

**THE ROLE OF SURROGATE FAMILY DYNAMICS  
IN YOUTH GANG RECRUITMENT AND  
INVOLVEMENT**

by

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A THESIS

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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Title: The Role of Surrogate Family Dynamics in Youth Gang Recruitment and  
Involvement

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kevin Alltucker", is written over a horizontal line.

Professor Kevin Alltucker

This work is a compilation of various methods of research in an attempt to gain a better understanding of youth gangs, and what initially draws young people to enter the dangerous world of street gangs. I have analyzed autobiographies, current literature, and have also had the unique opportunity to interview an ex-gang member to study specific dynamics that exist within gangs that may mimic a family. This thesis serves as a contribution to literature, as well as offers insight into a specific aspect of gangs (surrogate family dynamics) that have not been previously studied significantly.

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## **Introduction to Research Topic**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the risk factors associated with youth gang involvement. While this thesis looks into numerous risk factors of youth gang involvement, the primary goal of this research project is to focus on the role of surrogate or “pseudo-families” in recruiting youth to become involved in gangs, as well as the actual structure of these surrogate families once an adolescent has become a member of the gang. There are many different types and structures of gangs, and research project will focus entirely on criminal street gangs. The questions that this thesis seeks to answer include:

1. What are the dynamics and basic structure of surrogate families that develop in gangs?
2. Do youth and young adults seek admission to a gang due to the lure of being included in a “surrogate family”?
3. How can human service professionals use this information to better support at-risk families?
4. What programs are most effective in preventing youth gang involvement?

## **Time Line of Research**

This thesis changed and evolved significantly throughout the past year. Due to the sensitive and complicated nature of conducting research about, and with, ex-gang members, this research has required substantial flexibility and understanding. Writing this thesis was a learning process on multiple levels and it supported why there is a lack of knowledge about gangs. Gang members may not want to talk about and discuss their experiences in a gang, due to the painful and difficult memories and experiences that gang participation may have created. Therefore, it is difficult to conduct research on gangs, if there are not many willing individuals to discuss their experiences. Gang and ex-gang members are certainly the experts on gangs and their experiences are key in developing a deepening understanding about criminal youth gangs. A deeper understanding about the phenomena of criminal youth gangs is important in creating effective interventions to prevent youth street gang membership and thus reducing the numerous negative outcomes associated with youth street gang membership. The following section will discuss a general time line of research conducted for this thesis and how this thesis has evolved.

The initial subject of this research project developed in January of 2013. On January 12 2013, more than 250 community members from Lane County attended a Gang Symposium held at Lane Community College. The goal of the gang symposium was to address the concern of gang activity in Lane County, Oregon. The community members who attended the Gang Symposium were divided into seven different “affinity” groups. These affinity groups include Faith Based Organizations,

Municipalities, Law Enforcement, Mixed, Community Members and Education. Throughout the symposium, community members had an opportunity to provide feedback and comments about the process of the symposium, the keynote speakers, general comments about gangs in Eugene, as well as questions that they still had. The comments were written down and transcribed into one document.

Following the compilation of the comments, a team of eight University of Oregon students from the Family and Human Services major, along with Professor Kevin Alltucker and Dr. Jennifer Cearley from the Department of Youth Services began the process of qualitatively analyzing the information. The group worked for approximately eight weeks to discuss coding strategies, conduct reliability checks, data analysis and write the final report. The purpose of the qualitative study was to better understand the general attitudes of Lane County residents towards gang activity and prevention methods necessary to protect youth from becoming involved in gangs.

Each affinity group had a slightly different take on youth gang participation and gang activity in Lane County and offered a unique perspective on the issue. However, common themes occurred throughout all of the affinity groups. Many participants felt as though Lane County should be doing more to initiate gang prevention. Many community members also felt as though an important aspect of prevention was providing sufficient services to young adults who are at-risk of potentially joining a gang. Community members also believe that families play a crucial role in preventing youth gang activity. The final report, "Formatted Gang Symposium Summary," was published through the city of Eugene and is now available for public reference ([www.eugene-or.gov](http://www.eugene-or.gov)).

On April 27<sup>th</sup>, the Department of Youth Services hosted the second of two Gang Symposium. At the symposium, several University of Oregon students (including myself) presented the common themes that emerged from analyzing data from the first symposium.. Additionally, at the gang symposium, a panel of ex-gang members spoke about their experiences as gang members. They touched upon the reasons why they decided to join gangs. Several of the panelists referred to their ex-gangs as “families” and made references to joining gangs because they were not receiving adequate support from adults at home.

My experiences at the Youth Gang Symposium, particularly comments made by ex-gang members, sparked an interest in learning more about gangs, particularly the structure and dynamics that exist within gangs. I left the symposium wondering: What causes young people to decide to join gangs? What do they seek from becoming actively involved in the dangerous and high-stake world of gang involvement? I decided that in order to answer these questions, the focus of my research would consist of researching the role of gang surrogate family dynamics within gangs, and the role that these surrogate family dynamics play in recruiting youth to become involved in gangs.

In the spring of 2013, I took Thesis Prospectus, in which I presented on my plan of administering surveys to gang-affiliated youth involved with the Department of Youth Services. Throughout the summer of 2013, I spent several months working on and editing research proposals for the International Review Board with Professor Alltucker. However, conducting research with youth involved in the Department of Youth Services who also have self-disclosed gang involvement presented several risks. People under the age of eighteen have to receive parental permission to become



involved with research, which runs the risk of breaching confidentiality and having parents find out about their children becoming involved in gang activity. Conducting surveys with youth at the Department of Youth Services also presented the possibility that there may not be any youth currently residing at a Department of Youth Services facility who self-identify as being involved in a gang.

In August of 2013, I revised my research plan and submitted a proposal to the International Review Board to interview adult ex-gang members instead of minors. The target population who I identified included the ex-gang members who publicly spoke about their experiences at the April 27<sup>th</sup> Youth Gang Symposium. The proposal passed through an expedited review process and was approved. In the fall of 2013, I completed my first interview with an ex-gang member. He gave me the contact information of several other ex-gang members in the community who he believed would be interested in talking to me. Throughout the end of fall term, as well as the beginning of winter term 2014, I spent substantial time trying to get in contact with the men and women whose contact information I had received from my first interview. However, I ran into problems of not being able to get a hold of people, and also not hearing back from individuals after I had made initial contact. I ultimately was unable to get a hold of any more ex-gang members, which led me to add one more research method to this thesis: analyzing five autobiographies written by ex-gang members, using the same interview questions I had planned on using in my interviews.

