is very important to begin prevention early in life, "before harmful lifestyle decisions are made and before transient behaviors in childhood, such as aggression, turn into habits that are hard to break," the authors argue.

"We know," they write, "that children are at risk for joining a gang from an early age if they are hyper-sensitive to threat because they regularly see shootings in the neighborhood, have fallen behind in school because they can't read, or live in neighborhoods where gangs and 'easy money' seem to go hand-in-hand."

There are protective factors, however, that can help youth who are growing up in high-risk communities; these include higher levels of social-emotional competence, academic success, secure attachment and effective parenting.

In *Changing Course,* Guerra and her colleagues explore ways to identify at-risk youth and provide them with age-appropriate prevention strategies, such as those that improve family functioning and connections with schools, facilitate involvement with socially appropriate peers, and reduce bullying and victimization. Such programs can help them avoid a cascade of problems, including gang-joining, delinquency and violence.

The Role of Families

Deborah Gorman-Smith and her colleagues, Andrea Kampfner and Kimberly Bromann, discuss how early prevention strategies can increase the protective role of families in preventing gang-joining. We know, for example, that aggressive and antisocial behavior during childhood is a risk factor for crime, violence and gang involvement later in life. In general, the earlier that youth join a gang, the greater the severity of involvement. The age of onset, in turn, tends to be related to family functioning. Serious disruptions in parenting and family functioning are related to earlier onset of delinquent behavior, which is generally more severe and dangerous than when criminal activity begins later in adolescence.[36]

Effective parenting and strong family functioning — with warm affective bonds, high monitoring and consistent discipline — protect against a variety of antisocial and problem behaviors, such as involvement with delinquent peers and subsequent likelihood of gang membership and violence.

"Particularly for families living in high-risk neighborhoods, programs that help to build networks of social support and foster family-community ties can provide an additional protective factor to support healthy development and prevent youth involvement in gang and other types of violence," Dr. Gorman-Smith and her co-authors say.

Very early prevention is possible. For example, among the most promising evidence-based prevention programs are those focused on providing support and assistance to low-income pregnant mothers and to families with young children.

Practitioners, policymakers and prevention scientists need to coordinate efforts for scaling up and disseminating evidence-based, family-focused programs, the authors write.

Although the path toward gang involvement is complicated — with, as Gorman-Smith and her colleagues note, "multiple determinants and no easy answers for prevention" — strengthening the family can help protect a child who is at risk of joining a gang.

The Role of Schools

Gary D. Gottfredson describes the need to increase the ability — and the willingness — of schools to accurately assess gang problems, implement prevention strategies, and address the fear in schools that contributes to the risk for gang-joining. Indeed, Dr. Gottfredson argues, providing a safe environment to ensure that students are not fearful may be the single most important thing schools can do to prevent gang-joining.

"Communities must prevent gang problems and provide safe school environments not only to protect students and improve their educational outcomes but also to forestall a cycle in which school disorder and community disorganization perpetuate each other," he writes.

Arguing that many principals in schools with gang problems do not recognize or admit a problem, Gottfredson points to a large study of secondary schools, which found that only one-fifth of the principals of schools with gang problems (defined as more than 15 percent of students reporting they belonged to a gang) said their school had a problem.[37]

Gottfredson underscores the need for educational leaders to implement programs that make efficient use of educational time, use state-of-the-art methods, and have been shown to be effective in preventing problem behavior or gang involvement. Leaders must also be certain the programs are implemented as designed.

Gottfredson says that, despite their potential to reduce the risk for problem behavior and violence in the general population when implemented well, school-based programs are unlikely to reach youth who are at greatest risk of gang-joining because many have dropped out or are not fully engaged in school. In places with staggering dropout rates such as Baltimore (41 percent), Albuquerque (49 percent) and Philadelphia (61 percent),[38] it is unrealistic, he says, to expect that school-based programs will reach the youth who are most at risk.

"Much of the dropout occurs in the ninth grade, which means that youths at risk of dropout — who are typically poor school attendees while they remain enrolled — have little chance of exposure to programs in high school," he writes.

Gottfredson also notes that although alternate strategies, such as evening programs, may be helpful in reaching a fraction of this population, rigorous research on the efficacy of such approaches is lacking.

