

Hamline University

DigitalCommons@Hamline

School of Education and Leadership Student
Capstone Projects

School of Education and Leadership

Fall 2021

Holistically Discouraging School Aged Students and Youth From Joining and/or Becoming Affiliated With Gangs and Gang Violence

Megan Steinhoff
Hamline University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/hse_cp



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Steinhoff, Megan, "Holistically Discouraging School Aged Students and Youth From Joining and/or Becoming Affiliated With Gangs and Gang Violence" (2021). *School of Education and Leadership Student Capstone Projects*. 730.

https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/hse_cp/730

This Capstone Project is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education and Leadership at DigitalCommons@Hamline. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Education and Leadership Student Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Hamline. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@hamline.edu, wstraub01@hamline.edu, modea02@hamline.edu.

HOLISTICALLY DISCOURAGING SCHOOL AGED STUDENTS AND YOUTH
FROM JOINING AND/OR BECOMING AFFILIATED WITH GANGS AND GANG
VIOLENCE

By

Megan Steinhoff

A Capstone submitted in the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, MN

December 2021

Primary Advisor: Laura Halldin

Content Reviewer: Amelia Ousley

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	5
Overview.....	5
Personal Background.....	7
Professional Background.....	8
Summary.....	11
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review.....	12
Introduction.....	12
Gangs in Schools.....	13
Gang Membership and Affiliation in School Settings.....	13
How Gangs Show Up Within Schools.....	15
Current and Future Responses to Gangs in Schools.....	18
Gang Affiliation/Membership.....	20
The Definition of Gangs.....	20
History and Background of Gangs.....	22
Why Do People Join Gangs?.....	24
Present Programs/Prevention.....	27
Overview of Prevention and Intervention Programs.....	27
Positive Youth Development and Teaching Personal and Social Responsibilities Model.....	28
Juvenile Intervention and Prevention Program.....	29
Gang Resistance Education and Training.....	31
Project YES.....	31

Multiculturalism.....32

Outcomes of Gang Membership (Where Are They Now).....35

Physical Health.....36

 Mental Health.....37

 Education and Occupation.....38

 Recommendations Based on Gang Outcomes.....38

 Summary.....40

CHAPTER THREE: Project Description.....41

 Overview of Project.....41

 Project Description.....43

 Setting and Audience.....47

 Timeline.....47

 Assessment.....48

 Summary.....48

CHAPTER FOUR: Reflection and Conclusion.....50

 Introduction.....50

 Personal Reflection.....50

 Influential Literature Review Research.....52

 Implications of Project and Benefit to Profession.....53

 Limitations of the Project.....54

 Future Project Use and Communication.....55

 Summary.....56

REFERENCES.....58

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Overview

Schools as we know them today function way beyond that of just institutions for learning. They provide spaces for students to make connections with similar aged peers, adults, and school personnel like social workers, counselors and community liaisons to name a few. Schools also provide some students with temporary shelter and access to food, and offer a stable place to discover how to belong in the world and community. These services and supports that are provided to the students play a large role in student outcome and can have a great impact on students' lives. Because of this, the way in which they are provided to students matters.

Despite the large swath of social, emotional, academic and physical development that schools foster, they are consistently and systematically underfunded. Specific populations, mainly Black students and students of color, have disproportionately been excluded from culturally responsive services, instruction and support, leading to them having less opportunities to find success outside of school. This creates an environment where students find other ways in which they can survive in the community around them. One example of this search for success and survival is gangs. Gangs also provide adolescents with a space to define themselves and create an identity. Gangs can also provide a sense of community and resources (like housing and physical protection) that the state and local governments as well as the police and federal systems like welfare have not and cannot provide. In an effort to provide students with tools to find success

within school, society and their immediate community, the following seeks to answer the question, *how can schools holistically discourage gang affiliation and/or violence within school aged students?*

In the year 2021, the Twin Cities is facing a high rate of violence, specifically gun violence. According to MPR News, “more than 24,000 bullets flew in Minneapolis last year...More than 550 people were wounded by gunfire in 2020, which also includes those who were fatally shot. That represents a more than 100 percent increase over the tally in 2019” (Williams, 2021). Communities within the Twin Cities are trying their best to navigate school closures due to Covid-19, food scarcity, job insecurity and the housing crisis were all at a peak. Combining all these factors creates an environment where marginalized, oppressed and underrepresented communities are struggling even more to survive.

Young adults from underprivileged and underserved communities in urban areas often see that they have little to no choice but to join a gang as a result of the several instances mentioned above. John M. Hagedorn (1998) quotes in his book *People and Folks: Gangs, Crime and the Underclass in a Rustbelt City*, “My fundamental conclusion is that underclass gang members differ from you and me not in their ‘culture’, but in the different opportunities they face and the kinds of choices available to them”. The research question seeks to find a way to use different resources that are present within schools to holistically support students who are at a higher risk of joining gangs, and as a result provide them with other opportunities to find success and a sense of community. The rest of this chapter will outline both personal and professional connection to the research question and topic.

Personal Background

As a white, cisgender, middle class female growing up in Saint Paul, I had little to no personal connections to gangs. It wasn't until I met a friend and colleague in my teacher graduate school program that I became more interested and aware that gang affiliation was at the forefront of the minds of many Minneapolis and Saint Paul youth. My friend and colleague was hired at a Minneapolis charter school that targets students who had been pushed out of traditional school. The teachers and staff at this charter school walk around the streets of the Twin Cities during the school day looking for school aged students in need of credit recovery. Once they have identified these young adults, they recruit them to join their schools. The majority of their student body can be defined as either a gang member or a gang affiliate. All are affected by the presence of gangs in their neighborhoods.

My friend and colleague was quickly submersed into a different world, as she was brought up in a similar way to myself. The two of us began to have many in-depth conversations about the students, their home lives, how they present themselves in school, their past success or lack thereof in school and many other elements that made them unique. We soon discovered that there was an overwhelming amount of information that we did not know about gangs. As two people who are passionate about education, social justice and anti-racist teaching, we decided to deepen our understanding of gangs as a way to understand these students as a whole.

Together, we decided to read some literature on this subject and create an informal book club with the two of us. We would read and discuss the different theories around how gangs form, how they are named, the different rankings and role within gangs and

how they have spread across the United States. The literature also discussed some information about policy and policing in certain cities and states to try and diffuse gang activity and violence.

Recently, especially in the Twin Cities, police violence, police brutality and policed presence has come to the forefront. As a result of this, many communities are deciding to take a look at police reform and abolition. According to MRP News, “The [city] council's draft charter amendment last year called for replacing the Minneapolis Police Department with a Department of Community Safety and Violence Prevention. The language said that this department may include — but would not be required to have — a division of law enforcement services” (Sepic 2021). Many areas are looking to invest in other programs that will better serve the people within the community.

As a result of the recent increase in attention to police reform and/or abolition, along with the combined increased gun violence within certain communities, my awareness of gangs was reignited. After some thought and new discussions with my friend and colleague, I decided it would be valuable to consider focusing this Capstone on how we can holistically provide students with tools and strategies that will lessen the need for gangs within communities.

Professional Background

The professional connection to this topic is closely linked to the personal connection. However, the professional connection is centered on how students and educators experience gang affiliation within schools.

In the previous sections, it is mentioned why individuals join gangs in relation to their personal lives outside of school. Young people join gangs to remedy a host of social

and economic inequities and injustices created by the absence of secure housing, employment and food. Furthermore, as schools struggle to mitigate racial disparities, students of color turn to gangs to find opportunities for belonging, self-definition, security and affirmation that schools fail to provide. It should also be noted that a significant amount of gang members are Black and people of color. Hagedorn posited that “The problem of race in our nation’s cities is also becoming increasingly confounded with the problem of class, particularly with formation of an urban minority underclass. To deny that gangs today are predominantly a minority problem inevitably leads to a failure to analyze the impact of our changing economy on various classes within minority communities” (1998). There is a glaringly obvious connection between who is pushed to the margins in schools, and who is affiliated with gangs. Intersectional groups, especially students of color who are also a part of the lower-class by socioeconomic status, are at a higher risk of being marginalized within the walls of a school and therefore going out and finding new ways to be successful and feel as though they are a part of a community.