## **Background**

### **Gang Activity in the United States**

Gangs are a serious issue in the United States. In 2011, the Federal Bureau of Investigation issued a report on gangs titled *Gang Threat Assessment*. This report found that there are roughly 1.4 million people in prison, street, military and motorcycle gangs, which is a 40% increase from 2009 (FBI, 2011). Gangs have very detrimental effects on the nation as whole and on individual communities. It is suspected that gang members are responsible for 48% of violent crimes that occur in the United States (FBI, 2011). From 2002-2006, it was estimated that in the eighty-eight largest cities in the United States, gang affiliated individuals were responsible for twenty percent of the country's homicides (McDaniel, 2014).

Additionally, in the past ten years gangs have become more involved in nontraditional activities. From 2010-2011, 35 states reported that gangs in their states had been involved in human smuggling, trafficking and prostitution (FBI, 2011). Tragically, there are an estimated 1.4 million victims of sexual exploitation, 98% of whom are underage girls, and gangs are playing a large role in perpetuating the violence (FBI, 2011).

Finally, *Gang Threat Assessment* found that youth gang involvement had increased as well. The age that youth first begin to associate with gangs ranged from 12-13, and many adolescents are beginning to join gangs between the ages of thirteen and fifteen years old (FBI, 2011). The official reported that youth were the targets of

“aggressive recruitment” because gangs have become involved in so many more activities for which they need labor (FBI, 2011).

These numbers and statistics provided by the FBI paint a very negative portrait of gang activity in the United States. While there is no disputing that gang activity is a serious problem in the United States, there are ways that we can help to prevent gangs. With a greater understanding of gang life and dynamics, more effective prevention and intervention programs can be designed and implemented to keep youth from joining gangs and therefore avoid negative life outcomes associated with gang membership.

## **Research Methods**

The research for this thesis was collected in a mixed-methods fashion, utilizing three methods including: a literature review, one interview with an ex-gang member, and an analysis of five autobiographies written by ex-gang members.

### **Interview**

I developed a survey based off of the University of Alabama's Parenting Assistance outline of qualities of a health family (See "Definitions" Section). However, the questions were written in an open-ended fashion in order to allow individuals an opportunity to discuss their backgrounds and provide any background information that they were willing to share. This survey was also intended to be as open-ended as possible, and interviewee was informed that he was, of course, able to answer as many or as few of the questions as they felt comfortable. One ex-gang member in the Eugene area completed the following survey:

1. What are some of the main reasons that you decided to join a gang?
2. At what age did you become fully involved in a gang?
3. What was your relationship like with your parents at the time when you became involved in a gang?
4. Were your parents aware that you were becoming involved in a gang?
5. Did you feel like your fellow gang members provided you with a sense of safety and belonging?
6. Did you consider your fellow gang members to be like family members?
7. What benefits did you gain from being in a gang?
8. What preventative measures do you think that we can take to prevent youth from being involved in a gang?
9. What can the criminal justice system do to help prevent youth gang involvement?

## **Literature Review**

The second aspect of this thesis included a thorough literature review of existing studies that have been conducted about the role between family and youth gang involvement, including examining familial risk factors associated with youth gang involvement, as well as dynamics of youth gangs. The literature review also encompasses studies that have examined the structure of gangs, including the hierarchy and power system that is present within gangs. The literature review was primarily conducted by utilizing the University of Oregon electronic database in order to find peer-reviewed articles.

## **Analysis of Autobiographies**

Five autobiographies written by ex-gang members were also analyzed for this thesis. These five autobiographies are: *I Love Yous Are For White People* by Lac Su (2009), *My Bloody Life: The Making of A LA King* by Reymundo Sanchez (2000), *Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member* by Sanyika Shakur (2004), *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in LA* by Luis J Rodriguez (1994) and *Lady Q: The Rise and Fall of a Latin Queen* by Sonia Rodriguez (2006). These autobiographies were analyzed for information pertaining to familial risk factors associated with young gang involvement, as well as the internal structure and hierarchy of street gangs, using the survey that was designed for interviews with ex-gang members.

## **Important Definitions**

### **Gang-**

While there is no one definition of “gang,” the Chicago Police Department has developed a comprehensive definition of “gang.” They define a gang as:

“An organized group with a recognized leader whose activities are either criminal or, at the very least, threatening to the community... Gangs displayed their identity and unity in obvious ways, such as the use of jewelry, selected colored clothing, jargon and symbols. Members remain together in quiet times as well as in conflict. In response to this twisted loyalty, gang members are rewarded by being accepted and recognized as a gang member” (Chicago PD).

### **Surrogate/ Pseudo-Family**

The Beverly Police Department defines surrogate family’s in gangs as the, “perception that affection, affirmation, understanding as well as physical and emotional support can be found in gangs, and is absent at home”

### **Healthy Family**

It is difficult to create a holistic and comprehensive definition of the phrase “healthy family.” Every culture, and every individual family for that matter, may have a different definition for what defines a health family. However, The University of Alabama’s “Parenting Assistance” program outlines six traits that comprise a healthy family:

1. Families spend time together: Families make an effort to engage and interact with one other enthusiastically.

2. Communication: Families illustrate that they care about one another through caring and effective communication. Families celebrate one another's good news, as well as demonstrate supportive listening skills when something is wrong.
3. Appreciation: Acknowledge and appreciate kind and thoughtful gestures of one another, as well as appreciating a person for who they are. Appreciation is an important aspect of increasing one's self esteem.
4. Good coping skills: Families are able to stay together, and stay strong, even during difficult times and crises, through good communication skills.
5. Commitment: Families make each other's happiness and welfare as a top priority, and understand the meaning of "family first." Family members are flexible to restructuring their schedules
6. Values and convictions: Families identify and practice moral and values, either through religious practices or open discussions. Parents are most likely to teach their children morals and values through actions; "Children may not hear everything [his or her parent] says, but they see everything [you] do!" ("Parenting Assistance Line", n.d.)

## **Literature Review**

### **Why Do Youth Join Gangs?**

The question of why youth join gangs is complex and multi-faceted. There is not a single reason why a young person makes the decision to become involved in gang activity. However, this section will explore some of the risk factors associated with youth gang involvement based on peer-reviewed articles. For the purpose of this thesis, the title of “youth” is applied to any adolescent between the ages of 12-17.

Youth may choose to become involved in a gang for a variety of reasons. The media often portrays youth gang members as troublemakers who join gangs to commit violent crimes and sell drugs. Contrary to media portrayal of youth gang involvement, many studies have found that the reasons why an adolescent decides to join a gang may stem from problems at home or other deeper issues.

