GANG MYTHS

Thought Leadership for Better Solutions

Richard R. Ramos

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Introduction

In 1967 President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to study the rioting that took place in several different parts of the country during the summer of 1967. It was a defining moment and turning point for the nation as protests among the black community broke out in rioting and civil disobedience that shook the nation to the core of its conscience. The riots made it acutely obvious that something was definitely wrong, and could no longer be ignored, in the relationship between blacks and whites in American society. In an effort to get to the root of the problems President Johnson directed the commission by saying in part:

"…The only genuine, long range solution for what has happened lies in an attack – mounted at every level – upon the conditions that breed despair and violence. All of us know what those conditions are: ignorance, discrimination, slums, poverty, disease, and not enough jobs. We should attack these conditions – not because we are frightened by conflict, but because we are fired by conscience. We should attack them because there is simply no other way to achieve a decent and orderly society in America." (U.S. Riot Commission Report by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder)

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When it was all said and done, and the report was produced on how to address the violence crisis, one of the witnesses invited to appear before the commission stated:

"I read that report… and it is as if I were reading the report of the investigating committee on the Harlem riot of '35, the report of the investigating committee on the Harlem riot of '43, the report of the McCone Commission on the Watts riot. I must again in candor say to you members of this Commission – it is a kind of Alice in Wonderland – with the same moving picture re-shown over and over again, the same analysis, the same recommendations, and the same inaction."

After investing over two decades of my career on the "front lines" of gang prevention and intervention, I have to concur with the statement of the gentlemen referred to above. I have followed and tracked the community response to gangs and witnessed many communities continuing to repeat the "the same analysis" and "the same recommendations" over and over again in regards to youth gangs and how to best go about addressing this growing community problem.

Specifically what I am seeing "over and over again" is a heavy reliance on law enforcement to solve the gang problem, especially in communities where gangs are a

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new phenomenon. This reaction of course is natural since gangs do involve violence and other illegal activities as part of their culture. However, as we now know (and as law enforcement officials have admitted), the gang problem is not something that law enforcement can solve. To be sure, the suppression tactics of law enforcement are a necessary and important piece of dealing with the problem, but new communities should keep this in perspective; that law enforcement is a necessary, short-term disruption—not a long-term solution.

Gangs are a fact of life not a mere problem

In his comments made to the National Investigative Committee, President Johnson correctly summed up why youth violence, or gangs, exists:

- Ignorance
- Discrimination
- Slums/Poverty
- Disease
- Not enough jobs

I would also add a few more reasons: racism, drugs and broken families. But the point is that youth violence, in the form of a gang or other expressions, is the result of

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larger social conditions. And while we have "attacked" these social conditions, as the President suggested back in 1967, we still have not been able to rid our society from these conditions that breed gangs and other forms of youth violence. It is important for community leaders and decision makers to understand these larger social issues as they seek solutions and develop strategies that prioritize use of limited community resources.

"…long term successful gang control will not be achieved by intervention with youth, but by intervention with the nature of gang-spawning communities." – Klein/Maxson

Because of the continuance of these larger social issues, communities need to view gangs as a fact of life vs. a mere problem. A problem is usually something I can fix. A fact of life is something I have to learn to live with. Therefore, unless we are able to somehow come up with solutions to these larger social issues, the fact is we are always going to have gangs.

Gangs are not a problem that a community can get rid of "once and for all", anymore than a gardener can get rid of the problem of weeds. They just keep coming back due to the natural laws of the environment that

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produce them. Yet, in light of this, we continue to hear community authority figures say things like, *"We are declaring war on gangs"* and *"we will remove this scourge"* from our community. For example, in 2011 the heavily gang infested area of the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles County, the Contra Costa Times newspaper reported, *"Gang members in the central San Fernando Valley were put on notice this week: Stop the violence, or law enforcement will come down hard on not just you, but your entire gang...it's going to be like nothing you've ever seen before...it's going to be relentless."* (Contracostatimes.com – posted 6/1/2011). However, seven years later gangs remain a deep part of the fabric of the San Fernando community.

When faced with the ongoing gang crime, violence, and often the loss of innocent lives, it's understandable that the police response would be to "declare war" as stated in the article above. But the point I'm making here is this strategic attitude has not worked. Yet, communities continue to resort to this as the answer and consequently invest the majority of their resources in this war on gang's effort. It would be wiser to approach the gang issue as a fact of life and therefore something

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to allocate resources to in a more efficient and effective strategy for the long-term.

Another aspect of communities dealing with gangs is the need for accurate knowledge. When I observe communities implementing the same old practices and priorities that have proven ineffective, I fear we have given in to the myths and not the facts.

There's a lot of information these days regarding gangs. It has evolved into quite an industry with gang conferences springing up all over the country providing information on the latest trends, statistics and "best community practices." Yet, despite these efforts to educate, there is still a tendency for "gang myths" to drive the agenda of local, state and national gang policies.

Using a sports metaphor, I encourage communities to look at gangs as their "competition" as opposed to their "enemy." An enemy implies a whole different mindset and strategy, whereas competition is an attitude much more conducive to most (not all) gang situations. Following this line of reasoning, and given the vicious non-stop growth of gangs and search for more and

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better solutions, it's time for a community time out or, as I like to call it, a "community two minute warning." For those of you not familiar with football, a two-minute warning is a specific time in the game where the officials call an automatic time out for both teams. This time is used for strategic purposes where the coaches and players can confer and assess where they are in the game and make the necessary adjustments to give them the best advantage to either stay ahead and win, or come from behind and win.

This is exactly what we need to do as communities dealing with gangs. It is time for city officials to step back, call time out and think about what we are doing, whether or not what we are doing is working, and if it is the best use of community resources. Just like football teams that develop special plays and players to implement specific strategic plays during those final two minutes before the end of the game, so we also need to make sure we have the right "players" on the field to deal with our specific needs to win.