Because gangs are already deeply embedded into different communities in urban areas, it is not enough to simply create ways for students to find success in school to discourage young adults from joining gangs. While it is considered best practice to get to know students on an individual level and create opportunities for them to succeed within your classroom, there needs to be other holistic strategies put in place to discourage students from entering these groups. Furthermore, the responsibility rests on schools not only to identify the causes of gang affiliation and participation, but to provide competing opportunities for students to experience security and build relationships with one another.

As an educator, I am always striving to create an environment where students can be present as their true, authentic selves. As a white educator I am also constantly checking for any bias with my views and attitudes, and I am always working towards being an anti-racist educator. With that being said, the idea of the system and tools put in place for the students who are affiliated with gangs needs to be holistic. It needs to take into account who they are, where they are coming from and it cannot be any form of policing. If the tools and systems are anything but these things, they will certainly fail and have the opposite effect. It also needs to be noted that the way in which these systems and tools are provided to students is not coming from a white saviour complex. These students do not need saving from their affiliation with gangs, but instead deserve to have tools, systems and opportunities that will allow them to make different choices. The failure of schools is leaving students no choice but to join gangs.

The last portion of my professional connection to this Capstone project comes from how I see gangs present themselves in schools. Students who either have affiliations with a gang or have become members of a gang often times wear the same color clothing, share familiar handshakes, use 'gang signs' which can be defined as holding fingers and hands in a specific pattern to represent a specific group, and acronyms that represent the names of gangs. Students who are a part of the same gang, or who are a part of two gangs that are affiliates with one another are able to bond within the school. When a student is having trouble connecting with students and staff within a school setting, an easy way to make friends is to discover that they have a connection within the gang system.

On the other hand, when students share a school community but are a part of opposing gangs, feeling like you belong and have an opportunity to learn quickly

diminishes. Violence between students from opposing gangs is easily provoked for a multitude of reasons. This causes stress and strain both in school and out of school. Existing protocol in schools often suspends or expels students rather than providing opportunities for restorative justice, a practice that exemplifies the school to prison pipeline. This leads to students missing learning, which then perpetuates the opportunity gap, which then also closes the circle because these students have a harder time finding success in a white-centered society and in turn may be put at a higher risk of joining a gang.

Summary

All of this culminates to my passion for creating a Capstone project that provides students and educators with the tools and systems to find success both in school and within their community, without feeling like their only option is to become a member of a gang. The increased violence within specific communities, especially the Twin Cities at this time, sheds light onto the need for change. Black students and students of color are at a higher risk of being pushed out of schools, therefore leaving them with less opportunities than their white student counterparts. Statistically, there are more Black people and people of color who are a part of gangs (National Gang Center). The connection between these two realities comes to a head in this Capstone. In chapter 2, the literature review takes a look at how systems and tools can be created and provided to students so that success and choices are available in an equal measure to all students.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Introduction

The following literature review aims to answer the question, *how can schools holistically discourage gang affiliation and/or violence within school aged students?* The literature review is broken down into four different sections to better understand the essential question and the research: gangs in schools, gang affiliation/membership, programs/prevention, and outcomes of gangs (where are they now?).

Part one of the review looks at how gangs present themselves in schools. Because this Capstone focuses on school communities can help discourage and prevent students from joining gangs, it is important to understand how they currently operate within a school system. The section will overview how prevalent gang affiliation and membership is within schools. It will also discuss the personal view and opinions that students, families and school staff have on the presence of gangs and students who are involved in them. This section will also briefly cover when youth and young adults are at the highest risk for joining a gang, and a possible pertinent time to intervene in gang affiliation and membership. The next section will go over the logistics of gang membership and affiliation. In order to holistically support students who are in gangs or are at high risk for joining a gang, it is important to understand things like why people join gangs, how gangs started to form, who makes up gangs and how they operate. This section will also discuss various definitions of the word “gang” and how it changes based upon the researchers. The third section will review programs and preventions that are already in place. There are several programs across the nation that have been out in place within

schools and communities. This research and information will provide a solid foundation for what has worked and what has not in the past in terms of gang prevention and intervention. The last section of the literature review will discuss research findings on gang membership outcomes. This information will be used to determine how programs and interventions can be improved upon. Again, this Capstone aims to create and find holistic ways to discourage gang affiliation and/or violence. Therefore, discussing how gang membership affects individuals is necessary in order to understand these people as a whole.

Gangs in Schools

How gangs operate within schools and how the structure of schools contributes to gang membership are both important ideas to examine. Students who are members of gangs or who have close ties to gangs, are unable to leave the pieces of their environment that affect them at the door while at school. Because of this, behaviors and school involvement are greatly impacted. The beliefs and stereotypes that school staff have of students who are gang members also has an impact on the way both school staff and students can effectively operate within an educational setting (Estrada 2014). This section provides an overview of how many students are gang members and how that affects the way in which they are existing within a school setting. This section examines how gang membership and affiliation show up within schools as well as some information on how some schools choose to address gang membership and violence.

Gang Membership and Affiliation in School Settings

The topic of gang membership and gang affiliation within school settings has been a topic of researchers for a long time. To best understand how students who are

gang members or who have affiliations with gangs show up and navigate their life in school, it is important to take a look at some data that tells educators and school communities how many students and adolescents are actually associated with gangs. In general, the amount of young adults and school aged students who are involved in gangs has been steadily on the rise since the 1990s. According to Lenzi et al. (2018), gang involvement within schools ranges from 2% to 37% depending on the community.

Many studies have chosen to provide students with surveys to fill out to determine gang affiliation. Most surveys include a number of questions with one specific question asking about gang membership and/or association. However, some studies have used surveys where the sole question being asked is in regard to gang affiliation and/or membership. According to the Healthy Youth Survey that was used in Donlin and the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (2019), 5% of eighth, tenth and twelfth graders self-identified as being a member of a gang within the last twelve months of the survey. It should be noted that this survey was a one question survey, asking students to mark “yes” or “no” in relation to gang membership. Another survey, used in a study Estrada et al. (2014) reported that 8.2% of students of over 200,000 high school students are in a gang. Another study, conducted by Gebo and Sullivan (2013), shows that 6.9% of students in various high schools throughout various states self-reported as being involved in a gang. While these numbers seem to be low, it is necessary to point out that this data was collected from a variety of sources and studies, but relied solely on self-reporting via a survey, many of which asked students if they were members of a gang like stated above. There are many reasons as to why a student would

not be honest when self-identifying on a survey like these so educators or anyone consuming this data must keep that in mind.

Several studies also looked at perceived gang membership and affiliation from students, families and school staff/administration. A 2010 National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse XV reported that 45% teens and parents believe that there are gangs or students who identify as being a gang member in their school (Estrada et al., 2014). Another survey found that 18% of twelve to eighteen year olds said that there were gangs within their schools. Additionally, it was found that teachers and school administrators believe that gangs are the number two safety problem within schools. The number one problem, they believe, is drugs (Estrada et. al, 2014). The difference between the data collected for self-identified gang members and the data collected on outsiders' perceptions of who is a gang member or affiliated with gangs is drastically different. Outsider's perceptions are much higher than the amount of students who self-report which can be attributed to a number of factors like safety and unwillingness to reveal information to people in positions of power and authority.