The Seattle Social Development Project conducted a longitudinal study on 808 children, following them from the ages of 10-18. The sample was ethnically and socio-economically diverse. They found that risk factors for gang involvement can be broken up into sub-categories, including individual, family, school, and community risk factors (Hill, Howell, Hawkins & Batton-Pearson, 1999). Note: FYI—I am currently working on a project with Rico Catalano from U. of Washington. He’s David Hawkin’s colleague in all of the SDP work.

Individual risk factors include antisocial and violent behaviors and tendencies. Family risk factors include family history of problem behavior, poor family management skills, high levels of family conflict and parental attitudes towards



antisocial behavior. School risk factors include low degree of commitment to school and academic failure. Finally, community risk factors include extreme poverty, availability of firearms and drugs, disorganized neighborhoods and high rates of mortality (Hill, et al., 1999).

Another study, “Gang Membership As a Turning Point In The Life Course,” sampled more than 1,400 youth in a study that sought to answer why youth join gangs. The study examined youth gang involvement from a life-course perspective and explores a young person’s decision to join a gang as a “turning point” in his life. The study found that when a young person decides to join a gang, significant changes in their emotions, behaviors and attitudes occur (Melde & Esbensen, date). The study found that a lack of familial and pro-social relationships is what primarily drives young people to seek gang involvement. Furthermore, the study found that the most effective way to stage an intervention for youth involved in gangs is through involving one’s family in interventions, as “it is likely that parenting monitoring, or the lack thereof, is associated with gang member status in the first place... parental monitoring is associated significantly with delinquency” (Melde & Esbensen, date, p. 27). According to this study, adolescence is a pivotal point of development, and also a time when individuals make important decisions that may significantly impact their lives in the future. When strong family bonds do not exist, a young person may seek and desire strong family relationships in other areas.

Another study, “Risk and Protective Factors Associated With Gang Affiliation Among High-Risk Youth: A Public Health Approach” (McDaniel, 2014), examines risk factors of youth gang involvement from a public health approach. Gang involvement

has a very negative impact on a young person's health. Youth who are involved in gangs are more likely to deal with alcohol and drug abuse, mental health disorders such as depression, and are more likely to commit suicide (McDaniel, 2014). The sample size of this population was comprised of students in grades seven, nine, eleven and twelve who resided in a "high risk" area. The study found that the students who were at highest risk for gang involvement were males who had consumed alcohol in the past twelve months, had participated in delinquent behavior in the past twelve months, and who had been bullied by a peer in the last twelve months (McDaniel, 2014). Students who were at lower risk of gang involvement reported having a parent who provided positive reinforcement in the last thirty days, having a parent who monitored their activities in the last thirty days, and felt as though they had adult support at school (McDaniel, 2014). The study concluded that perhaps the best way to address youth gang prevention is through focusing and emphasizing protective factors.

### **Surrogate/ Pseudo Families in Gangs**

Research conducted on gangs in the United States is vast and expansive, which reflects many aspects of gang activity in the United States. However, literature centered specifically on gang pseudo or surrogate families is extremely lacking. Many studies touch on how risk factors associated with youth gang involvement stem from familiar problems. However, very few studies have been dedicated to analyzing traditional family roles in street gangs.

A Systemic Analysis of the Dynamics and Organizations of Urban Street Gangs, a 2000 study conducted by Ruble and Turner is regarded as one of the most important

gang studies conducted about family systems within gangs. Ruble and Turner draw connections between the structural family systems theory developed by Argentinean psychologist Salvador Minuchin to family dynamics that may be present in gangs. Some of the most striking similarities to Minuchin as pointed out by Ruble and Turner include: communication, hierarchies, boundaries, and subsystems.

**Communication:** Just like in a health family, communication is one of the most important aspects of a gang. Many gang members have non-traditional methods of communication, however. For example, certain gangs wear specific colored clothing to communicate their gang affiliation. Gang's also have hand signals to symbolize their loyalty to their gang. Tagging, or creating graffiti, is also a clear form of communication between gangs. Gang members will mark their territory through the use of tagging, and also use tagging to communicate threats to other gangs (Ruble & Turner, 2000). Clear communication is important for functional, healthy family development. (Minuchin, 1974). Gangs have adopted nontraditional ways to communicate with other gang members as well as with rival gangs.

**Hierarchies:** Most traditional families also have some sort of hierarchy. In a traditional family, the grandparents may be at the top of the hierarchy, followed by their children and then finally grandchildren. Family members are able to move up the hierarchy with experience, accomplishment and age. Hierarchies play a vital role in the cohesion of gangs. The senior leader in many gangs is referred to as the "Original Gangster" or "OG" (Ruble & Turner, 2000). The OG has a role that is similar to a role that a parent may have in a healthy family. He or she is looked to for protection, advice and guidance by less experienced gang members (Ruble & Turner, 2000). Nonetheless,

all gangs vary slightly on their hierarchies, and there may be multiple leaders at one time, but Ruble and Turner argue that there is an unambiguous pecking order that exists in street gangs.

**Boundaries:** Salvador Minuchin dedicated a great deal of his research to exploring the importance of boundaries in a family structure. According to Minuchin, boundaries are one of the most important aspects of a family system, because they (ideally) allow for autonomy and independence while facilitating family cohesion and clear expectations (Medina, 2010) Boundaries are also very important to the structure of gangs. For example, clear boundaries exist around who is able to seek membership into a gang. For many gangs, there are strenuous initiation practices that help to eliminate weak members from joining (Ruble & Turner, 2000). Once a person decides to join a gang, they subject themselves to impermeable boundaries, or what Minuchin would refer to as “rigid boundaries” (Medina, 2010).

**Subsystems:** Another point of focus for Minuchin was the existence of subsystems in a family structure. Minuchin categorized family subsystems into three specific groups: spousal (or couple), parental and sibling sub-systems (Minuchin, 1974). Ruble and Turner explore how parental subsystems can develop between leaders of the gang, as they often take on parental roles of offering guidance, support and safety to the members. Couple subsystems may develop between gang members and female associates that spend time with gang members consistently. Finally, sibling subsystems are most likely to develop between less experienced gang members or “wannabe’s” (Ruble & Turner). While subsystems are not as clear in gangs as they are in families,

subsystems provide members with an opportunity to experience inclusion and a sense of community.

Diaz (2004), has also been a lead researcher on the role of surrogate families in gangs, and has conducted extensive research on Chicano gangs in Southern California. In his research article titled “Chicano Gang Membership, Familism, and Social Support: A Critical Examination of Conflicting Theoretical Models”, he explores Chicano gang dynamics in a direct response to Ruble and Turner’s 2002 study. Diaz also refers to the study of surrogate gang families as “much neglected” (Diaz, 2004). According to Diaz, in the past gangs have been considered to be marginalized or oppressed groups, so many researchers today are still reluctant to blame families for youth delinquency (Diaz, 2004). Diaz himself conducted face-to-face interviews with 52 gang members in Southern California to learn more about family connection in and outside of a gang.

