



#### Summary

There is no robust research (using the randomised control trial approach) on the effectiveness of giving children and young people (aged 7-16) educational and employment opportunities to reduce gang involvement - an approach known as 'opportunities provision.' There is an urgent need for rigorous primary evaluations of gang prevention and intervention programmes to justify current programme funding and guide future interventions.



#### What is a 'what works' briefing?

This briefing has been developed by researchers from the College of Policing to summarise the best available research evidence in relation to preventing youth gang involvement using opportunities provision.



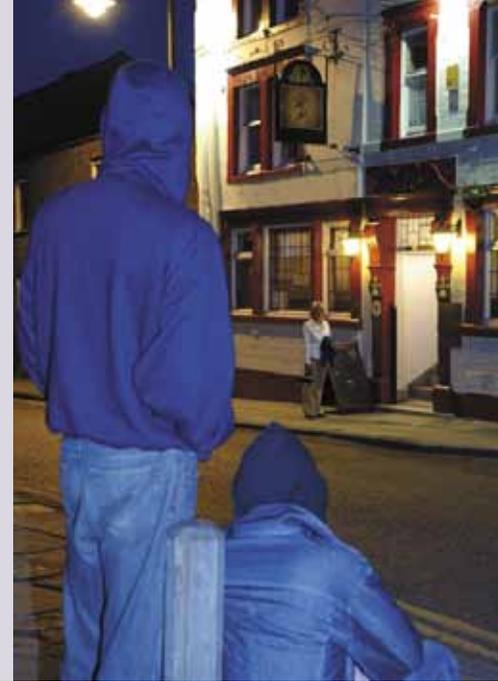
This document briefly summarises a Campbell Collaboration Systematic Review which is a longer and more technical report that trawls for all available evaluations of opportunities provision for preventing youth gang involvement for children and young people aged between 7-16.

The Campbell Collaboration is an international research network that produces systematic reviews of the effects of social interventions, including those in the crime and justice field.



## What is a youth gang?

Whilst there is no unanimously accepted definition for a youth gang, several characteristics typically distinguish youth gangs from other youth groups or organised crime groups, primarily: participation in criminal activity, typically engaging in a range of criminal offences; and projection of a shared identity, through naming, symbols, colours, or association with physical or economic territory<sup>1</sup>. Most gang members in the United States and internationally are adolescents with the peak age of recruitment into gangs and increased criminal involvement between eleven and fifteen<sup>2</sup>. Most gang members in the US are also ethnic or racial minorities, predominately Hispanic and black/African-American, and the vast majority are male, although the percentage of non-minority gang members and female gang members varies substantially with jurisdiction type and between self-report and law enforcement data<sup>3</sup>.



## Increased delinquency associated with youth gang membership

Research indicates that gang members are disproportionately involved in crime, particularly serious and violent offences, compared to non-gang youth and non-gang delinquent youth<sup>4</sup>. Gang membership has a unique criminogenic influence over and above the effect of having delinquent peers or prior involvement in delinquency<sup>5</sup>, suggesting that there may be a unique aspect of the gang as a delinquency-enhancing social unit.

## Why do youths join gangs?

There are a wide range of theories relating to why youth become involved in gangs. One of these proposes that the gang provides a means of fulfilling the economic needs of youth excluded from the legitimate labour market.

This theory is supported by the finding that “underclass” youth raised in conditions of social deprivation and exclusion are particularly likely to be drawn to gangs and the associated delinquency as an alternative means to achieve status and success, when the legitimate opportunities system is closed to them<sup>6</sup>. Identified risk factors for youth gang involvement also include low academic achievement, educational frustration, living in poverty, and barriers to economic and social opportunities<sup>7</sup>.

## What is opportunities provision?

Opportunities provision is a commonly used gang prevention strategy based on the belief that giving youth educational and employment opportunities will reduce gang involvement. Common techniques within opportunities provision included tutoring, remedial education, job training and job placement.



## Does it work?

We don't know. The review found no research studies that were robust enough to provide convincing evidence on the impact of opportunities provision for preventing youth gang involvement in children and young people (7-16) – despite an extensive systematic literature search. No randomised control trials or quasi-randomised control trials, the strongest type of studies, were identified. Two studies were found that evaluated opportunities provision to some degree: a case study of a multi-component gang prevention programme for high-risk students that included some opportunity provision components<sup>8</sup> and a qualitative study of one interview with an ex-street gang leader<sup>9</sup>. However, the methodological flaws in these studies were such that they can not provide even speculative evidence as to the possible effectiveness of opportunities provision on deterring gang involvement.



## Conclusion

The only finding from this systematic review, therefore, is the absence of any rigorous primary research regarding opportunities provision for preventing youth gang involvement for children and young people (aged 7-16) .

## Policy and Practice Implications

The systematic review clearly highlights the need for more and more rigorous evaluations of opportunities provision programmes designed to prevent children and young people (aged 7-16) from becoming involved in youth gangs. Those tasked with managing and delivering such programmes should actively consider and encourage their evaluation.