This requires an accurate assessment of where we are weak, where we are strong, as well as, the weaknesses and strengths of our competition. No coach worth their

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salt would devise a strategy on faulty information about their team or their competition. They are dependent on accuracy, facts, and discoveries that guide them into an advantage. They would feel sabotaged by their assistants if they did not report back "the good, the bad and the ugly." As expert gang researcher Malcolm Klein says:

"In short, gang proliferation has changed important aspects of our society and seldom in desirable ways. Thus the extent to which responses are based on inappropriate, conventional wisdom versus accumulated fact-based understandings takes on special importance."

Thus, if we are to avoid repeating the same analysis, which leads to the same ineffective recommendations of the past on how to deal with gangs, we must be sure about the facts vs. the myths. This is why I have written this simple, short book. Like an assistant coach sitting up in the coaches' box overlooking the field, I am giving you a viewpoint of where we are weak, where we are strong and what we need to do to stay relevant and competitive in this life and death "game." As community leaders (like the "head coach" of your team) it's up to you to either receive or reject the accumulated

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fact-based understanding of youth gangs and make the calls on your own home field.

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PART I

GANG MYTHS

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Myth # 1: Declaring War on Gangs will eradicate gangs.

Since 1999 I have been collecting and analyzing the gang literature addressing prevention, intervention and suppression. Below are a few quotes regarding years of study and research on the "war on gangs" approach:

"In conclusion, there is no clear solution to preventing or reducing gang activity, although some promising programs have been identified…Clearly, there is no one "magic bullet" program or "best practice" for preventing gang affiliation and gang-associated violence…In spite of years of research and years of suppression, intervention, and prevention efforts, considerable disagreement exists regarding the nature and extent of youth gangs. Debate still centers on how to define gangs…These definitional questions reveal both a lack of consensus about the magnitude of the gang problem and confusion about what policies might best address it." - OJJDP 2000, JJ Bulletin, Sept. 2000

"Part of the difficulty in addressing gangs lies in knowing what exactly a gang is." American Prosecutors Research Institute 2007

"A proven, effective set of prescribed steps for mobilizing communities to address gang problems does not exist." - OJJDP – 2009

"Most regions in the United States will experience increased gang membership, continued migration of gangs to suburban and rural

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areas, and increased gang-related activity...Gang related violence is very likely to remain at high levels or increase as gangs expand their criminal operations..." – National Gang Threat Assessment - 2009

"The most notable trends for 2011 have been the overall increase in gang membership, and the expansion of criminal street gangs' control of street-level drug sales and collaboration with rival gangs and other criminal organizations…Gangs are expanding, evolving and posing an increasing threat to US communities nationwide." – 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment

"Results of the 2015 NGR indicate that gangs of all types remain steadfast in their objectives to generate revenue and gain control of the territories they inhabit; and in their dedication to these habits gangs continue to grow in numbers and expand in their criminal activities." – 2015 National Gang Report

I understand the passion, frustration, anger, and desire of law enforcement, politicians, community leaders and parents that are tired of the problems gangs create, and want to put a stop to it all. Nevertheless, the fact is there are neither quick-fix solutions nor any magic law enforcement tactics proven to have solved the riddle of how to eradicate the gang problem. Yet, many "new" as well as old gang communities continue to invest their scarce resources in a heavy suppression strategy.

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"After a quarter century of a multi-billion dollar war on gangs, there are six times as many gangs…Suppression alone…cannot solve this problem. Law enforcement officials now agree that they cannot arrest their way out of violence crisis…In sum, despite decades of research into gangs and violence, there is no single, definitive formula for success in reducing either. Even federal authorities who have invested heavily into gang suppression strategies note, 'Although thousands of programs have been implemented…the ongoing difficulties with youth gangs make one lesson very clear: there are no quick fixes or easy solutions for the problems that youth gangs create or the problems that create youth gangs.' And leading gang researcher Malcolm Klein recently noted that the quest for how to end gang activity and violence remains largely unanswered."- Final Report, L.A. Advancement project – 2007

"Law enforcement agencies play a critical role in any plan; however, a suppression strategy alone will never solve the problem of gang violence. If government continues to disproportionately fund law enforcement efforts in neighborhoods plagued by violence without adequately funding gang intervention work on the streets and within detention and incarceration facilities to end violence, then governments will only provide temporary solutions. Thus, law enforcement should be an essential part of a comprehensive gang intervention package, but they should not be relied upon to reduce gang violence. Gang intervention cannot be law enforcement driven." – Los Angeles City Council's Ad Hoc Committee on Gang Violence and Youth Development – 2008

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The above two statements represent the mainstream opinion across the country and all the way up into Canada (where they're seeing an increase of gang activity like never before). Study after study, gang experts and law enforcement continue to speak in harmony that gang suppression is not the primary place where communities should invest their resources to effectively address this issue. Yet, communities still continue to employ this strategy.

Acknowledging that a "war on gangs" mentality is NOT the answer is an important first step in helping us to re-think our strategies and allocation of community resources.

Myth # 2: America's youth are joining gangs by the thousands.

If we consider gang joining on a national, big scheme of things, then it might seem like thousands of youth are joining gangs. However, upon closer scrutiny the truth is that most American youth never join gangs. According to renowned gang research experts, Malcolm W. Klein and Cheryl L. Maxson:

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"The best estimate of general U.S. youth gang prevalence is 5% ever-joined, 2% current gang members…Perhaps the strongest message in this research is that even with unrestricted definitions in high risk populations, most youth – 7 or 8 out of 10 – do not join gangs through adolescence." - Klein, Maxson, 2006. "Street Gang Patterns and Policies", Oxford University Press

Thus, with this fact (which is seldom given its proper attention) we gain a new perspective in searching for answers to gang prevention. In fact, given the research in our quest for solutions, the question—"Why kids join gangs?"—is the wrong question. The correct question, where we find a huge clue to prevention, is, "Why do *most* kids *not* join gangs?" And the answer is – most kids don't join gangs because there are still homes where parents are doing a good job of raising children to be loyal to their families, have respect for authority, and, most importantly, giving unconditional love that gives the child inner security and self-worth that satisfies their individual need to belong and matter.