Diaz’ research indicates that gangs do provide members with many necessities that a family would, such as social support or advice (Diaz, 2004). However, Diaz also found that Chicano gang members generally still have strong ties to their biological families and he did not find the family structure theory presented by Rubles and Turner to be entirely applicable to the Chicano gang members he interviewed. Many of the gang members he interviewed stated that they still felt comfortable turning to their biological families for social support. However, Diaz found that the older the men were, the more likely they were to seek support from biological family members (Diaz, 2004). Diaz ends his research journal by stating, “It is clear that more longitudinal research on gang members... is necessary to untangle the complexities between Chicano gang members, their families, and social support” (Diaz, 112).

## Results

### *Interview*

The following were the answers gained from the ex-gang member who agreed to participate in the study. To protect the confidentiality of the ex-gang member who was interviewed, the interview was not electronically recorded. Therefore, the answers to the questions are all paraphrased, but are very close to exactly what the ex-gang member had to say.

1. What are some of the main reasons that you decided to join a gang?

[I was looking for acceptance, direction, and wanted to feel important. I was looking for male role models, and all of my male role models were involved in the gang.]

2. At what age did you become fully involved in a gang?

[I first started associating with the gang at age 11. First became involved in petty crimes such as stealing, and then at the age of fifteen began dealing drugs and weapons. The third stage of gang involvement included more violent crimes, such as robbery and vandalism, and activities that included increased person-to-person violence. At age 16 I was officially “jumped into” the gang and from then could keep more of the proceeds that I was making from my crimes.]

3. What was your relationship like with your parents at the time when you became involved in a gang?

[My parents were involved with the gang. I used drugs and drank with my parents as an adolescent, and had sexual relations with my mothers’ friends. When I left my home, or was sent to jail, I would come home to find that another gang member was living in my bedroom. There was a lack of stability in my home.]

4. Were your parents aware that you were becoming involved in a gang?

[Yes- they were also involved in gangs]

5. Did you feel like your fellow gang members provided you with a sense of safety and belonging?

**[Yes- I had support and I felt understood. I did not feel understood by most of society.]**

6. Did you consider your fellow gang members to be like family members?

[Yes- gang members become more important than your biological family, because you are forced to put them before family. I had a wife and kids while I was still involved in the gang. In gangs, brainwashing techniques are used, similar to techniques that are used with hostages... I finally hit rock bottom and got out of my gang, when I was addicted to heroin, my kids were in stranger foster care and my wife was in rehab... It wasn't difficult for me to leave the gang because I wasn't a contributing member anymore. When you're not a helpful member, it's not as big of a deal to exit the gang]

7. What benefits did you notice that you gained from being involved in a gang?

[Sex (I was having sex with my mom's friends as a teenager), money, an apartment, a sense of importance, and street smarts. I had my own apartment as a teenager and could do whatever I wanted. Also, power—the power is more addicting than the drugs.]

8. What preventative measures do you think that we can take from preventing youth from being involved in gangs?

[First of all, don't judge people who are in gangs. If someone joins a gang, realize that there were probably traumatic forces that pushed them there. Also, it is dangerous to suspend and expel youth who are acting out, as it gives them more time to become involved in a gang. We need to stop spending money on research and events like gang symposiums—

we don't need to talk about it any more. Let's start creating prevention programs, and target at-risk youth from a young age. Why are we waiting to do risk assessments on youth when they are in juvi? These need to be taking place when kids are in elementary school. The police are also a problem; it's a game of cat and mouse with the police.]

#### Miscellaneous Information Not Relating to Interview Questions

[In California, there is a tax system on drugs. The corner dealer is told what to do by the shot caller, who essentially serves the original gangster. After the drugs are sold, a cut is sent back to the Mexican Mafia]

#### *Analysis of Autobiographies*

Five autobiographies were read and analyzed using the same interview questions of those used to interview the ex-gang member. Although each autobiography did not provide the answer to every interview question, valuable information was obtained from reading and analyzing these autobiographies. The five autobiographies include: "I Love Yous Are For White People" by Lac Su, "Always Running: La Vida Loca" by Luis Rodriguez, "My Bloody Life: The Making of A Latin King" by Reymundo Sanchez, "Monster: The Making of A LA Gang Member" by Sanyika Shakur, and "Lady Q: The Rise and Fall of a Latin Queen" by Sonia Rodriguez and Reymond Sanchez. Very few autobiographies written directly by ex-gang members exist, but these five autobiographies were chosen due to the diversity and insight that each story presents.



“I Love Yours Are For White People” by Lac Su

“I Love Yours Are For White People” is an autobiography written by Lac Su, a Vietnamese American, who moved to Los Angeles as a young child. Su faces the challenges of adapting to a new culture, while growing up in an abusive household. Su never becomes fully involved with a gang, but describes his experiences spending time with a gang.

1. What are some of the main reasons that you decided to join a gang?

Su never officially, or formally joined a gang. However, he begins spending time with gang members out of a need to have a place to spend time instead of his house. Su also expresses a desire to feel like he belongs somewhere.

2. At what age did you become fully involved in a gang?

Lac Su never became fully involved within a gang. However, he began spending time with Street Ratz gang members in high school.

3. What was your relationship like with your parents at the time when you became involved in a gang?

Su had a very tumultuous relationship with his parents. Su states feeling constant pressure from his father to excel academically, and feels like he is consistently a let down. Su also struggles with having a very non-emotional or loving relationship with his father. At one point, Su describes hearing his friend say, “I love you to his father.” Su is shocked by this, and tries to tell his father that he loves him, but is met with ridicule and scorn. Su reflects,

**My fantasy is shattered. My eyes swell with tears. It shouldn't be this way. He's supposed to say, “I love you” back to me. Aren't families supposed to say these words to each other? Isn't Pa my family?” (150).**

4. Were your parents aware that you were becoming involved in a gang?

Su's parents, specifically his father, had some suspicion that Su was getting into trouble, and constantly threatened him against hanging out with “hoodlums.” However, in his autobiography, Su does not imply that his parents are aware the extent to which he is drinking, and hanging out with deviant peers.

