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Gang prevention starts with community involvement

By [Jeremy Baldillez](#)/For the Sun-News
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Gang culture among young people is nothing new. Youth gangs have been an important part of society since at least the 1800s, when Charles Dickens described Fagin's pack of young boys roaming the streets of London in *Oliver Twist*.

The involvement of youth in gangs is an area of increasing concern, especially their involvement in gang activity in the school environment. Gang involvement is increasingly evident among today's youths. The National Youth Gang Center estimated that approximately 760,000 gang members and 24,000 gangs were active in more than 2,900 jurisdictions that city and county law enforcement agencies served nationwide.

Feeling marginalized or isolated, adolescents join gangs for social relationships that give them a sense of identity. For some, gangs provide a way of solving social adjustment problems, particularly the trials and tribulations of adolescence. In some communities, youths are intensively recruited or coerced into gangs. They seemingly have no choice. A few are virtually born into gangs as a result of neighborhood traditions and their families' earlier and perhaps continuing gang participation and/or involvement in criminal activity.

Members of most gangs in the United States live in the least comfortable areas of the cities in which they live. Those young people did not recently experience bad luck or fall from grace, and then decide to settle in the worst, most marginal parts of the city. In fact, they reside in an area of the city

in which their families can afford to live. This separation from mainstream people and institutions limits the access, exposure, and identification that one has with the dominant culture and customs, which thus blocks avenues for integration. Being bottled up in this manner adds to frustration and aggression among the underprivileged in general.

Effective gang prevention should be part of a larger school context that fosters a safe and healthy learning environment and should be closely integrated with community programs. Before educators can respond effectively to gang influence in schools, they must be aware of the reasons that youths become involved in gangs.

School personnel should treat gangs as a symptom of underlying community problems, not as the cause. When gang problems in schools are treated as symptoms, solutions will include an investigation into the needs that

young people are attempting to satisfy through gang activity and the coordination of community resources to help respond to those needs.

All young people, regardless of socio-economic status, should have an opportunity to bond, belong, and contribute to their schools and to their communities. Educators must take on the responsibility of assisting marginalized youths in achieving that goal.

Questions and comments should be addressed to Jeremy Baldillez, Ed.S., NCSP, School Psychologist, Las Cruces Public Schools at jbaldillez@cps.k12.nm.us

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