Yet, this simple truth is almost always overlooked or underemphasized as a root gang prevention tool that should be the first priority, or at least at the core, of any

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community gang prevention strategy and allocation of resources.

Why some kids choose to join gangs and other negative lifestyles

None of us can claim that we've never made any mistakes in our past. Most of us have done things, both in our youth and as adults, which we're not proud of. However, making mistakes in life is much different from choosing a lifestyle of negative behaviors.

My experience in working with and helping many gang members get out of their gang taught me that the primary reason they chose this negative lifestyle was because something was missing in their relationship at home with their parents. Thus, contrary to the conventional wisdom of developing another youth program, I developed a parent leadership program I call, "Parents on a Mission" (POM), which intentionally addresses the parent-child relationship in the home.

This is not to say that parents are always to blame for every youth who decides to take the wrong path of life. As I often teach parents, *we are not blaming you, but*

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rather naming you as the number one asset in your child's life, especially as it pertains to the long-term affect on the community at large.

While it remains true that some parents can do everything "right" and their kids can still rebel. And other parents can do everything "wrong" and their kids turn out great. Nonetheless, in general, I contend that the parent-child relationship is a vital component of the research alluded to by Klein and Maxson stating that only 5% of American youth "ever-joined", and "2% [are] current gang members."

It seems a matter of common sense that healthy child rearing most often results in children who choose productive lifestyles and make positive contributions to society. At this point, as I continue to watch, collect, and study the gang literature and news stories, I'm happy to report that more and more law enforcement and authority figures are beginning to adopt the "Parents on a Mission" message and mind-set as a long-term solution to keeping kids from joining gangs.

It does NOT take a village to raise a child

Community youth programs are good, needed and well

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intended. But they can never replace the important role of the parents in nurturing and cultivating children who grow to be positive, contributing members of their community and therefore have no need to join gangs or any negative lifestyle. Parents who understand how to win the battle for the loyalty of their children, are empowered to know that the answer to their worries or concerns is not out there somewhere in "the village", but is really under their control, under their roof, and under their loving guidance. Understanding this, parents in any situation, culture or ethnicity and in any family situation; single mothers, divorced, blended, foster, grandparents raising their children's children, step-parents, or just the plain old "nuclear family" can have confidence and hope that their investment in themselves to practice the principles of personal growth and maturity and loving relationship with their children, provides their children with a type of "immunity" to community negative influences. To be clear, I'm not talking about perfection or young people who never make mistakes or wrong choices. I'm talking about parents building a solid moral foundation that will ultimately develop an "immune system" within that will win out over the temptations to choose to join long-

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term negative lifestyles.

To illustrate, I am reminded of a conversation I had one day as I was attending child's birthday party. The Grandfather of the child was there and as we were sitting together, we had the following exchange:

"Richard, I want to ask you a question. A lot of kids in this community listen to you and with all the problems we are having with gangs and youth violence, why don't you get them all together and talk to them?" I replied, "Well that would certainly be helpful and I have, and will continue to do that. But, I don't think that is really the best way to handle this situation." He looked at me somewhat puzzled and said, "What do you mean?" I replied, "Well, since you are a gardener by profession, let me put it to you in a way that I know you'll understand. If you walked by your neighbors garden and saw that the flowers were all wilted, dry and dying, who would you rather talk to, the flowers or the gardener?"

With that a smile broke out on his face and he told me that I made a good point that he really had not considered before. I explained to him that our children

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were like the flowers in our garden and the parents were like the gardeners, and if we really wanted to make the best and most effective prevention impact, it would be the work done with "gardeners", more than just the "flowers.

Myth # 3: Authorities have an accurate method for assessing how many gangs and gang members exist in their communities.

The fact is they do not. According to the Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report, the gang numbers were between 24-30,000 gangs and approximately 760,000 gang members in America. In 2008 The National Gang Center estimated that 32.4 percent of all cities, suburban areas, towns, and rural counties experienced gang problems. It was estimated that there were approximately 774,000 gang members and 27,900 gangs active in the United States in 2008. The number of gangs increased by 28 percent, and the number of gang members increased by 6 percent from 2002 to 2008.

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In 2009 the National Gang Threat Assessment released information with totals of 20,000 gangs equaling 1 million gang members.

Let's take a closer look at these numbers:

- In 2006 we were told there were between 24–30,000 gangs and 760,000 members.
- In 2008 we were told there were 27,900 gangs totaling 774,000 members.
- In 2009 we were told there are 20,000 gangs in America totaling 1 million members.
- In 2011 the National Gang Threat Assessment stated there were now more than 33,000 gangs and 1.4 million gang members.

There seems to be a lot of discrepancies within these numbers. Under closer scrutiny by those who study these things it is doubtful we are getting an accurate picture.

As pointed out earlier, because there is no accepted written definition of what a gang is, the question becomes – how can law enforcement count gangs and gang members accurately? Recognizing this problem, the National Youth Gang Center, which conducts

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annual, national surveys for OJJDP, has had to change its definition over the years of which groups law enforcement should count as gangs.

The first definition given to law enforcement agencies gathering the data on gangs and gang members in their community read; "A group of youths or young adults in your jurisdiction that you or other responsible persons in your agency or community are willing to identify as a 'gang.'"

Leaving it up to police and/or "other responsible persons" to be willing to choose who they think is a gang member raises some serious doubts as to not only the accuracy of the areas counted, but the type of youth as well.

Second definition: "A group of youths in your jurisdiction whose involvement in illegal activities over months or years marks them in their own view and in the view of the community and police as different from most other youthful groups. Do not include motorcycle gangs, hate or ideology groups, prison gangs or other exclusively adult groups."