5. Did you feel like your fellow gang members provided you with a sense of safety and belonging?

Su expresses finally gaining a sense of belonging when he begins associating with the Street Ratz. He states,

**“Most of tem can relate to what I’m going through. They have Asian fathers of their own who scrutinize and beat on them... When I hang out with the Street Ratz, I get the same feeling of belonging that I enjoyed living across the street” (157).**

6. Did you consider your fellow gang members to be like family members?

While involved with a gang, Lac refers to the men in the Street Ratz who he spends time with as “family.” At one point, when Lac contemplates disassociating from the gang he reflects,

**“The attention and respect I’m getting here form my “family” is not something hat I can just walk away from. The year I’ve spent running with the Ratz is the only time in my life I’ve felt in control of my surroundings. They shower me in positive regard. They show me that I have a place in this world and am no longer just life’s dust” (193).**

7. What benefits did you gain from being in a gang?

Su’s association with a gang serves as a protective factor, as he see’s it has a safe space to go when he is unable to cope with being in his stressful and abusive home environment. In relation to living in a chaotic and abusive household Su states,

**“I cope with the best way I know how... I drink and leave the house. The Street Ratz are almost always there, hanging out in his garage. Dragon’s Head’s house gives me the best of both worlds—there’s always booze, and I get to hang out with people who enjoy my company” (155).**

8. What preventative measures do you think that we can take to prevent youth from being involved in a gang? (N/A)
9. What can the criminal justice system do to help prevent youth gang involvement? (N/A)

“My Bloody Life: The Making of A Latin King” by Raymundo Sanchez

“My Bloody Life: The Making of a Latin King” is an auto-biography written by Raymundo Sanchez, a Puerto Rican- American who is an ex-gang member of the Latin King gang based in Chicago, Illinois. Raymundo, a victim of sexual, emotional, and physical abuse, initially runs into gang activity, as he spends the majority of his childhood on the streets in an effort to avoid his abusive mother and step father.

1. What are some of the main reasons that you decided to join a gang?

As a child and an adolescent, Sanchez lacks attention, love and affection from his family members and discusses the emotional toll that watching his siblings being nurtured and loved by his parents while he felt a victim to their abuse. Sanchez’ mother did not allow his stepfather to abuse his sisters. When Sanchez’ mother and stepfather have their own child together, Sanchez increasingly becomes the victim of intense physical abuse from both his mother and his stepfather. Sanchez does not feel physically safe in his home, so he seeks refuge in the streets of Chicago. He states,

**“I felt alone; my sisters had my mother, Junior had his father, but I had nobody... I thought I would have all the friends I needed once I joined the Disciples. There would never be a lack of attention for me” (28).**

When Sanchez is in middle school, his parents begin to discuss moving back to Puerto Rico. Sanchez also decides to join a gang due to the fear that he has for moving back to Puerto Rico with his stepfather. He states,

**“I immediately started thinking of ways to stay in Chicago. I could become a Lord and sleep at their clubhouse or I could sleep on the streets— anything would be better than the hell Pedro was preparing for me in Puerto Rico” (41).**

2. At what age did you become fully involved in a gang?

Sanchez becomes full involved with the Latin Kings in high school, although he begins hanging out with other gangs beginning in middle school.

3. What was your relationship like with your parents at the time when you became involved in a gang?

Sanchez' relationship with his parents consists of one of abuse and neglect. He was the constant victim of physical and psychological abuse from both his stepfather and his mother.

4. Were your parents aware that you were becoming involved in a gang?

Sanchez' parents were aware that he was getting into trouble, starting in elementary school. However, his disruptive behavior is simply met with physical and emotional abuse at home.

5. Did you feel like your fellow gang members provided you with a sense of safety and belonging?

Initially, Sanchez discusses how associating with gangs was the only way for him to feel like he had friends at school. He states,

**"I was just happy to know that I was welcome somewhere"** (42).

He expresses throughout his autobiography the shallow and *false* sense of belonging and safety that gangs provide to young adolescents. He reflects,

**"There was a very fine line between being welcomed by and being in danger with a gang. Even those closest to you can become hostile in an instant. Being an actual member has its advantages, but these can disappear at any moment"** (81).

In the prologue of his autobiography, Sanchez also offers a warning to adults about youth gang involvement. He states,

**"[Gangs] give kids a false sense of belonging- something their parents fail to do"** and, **"Most kids are driven to gangs because of adults, not by their peers"** (12).

Sanchez also states,

**"A gang's loyalty to its members is very tenuous. If a member is not righteous in the eyes of the leaders, he may as well be a rival. This is probably the reason why so many gangs exist in so little territory"** (134).

6. Did you consider your fellow gang members to be like family members?

Sanchez reflects that in his younger days when he was involved in a gang, he was willing to tolerate the violence and downfalls that come with gang involvement because he finally felt a sense of family. He states,

**“My experience with the Spanish Lords gave me a strong feeling of belonging, respect, and love. These were feelings that I didn’t receive or expect anymore at home” (46).**

Later in his autobiography, Sanchez also reflects on what causes a sense of connection and “family” between gang members: shared childhood trauma and abuse. When a female gang member discloses to Sanchez childhood sexual abuse she had experienced, Sanchez reflects,

**“That’s what China and I and many other gangbangers had in common—these memories bonded us together. That’s why gang members embrace each other’s acts of violence. That’s why they go to jail for one another. That’s why gang members kill and die together. That bond relieves the pain of what is the truth” (111).**

7. What benefits did you gain from being in a gang?

As an adolescent, Sanchez gains an unlimited supply of drugs, alcohol, and women. However, he also gains shelter and a place to spend time away from his abusive home. When Sanchez is sent back to Puerto Rico, he seeks refuge at a gang clubhouse, as he has very few other options of ways to obtain basic necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing. Sanchez also gained a sense of power and authority as a gang member in the Latin Kings.

8. What preventative measures do you think that we can take to prevent youth from being involved in a gang? (N/A)

9. What can the criminal justice system do to help prevent youth gang involvement? (N/A)

### Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days In LA: Luis J Rodriguez

“Always Running: The Vida Loca” is an autobiography written by Luis J. Rodriguez. As a former gang member in Los Angeles, Rodriguez initially began initially writing casually about his experiences in a gang, in order to present his writings to his adolescent son in an effort to detour his son from becoming involved in a gang. His notes became a published autobiography.

1. What are some of the main reasons that you decided to join a gang?

Rodriguez' initial contact with gangs comes from his experiences living in South Central Los Angeles, and attending schools where gangs were a large part of the culture. As a young child, when Rodriguez witnesses an act of gang vandalism Rodriguez reflects,

**“All my school life until then had been poised against me telling me what to be, what to say, how to say it. I was a broken boy, shy and fearful. I wanted what the Three Mystics had; I wanted the power to hurt somebody”** (47).

