

Helping Gang Members Assimilate Back Into Society

Santa Cruz County Children's Mental Health Prop. 63 Mental Health Services Act Family & Youth Input From Watsonville Digital Bridges Academy Surveys

One of the strengths of our local Children's Inter-agency System of Care is the on-going needs assessment, quality improvement, and strategic planning engaged in by all partners. This community input is included as a key part of our local Prop. 63 planning.

The Watsonville Digital Bridges Academy assists youth and adults at-risk in successfully "bridging" the transition to college and the workforce. The following information has been used to help identify key needs and issues in the area of helping youth involved with gangs assimilate back into society, from the viewpoint of community members.

Assimilating Back To Society: The Need

Background

- Surveyed 131 people
 - 48% - Ex-Gang members
 - 37% - Current gang members
 - 11% - Families of gang members
 - 99% Latino – Gang or Ex-Gang members
 - 88% Male – Gang or Ex-Gang members
 - Most were single or not married
 - 78% - Have families with gang history
- Interviewed 6 people from:
 - Santa Cruz County Probation Department
 - Watsonville Police Department's Gang Unit
 - Si Se Puede – Residential Drug Treatment Program

What is the need?

- All ex-gang members surveyed expressed a desire to assimilate back into society.
 - 61 Ex-Gang members surveyed
 - 6 are in gang intervention programs
- 93% of gang members surveyed indicated they don't have good opportunities for the future.

Why did they leave the gang?

- Wanted a better future
- Need to make money
 - Felt they were not going anywhere; not job prospects
 - Having to sell drugs to make money
- Getting into too much trouble with the law
- Wanted an education
- Did it for their families; kids, parents or because it was causing problems at home.

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Made right decision to leave gang?

- 93% - Ex-Gang members indicated they made the right decision to leave the gang.

Why did they want to assimilate back into society?

- Realization
 - Wake up call
- Opportunities
 - For a better life
 - For more opportunities
- Family
 - Better life for family
- Grew out of it
 - Didn't like it anymore
 - Tired of gang life

What was it like when you got out?

- Difficult
 - Name calling from peers
 - Harassed
 - Bad experience, threatened
 - Violation of car, house, property etc...
- Watch Out!
 - Need to be careful in different neighborhoods due to harassment
 - Couldn't go to many places
 - Difficult

How would you help a family member to get out of a gang?

- Advice
 - Support them and tell them that gangs are no good
 - Give them advice
- Programs
 - Group home
 - Get them into a program
- Don't do anything
- Don't know

When is the need evident?

- When coming out of jail
- When people in the community begin to stereotype and judge them
- When they get jumped or get into problems with other gang members.

Why does this need occur?

- They want to change lifestyle
- They want to work so they don't get into trouble

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- They want to be back in and a part of society
- They want to be successful

What are the consequences of meeting the need?

- People may change
- There would be programs to help them
- People would understand that they want to change and that they want to help others
- Help transition gang members out of gangs

Consequences of not meeting the need

- There would be more gangs
- More crime
- More drugs

What do they need to do to assimilate?

From surveys with Ex-Gang members they indicated:

- Find new friends
- Change their living environment
 - Move to another neighborhood
- Change their appearance
 - Clothing
 - Tattoo removal
- Change themselves, the way they:
 - Think, talk and act in the world
 - Love themselves

Assimilating Back Into Society – Two Solutions:

- Education
 - Change gang behaviors and appearance
 - Graduate from High School or go to Cabrillo (if 18 years old)
 - Prepare them for college-level performance
- Employment
 - Change gang behaviors and appearance
 - Find minimum wage job
 - Find job training program

Criteria for Selecting Solution

- Money in the short term
- Careers that have a future – money in the long term
- Better jobs
- Health benefits
- Keep busy
- Contribution to society
- Opportunity to advance

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- Profit sharing
- Better preparation for life
- Job security
- Physical problems from doing manual labor
- Level of knowledge obtained

Why Youth Join Gangs - Proposal

What is the need?

- Provide youth with more support in their lives
 - Reach them at a young age (5th grade and above)
 - Help them belong to something meaningful
 - Focus their need for excitement constructively
- Decrease gang involvement
- Lower street violence and crime

What age do youth join gangs?

- A majority joined gangs between ages of 10-16 years old.

Why youth are joining gangs?

Lack of family involvement

- Many have one parent who works
 - 84% - Surveyed live with one parent
 - 100% - Surveyed say parents work
- Many parents work at night
 - 65% - Surveyed shows parents work night shift
- Other reasons
 - Family members are involved in gangs
 - 73% - Have family members involved in gangs
 - Want fun and excitement
 - They like the thrill of controlling their turf
 - Girls, parties and drugs
 - Want respect and belonging
 - Friendships (deal with their loneliness)
 - Being a part of something

What was it like to be in a gang?

- No opportunities, low paying jobs
- No job except selling drugs and stealing
- Getting into trouble
- Making enemies, being a target
- Isolation, couldn't go to many places
- Turning to drugs to get away
- Following orders, fighting for something

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- Having back-up
- Respect and belonging

When is the need evident?

- Youth are out in the streets
- When their appearance and attitude begins to change
- Crime rates are increasing among youth
- Parents are estranged from their children
- Violence increasing in schools and neighborhoods
- When youth are joining gangs

Consequences of NOT meeting the need

- Increase in violence and crime
- More drug use and drug trade
- Parents disowning their kids
- Teen pregnancy
- Deterioration of our community

What do youth need to NOT join gangs?

- More support in their lives
- Reach them at a young age (5th grade and above)
- To belong to something meaningful to them
- Focus their need for excitement and physical activity constructively

Relevance to Children's Prop 63 Recommendations

- ❖ **Increased Dual Diagnosis Mental Health/Substance Abuse services for children/youth in our community (including Probation, Child Welfare, School and Community referrals).** *(Identified in recommendations by each subcommittee)*
- ❖ **Increased focus on Transition Age youth needs/issues through supportive counseling and linkage to pro-social activities, jobs, etc.** *(Child Welfare recommendation #3)*