How Gangs Show Up Within Schools

Another important aspect to take a look at to better understand gang membership within adolescents and school aged students is how and why gang membership and affiliation shows up in schools. When a student enters the doors of a school, they bring with them everything they are experiencing outside of school into the school with them. In turn, students who identify as gang members bring with them to school their attitudes, behaviors and conflicts (National Gang Center, 2019). Estrada et al. (2014) posits that school violence and gangs are the two most serious social issues that high school students

face. In many different studies, researchers have taken a look at possible associations between gang membership and school environment. Educators know how much a school community can positively or negatively impact a students' experience at school. This experience can affect not only their academic performance but how they move about in society and their community outside of school as well. In a study conducted by Estrada et al. (2014), it was noted that fifth and sixth grade students who have low levels of school attachment are almost twice as likely to join a gang during seventh through twelfth grade. This further demonstrates that gang membership and affiliation is more transitory during the middle school years and becomes more solidified during the high school years (Gebo & Sullivan, 2013). In connection to this, Shoho (1996) discussed how schools respond to student behavior, especially in middle school, which can have a great impact on gang membership later on. In general, adolescents have a strong desire for autonomy and control over their lives. This is especially true in middle school. However, this kind of autonomy and self discovery is suppressed in the middle school years, where teachers and school staff are attempting to control student behavior and maintain control over a classroom environment (Shoho, 1996). The authoritative structure of schools contributes to the above concerns as well as increased alienation. This increases student alienation within a school, according to Shoho (1996) is a contributing factor in gang membership.

This leads to the next point of importance, which is to look at the contributing factors that school systems place upon students, causing them to be at a higher risk of joining a gang. Several researchers, like Estrada et al. (2014), have found that risky behaviors place students at higher risk for joining gangs. Some of these risky behaviors are things like truancy, low academic achievement, lack of attachment to school, bullying

and labeling by teachers all place students at a higher risk for gang membership (Gebo & Sullivan, 2013). However, it is important to note that gang members often come from various high-risk groups. The intersectionality of gang members plays an important role in how they move about in society and school settings, implying that gang membership and affiliation is complex (Gebo & Sullivan, 2013).

With proper programming and training, schools do have the ability to create and maintain an environment that decreases the chance that a student will join a gang. In a study conducted by Lenzi et al. (2018), it can be determined that schools that are able to create positive social and emotional climates are associated with fewer risk behaviors. Therefore, by having less risk behaviors students are less likely to self-identify as a gang member. Also, if the school can be characterized as emotionally competent, defined by Lenzi et al. (2018) as promoting and fostering behavioral self-control, empathy and emotional regulation, there is potential to have reduced gang membership within the student body. Specifically, in schools where students reported higher levels of emotional competence, students were twenty times less likely to identify as a gang member (Lenzi et al., 2018).

Estrada et al. (2014) stated in their research that all students, even gang members who feel connected, safe and supported at school are less likely to be victimized. In this same study, Estrada et al. (2014) noted that students who feel victimized at school are more likely to be involved in risky behaviors which in turn gives them a higher chance of choosing to join a gang. With all of this, it is safe to say that the environment at school and how students connect to teachers plays an important role in a student's decision to become a gang member.

Current and Future Responses to Gangs in Schools

Present studies have mentioned how schools both in the past and present have decided to respond to the presence of gangs. Gebo & Sullivan (2013) believe that school staff do not have the expertise when it comes to dealing with students that they suspect to be involved in a gang. School staff instead turn to police who use suppression based responses that do not address the root causes of joining a gang which are student needs. At the present, a number of schools use punitive and exclusionary policies to correct student behavior. Some of these policies include forbidding specific clothing, paraphernalia and communication (Shoho, 1996). Lenzi et al. (2018) states in their research that these types of policies disproportionately affect students with disabilities, students of color and students living in poverty. As a result, these students are being pushed out of classrooms and schools which in the long run puts them at higher risk for joining a gang (Lenzi et al., 2018).

The present studies have also recommended what they believe to be positive responses and preventative measures to seeing gang affiliation within a school. According to the National Gang Center (2019), the best strategies are proactive instead of reactive. Schools need to work towards providing students with resources and tools to help them become successful both in and out of school. This will then put them at a lower risk for joining a gang. Shoho (1996) recommends that middle schools should focus on adolescent identity development. Schools should create both formal and informal opportunities for students to express their perceptions of the school climate. They can do this by creating small more personalized groups to allow students to have these discussions (Shoho, 1996). Shoho also recommends that schools work to recruit and

maintain teachers of color, as well as restructuring the school's environment to allow for more student empowerment. Gebo and Sullivan (2013) suggest in their study that schools cannot be the only answer to preventing gang membership. They suggest that there needs to be strong connections created between youth, the school and the community (Gebo & Sullivan, 2013).

The National Gang Center (2019) agrees with the previous study's suggestions and also believes that law enforcement is an integral piece in the development and implementation of a safety plan to address gang membership within a school community. They suggest that a strong safety plan works when school administration collaborates with law enforcement, documents gang-related incidents and implements both a prevention and an intervention plan. Another suggestion made by the National Gang Center (2019) is to create a team within the school that consists of administration, teachers, counselors, mental health specialists, school resource officers, law enforcement and gang intervention specialists. Together this team can work to support all students but especially students at high risk of joining a gang or students who are already gang members. Lastly, Lenzi et al. (2018) states in their study that socioemotional features at the school level can be more effective than some structural ones that influence gang membership.

It is clear that gang membership and affiliation shows up in schools in a variety of ways. The present research discussed specific data on the number of students that self-identify as a gang member as well as perceived affiliation and membership from other school community members. How gangs show up in schools was also discussed in the present section. School plays a large role in youth and adolescent life, as a majority of

students attend school from ages six to eighteen. How school environments impact the lives of students can help educators understand how students as a whole function within the school system. The present studies also shared their recommendations for how schools should respond to gangs in schools. They used the findings in their research to create ideas on how to best support high risk students. The research that focused on gangs in schools has worked towards answering the research question, *how can schools holistically discourage gang affiliation and/or violence within school aged students?* The following section focuses on research that discusses baseline information on gangs such as membership, the definition of gangs and data/statistics on the identity of gang members.

Gang Affiliation/Membership

In order to better understand gangs within schools and how young adults and students are involved in gangs, it is crucial to determine some baseline information about gangs. According to Garot (2010), there has not been a consensus among gang research as to an exact definition of gangs. Therefore, it will be beneficial to discuss various definitions of gangs that previous researchers have used. These definitions will be addressed in this section. Gangs have a deep and rich history that needs to be addressed and in order to create holistic intervention and prevention tools. This history will be overviewed in this section and will pull from a variety of researchers. A basic understanding of why youth join gangs and the different societal pressures that push youth into joining gangs will also be reviewed in this section.

The Definition of Gangs

While examining research surrounding gangs and attempting to make sense of what they are, why they have been created and how to understand the individuals within a gang it is crucial to first identify the various definitions being used when referring to gangs. Garot (2010) has determined through his own research that there has been no general consensus among gang researchers as to a true definition of what a gang is. The definitions vary throughout research and often depend on the theory, lens and fundamental belief system that a researcher or set of researchers holds. Despite this lack of consensus, it will still be helpful for educators to be privy to an array of these definitions in an attempt to understand the various roles gangs can play. In Garot's (2010) research, he cited a definition from Walter Miller who attempted to create a definition of gangs. He came up with six items to include in his definition that were agreed upon by 87% of 309 teachers, police officers and community workers with experience in gangs (Garot, 2010). These six items are: "gangs are self-formed associations of peers, they are bound together by mutual interest, with identifiable leadership, and well developed lines of authority, acting in concert and controlling a specific territory" (Garot, 2010).

Another gang researcher, Hagedorn (1998), came up with a broader definition of gangs after spending a lot of time collecting qualitative data through interviews with gang members across the Upper Midwest of the United States. He posits that gangs refer to "quasi-institutionalized structures within poorer communities" (Hagedorn, 1998). His research focuses heavily on the history of gangs and views gangs as a survival strategy for poor communities of color in the Upper Midwest that was caused by the major employment shift in the 1970s and the 1980s. Hagedorn (1998) also refers to another gang researcher, Frederick Thrasher, and turns to his definitions of gangs in his research

as well. Thrasher defines gangs as interstitial groups that were formed spontaneously but then found more structure because of conflicts (Hagedorn, 1998).