Rodriguez also became involved with gang activity out of a need for safety and protection. Rodriguez lived with his family in Las Lomas, in South Central Los Angeles. From a young age he witnesses violence at school and in his neighborhood and sees associating with gangs as essentially the only way to stay safe, and to have protection from violence. A classmate of Rodriguez imparts words of wisdom onto him:

**“You live in between the two largest ‘hoods/ You got to figure out which one to claim or you’re going to get fu\*ked by both of them”** (56).

Finally, growing up in a poverty-stricken household, with significant chaos and disorder, Rodriguez reflects that he first began to **“take refuge in the streets”** (41) in order to avoid interactions with his family.

2. At what age did you become fully involved in a gang?

In junior high school, Rodriguez begins to more seriously associate with gangs. In high school, Rodriguez becomes significantly associated with a Lomas “Loco” Gang, and is expelled from school. He reflects, **“This was fine with me. I hated school. And I loved fighting”** (100)

3. What was your relationship like with your parents at the time when you became involved in a gang?

Rodriguez' parents were aware that he was becoming involved in criminal activities, yet lacked the ability to do anything about it, despite being concerned. By middle school, Rodriguez is kicked out of his home, and then banished to living in the garage (85).

4. Were your parents aware that you were becoming involved in a gang?

Yes, his parents were aware that Rodriguez was becoming involved in a gang. However Rodriguez reflects,

**“[Mama] is worried about me, although not really knowing what I was up to; to protect herself from being hurt, she stayed uninvolved” (128).**

5. Did you feel like your fellow gang members provided you with a sense of safety and belonging?

Rather than providing him with a sense of safety and belonging, Rodriguez' gang members provide him with an opportunity to express his anger at feeling consistently marginalized, judged and brutalized by police and society. Rodriguez also seeks shelter at the homes of gang members throughout his adolescence when he is kicked out of home.

6. Did you consider your fellow gang members to be like family members?

Rodriguez does not address his fellow gang members as family members, and criticizes many of their actions, but yet finds himself seeking acceptance and friendship with the men in his gang.

7. What benefits did you gain from being in a gang? (N/A)
8. What preventative measures do you think that we can take to prevent youth from being involved in a gang?

Rodriguez discusses positive experiences that he has spending time at a community center, where he had opportunities to develop interests in books and music, and eventually finds employment.

He also states that gang prevention programs need to be more comprehensive. He states,

**“Thousands are hacking at the branches of the problem; few are working at the root” (10).**

In the prologue, Rodriguez also offers an eloquent explanation for why he believes that youth gangs form. He states,

**“Gangs are not alien powers. They begin as unstructured groupings, our children, who desire the same as any young person. Respect. A sense of belonging. Protection.... Gangs flourish when there's a lack of social recreation, decent education or employment” (229).**

9. What can the criminal justice system do to help prevent youth gang involvement?

Rodriguez expresses strong opinions about the role that the police play in gang activity, and how he believes that police activity encourages youth gang involvement. He states,

**“In the barrio, the police are just another gang... Shootings, assaults and skirmishes between the barrios are direct results of police activity. Even drug dealing. I know this. Everybody knows this” (76).**

“Monster: The Autobiography of a L.A. Gang Member by Sanyika Shakur

The fourth autobiography that was analyzed for this thesis was “Monster: The Autobiography of a L.A. Gang Member” by Sanyika Shakur. “Monster” is a graphic, and intense novel written by Shakur from solitary confinement. He discusses his days of serving as one of the most notorious founding members of the Crips.

1. What are some of the main reasons that you decided to join a gang?

Shakur never states a solid reason for his gang involvement. However, he references a tumultuous childhood, which included witnessing domestic violence between his parents, growing up in poverty without a father figure, and being bullied and harassed in school as a young child (102-103).

2. At what age did you become fully involved in a gang?

Shakur became fully initiated into the Crips at age 11.

3. What was your relationship like with your parents at the time when you became involved in a gang?

Shakur states the negative impact that his gang involvement had on his already tumultuous relationship with his mother. When he initially begins to affiliate with a gang his relationship with his **“mother soured continuously” (25).**

4. Were your parents aware that you were becoming involved in a gang?

Shakur reflects that his mother was aware that he was becoming involved in a gang, but did not understand the extent of the violence that he was engaging in. The later Shakur goes into gang involvement, the more that his mother seems to give up on him.



5. Did you feel like your fellow gang members provided you with a sense of safety and belonging?

When Shakur initially became involved with the gang, he reflects,

**“I have never, ever as secure as I did with the presence of these cats, who were growing fonder of me, it seemed, with each successive level of drunkenness they reached” (8).**

When Shakur is arrested for the first time, he receives significant support from his fellow gang members at his trial. He writes,

**“The gang turnout was surprising. Along with my family, at least fifteen of my homeboys came. All were in full gear” (23).**

Shakur also describes the sense of community and pride that gangs foster. He states,

**“All participants are obligated to respect their allegiance to their respective sets everywhere they go. You are taught from recruitment that your set is something to be proud of” (78).**

6. Did you consider your fellow gang members to be like family members?

Throughout the book, Shakur repeatedly references his gang members as family members. For example, upon formal initiation into the crips, he quickly bonds with an older gang member, as he states,

**“Tray Ball became my mentor, friend, confidant, and closet comrade” (12).**

Shakur refers to his fellow Crips members as family members when he states,

**“My homeboys became my family members—the older ones were father figures” (25).**

As Shakur becomes more involved with the gang, he states,

**“My life was totally consumed by all aspects of gang life. I had turned my bedroom into a virtual command post, launching attacks from my house with escalating frequency. My clothes, walk, talk and attitude all reflected my love and allegiance to my set. Nobody was more important than my homeboys—nobody. The only reason my little brother and I stayed close is because he joined the set” (69).**

7. What benefits did you gain from being in a gang?

Shakur gains respect and fear from others as a benefit of gang member. He is quickly nicknamed “Monster,” due to his violent actions, and rises up to Original Gangster status.

Shakur also reflects on the immense sense of stability that he received from gang involvement. He states,

**“The set was my clearest vision of stability. Although changes took place in the hood, the hood itself never changed”** (103).

8. What preventative measures do you think that we can take to prevent youth from being involved in a gang? (N/A)

9. What can the criminal justice system do to help prevent youth gang involvement?

Shakur explains the disdain he feels for the justice system throughout the book, and discusses the impracticality of the war on gangs concept. He states,

**“When gang member stop their wars and find that there is no longer a need for their sets to exist, banging will cease. But until then, all attempts by law enforcement to seriously curtail its forward motion will be in vain”** (79).

“Lady Q: The Rise and Fall of A Latin Queen” by ‘Sonia Rodriguez’

The final autobiography analyzed is an autobiography written by a female gang member. Rodriguez’ (pseudo name) story is told through a series of interviews she completed with Raymundo Sanchez. Rodriguez is an ex-gang member who was only involved with the Latin Kings and has been referred to as, “The Queen of All Queens,” before she ended her participation with the Latin Kings/ Queens.