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Consequently, estimates based on the first definition were inaccurate. According to data from the survey using the second definition above, the number of jurisdictions with gangs was overestimated by 12%, and the number of gangs in those jurisdictions was overestimated by 26% (Klein: p. 6). Moreover, these and other current definitions used to define gangs continue to make it nearly impossible to get an accurate count of gangs and gang members. And, according to the Justice Policy Institute report, "Gang Wars";

"…the most recent comprehensive law enforcement estimate indicates that youth gang membership fell from 850,000 in 1996 to 760,000 in 2004 and that the proportion of jurisdictions reporting gang problems has dropped substantially. The myth of the growing gang menace has been fueled by sensational media coverage and miss-use of law enforcement gang statistics, which gang experts consider unreliable for the purpose of tracking local crime trends." (www.justicepolicy.org).

Additionally – Who is counting the hundreds of gang members that leave the gang each year?

This is a subject that deserves more attention. If there is research that gives these numbers I am unaware of it. However, that does not mean gang members aren't

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leaving gangs. To the contrary, it's happening all the time, as any gang prevention/intervention community worker knows.

Finally, the latest statistics released in the 2015 National Gang Report stated:

"Street gangs continue to impact communities across the United States and do not show signs of decreasing membership or declining criminal activity."

This research concludes that the number of gangs and gang members is inconclusive and that we need to keep the problem in perspective especially since billions of taxpayer dollars are invested in prevention and intervention strategies.

Myth #4: All gang members are criminals and most are illegal immigrants.

First, *all* gang members are not criminals. Or, said another way, not every single gang member lives a daily life of crime. However, some jurisdictions have passed laws that make it illegal to be in a gang and to recruit others to join their gang. That is a different subject, and misses the point I'm trying to address here.

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Ultimately, being in a gang can lead to criminal activity, but I've worked with many young gang members who had not committed crimes at the time I was trying to help them leave the gang. Secondly, a good majority of youth street gang members are local, American born citizens who unfortunately have chosen this destructive lifestyle.

Contrary to popular myths, all gang members do not carry or use guns. All gang members do not sell or use drugs. All gang members do not commit criminal acts of violence. Of course many gang members do commit crimes, carry guns, use and sell drugs. And there are many undocumented gang members to be sure. But tying together all local youth gang members as criminals and illegal immigrants is misleading in a variety of ways. Are there some connections? Yes, and recent statistics from the 2015 National Gang Report (p.30) show an increase in some particular places and situations. Thus, there is overlap, but it should not be assumed that overlap is the same everywhere.

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Myth #5: Tougher Laws and harsher prison sentences will solve gang activity.

As already pointed out – Law Enforcement knows better. Nevertheless, both State and Federal lawmakers continue to take the suppression approach and the call to increase our judicial power to prosecute more juveniles as adults. In a 2005 report, *Ganging Up on Communities, putting Gang Crime in Context* (Justice Policy Institute www.justicepolicy.org) stated the following:

"Although crime has been decreasing in the United States for the past twelve years, many people fear that violent crime, especially gang-related crime, is rising…Currently, public opinion is swayed by sensationalized stories from media and lawmakers who say that gang-related crime is a "national crisis," requiring new federal and state legislation, mandatory minimums, and new powers to arrest, detain, imprison, and deport young people… Responding to provisions to transfer youth to adult prison, Robert Shepherd, Professor of Law at the University of Richmond and former Virginia prosecutor, says: "this bill flies in the face of what works with young people …the evidence shows that trying young people as adults exacerbates rather than lessens crime."

To be fair, not all communities or law enforcement are pushing this narrative as it was in the past. I believe it's

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because of the effect of past and current research, as well as some of the comments of former prison gang members on the ineffectiveness of sending youth to prison as a gang solution:

"Rather than prison being a place to send gang members in an attempt to break up the gang, gangs have adapted and used prison to advance their interests." - Hagedorn, "A World of Gangs" (2009)

"It's an accepted fact of life that Mexican Mafia members and associates don't need to be on the street to conduct business. To shot-callers…going to prison doesn't put you out of circulation. It means you've been relocated to the home office." - Rafael, "The Mexican Mafia" (2007)

"Gang proliferation and gang migration – mostly emanating from southern California – has spread across the United States and into a number of foreign countries as if it were a disease…Clearly, I don't possess a cure for that plague, but what I can do is offer…an insiders view of prison…the Mexican Mafia's tentacles reach far beyond the walls and razor wire fences of prisons. And sadly, its influence also continues to ignite racial violence between Blacks and Latinos in schools, as well as racially motivated street gang wars." – Rene, "Boxer", Enriguez, former EME leader. Blatchford, "The Black Hand" (2008)

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Let me be clear: incarceration is needed. It does have an important and appreciated role to play in dealing with certain necessary aspects of this problem. Yet, at the same time communities must continue to give attention to the data other than that which supports the "'round'em up and lock'em up", gang injunction, war on gangs approach.

Myth # 6: Street gangs are very well organized.

To the contrary – most gangs are not well organized.

"First and foremost, we need to recognize that gang members spend much more time hangin' than bangin" - Klein

Generally speaking, anyone who has been a gang member, or spent time with gang members, knows there is not a lot of sophistication to what they do, when they do it, and how or where they do it. The idea is a myth that a local street gang sits around a table strategizing crimes or revenge on their enemies. "Strategic planning" is not common to *most* local youth street gangs.

Conversely, it is important that we not overlook the previous statement of the ability of prison gangs and

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gangs that smuggle and sell drugs, to utilize a certain amount of strategy and planning. In a book on the Mexican Mafia, the author states:

"The EME/street gang enterprise is organized. Importing and distributing drugs, collecting proceeds, keeping out competitors, taxing the dealers and funneling the money into prisons requires at least a functional level of organization…to deny a functioning organization is to deny reality…Street gangsters are often the puppets of the big homies locked up in prison. The proof is overwhelming and plays itself out on almost a daily basis in almost every neighborhood in Southern California." – Tony Rafael

But, again, this does not apply to all gangs. Most local youth gangs operate more on a spontaneous reaction to an event, or go out looking to cause trouble, which is not exactly the same as a well thought out scheme rehearsed and timed. Even the issue of leadership is a question. Leadership in a gang is very organic and can change from situation to situation. Thus, while I understand there exists so-called sophisticated national and international gangs, we should not make the mistake of classifying all gangs and gang members in this category.