The last definition we will look at is one from Trump (1993). In his research, he looks at how different time periods affected the definition of gangs. According to Trump (1993), in the 1950s and 1960s, the definition of gangs was related “to issues of etiology and were based off of liberal, optimistic, social-reform assumptions”(Trump, 1993). He then says that in the 1970s and 1980s the definitions of gangs became more descriptive and emphasized violent and criminal characteristics and were most likely based on conservative social philosophies (Trump, 1993). While Trump (1993) did not mention this himself within his research, it can be noted that the change in definition in the 1970s and 1980s can be connected to the change in how gangs looked. In the 1970s and 1980s, African Americans were joining and creating gangs at a higher rate than previously because of the unemployment crisis in blue-collar jobs that was happening (Freng & Taylor, 2016).

History and Background of Gangs

Gangs have a rich history that needs to be understood if anyone wants to holistically view gangs and their members. In general, gang literature and gang theory have pointed out over the years that gangs and their members have specific characteristics. Some of these characteristics are that gang members are more often male, people of color (specifically Latinx or Black) and from low-income, inner-city neighborhoods (Estrada et al., 2016). However, it is important to note that this information is based on newer gangs, and how gangs within the last few decades have looked. It is imperative to discuss that most of the original gangs in the United States

began as white gangs. These early gangs consisted of Irish and Polish immigrants and the change to gangs being composed of people of color began in the 1950s (Freng & Taylor, 2016). Gang membership then and now is often portrayed by the media as an issue that affects people of color that live in low-income, inner city neighborhoods in the United States (Freng & Taylor, 2016). The media also chooses to ignore that even now there are a significant number of white individuals who are gang members and this creates an inaccurate representation of the large number of youth of color who do not join gangs (Freng & Taylor, 2016). It should also be noted that self-report surveys, which are very common in the present gang research, show a higher percentage of white gang members. However, when you look at the law enforcement data, there is a much lower percentage of white gang members being reported (Freng & Taylor, 2016).

As briefly discussed above, the original gangs in the United States started with European immigrants. This influx of European immigrants slowed down in the 1920s and by the 1960s the demographic of gangs changed to more Black and Hispanic gangs (Hagedorn, 1998). Hagedorn (1998) focuses a lot of his research on Milwaukee, Wisconsin gangs and how communities of color in the Midwest were heavily affected by the unemployment and low wage crisis in the 1980s. As the gangs grew, they began to attract the attention of law enforcement which resulted in increased conflict and in turn strengthened many gangs (Hagedorn, 1998). What started off as a group of similar people looking to find success and connection in a time where communities of color were being disproportionately and negatively affected by society and the economy, quickly became a battle between an overwhelmingly white police force and gangs composed of people of color (Hagedorn, 1998).

Gangs have also created somewhat of a generalized outward appearance. In places where gangs are active, members often create ways of talking, walking, writing graffiti and wearing makeup that set them apart from non-gang members (Garot, 2010). A way to create a sense of belonging and to identify themselves as a part of a specific group, gang members have signifiers to one another that help create that sense of community and at times creates conflict. According to Garot (2010), who spent a majority of his time researching gangs and collecting qualitative data in a school setting, schools are one of the most powerful and simultaneously problematic places for gang members to perform their identity. Historically, schools are institutions who have been most concerned about gangs, and gang members make up a group of students that attract the most concern from school staff (Garot, 2010). To round our understanding of gangs, the reasons that back up one's decision to join a gang need to be discussed.

Why Do People Join Gangs?

Present gang research has also worked towards analyzing why people decide to join gangs. Other than an economic crisis, as mentioned in the previous section, Trump (1993) created a list of reasons why gangs are created and why people decide to join them. In this list he mentions a breakdown of family, like losing a family member or growing up without a formative family member (Trump, 1993). He also mentions that individuals who choose to join a gang have low self-esteem and have a need to belong (Trump, 1993). Poverty and poor living conditions can also play a factor in why someone would want to join a gang, as well as an increased availability of alcohol, drugs and weapons (Trump, 1993). Also, the failure of public education institutions, the criminal justice system and the inability of social institutions to meet the needs of community

members are all factors that may play a role in an individual deciding to join a gang (Trump, 1993). It is clear that the present research on gangs shows that many factors, especially stressors, in an individual's life may lead them to joining a gang. Educators must be critical when thinking about the reasons that individuals, especially youth, decide to join gangs because the media portrays them as solely a crime problem (Hagedorn, 1998). However, through research and discussion we can see that gang membership is far more complex than that of street crime and selling drugs.

Many of the reasons that individuals decide to join gangs can be traced back to systemic racism within our society. One example of this is mentioned in research by Freng and Taylor (2016) who noted that people of color are more likely than the white community to live in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Because of this, people of color are put at a higher risk for joining a gang. Some of these risk factors mentioned by Freng and Taylor (2016) are concentrated poverty, social and geographic isolation, resource deprived social institutions, less fruitful job opportunities, rundown housing, high crime and violence rates as well as a systemically racist criminal justice system. Also, systemic racism has affected specific neighborhoods, as briefly mentioned above, which creates isolation. Because these communities are isolated in an area with extreme disadvantage, violence is often seen as a good solution (Freng & Taylor, 2016). This isolation and violence creates a community that has an extreme lack of trust with society as well as the formal justice system, so people and gangs feel the need to always be ready to protect one another (Freng & Taylor, 2016).

There are also some overarching factors that attract youth to joining a gang. Some of these factors are a desire for power, status, security, family, and friendship (Trump,

1993). Previous research has shown us that many students, especially students of color are not finding a sense of power and belonging within a school setting, leading them to finding it in other places. Watkins and Melde (2016) found in their research that adolescents may join a gang because they have psychological and emotional needs that aren't being fulfilled. Some of these needs include self-worth, a psychological sense of community and a sense of purpose (Watkins & Melde, 2016). According to Freng and Taylor (2016), programs that aim to prevent gang membership need to focus on changing the structure of communities in order to find optimal success. By providing youth with prosocial opportunities, their basic needs and the root causes of gangs will be addressed (Freng & Taylor, 2016).

A basic understanding of gang membership and affiliation is necessary in order to begin to think about how educators can prevent students from joining gangs. The research reviewed in this section aimed to work towards answering the following research question, *how can schools holistically discourage gang affiliation and/or violence within school aged students?* Present gang research often does not agree on a definition of gangs. Different researchers have different lenses, theories and motivations behind their work so it is beneficial to take a look at what some of the definitions being used are. Gangs also have a history that is often overlooked and unknown. By looking into this history, educators can begin to piece together how gangs were formed originally and how they are being formed and retained now. System racism also has a large impact on people of color's decision to join gangs. Reviewing and analyzing the various reasons someone might decide to join a gang or ways in which society pushes people to join gangs can help create the holistic view that drives the research question at hand.

Present Programs/Prevention

The focus of this Capstone is to create a toolkit for educators to use within schools to help discourage school aged youth from being affiliated with gangs and prevent possible membership. A key feature in this project is to ensure that any resource provided in the toolkit is holistic in nature. It is important that all areas of a student are taken into consideration, and instead of criminalizing gang membership and/or affiliation the goal is to provide resources and opportunities to these students to inherently and holistically eliminate the need to join a gang. This section will look at other programs and prevention tools that have previously been researched like project YES (Randell, Smith & Steinman, 2015), The Juvenile Intervention and Prevention Program (Koffman et al., 2009) and the Gang Resistance Education and Training Program (*Gangs in Schools*, 2019). The different research will be reviewed in this section and later will be analyzed in order to determine what has worked in the past and where there have been shortcomings. These findings will be used to create the Capstone project.