## Advice and Guidance

For the full review see: Campbell Systematic Review: Opportunities Provision for Preventing Youth Gang Involvement for Children and Young People (7-16) (2008) Fisher, H; Montgomery, P and Gardner, F

<http://library.college.police.uk/docs/Fisher-youth-gang-2008.pdf>

The US Problem Oriented policing website has many guide on problems that relate to gang activity such as gun violence see

<http://www.popcenter.org/>

For evidence on problem-oriented policing frameworks to prevent gang and group-involved violence generally known as the “pulling levers” focused deterrence strategies see the Campbell systematic review Braga, A.A and Weisburd, D.L. (2012) The effects of ‘Pulling Levers’ focussed deterrence strategies

<http://library.college.police.uk/docs/Braga-Pulling-Levers-Review-2012.pdf>



## References

- 1 Huff CR. Gangs in the United States. In: Goldstein AP, Huff CR, editor(s). The Gang Intervention Handbook. Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1993.

Spergel IA , Curry GD. The national youth gang survey: A research and development process. In: Goldstein AP, Huff CR, editor(s). The Gang Intervention Handbook. Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1993.

Spergel I, Curry D, Chance R, Kane C, Ross R, Alexander A, Simmons E, Oh S. Gang suppression and intervention: Problem and response. Research Summary. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1994.

Howell, JC. Youth Gangs: An Overview. Bulletin. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Programs, Office of Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1998.

Esbensen F-A. Preventing adolescent gang involvement. Bulletin. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2000.

White R. School Strategies to Deal with Gangs; trends & issues in crime and criminal justice. 6 edition. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, 2002.

OJJDP. Gang Prevention. Model Programs Guide Version 2.5 2004.

Carlsson Y, Decker SH. Gang and youth violence prevention and Intervention: Contrasting the Experience of the Scandinavian Welfare State with the United States. In: European Street Gangs and Troublesome Youth Groups. Lanham, MD: Alta Mira, 2005:259-286.
- 2 Kodluboy DW, Evenrud LA. School-based interventions: Best practices and critical issues. In: Goldstein AP, Huff CR, editor(s). The Gang Intervention Handbook. Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1993.

Huff CR. Comparing the criminal behaviour of youth gangs and at-risk youths. In: Research in brief. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs National Institute of Justice, 1998.

Hill KG, Howell JC, Hawkins JD, Battin-Pearson SR. Childhood risk factors for adolescent gang membership: Results from the Seattle Social Development Project. Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency 1999;36(3):300-322.

OJJDP (2004) ibid.
- 3 Moore JP and Terrett CP. Highlights of the 1996 national youth gang survey. In: Fact Sheet. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1998.

Moore JP and Cook IL. Highlights of the 1998 National Youth Gang Survey. In: Fact Sheet. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1999.

Egley A Jr. Highlights of the 1999 National Youth Gang Survey. In: Fact Sheet. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2000.

Egley A Jr, Howell JC, Major AK. National Youth Gang Survey 1999-2001. In: OJJDP Summary. Washington DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2006.

Snyder HN, Sickmund M. Juvenile Offenders and Victims. In: 2006 National Report. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2006.



4 Thornberry, TP, Burch JHI. Gang members and delinquent behavior. Bulletin. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1997.

Battin SR, Hill KG, Abbott RD, Catalano RF, Hawkins JD. The contribution of gang membership to delinquency beyond delinquent friends. *Criminology* 1998;36(1):93-116.

Howell, JC. (1998) *ibid*

Hill KG, Howell JC, Hawkins JD, Battin-Pearson SR. (1999) *ibid*

Hill KG, Lui C and Hawkins JD. Early precursors of gang membership: A study of Seattle youth. Bulletin. December edition. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2001.

OJJDP (2004) *ibid*.

5 Battin SR et al (1998) *ibid*

6 Goldstein AP. Gang intervention: A historical review. In: Goldstein AP, Huff CR, editor(s). *The Gang Intervention Handbook*. Champaign IL: Research Press, 1993.

Huff CR (1993) *ibid*

Howell, JC. (1998) *ibid*

Stinchcomb JB. Promising (and not-so-promising) gang prevention and intervention strategies: A comprehensive literature review. *Journal of Gang Research* 2002;10(1):27-46.

7 Howell, JC. (1998) *ibid*

Maxson CL, Whitlock ML, Klein MW. Vulnerability to street gang membership: Implications for practice. *Social Service Review* 1998;March:70-91.

Hill KG, Howell JC, Hawkins JD, Battin-Pearson SR. (1999) *ibid*

OJJDP (2004) *ibid*.

8 Simun PB, Slovacek SP, Batie M, Simun M. Project Support Evaluation, Los Angeles Unified School District. Report No 3. Final Evaluation. Los Angeles: California State University, 1996. (published data only)

9 Weisfeld GE, Feldman R. A Former Street Gang Leader Reinterviewed Eight Years Later. *Crime and Delinquency* 1982;28(4):567-81. (published data only)