The chapter discusses the importance of grounding school-based gang-prevention programs on a careful consideration of specific needs. Assessments of gang risks as well as the usefulness of current prevention activities are necessary to guide future action. Systematic self-report surveys regarding gang involvement and victimization should be used to supplement existing data collection — such as school- or principal-reported incident or suspension rates — which are insufficient to develop a true picture of gang problems in schools. Schools can use this information to make decisions about which risk factors for gang-joining — including substance abuse, delinquency and violence — are most prevalent, choose programs that are known to reduce those risks, and then fully implement those programs.

The Role of Communities

Because of a heavy emphasis on school-based programs, communities have largely been overlooked as a valuable resource in reaching kids who are at risk of joining a gang. Too often, says Jorja Leap, programs in the classroom are not connected to what is going on in the streets.

This disconnect can be exacerbated by a feeling in the community that a "solution" is being imposed on them from the outside, but this paradigm must change, Dr. Leap argues. In her discussion on the role of communities in preventing gang-joining, Leap says that, in today's economic reality — where budget cuts have reduced or entirely eliminated youth development programs — community partnerships must be a priority. Emphasizing the need for comprehensive approaches that enhance "core activities" such as tutoring, mentoring, life-skills training, case management, parental involvement, connection with schools, supervised recreational activities and community mobilization, Leap outlines key strategies, including:

• Avoid reinventing the wheel by building on programs that already exist.

• Develop strategic plans.

• Identify real and imagined boundaries.

• Make community participation a priority and maximize partnerships.

• Use training and technical assistance to expand organizational capacity.

• Ensure sustainability.

Emphasizing opportunities to build on a community's existing strengths, Leap describes the need for multifaceted prevention efforts that are grounded in collaboration among the various stakeholders. She discusses how communities can conduct a needs assessment, choose the right partners and eliminate bureaucratic obstacles.

The hard reality is that many community-based gang-prevention programs depend on a single or a small number of funding sources, Leap concludes. Because sustaining effective programs requires a continuing funding stream, building partnerships can be crucial.

Preventing Girls From Joining Gangs

Until recently, girls in gangs were often "invisible," says Meda Chesney-Lind. One reason for this is that girls enter gangs — and exit from gang activity — at earlier ages than boys.

In *Changing Course,* Dr. Chesney-Lind discusses families that are unable to support female adolescent development and provide basic safety. This — in conjunction with dangerous neighborhoods, possible sexual and other abuse, and poor-quality schools — paints a daunting picture for girls who are at risk of joining a gang.

Girls in gangs are far more likely than their non-gang peers to have been sexually assaulted, generally by a family member.[39, 40] In one study, researchers found that 62 percent of female gang members had been sexually abused or assaulted, and three-fourths said they had been physically abused.[41]

Although girls join gangs for many of the same reasons as boys, girls are more likely to be seeking safety and security that they cannot find in a troubled or abusive home. Some girls join gangs in search of a surrogate family; others turn to a gang as a solution to family violence, believing that the gang may equip them to fight back physically or emotionally.[42]

The reality, however, is that a gang is not a good place for protection. Not only do girls experience higher levels of delinquency once in a gang but they can be raped during initiation.[43, 44] Being in a gang significantly increases delinquent behavior for girls, as it does for boys.

Chesney-Lind argues that early gang-joining prevention should focus on children who are at the greatest risk of neglect or abuse. There should also be a focus on helping girls stay in school and avoid substance abuse and abusive boyfriends, and on giving them the skills to delay early sexual activity and parenthood.

"Such work will be challenging, however, given years of inattention to girls' programming and the consequent lack of robust, gender-informed program models," she says. "We urgently need strategies to help the girls who are at the greatest risk for gang-joining, particularly those who may turn to a gang for 'protection' or a sense of belonging."

The Role of Race and Ethnicity in Gang-Joining

Adrienne Freng and Terrance J. Taylor look at the complex role that race and ethnicity can play in gang membership, concluding that, although more research is needed, common underlying risk factors — such as poverty, challenges for immigrants, discrimination and social isolation — should be the focus at this point.

"The roles of race and ethnicity in gang membership are becoming increasingly complicated, and it is important to understand that the term *gang membership* is not 'code' for race or ethnicity," they write in *Changing Course.* "The truth is that more and more gangs include white gang members and are becoming multiracial."