Overview of Prevention and Intervention Programs

There has been research done on the topic of gangs since the early 1990s and something that most research has in common is that they make recommendations for prevention and intervention of gangs. Researchers have stated that gang members often exhibit similar antisocial behaviors and some that specifically affect how they navigate their school life. Some of these behaviors are fighting, hyperactivity, inattention, oppositional behavior and involvement in delinquent activities (Buckle & Walsh, 2013). Young gang members are also at a higher risk for drug use, they are more likely to perpetrate crimes, demonstrate lower social problem solving skills and have higher levels

of hopelessness about their future (Buckle & Walsh, 2013). Gang research also generally recommends that intervention start early, ideally middle school, and should address multiple risk factors like the ones mentioned above. Estrada et al. (2016) recommends that gang intervention start as early as elementary school so students that are assumed to be at high risk for joining a gang can be given resources before they join a gang, drop out of school or get pushed out of the school system. Below are several specific gang prevention/intervention programs that have been researched. Each section will provide a brief overview of the program and the results that the researchers found.

Positive Youth Development and Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility Models

Researchers Buckle and Walsh (2013) identified two gang prevention and intervention models that they believe will help young students learn skills that are necessary for avoiding gang affiliation and membership. They believe that it is important to use protective factors as a part of a prevention strategy. These protective factors are things like increasing resiliency, strong family involvement, resource development in social and physical contexts (like job training, extracurricular activities and team sports) as well as protection from bullying, creating a sense of connectedness to school and learning a sense of personal and social responsibility (Buckle & Walsh, 2013). The Positive Youth Development (PYD) and the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) models are two models that Buckle and Walsh (2013) believe should be used within the gang prevention and intervention programs.

The core constructs in a PYD program includes the promotion of bonding, resilience, and social/emotional/cognitive/behavioral/moral competence (Buckle & Walsh, 2013). The other model, the TPSR model, works on strengthening five core life

skills. Programs that use this model should work on increasing respect and self control, effort and participation, self direction, caring and leadership, and transfer of skills outside the program (Buckle & Walsh, 2013). By focusing on these constructs, the researchers believe that students will better be able to navigate school and community life and therefore will be put at less risk of joining a gang.

Juvenile Intervention and Prevention Program

Koffman et al. (2009) set out to study the effects of the Juvenile Intervention and Prevention Program (JIPP) on young males in the Los Angeles, California area who were identified as either being a gang member or at high risk of becoming a gang member. This program is considered by the researchers to be a comprehensive whole child program that works to address various factors in the lives of young males in a community that is marked by personal and collective trauma (Koffman et al., 2009). These risk factors are all in the areas of self, school, family and the community. The program was created and staffed by the Los Angeles Unified School District, Local District 4, Los Angeles Police Department, Rampart Division, Families in Schools and California State University Los Angeles (Koffman et al., 2009).

The students that participated in this study were referred by deans/school administration, counselors, attendance review boards, the Los Angeles city attorney's office and the California Department of Children and Family Services (Koffman et al., 2009). JIPP is an eighteen week program that targets four areas - biobehavioral, psychosocial-emotional, academic and family system support (Koffman et al., 2009). The training program is taught by police officers from the Los Angeles Police Department, and the eighteen weeks are broken down into three, six week sections. The first six weeks

focus on “resistance”. This is where the students will focus on increasing their biobehavioral skills through a physical training program (Koffman et al., 2009). After the first six weeks, the students then move on to the next six week chunk that focuses on “empowerment”. Here the students are broken into middle school and high school groups and they learn things like public speaking, job interviewing, increasing their trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship (Koffman et al., 2009). The last six weeks focuses on “leadership”. This section of the program includes enrichment classes on leadership, job interviewing and public speaking and even elects some students to be peer mentors (Koffman et al., 2009).

Throughout the first twelve weeks of the program, the students are also provided with academic interventions in English and math (Koffman et al., 2009). Students participating in the program are also expected to wear a uniform. In the first six weeks, students are expected to wear gray sweatpants, a white t-shirt with their last name on the front and a gray sweatshirt. During the next six weeks, students are expected to dress in business casual attire (Koffman et al., 2009). The parents of the participants are also involved in the program. They are required to participate in an eighteen week psychoeducational parenting class (Koffman et al., 2009).

The results of this program showed a decrease in mild mood disturbances, borderline clinical depression, and moderate depression (Koffman et al, 2009). Behavioral suspension rates decreased and the number of suspension days dropped by 50% (Koffman et al., 2009). There was also an increase in test scores in the areas of English and math (Koffman et al., 2009). In general, this study can tell educators that highly intensive intervention programs like this one, have the ability to remove some of

the risk factors that increase the likelihood of youth deciding to join a gang and perhaps even dissociate themselves from gang activity. A program similar to JIPP will be discussed in the next section.

Gang Resistance Education and Training

The National Gang Center (2019) referenced the gang prevention program called Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT). This is a widely referenced program that is often referenced in gang literature. Similar to JIPP, GREAT is taught by local police officers in the community that they directly serve. GREAT is a summer program that targets fourth through seventh grade students (National Gang Center, 2019). This program works to build strong bonds with students and communities and works to target youth before the prime age of risk behaviors and gang affiliation (National Gang Center, 2019). The program does this by using an officer-instructed curriculum that addresses several components like crime, violence, drug use, identifying norms surrounding gangs, roles of students in their communities, communication and decision making skills to name a few. GREAT also has a family component that aims to strengthen the resiliency of families that are at high risk to gang involvement (National Gang Center, 2019). This gang prevention program is used around the United States and has been around since 1991.

Project YES

Unlike the two previous programs mentioned in this section, Project YES (Youth Empowerment Success) is an after school gang prevention program that started at Thurgood Marshall Middle School in Lynn, Massachusetts and is run by school staff (Randell et al., 2015). Together the program was created by representatives from the city

government, the public schools, community organizations and the North Shore Community College (Randell et al., 2015).

The program identified students who had low academic achievement, delinquency, negative peer relationships and known association with gang members (Koffman et al., 2015). During the program, students met twice per week during the school year and three times per week during a six week summer session (Randell et al., 2015). Project YES focuses on multiple areas like academic support, life skills, socioemotional learning, communication skills, career development and recreational/fitness activities (Randell et al., 2015).

Randell et al. (2015) took this group of students at Thurgood Marshall Middle School and tracked their progress throughout the process. The results of the study showed that parents reported their students were spending more time on their homework, became more involved in school activities and parents also reported higher levels of empowerment in their children (Randell et al., 2015). The study defined empowerment as having high grades, increased attendance and improved behavior (Randell et al., 2015). Parents also reported that they believed their children had more empathy by the end of the program (Randell et al., 2015).

Multiculturalism

Clark and Jenkins (1993) state in their research that society needs to recognize and accept that problems related to gang violence are connected to institutional racism and that in order for these issues to be solved every citizen must participate in the solution. Together students, parents, educators and the general public as well as businesses and the government need to actively and collectively pursue broad

multicultural approaches to get rid of gang violence and systemic racism (Clark & Jenkins, 1993). Unlike the other programs and interventions discussed above, Clark and Jenkins (1993) take a much different approach to gang prevention. Together they have created recommendations for communities and educators that they believe will help with the problem of both institutionalized racism and gang violence, because to them these two work together cohesively. Their first recommendation is the idea of multicultural community policing. They define multiculturalism as “the process of recognizing, respecting and valuing cultures other than one’s own, stressing appreciation for the impact of difference, especially across races and ethnicities” (Clark & Jenkins, 1993, p. 17). To properly implement multicultural community policing, both the police and the citizens must have a real understanding of every culture that is involved within the community (Clark & Jenkins, 1993). The policing must also be reflective of the community in which it serves and the attitudes of the police officers need to reflect the attitudes and values of the community (Clark & Jenkins, 1993). Policing power would be shared by both the police and the citizens of the neighborhood. According to Clark and Jenkins (1993), this would in turn reduce the fear of criminality and politically and socially empower the citizens of the community who would otherwise be powerless. Clark and Jenkins (1993) believe that by incorporating multicultural community policing, all forms of violence in society will be reduced, even forms of violence that are inclusive of institutional racism and gangs/crime. The researchers also believe that schools, especially those that already use a form of policing, should use multicultural community policing (Clark & Jenkins, 1993).