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Myth # 7: Youth who join gangs are looking for respect, power and quick ways to make money.

Yes, but there's more to the story. According to my own experience and research with hundreds and hundreds of boys and girls who joined gangs, their number one response for why they joined was because they were sad, broken hearted, unappreciated, neglected and simply unhappy at home.

I realize this might seem trivial to some, but as one who has had the chance to build trust with gang members and get them to speak the truth from their hearts – they confessed to me that the root of the problem lies in the home, not in the streets, schools or society.

Furthermore, as gang experts have invested a lot of time and money in studying the gang phenomenon—they still are not in agreement, or able to answer three very basic questions communities want to know:

1. What is a gang?
2. Why do kids join gangs?
3. What is the best way to prevent youth from joining gangs?

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Oftentimes I believe we can over think a situation and can also forget that sometimes scientific research is not always the only—or best—way to find solutions to human problems.

Here is a case in point from a 14-year-old girl gang member answering the question of why she joined a gang—that answers all three questions above:

"EVERYONE WANTS TO KNOW WHY.WHY DID YOU JOIN? YOU HAVE A FAMILY WHO LOVES AND CARES FOR YOU,WHY, WHY MEJA WHY? I JOINED BECAUSE WHEN I WAS A LIL GURL ALOT SHYT HAPPENED TO ME THAT NOBODY KNOWS ABOUT AND I HAVE KEPT INSIDE OF ME ALL THYZ TYME. NOWBODY LISTENED TO ME AND WHEN THEY DID,THEY, THEY SAID I WAS LYING. DRUG ADDICT DAD AND WORK ALCOHOLIC MOM, NO BROTHERS, NO SISTERS, A STEP DAD THAT ONLY WANTS TO TOUCH ME. AND A BABYSITER WHOSE SON DID TOUCH ME.MY MOM ALWAYS RIPPING ME OUT OF FAMILIES THAT I THOUGHT WERE MINE, IT WAS ALL LIES. LIVING IN THA GHETTO WONDERING WHY? CAN YOU TELL

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ME WHY? CAN YOU TELL ME WHY I WAS BORN IN THIS LIFE OF SEX DRUGS AND ALCOHOL, BACK STABBING OF MY SO CALLED REAL FAMILY? I WAS JUST A LIL GURL DANM. THOSE MEMORIES ARE WITH ME FOREVER I'M SCARED TO LIVE LIFE I'M SCARED TO TRUST N-E BODY, I'M SCARED. SO WHY DID I JOIN? I JOINED BECAUSE I NEEDED SUMONE AND THEY WERE THE ONLY ONES THERE.I NEEDED SUMONE TO MAKE ME FEEL WANTED AND I NEEDED SUMONE TO CARE. THATSTHAT'S WHY."

We can continue to argue, debate and spend a lot of money to study the gang. But to me it's really not that hard to understand. Is it really more complicated than what this girl is saying? I don't think so.

In this insightful and honest testimony from a 14-year-old girl, we have the answers to all three questions:

1. What is a gang? A gang is a second family.
2. Why do kids join gangs? Because they can't trust their dysfunctional families to be loyal to them.

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3. How can we prevent youth from joining gangs? Good parenting is the best prevention.

Myth # 8: Once a gang member – Always a gang member.

If this were true, and we really believed it—then why do we do what we do as gang prevention/intervention specialist? Why would we spend time and money creating gang intervention programs if we believe that gang members never choose to leave the gang? Sadly, this remains one of the greatest disservices of our media and others who have the means and could be exposing the truth, and give a message of hope on a mass scale that even the hardest of gang members are not beyond the reach of the arm of compassion.

It is true that leaving the gang is difficult and that some do pay with their life. But if we believe this is the consequence 100% of the time—why would we want to put someone's life in danger with a gang prevention/intervention program encouraging him or her to do the very thing that endangers their life?

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The truth is the "once a gang member always a gang member" and "blood in – blood out" does not apply to all gang members who desire to leave their gang. If it did, none of us would know any gang members who have successfully left the gang life. The truth of the matter is many of us do know gang members who have left their gangs.

The untold story in this arena is the effectiveness of the faith community in reaching out to and transforming the lives of literally tens of thousands of hard-core gang members (as parole and probation officers, police and gang practitioners know). The facts is that during the same time in which gangs have grown over the past forty or fifty years, thousands of gang members have transformed their lives, left the gang, and are leading responsible community contributing lifestyles. But as I mentioned earlier- the social science practitioners and investors in studies are not counting those numbers.

Another fact is that many gang members simply out grow the gang lifestyle and choose to become "inactive" for a variety of reasons ranging from getting a good to job to getting their girlfriend pregnant and/or getting married.

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We do well to remember that gang members are people. They are human beings before they are anything else. They have the same human needs that we all have and given the right circumstances and opportunity, *any* gang member can change at any time.

Many wonderful faith-based organizations are doing great work in the life transformation of individual gang members. Unfortunately, most faith-based organizations tend not to do a great job of documenting or publicizing their results because it's not a part of their organizational culture. Additionally, their methodology is hard to quantify in social science terms and therefore down played and considered "only anecdotal" by academics.

Faith-based work is considered controversial since it involves an element of faith and religion. Fortunately, the good news is government and city officials, schools, and law enforcement have become much more concerned with focusing on results—the individual anecdote—rather than the so called "evidenced-based" social science practices that in many cases have not proven to be as effective as they are purported to be.

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With the focus on the tangible results of a transformed life we can bring hope to parents and families struggling for answers to the gangs competing for the hearts, minds, and souls of their children.

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PART II

A Blueprint for Action

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Community Strategy

If a Mayor of a city asked me what to do about gangs in their community, I would recommend the following strategies outlined below. This is not a comprehensive list, nor are these strategies new ideas, but perhaps new in priority and emphasis.