1. What are some of the main reasons that you decided to join a gang?

Sonia’s decision to become involved in a gang was a slow and desperate process, as she developed a desire and need for affection and love. From a young age, Sonia experiences sexual abuse, yet her mother does not believe her claims. Sonia learns that she cannot rely on her family for support and care. Sonia also struggles to make friends at school and faces extreme feelings of isolation.

**“Being molested left Sonia damaged in ways she was still, at age twelve, too young to understand. She already felt as though other kids her age didn’t want her around them, but now she had an added reason to believe she was different” (25).**

Sonia’s first interactions with gang life occurred when her older sister becomes involved with the Latin Kings, and her mother allows their apartment to turn into a clubhouse for the gang. Nonetheless, she continues to avoid becoming involved in a gang, and seeks refuge in school and a street dance club.

The dance club that Sonia becomes involved with in high school **“was well known and performed in the Puerto Rican parade and at night assemblies at Roberto Clemente High School. This was a great out-let for for Sonia, who made new friends and was given responsibility and respect. Best of all, it kept it out for her home” (35).**

However, Sonia is removed from the dance team as her sister’s involvement with the Latin Kings begins to negatively impact Sonia’s reputation. Sonia “was heartbroken” (38), and consequently, “began befriending members of the Latin Kings and Queens who surrounded her” (38).

Sanchez reflects,

**“Sonia’s introduction into gang life was subtle and unexpected. Although she lived in a gang-infested area, she had never chosen to hang out with active gang members. It wasn’t until her home became a Latino King/Queen hangout that she had unavoidable encounters with gang members and the gang way of life” (39)**

Essentially, Sonia joined a gang out of necessity.

2. At what age did you become fully involved in a gang?

Sonia became formally initiated into the Latin Queens at age 16.

3. What was your relationship like with your parents at the time when you became involved in a gang?

Rodriguez had a very tumultuous and uneven relationship with her parents. From a young age she experienced physical and emotional abuse.

4. Were your parents aware that you were becoming involved in a gang?

Sonia’s mother was aware that she was becoming involved with the gang, and inflicted significant physical abuse on Sonia for her decisions, regardless of the

fact that her older sister and her mother herself were involved with the Latin Kings.

5. Did you feel like your fellow gang members provided you with a sense of safety and belonging?

Rodriguez' first encounter with a gang member provided her with belonging, a feeling that she had been missing.

**“Sonia, starved for someone who cared about her and made her feel important, Whatever Reina’s motives and whatever her beliefs, Sonia found a home in her company. And while their friendship grew, events in Sonia’s “real” home pushed her out” (42).**

Before becoming formally initiated into the Latin Queen/Kings, Sonia also receives a promise that, **“Queen sisters and King brothers would always be there for her. Acceptance, protection—these were the very things she’d always sought from her own family but never received” (47).**

When Sonia moves back from Puerto Rico to Chicago, she finds peace with knowing that, **“the gang would welcome her back and accept her. That was, after all, what made gang life so attractive” (63).**

6. Did you consider your fellow gang members to be like family members?

Sonia considered her fellow gang members to be like her family. When her family considers moving back to Puerto Rico, she knows that, **“regardless of where her family moved, she would always return to the hood where new family dwelled” (51).**

As Sonia gains honors and responsibility as a Latin Queen, **“she gained prestige in this family of the streets, which fed on each other as much as her birth family fed on its members” (75).**

Sonia also takes on a ‘mother role’ as she becomes a mentor and recruiter for younger female gang members later in her gang career.

7. What benefits did you gain from being in a gang?

Sonia gained benefits ranging from drugs, alcohol, and opportunities to engage in parties, from housing and food when she was homeless with an infant, to love and support as an adolescent.

8. What preventative measures do you think that we can take to prevent youth from being involved in a gang?

In the epilogue, Sonia discusses measures that she has taken to prevent her son from becoming involved in gangs, such as involving him in the Boys and Girls club, and making sure that she meets all of his friends. She states,

**“I want people to understand how a person with big dreams can lose everything to the streets without the proper love and support. So don’t let a day go by without you telling your kids you love them. If they don’t feel your support at home, they’ll seek it elsewhere and from people who only say they love them”** (194).

9. What can the criminal justice system do to help prevent youth gang involvement? (N/A)

## Discussion

As stated in the introduction, this goal of this thesis is to answer the following four questions:

1. What are the dynamics and basic structure of surrogate families that develop in gangs?
2. Do youth and young adults seek admission to a gang due to the lure of being included in a surrogate family?
3. How can human service professionals use this information to better support at-risk families?
4. What programs are most effective in preventing youth gang involvement?

The conclusion of this thesis was drawn from mixed-methods research, including a review of research previously conducted on surrogate family dynamics within gangs, one interview with an ex-gang member, and information obtained from five biographies written by ex-gang members. It is conclusive that surrogate family dynamics within gangs play a large role in youth gang recruitment and involvement. Young people seem to gravitate towards groups where they feel as though they will receive the qualities of a healthy family, such as attention, time spent together, boundaries, and trust. The conclusions drawn from this thesis will be specifically discussed through the following four questions listed above.

*What are the dynamics and basic structure of surrogate families that develop in gangs?*

The research highlighted hierarchies and power relationships that develop within gangs. At-risk youth typically seem to begin associating with gangs around the age of ten. They may become victims of aggressive recruitment from one or more gangs. When a young person decides to become formally involved within a gang, the initiation process seems to typically involve two parts: participating in a “hit” of a rival gang, and

being beaten up for a certain period of time. When an adolescent is formally initiated into a gang, they begin at the bottom of the hierarchy and carry out orders from older gang members. Older gang members, sometimes formally called “Bosses,” “Shot Callers,” and “Original Gangsters,” serve as mentors for younger gang members. In the autobiographies, older gang members were consistently referred to as “father figures” or “older male role models.”

Amongst gang members, a strong sense of camaraderie and loyalty exists, similarly to relationships that may exist between siblings. Gang members place each other before their own biological families, if they still have relationships with their families.

Another common theme that came up throughout this research was how gang members provide one another with physical materials, such as clothing, food, and shelter—things that parents typically provide for their children. Many of the gang members reflected that initial gang involvement developed from a need to obtain basic necessities.

However, it is important to note that upon later reflection, the ex-gang members consistently discussed how the “family” bond that in gangs that is first appealing is both shallow and temporary—one wrong move that is viewed as treacherous or disloyal, and gang members risk losing all of the benefits of being in a gang, and may even risk their lives.