Moving into a more educational based recommendation by Clark and Jenkins (1993), they believe that another way to address issues of violence, gang related and other forms, within schools is to incorporate multicultural education. They believe that professional development initiatives that include goals to better equip all school staff in their interpersonal and curriculum development are necessary (Clark & Jenkins, 1993). Specifically, when it comes to curricula development, Clark and Jenkins (1993) strongly believe that all staff need opportunities to learn how to develop multicultural curricula content. This means they would need to revise content that is focused on the monoculture and move towards content that represents all students (Clark & Jenkins, 1993). Beyond just creating curricula, the researchers state that there needs to be professional development that is aimed at helping educators learn strategies that help them implement their curricula (Clark & Jenkins, 1993). It is not enough to simply learn how to create this type of content, it is important to also learn how to use it within the classroom. More specifically, the curriculum should address different learning styles, teachers should vary their instructional materials and instructional models and activities (Clark & Jenkins, 1993). Educators should also give up teaching for mastery and should focus on being the facilitators of the process of learning (Clark & Jenkins, 1993).

Through the use of multicultural community policing and multicultural education, major stakeholders in the lives of students who are gang members or who are at high risk of being affiliated with a gang can create a community where high risks are decreased. Clark and Jenkins (1993) view gang violence as more of a systemic issue than previous program creators and believe a focus on multiculturalism is a step in the right direction.

This Capstone project aims to answer the question, *how can schools holistically discourage gang affiliation and/or violence within school aged students?* After gathering the necessary resources to work towards answering this question, a toolkit of resources will be created for educators to use within their schools to help prevent and intervene where deemed necessary. Present gang research offers many recommendations for such programs and resources, and some research studies the outcomes of programs that have already been put in place. By looking at several different prevention and intervention programs and their results, the present project can analyze what has worked and what has not. It can also be helpful to discuss a variety of programs and interventions to eventually create one that takes bits and pieces from each that have been successful. As a final step in attempting to understand how to discourage young students from being affiliated or joining gangs, it is necessary to learn how being a gang member affects individuals. The next section will look at how gang membership has affected young adults into adulthood to work on creating a holistic view of gang members.

Outcomes of Gang Membership (Where Are They Now)

In order to properly understand all aspects of gang membership, it is crucial to understand how gang affiliation and membership affects youth as they transition into young adults and beyond. This section seeks to explore and understand ways in which adolescents and school aged youth who are in gangs are affected later in life. In general, there are many adverse effects of being a gang member. Some of these include poor mental health (Bacak, DeWitt & Reid, 2021), higher odds of arrest, alcohol abuse, anxiety, depression, dropping out of high school, and poor general health (Connolly & Jackson 2019). There is not a significant amount of present research on this topic,

however the research that has been done is crucial to include in the literature review. These implications will allow for a better understanding of how to holistically provide youth with other resources for success and belonging in both school and their community.

Physical Health

After examining the present gang research, it is evident that gang members or individuals who are affiliated with gangs are exposed to numerous risk factors throughout their adolescent years. Young gang members are also exposed to more violence than their non-gang member peers. When an adolescent is exposed to consistent violent offending, like that of a gang member, a study conducted by Bacak et al. (2021) predicted that chronic health disease, especially diabetes, was more likely to be found in young adults aged 24-32. This poor health prediction connected to violence can also be traced back to youth involvement in serious fighting. If an adolescent is chronically involved in serious fighting and other related behaviors, it is linked with an increased regularity of minor health problems such as headaches, cough and insomnia (Bacak et al., 2021).

Interestingly, it has been noted throughout gang research that youth choose to join gangs over safety concerns, as one reason out of many. However, one consequence of joining gangs is victimization, which would in turn create more safety concerns for youth. Despite this irony, the consequences of victimization create a range of health conditions like hypertension, depression, injuries and poor self-rated health (Bacak et al., 2021). Overall, gang membership has the potential to create long-term negative physical health outcomes in adulthood. The next section covers research that has been done on the impact of gang life on mental health.

Mental Health

According to Bacak et al. (2021), there are scholars in the criminology and public health sectors that have determined that gang membership and mental health are two phenomena that are intertwined. The research reviewed in the previous sections outline major risk factors and stressors that youth gang members and affiliates are exposed to from a young age. It is no surprise that these factors and stressors create health problems in adulthood. In a study conducted by Drury and DeLisi (2011), they mentioned that 25% of state prisoners are gang members. Incarceration is also linked to poor mental health. Bacak et al. (2021) noted in their research that incarceration can be connected to psychological stressors such as dehumanization, deprivation and danger.

Another study found that joining a gang can be linked to escalate symptoms of depression and place an individual at a higher risk of suicide (Bacak et al., 2021). Joining a gang has also been connected to increased indicators of anxiety, hostility and paranoid ideation (Bacak et al., 2021). However, there was a study that Bacak et al. (2021) referenced in their research that determined gang members were actually just as likely to meet the criteria to be diagnosed with major depression and generalized anxiety disorder in the late twenties and early thirties as non gang members. These several studies seem to contradict themselves but may have more to do with where these individuals lived, what their experiences were and how they may have been genetically predisposed. As mentioned in the previous section, being exposed to violence plays a major role in both mental and physical outcomes for gang members. Connolly and Jackson (2019) stated within their research that being consistently involved in violence, whether a person is a victim or the perpetrator, can be linked to psychological distress, emotional trauma and

an increased wear and tear on an individual due to chronic stress. Beyond mental and physical health, gang membership and affiliation has the potential to affect an individual both educationally and occupationally later in life.

Education and Occupation

Another area in which gang members and gang affiliates are affected is their educational and occupational lives. In a study done of approximately 228 male gang members, it was found that $\frac{2}{3}$ did not have their high school diploma or their general equivalency diploma (GED) (Gilman et al., 2014). More generally, if an adolescent is in a gang, they are half as likely to graduate high school in comparison to non-gang members (Gilman et al., 2014). One may think that gang membership affecting graduation rates is more likely to occur when an individual has been in a gang for a long period of time, however it has been shown that even if an adolescent is in a gang for just one year, they have a reduced likelihood of graduation high school or moving on to earn a four year degree (Connolly & Jackson, 2019). Gang life also negatively impacts employment rates, showing that of the same 228 male gang members mentioned previously, less than 32% were employed in a traditional sense (Gilman et al., 2014). In the same group of young male gang members, over 63% had been incarcerated (Gilman et al., 2014). Beyond education and employment rates, gang members are also put at a higher risk for early pregnancy and teenage parenthood (Gilman et al., 2014). While the outcome for many gang members does not seem to be positive, educators can take the information from gang research and apply it to prevention and intervention programs. The next section will cover some recommendations for programs by the researchers discussed in this section.

Recommendations Based on Gang Outcomes

The researchers mentioned in this section briefly mentioned some recommendations for future programs for gang prevention and intervention. This may be helpful when thinking about what to include in the project portion of this Capstone. Bacak et al. (2021) mentioned several negative outcomes on mental health that gang membership and affiliation can have on an individual. The researchers suggested that future interventions include psychological resources for gang members, in hopes that they learn to better deal with the stressors that they encounter in gang life (Bacak et al., 2021). Alongside these resources for mental health, Connolly and Jackson (2019) mentioned that programs could also provide resources specifically for depression and anxiety. They also suggested that adolescent gang members be provided with redirection to other, more positive activities (Connolly & Jackson, 2019). This would in turn improve adolescent gang members with their long-term health and well-being (Connolly & Jackson, 2019).