The following Blue Print requires mature leadership (not necessarily from the Mayor) to facilitate stakeholder discussion, investment of resources, and selection of a lead agency for implementation.

1. Call a meeting of local ministers. There are many faith-based leaders interested in helping address this issue. Sometimes they just need to be engaged and educated on how they can use some of their abilities and individuals in their congregations to support citywide efforts that includes but not limited to:

- A consistent and systematic strategy of targeted prayer,
- Consistent outreach to gang members,
- Practical support to the gang member's families that are open to receiving a variety of services faith based organizations offer.

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2. Organize a collaboration of faith and community based nonprofits and other community agencies. Many grassroots organizations have already established relationships with gang members and other high-risk youth and their families. Specific meetings can be held to learn what they are doing and where community resources can help their organization expand, strengthen and improve their effectiveness. City and County officials can make a commitment to keep this work supported. Accountability should be required by quarterly reports to an established community committee or advisory council.

3. Organize community stakeholders of means. Community officials and stakeholders are encouraged to make specific connections with local businesses, education, Universities/Colleges, and philanthropic entities, to develop specific targeted resources to be directly applied to those grassroots organizations proving to do consistent, effective gang prevention/intervention work. *This specialized type of work is not for everyone and therefore should not be a matter of open competition for funding.*

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What generally happens when money becomes available for gang prevention/intervention work is more sophisticated nonprofits—that don't necessarily have a proven track record for this type of work—apply for the money get awarded because they have a grant writer that knows how to say all the right things that funders want to hear. This is, and has been, a problem for a number of years. The other issue is that most of the money ends up going to law enforcement.

What I am suggesting here is that a fair majority of the money should go to community-based organizations with a proven history of results in transforming the lives of gang members. There should NOT be an open competition for these specific dollars. Funders should specify that the main criterion for eligibility to apply for this money is the ability to show proven results.

4. Recruit and develop more *School Resource Parents* in addition to School Resource Officers. I suggest this could be one of the best ways for school officials to create a safe culture and calmer environment for those schools with gangs and other potential violent incidents. This is a powerful combination. Police presence brings one type of culture – parent presence

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brings quite a different type of school culture and social compliance that eases tension and builds community rapport. Additional alumni (who may not be parents) from the school and community stakeholders are also a good resource to be on campus.

5. Specific Resources for Faith-based organizations. The best intervention strategy for local youth street gangs I have experienced is the engagement of and support for a systematic – consistent outreach from the faith community. Especially those comprised of ex-gang members.

Because of the religious nature of this type of outreach resources usually must come from private donors. But if city officials are serious about effectively impacting local gangs, they should be willing to seek and solicit faith-based private funds with the same enthusiasm as any other non faith-based community project that benefits their constituents.

The spiritual component may not be the conventional approach sought by some city officials, but that traditional bias has changed much over the past several years because community stakeholders have become

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more focused on the bottom line of positive results regardless of the methodology.

Some persons may even criticize a city official for meeting with faith-based leaders. Nevertheless, this is a respected aspect of the gang culture that is seldom addressed and overlooked as a strategic part of a community plan. However, faith-based organizations have a long history of making a huge difference in transforming the lives of gang members because of the "inside-out" nature of their work.

"Other former gang members tell similar stories. The church — in particular the evangelical Pentecostal church — drew them into its fold and wrenched them, prayer service by prayer service, from the tenacious grip of the gangs. The gangs, in turn, respected this exit. Becoming an active member of a religious community remains virtually the only way someone can leave the notorious gang Mara Salvatrucha, better known as MS-13, alive.

There is little reliable data on how many members have left MS-13 by joining a church, but in a recent Florida International University survey of nearly 1,200 gang members in El Salvador's jails, 58 percent said the church was the "most appropriate organization to lead rehabilitation programs." – Steven Dudley, April 26, 2018 (https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/26/opinion/ms-13-gang-religion.html)

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For example, part of the reason why human beings commit hateful and violent acts of crime against other human beings, is caused by more than what meets the natural eye. The scriptures tell us there is a spiritual dominance of evil that must be wrestled with by what can be called "spiritual warfare."

"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." - The Apostle Paul

One may, or may not, adhere to biblical teaching or believe in the supernatural—unseen realm—as it is referred to. Yet, I've never heard a better explanation for what causes humans to treat each other with such hatred and brutal acts of violence. I believe it is why the faith community has been so effective in helping to transform the lives of countless thousands of gang members.

6. Pursue local (or national) professionals from the entertainment, sports, arts, law enforcement, technology and other professional fields. Organize

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and implement strategic small seminars/conferences and expose high-risk youth and gang members to professionals from different areas of expertise who can share, inspire and instruct gang members in discovering and developing their talents in a positive lifestyle. These events do not need to be big, lavish, expensive events. One passionate professional in a room full of impressionable youth can work wonders if done consistently and followed up with local programs and guidance on an ongoing basis. In my experience of providing these types of events, I learned that exposing gang members to the Arts (music, dance, and drama) proved to be one of our most successful strategies for giving them motivation, vision and new purpose to use their talents in this arena and turn away from the gang lifestyle.

7. The role of Law Enforcement? Law Enforcement needs to do what they are best at – enforce the law, gather accurate intelligence and educate all concerned parties as to the nature of the types of gangs their community is dealing with. Some types of gangs may require more law enforcement focus and attention and the above strategies may not be effective with some more sophisticated and violent gangs. Having said that,

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the above strategies have worked with local youth and street gangs, as well as with the hardest of prison and drug gang members. Sometimes law enforcement is expected to "do it all" meaning to prevent kids from joining gangs, create mentoring programs, sports leagues and other "social program" efforts. To be sure—I applaud the work of our first responders to violence in our communities. Although there has been a lot of controversy in the past several years around police shootings, abuse of force and use of authority—I do believe that the majority of police officers are well meaning individuals with right motives to do their job as a service to their community. That said, most law enforcement agencies agree that their role is not to prevent kids from joining gangs, nor to solve or deal directly with the social issues that spawn neighborhood gangs.