*Do youth and young adults seek admission to a gang due to the lure of being included in a surrogate family?*

Based on the information gathered from the survey, literature review, and analysis of autobiographies, it appears that youth do indeed seek admission to a gang in an effort to fulfill their desire for qualities found in families that they may not have received, including attention, affection, belonging, safety, and stability. Many ex-gang members reported that their gang involvement initially stemmed from a need to be away from abusive and chaotic households.

Based on the research, it is also clear that most youth do not join gangs with the intention of becoming involved in violence, drugs, and other illegal activities. The first contact that youth have with gangs is often based on an innocent desire to feel accepted within a group of people. However, as the interview with an ex-gang member and the analysis of autobiographies described, adolescents come to the realization that the acceptance, affection, and camaraderie that they initially experience comes with a price. The desire to feel welcomed and a part of a community came up consistently throughout this research. For youth who have never experienced feeling welcome or a part of a family, the feeling of finally being valued and wanted seems to be worth doing almost anything, including engaging in the violence of gang life.

*What programs are most effective in preventing youth gang involvement?*

As will be discussed in the following question, perhaps the best way to prevent youth gang involvement is through working to strengthen families and make safe a home place for youth to be. However, this section will discuss two prevention efforts



that may be effective in working to prevent youth gang involvement, based on reoccurring themes that occurred throughout the research.

First, programs that connect at-risk youth to positive male role models may be effective in keeping young men (and possibly women) away from gang activity. The interview with the ex-gang member, as well as the autobiographies written by men, all discussed how they viewed older gang members as father figures, or were looking for older male role models when they first became involved with a gang. Connecting youth, particularly young boys, with positive male mentors from a young age may help to prevent youth gang involvement, as youth will have a male to model positive values and morals, and provide encouragement and support in a society that heavily pushes masculinity and toughness.

These programs may be most effective if they work to support fathers to stay more actively involved in their children's lives, while simultaneously connecting young boys to male role models (if they do not have contact with their fathers), who they have frequent and consistent contact with. If youth are able to see successful men who have not been involved with gangs, they will be able to gain a greater understanding that joining a gang is not the only option. It is important to note, however, that such programs should require a long-term commitment from the male role models. It may cause more harm than good for at-risk youth to connect with an adult who may have a temporary role in their life.

The "Big Brothers Big Sisters" (BBBS) program model exemplifies how role models can have a substantial impact in the lives of at-risk youth. The BBBS program targets at-risk youth who are living in poverty, living in a single-parent home, or

children who have an incarcerated parent ([www.bbgs.org](http://www.bbgs.org)). Over seventy percent of children who participate in the BBBS program are boys, and requires a minimum one-year commitment from the program's mentors ([bbbs.org](http://bbbs.org)). However, the program has shown to be very effective. A study conducted on 950 participants in the BBBS program over eighteen months showed that the children were 52% less likely to skip school, 46% less likely to begin using illegal drugs, 33% less likely to hit someone, and 27% less likely to begin to use alcohol ([bbbs.org](http://bbbs.org)). Based on the empirical evidence provided by Big Brothers Big Sisters, it is clear that connecting at-risk youth to positive male mentors will be effective in helping to prevent youth gang involvement.

Based on the research conducted for this thesis, it appears that another productive way to prevent youth gang involvement is through connecting youth to after school programs that foster and support pro-social skills. After school programs provide youth with a safe way to spend time while their parents or guardians may be working. Another reoccurring theme that came up throughout this research was a sense of feeling unwelcome and ostracized by peer groups in school, and only feeling welcome in gang groups.

Youth want to fit in, and want to have friends. After school programs provide youth with opportunities to spend time with peers in a structured, monitored setting, while also connecting youth to positive adult role models. The most effective programs will be ones which offer at-risk youth opportunities to discover talents and interests that they may have—ranging from dance, to music, to theater, and foster these interests. Another important aspect of after school programs for at-risk youth is that they should not be punitive—youth who face problems at home and at school may not respond well,

or chose to participate in, programs that are punitive in nature. Programs should focus on positivity and developing self-confidence in youth.

There is empirical evidence to support the effectiveness of after school programs. The peak hours of juvenile delinquency are between 3:00pm and 6:00pm (www.bcga.org). A 2009 study found that youth who were involved with The Boys and Girls Club were less likely to have negative peers as friends, exhibited increased confidence and school effort, increased levels of integrity, and an increased sense of community involvement (Arbreton, Amy J.A. et al., 2009). After school programs such as the Boys and Girls Club may be effective in preventing youth gang involvement, as they provide youth with a safe space to spend in the peak hours of youth delinquency, and have been proven to have many academic and social benefits.

*How can human service professionals use this information to most effectively support at-risk families?*

Based on all of the research compiled through the above methods of research, it is conclusive that the best way to prevent youth gang involvement is through funding programs that serve and support at-risk families, specifically focusing on parent education. Youth do not seem to want to join a gang; it is simply a protective factor to be away from home. All parents should be educated on topics ranging from early bonding attachment, communication skills, engaging in parental monitoring, and creating and delivering fair but firm guidelines and rules for their teens.

While parent education may serve as an important vehicle for preventing youth gang involvement, at-risk families will most likely require more comprehensive support. As discovered through the autobiographies, the biological families of the ex-

gang members faced issues such as: poverty, unemployment, racism, alcoholism, domestic violence, and issues of sexual and physical abuse. Human services professionals will be most effective if they are able to assist at-risk families in a comprehensive manner. If children and adolescents feel safe and secure at home, it is likely that they will not feel quite the draw to seek refuge in on the streets, or with deviant peers. The first step to eradicating gangs will be to support at-risk families and children.

Infants, children, and adolescents need and crave stability, love and affection. When children and adolescents are not surrounded by responsible adults who have an ability to serve as caring and attentive caregivers, the risk simply increases that they will seek these relationships in unhealthy formats, such as gangs.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, more research in general must be conducted on both biological family members of gang members and surrogate families to truly understand the role of surrogate families in gangs. The most valuable way that human service professionals will be able to develop appropriate gang-prevention services is if human service professionals understand why young people want to join them in the first place. A greater understanding of surrogate family dynamics in gangs will also help us understand how young adults define healthy families, and explore what young adults need out of families in order to be and feel successful.

Preventing youth gang involvement begins with strengthening and supporting at-risk families. Ultimately, human service professionals, and society as a whole, must treat current gang members, ex-gang members, and at risk families with dignity, respect and compassion and realize that, as one ex-gang member stated in an interview, “If a young person decides to join a gang, instead of judging them, realize that there is some traumatic force that has pushed them there” (Personal Communication, 2013).

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