Connolly and Jackson (2019) also mentioned the idea of Functional Family Therapy related to gangs (FFT-G). They believe that incorporating this form of therapy with youth gang members and their families would reduce key correlates of gang involvement (Connolly & Jackson, 2019). Some of these correlates that could be reduced are delinquency, drug use and alcohol use (Connolly & Jackson, 2019). One overarching recommendation, but one that was specifically suggested by Connolly and Jackson (2019) was that prevention programs should start before the teenage years, specifically elementary age. Throughout gang research, it has been noted that the early adolescents can be identified as higher risk for gang membership and by providing them with tools and prevention, they are less likely to become wrapped up in the snowball effects of gang life.

This section of the literature review focused on the outcomes of gang membership, which worked towards answering the essential question, *how can schools holistically discourage gang affiliation and/or violence within school aged students?* Gangs have been around for a long time, allowing researchers to follow gang members throughout their life to determine how different aspects of their life are affected by this specific life choice. This Capstone project wants to ensure that individuals who choose to join gangs are understood as a whole person, from a holistic perspective. Because research has shown that gang membership and affiliation tends to have negative effects on an individual, it is important to analyze those effects in order to better understand the people that are gang members. This section of the literature review has demonstrated that gang membership negatively impacts the physical and mental health as well as the educational and occupational paths of those who choose to join. This information can be used to create a prevention and intervention program that targets all essential areas being affected.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to explore the question, *how can schools holistically discourage gang affiliation and/or violence within school aged students?* In this exploration, how gangs perform in schools was established. It was determined that few students directly identify as a gang member, but stakeholders within schools like teachers, students, administrators and families feel that in specific locations gang affiliation and membership within a school is prominent. The research also found that gang membership affects how students move throughout a school community, and this should be noted by everyone involved in a school setting. Throughout the review of

literature on gangs, it was found that not one researcher is able to agree upon a definition of what a gang is. This can be caused by various factors such as background, motivation, funding and research theories being used in a study. The exploration also brought attention to why individuals decide to join gangs. The research pointed to system racism dating back to the 1950s and exposure to negative stressors as reasons for joining a gang. The need to find success and seeking belonging were also reasons found within the research as to why someone would choose the path of gang membership. The literature review also looked at prevention and intervention programs that currently exist, and how they have impacted those involved. Lastly, literature on how gang membership affects the adulthood of youth who join gangs was explored. It was determined through the present literature that overall, gang membership has a negative impact in the areas of physical and mental health as well as educational occupational life. The knowledge gained in this literature review was used in the next chapter. The following chapter describes a plan to create a toolkit of resources for educators looking to prevent school aged students from joining or being affiliated with a gang.

CHAPTER 3

Project Description

Overview of Project

Chapter three uses the learning from the previous literature review to develop a project that can be used by educators who work closely with students involved in gangs. The literature review provided necessary background information about the research question, *how can schools holistically discourage gang affiliation and/or violence within school aged students?* The research provides information on how gangs perform in schools and how they affect students' experiences within a school community. It also provides information on various definitions of gangs and gives a brief discussion on why different researchers may use different definitions. Why young people choose to join gangs and who joins gangs is addressed as well. This Capstone project focuses on prevention and intervention tools and the previous literature also provides information on programs that are already in place within various communities. Lastly, a discussion on how gang membership affects people into young adulthood was also reviewed.

The following chapter reviews the project description, the timeline, setting and audience as well as the rationale for the project. A brief description of the project will provide basic information on what the project will consist of and how it can be implemented. The timeline and setting will be laid out to aid in the understanding of the project and to give clear direction on where and when the project will take place. The audience will be reviewed to solidify to the reader who the project is intended for and how it can be best implemented and the research discussed in the previous chapter will be used in the rationale of the project.

Project Description

As previously mentioned, this project is intended to inform educators in a variety of settings to understand more about students who are involved in gangs in order to best create holistic preventions, interventions or programs within their schools to discourage young students from joining or being involved in gangs. The design includes an initial professional development that is followed up with an at-home, self paced professional development for educators to engage with at their own pace. After a school community goes through the first and second professional development sessions, the school as a community of educators will come back together for a third professional development to discuss and create their own plan of action to holistically discourage gang affiliation and/or violence within their school.

The initial professional development involves all stakeholders within a school community. Educators such as school administrators, teachers, counselors, educational assistants, teacher assistants, paraprofessionals and any other educator or school staff member that works closely with students should attend. During this session, these educators will gain a basic understanding of what gangs are, why students decide to join gangs, and how gang membership and affiliation affects a student within a school community. Educators will also have the opportunity to discuss with each other how they see gangs affecting their students and the school community. It will also be important to discuss and address any biases that educators may bring to the table when it comes to students who are gang members or who are perceived to be gang members. There will also be an initial opportunity for the group of educators to begin to think about how they

can disrupt gang membership and affiliation within their school community using the baseline information they will have received at the training.

The next step of the project is the second professional development session. This will provide the educators who took part in the initial session to dig into some more information on gangs and students who are a part of a gang or who are affiliated with a gang. The session will talk more about trainings that have been put in place already and the success rate of those programs. It will discuss recommendations by gang researchers for future programs and interventions to provide more information on what a school may want to include in their community. This professional development session will also include some thought provoking questions for the educators to think and write about to help them work through potential biases that are standing in the way of holistically supporting all students, especially those affiliated with gangs, in their school. This second professional development session is an at-home, self paced session. Educators will interact with the material on their own, and the school community will decide together a timeline for the completion.

The last session of the professional development will be a time and space for the school community to regroup after completing the first session and all staff members have looked through and worked with the materials in the second session. During this time, the staff will be able to discuss their experience working through the second session and perhaps new information they gained while interacting with the resources. Together they will then be able to collaborate with one another and create a plan of action for their school community. This allows a school to create a prevention and/or intervention program that fits their specific student body and community. This aids in the central idea

of this project which is to ensure that the students being focused on are looked at holistically. As stated in chapter one, these students do not need saving from their affiliation with gangs, but instead deserve to have tools, systems and opportunities that will allow them to make different choices.

The design of this project is backed up by a few recommendations based on adult learning theories. First, Malcolm S. Knowles (1992) created specific theories on giving presentations to adult learners. He states that when creating a presentation, it is important to focus on and build upon the backgrounds, needs and interests of the group being presented to (Knowles, 1992). This is initially embedded into the project by creating a first professional development session that targets schools and educational communities that believe they have a portion of their student body that would benefit from gang prevention and intervention tools. The information being presented at the first session will give educators the opportunity to learn more about a topic that directly impacts their school, and more specifically their students. Knowles (1992) also states within his theory on adult learning that the learners must be active participants in the process of inquiry. This project design follows this recommendation by giving educators the chance to work through the second professional development session on their own as well as work together to create a school-wide plan after the first and second sessions. The third session also appeals to Knowles' (1992) idea that when learners are given the space to take initiative and perceive the learning in the context of their own personal situations, the learners are better able to internalize and retain the information provided. By allowing educators to discuss their concerns with one another and begin to brainstorm during the first session, while also providing them with the space to create a plan that works for

them instead of using a prescribed program, this project heeds this advice from Knowles (1992) theory on adult education.

Another theory that was used while creating the design of this project is the self-directed learning theory that first became popularized by Alan Tough (“Adult Learning Theories and Principles”, 2020). The second portion of this project design involves educators looking over materials embedded into the second session of the professional development to become more familiar with gangs and how they show up in school and affect the lives of students. This session will also allow educators to spend time thinking about what they as individuals bring to the table and what biases may be contributing to how they show up within their school community. Having this time that is self-directed lets the adult learner in this situation take initiative of their learning, which is backed up by self-directed learning theory (“Adult Learning Theories and Principles”, 2020). The last portion of the project design that involves the educators coming together to create their own plan of action appeals to this theory as well.