8. Inside-Out vs. Outside-In Strategy

Simply put, on an individual level, intervention is about stepping into and interrupting someone's life that is headed down the road of self–destruction. This requires an "inside-out approach" FIRST that gets at the root cause of their reasons for pursuing a negative lifestyle.

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The inside – out approach lays the foundation for their capacity to receive programmatic help.

This is a very important point to understand as we traditionally have been going about it backwards. Somehow we continue to approach gang members with "programs" first, or what I call the "outside – in" methodology, not realizing that if we don't address what's going on "within", all the programs we offer from "without" will have minimal (if any) positive, short term effect.

I've personally run gang intervention programs that contained a faith-based element and others that did not. The difference between the two in life transformation, performance and improved relationships both in school and at home was very obvious. I'm not a psychologist and I won't pretend to understand all that goes on in the head of gang members – but having lived that lifestyle as an adolescent, I do understand what goes on in their hearts and have seen dramatic, positive results time and again when approached with this understanding.

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"Outside – In" vs. "Inside – Out" Gang Prevention/Intervention Strategy

Outside – In Approach		**Inside – Out Approach**
Relies on the Whole Community		Relies on the Home
Relies on Programs		Relies on Parents
Prioritizes Mental Health		Prioritizes Spiritual Health
Emphasizes Rehabilitation		Emphasizes Reconciliation
Prioritizes Jobs		Prioritizes Self – Esteem
Emphasizes new outer personal environment		Emphasizes new inner personal environment
Increase of Youth Mentors		Increase of Parent Mentors
More School Resource Officers		More School Resource Parents
Seeks Funding for Many Organizations		Seeks Funding for Specific Organizations

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These simple principles save a lot of time, money, and effort for everybody concerned. It specifies roles for different stakeholders in the community to contribute in areas where they are comfortable and competent.

It avoids the conventional wisdom of gathering "everybody" together to "talk about" the problem. But oftentimes people, who have no knowledge or experience with gangs, gang members, and their families, show up to these meetings, make irrelevant comments and/or speeches and add little to no value to the discussion or purpose of the meeting. There are other public forums and media outlets for members of the larger community to express their views, opinions, and vent their anger.

Not "everybody" is qualified to devise gang prevention and intervention strategies. Our purpose is to be agile, mobile, and quick to support effective and proven efforts already in place. We should not invest our time in having to begin at square one unless the gang issue is truly a new phenomenon and the community is without any experience in dealing with gangs.

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9. Gang Prevention and The Home Field Advantage

Years ago I was hired as an at-risk counselor by a nonprofit that was in partnership with the school district to fund my position. My primary role was to engage the at-risk youth referred to me by teachers, counselors, parents and/or the youth themselves. My caseload soon became filled with gang members, which was the beginning of a journey that continues today and why I have written this book to help communities and schools to address gang issues.

The school Principal (to his credit) allowed me much leeway in addressing and engaging the gang members on campus. I organized a school MECHA Club (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano De Aztlan). I organized contests, dances and other field trips and fun activities that these kids had never experienced before.

Ultimately, I became like a father figure to most of them. This allowed me to really dig deep and get at the root cause of why they were joining gangs and choosing such a destructive lifestyle.

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This interaction and relationship of trust on campus lead me to their homes where I witnessed all the dysfunction that unfortunately was common amongst my students and their parents: lack of respect, communication, control and healthy relationships. From these experiences I realized that if I really wanted to make an effective, long term and practical and positive impact with my students, it would be through investing my time developing the personal growth of their parents, more than intervening in the lives of their children.

The emphasis on parents as the best primary gang prevention strategy is becoming more and more prevalent amongst gang experts speaking around the country in the numerous gang conferences held each year. The role of parents is a fundamental safe community building block that we seem to leave out in our gang strategies.

"Gang-responsive/specific individual and family services complement the demanding work done on the streets. Unfortunately, the majority of these services have been unresponsive to the specific needs and problems plaguing gang-involved youth and their families. Gang intervention work has too often been undermined by either the absence of or ineffectiveness

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of these services. This committee is not recommending the continued funding of any existing social services that do not have specific methods, protocols, and procedures for servicing gang-involved youth. Rather, funds must be provided to those agencies that clearly demonstrate specific responsiveness to gang-involved youth and their families." – Los Angeles City Council's Ad Hoc Committee on Gang Violence and Youth Development (2008)

In general what many communities offer is some type of meeting for parents where law enforcement educates them "about gangs." Parents are taught what signs to look for in their children, what graffiti is and what it means, gang colors and garb, which type of gangs and their names, etc. This information is helpful, but when the presentation about the "what" is over, parents want to know about the "how to's" in preventing or pulling their kids out of gangs. This is often answered with some good advice, but parents need more. They need skills and ongoing support and coaching by mentors to assist them in making progress on a daily on-going practical level.

This is why I developed "Parents on a Mission" (POM)—to fill the need for more parent mentors focused on the problems that create rebellious youth, rather than on the problems that rebellious youth create.

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The difference between conventional parenting classes and parent leadership is the difference between focusing on teaching parents how to fix their children – versus teaching parents how to first fix themselves. This perspective takes parent involvement in gang prevention to a whole new level.

Parent Leadership classes give parents a sense of empowerment along with specific skills to know that they are in control of their family and can raise children even in a gang infested environment with the hope their kids will ultimately choose loyalty to family over loyalty to a gang.

Parents are the key to safe communities

We all want to live in a safe community. I suggest that the best place to promote a vision for a safe community is in the home first. I contend that safe communities are the result of good parenting that provides the leadership and role modeling at home of what it means to be a good citizen that contributes positively to their community.

We have had a forty – plus year plethora of well intentioned promoted public programs, parks, pools,

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and playgrounds. But without the necessary parent leadership in the home, the results speak for themselves. Moreover, the same principle applies to our schools.