Drs. Freng and Taylor argue that there has long existed a connection between race/ethnicity and gang membership. Early gang members traditionally came from white ethnic immigrant groups, such as the Irish and Polish. Starting in the 1950s, however, gang membership has been increasingly concentrated among racial and ethnic minorities such as African-Americans, Hispanics and, increasingly, Asian and American Indian groups[45–50] — although there are a considerable number of white gang members as well.[51–53]

Emerging gangs have also become much more multiracial, which affects the role that race and ethnicity play in gang-joining, especially with respect to conflicts between gangs.[54] But do we need race- or ethnic-*specific* programming to help prevent gang-joining? Do we need more targeted programs that focus on specific risk factors for different racial and ethnic groups? Or is general gang-prevention programming — which includes some race- and ethnic-*sensitive* elements — sufficient?

Freng and Taylor point out that there is surprisingly little research to answer these questions. Noting some recent evidence that racial/ethnic-specific gang-prevention programming may not be necessary, the authors suggest that general prevention programming — which includes race- and ethnic-sensitive elements — may be helpful.[55]

"To know whether race- and ethnic-*specific* programming would be more successful than general gang-prevention programming, it is important that current prevention programs be better evaluated to determine whether race or ethnicity has an impact on prevention efforts and outcomes," they say.

Freng and Taylor also argue that gang-prevention strategies should focus on "common denominators" that cut across racial and ethnic lines, such as poverty and immigration, social isolation and discrimination, drug use, limited educational opportunities and low parental monitoring.

"We can act now on what we know about shared risk factors — poverty, immigration, discrimination, and social isolation — and their consequences in terms of substance abuse, limited educational and job opportunities, family stress, neighborhood crime and the influence of gangs — by implementing prevention programs that are racially, ethnically and culturally sensitive and are known to reduce relevant risks," they write.

Evaluation: Prepare to Prove Success

In a chapter on the importance of evaluation, Finn-Aage Esbensen and Kristy N. Matsuda say that, although it is no surprise that policymakers, practitioners and researchers have different mindsets when it comes to solving a problem, it is crucial that their thinking converges when it comes to determining whether a solution does (or does not) work.

Everyone — from federal and state policymakers to local school board members, and from health departments to police departments — needs to be able to answer the question: "How do we *know* if we are preventing gang membership?" Anecdotal success stories do not justify creating a new program or continuing the investment in an ongoing one. Decisions should be made on the best available evidence. Therefore, it is crucial that decision-makers understand the key principles of process, outcome and cost-effectiveness evaluations.

A formal evaluation — of a strategy, initiative or program that is designed to prevent gang-joining — is the only way to measure outcomes and to understand what works and why it works. Drs. Esbensen and Matsuda say that, although many policymakers and practitioners understand that evaluation is critical to proving the success (or failure) of a program, most do not fully understand the role that evaluation plays in actually *designing* and *implementing* a successful gang-prevention program.

"It is important that policymakers and practitioners understand the components of the most rigorous evaluations and, most important, be able to articulate to their constituents the real-world occurrences that sometimes make an outcome evaluation difficult to execute," they write.

Esbensen and Matsuda describe the two basic types of evaluation: outcome and process. They also discuss the two strategies — cost-benefit analysis and cost-effectiveness analysis — for comparing the cost of a gang-prevention program with the cost of a criminal offender to society.

An Invitation

Changing Course extends an invitation to policymakers and practitioners to engage in a new way of thinking about the intersection of public health and public safety strategies and leveraging public health and public safety resources.

Offering broad, strategic actions that can help reduce gang-joining and the violence and crime that often result, the conclusion of the book discusses six themes that span the individual chapters: (1) building partnerships, (2) using data, (3) framing the issue, (4) creating a plan, (5) implementing the plan, and (6) evaluating its effectiveness.

The impacts of gang membership — and the burdens it places on our health, law enforcement, corrections, social and education systems — are significant. However, there is reason for optimism. By preventing youth from joining gangs in the first place, we significantly improve their chances for a safe and productive life. That is why CDC and NIJ call the book *Changing Course: Preventing Gang Membership.* Faced with the current economic realities, prevention is the best way to halt the cascading impact of gangs on our kids, families, neighborhoods and society at large. By working together to focus on the prevention of gang membership, rather than solely caring for the victims of gang violence and arresting gang-involved youth, we can **change the course** of the future for our kids.

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