Today it is popular to blame poor administration and teachers for the poor performance in our public schools across the board. But I reiterate: parent leadership is a key component that is overlooked as a solution that gets at the root of the problem, and consequently produces good citizenship in the home, which shows up in the classroom and allows teachers to spend more time educating than disciplining.

(Learn more about Parents on a Mission: www.richardrramos.com)

10. How should school administrators address gangs and gang members on campus?

It is no surprise to anyone with experience in these issues that it's all about relationship. I offer the following key points to teachers and school administrators for dealing with campus gang members:

- Cultivate the vision, compassion, flexibility and fairness it requires to publically treat these students with respect.

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- Approach them like you would any other student, talk to them, joke with them, and simply treat them as welcomed people on your campus.
- Provide "gang-banger in the classroom" teacher training.

This is not a fool proof, silver bullet solution for every problem schools will encounter. And, of course, the time will come when schoolteachers and administrators have to deal with excessive wrong behavior. But making a sincere effort to establish some type of positive relationship goes a long way in gaining cooperation from gang members.

Example of Gang Banger in The Classroom Training

A good principle for teachers to follow and remember in dealing with disrespectful and defiant gang members is "discipline without relationship breeds rebellion." Below is a personal example I've used to illustrate this principle:

"...whenever possible (and it is not always possible) I never would "front off" (embarrass) a gang member publically for bad behavior because I understood how important it was for them to save face in front of their peers/homies. This type of role modeling requires

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emotional maturity, but it can potentially set up a situation where one can deal with their bad behavior privately later. The leverage here is they know when they have done wrong and they acknowledge (though not verbally) that your actions allowed them to save face. This puts them in your debt (they never forget a favor) and they always want to pay that off in one way or another. Thus, I use my leverage to take them aside privately and emphasize that they now "owe me" and I will be calling that chit in at a later time. This takes patience, professionalism, and discernment on the part of the teacher but it can often pay dividends later in your time of needed cooperation."

With proper training like this (which most prospective teachers will not find or receive in college courses) teachers can be equipped to better handle the particular challenges they face with "gang-bangers" in the classroom. Not all teachers will comply and not all gang members will respond, but it does make for a better environment and more potential positive results with these types of high-risk youth. Thus, it is possible to gain cooperation from gang members on campus if the administration and faculty are willing and pro-active. Of course, suspensions, and expelling will happen, but hopefully not at the rate that continues to fill our alternative schools that unfortunately can't really provide a quality education. Suspension and

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expelling are often the easy way out and only serves to perpetuate the problem and not improve it.

11. Can a community ever get rid of gangs?

No. Gangs are a symptom of larger social issues America has been dealing with for decades. As Malcolm Klein says:

"...long-term successful gang control will not be achieved by intervention with youth, but by intervention with the nature of gang-spawning communities." – Klein/Maxson

What is meant by "the nature of gang-spawning communities"? Here is a summary:

- Where there is poverty – there will be gangs.
- Where there are drugs – there will be gangs.
- Where there is racism – there will be gangs.
- Where there is media glorification of gangs – there will be more gang spawning.
- Where the gap continues to widen between those in power and those on the margins of society – there will be gangs.
- Where there are broken families – and/or lack of parent supervision and leadership – there will be gangs.

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As I said earlier, a problem is something I can resolve. A fact of life is something I have to learn to live with. Because our society has been unable to win the war on poverty, drugs and other social issues such as racism, broken families, etc., gangs will remain a fact of life communities will have to learn to live with.

Having said that, does that mean there is no hope and that we should give up? Never! Just because we have never been able to rid our gardens and green lawns from the fact of weeds, does not mean we just give in to them and allow them to overtake our yards. Rather we deal with weeds on a consistent basis knowing they are something that will always be there, yet something we can stay on top of and bring under a measureable control.

This is the way communities should look at dealing with gangs—they are a "fact of life." Therefore, I suggest community leaders to adopt the long-term patience and mentality of the "farmer."

Every farmer knows seed and harvest time is an ongoing cycle that never stops. Each season might be different and various natural disasters and other

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environmental circumstances will arise. Nevertheless, for the most part, the harvest comes, the harvest goes and the fields must be worked again and again.

No farmer expects a harvest overnight or for the harvest to come automatically. They know they only have so much time to plow, plant, and cultivate if they expect to reap a fruitful harvest in due season.

Harvest time: I have seen small towns get the gang issue to the point where the violence and incidents are brought down to a minimum. Currently some large metropolitan areas have declared a decrease in gang related crime and violence.

Plowing & planting time: But what often happens over time (due to the spawning elements mentioned above) the "weeds" grow back and the specific tools for "working the fields" are needed again and again, season after season.

It is this mind-set I suggest community leaders need to adopt in order to avoid the fallacy of the "declaring war on gangs" thinking and thereby investing resources that could be better used for other more effective ways of "working on the farm."

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12. A Powerful Solution Formula: Community Farmers + Home Gardeners

Thus, as community stakeholders take their place on the community farm: some can invest finances, some can lend in-kind resources, others are out in the streets (fields), and still others are waging spiritual warfare. Simultaneously, the effort to control the community fields from being overcome with weeds—is taken up by individual trained and skilled gardeners in each neighborhood– Parents. This is why I insist that parents—not police, programs, pastor's, pools, playgrounds or prisons—are the number one assets in the community.

Every era has those extraordinary men and woman who have risen to the challenges of their time. It is my contention that the extraordinary men and woman of our time who must rise up to take on the complex challenges of this time, more than any other single entity, institution or community program, are parents. That's why I call them; "Parents on a Mission!

Prevention is not a matter of keeping our children from ever being touched by any or every negative experience

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available in today's American culture. No, our challenge is not one of isolation but one of infiltration. Infiltrating the hearts and homes of the hopeless with parent heroes! As one minister put it, "What counts in life is not being a hero to a guy two thousand miles away, but being a hero to a kid who is nine years old two bedrooms away."

(For more information visit: www.richardrramos.com)

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