This Capstone project involves a series of professional developments that will bring educators together to learn more about gangs and students who are involved in them. It also includes a second professional development that is an at-home, self-paced professional development session for these educators to engage with and to further their understanding of gangs and to begin to think about how they can implement a holistic approach to discouraging students in their school community from joining gangs. Lastly, there will be a third professional development session that will be an opportunity for these educators to regroup and create and plan a program or plan of action to use within their school to help discourage and prevent students from joining gangs. The design of

this project is backed up by adult learning theories created by Knowles (1992) and Alan Tough (“Adult Learning Theories and Principles”, 2020). The next section will discuss the intended audience of the Capstone project.

Setting and Audience

The intended audience of this project targets a specific community of educators who work closely with students involved in gangs. This project will best serve a school community that has a large student body that is involved in gangs or a school community that feels the presence of gang affiliation, membership or violence is affecting the community and the students within it. When the project was being created, the setting and audience was initially intended for school communities within the Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minnesota area, but can certainly be implemented throughout Minnesota as well as other school communities situated around the United States. To allow this to be truly holistic, it is ultimately up to the school and the educators within the school to determine if this project fits the needs of both the educators and the students.

Timeline

This Capstone project will be completed and ready to be implemented by the Spring of 2022. Once completed, the project will involve three concrete training and professional development sessions. One will occur at the beginning and will take between two and three hours to complete. The second session will function as a self-paced professional development where the educators will read, listen and watch several texts and sources to learn more about gangs. Educators will also spend time during this session analyzing and reflecting who they are, their implicit biases and how those may affect their students. The school and its educators will need to decide as a team how long they

need to properly look over the toolkit. This can take anywhere from one month to six months depending on the needs of the educators. The third session of the professional development will take place in person and would last approximately 2-3 hours. At this session, educators will take the information they have gathered from the first and second sessions to determine and create their own plan of action in regards to how they would like to prevent and possibly intervene in the joining and/or being affiliated with gangs among their student body. A school may decide to find more time and space to dedicate to this portion. This session would also be the last portion of the project.

Assessment

To initially assess the training being provided, educators will be asked to complete a survey. The information will help the trainer to understand thoughts and feelings that the educators had throughout the initial training and perhaps some questions they may still have that were not answered. There will also be a survey that the educators will be asked to fill out at the end of the third professional development. This will be similar to the one they will answer after the initial training and will include a self-reflection as well. Lastly, after the school community gathers to create their own plan of holistic intervention, a survey will be given to all stakeholders in the school community one year after the plan was implemented. This will survey the opinions of the educators within the school community to determine the effects of the plan being implemented. This will allow educators to reflect on their practices over the last year and think about if their plan was effective and if any adjustments need to be made to their plan.

Summary

The end result of this project may seem daunting, but research has shown that students involved in gangs require specific interventions like a strong connection to a school community, finding success both in and out of school, and not becoming involved in high risk behaviors to name a few. It is impossible to find and create a one size fits all solution to students and youth joining gangs, as demonstrated in the knowledge provided in the present gang research. Therefore, it is imperative that however a community decides to create a prevention plan, it must be holistic. That is why this project aims to provide educators opportunities to expand their knowledge on gangs, think about how their biases and backgrounds are affecting all students but especially those who are at high risk of joining a gang or who have already joined a gang, and then use this knowledge to create a plan that is best fit for their students and their school communities.

The exploration of this project is discussed in chapter four.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection and Conclusion

Introduction

Chapters one through three sought to answer the question, *how can schools holistically discourage gang affiliation and/or violence within school aged students?*

Chapters one and two looked at personal and professional motivation and connection to the topic as well as current research on the subject. Chapter three described a project that intends to provide educators with basic information on gangs as well as time and space for educators to reflect on how they impact students who are at high risk of joining gangs or who already have become affiliated with gangs through a series of professional developments. Chapter four continued this process and looked into the effectiveness of the project, major takeaways and potential benefits to the profession.

Chapter four is broken down into several sections. The first section reflects on my personal learning through the researching, writing and learning that accompanied this project. Following the personal reflection, the next section referenced the literature that was reviewed in chapter two. Specific sources that strongly impacted the project were discussed. The next section of the chapter discussed possible implications of the project and how the results of the project may impact the educational profession. Following is the section that discusses possible limitations of the project. The last section of this chapter reviews future uses for the project.

Personal Reflection

My knowledge on gangs was fairly widespread prior to this Capstone process. As mentioned previously, there was high personal motivation for this research question. The

climate in Minneapolis, Minnesota in the year 2021, with its violence, political change, uprisings and protests have made an incredible impact on many communities. As an educator, I also experienced the educational system flip in order to continue providing students with opportunities to learn while also trying to survive a global pandemic. These moments allowed me time to reflect on how educators and the education system frequently fails students, specifically Black students and students of color. The connection between who gets pushed out of school and who joins gangs is interesting to analyze. Through the process of this project, I was able to look at these connections more closely and begin to think of ways that educators can holistically break down the barriers that so many students experience in this educational system.

The process of researching and creating this Capstone has reinforced my skills as both a researcher and a writer. Prior to the creation of this project, I had little experience with writing formal research papers. My undergraduate degree required one large research paper as a senior, similar to this paper but much smaller in scale. I was able to use my skills from that experience to research and write this Capstone. As an English Language Arts teacher, and someone who writes with ease, it was helpful to continue to grow as a professional writer. As a public school educator I do not have a need to write formal research papers, so having an opportunity to continue practicing these skills was useful.

As someone who considers themselves a lifelong learner, I enjoyed the opportunity to research and learn more on a topic that I am passionate about. Having a high interest in gangs, gang affiliation and how these things show up in schools allowed me to dig deep into the work, making the process and the product more meaningful. Also,

knowing that other educators will have the opportunity to learn and grow from this project fuels my desire to continue to learn and share my knowledge on this topic.

Most of the findings during this project were not unexpected. Because I showed up with a fair amount of background knowledge, most of what I knew was reinforced. However, this time with research and data.

Influential Literature Review Research

One of the more influential pieces of research for this project came from John Hagedorn (1998). His research on gangs was, in my opinion, holistic to its core. He spent time in Milwaukee, Wisconsin talking and getting to know gang members. The interviews he includes in his work show perspectives from gang members that are often left out of gang research. He spends time discussing the systemic reasons why individuals join gangs and points out how society has systematically disadvantaged people of color, especially the Black community. Despite his research being from the late nineties, it proves to be the most holistic in nature.

Also, research that offered suggestions for future gang prevention and intervention programs was highly influential to the creation of my project. Bacak et al. (2021) recommended in their research that programs focus on psychological and mental health resources. Mental health outcomes for gang members is often overlooked, but is an extremely negative outcome that can be addressed early on. Their ideas influenced the way in which I discuss the mental health of gang members or adolescents exposed to violence and trauma that is associated with gangs. Connolly and Jackson (2019) are also two researchers that make recommendations for mental health resources for gang

members or individuals at risk for joining gangs. Both sets of researchers influenced significant portions of the professional development that was created for this project.

Lastly, Clark and Jenkins (1993) are two researchers whose ideas were used in the creation of this project. Their research focused heavily on multiculturalism and how educators need to use multicultural education within their schools. They believe that systemic racism and gang affiliation coexist, and if systemic racism is not addressed, especially within the educational system, gang prevention cannot take place. Their ideas helped me to create a professional development for this project that would lead educators into self-reflection that would hopefully allow them to begin to dismantle some of their privilege and biases. This would then allow educators and school communities to create plans and systems that looked at students holistically and could potentially prevent young students from being pushed out of schools and forced into a choice, like joining a gang, that negatively impacts multiple facets of their life.

Implications of Project and Benefit to Profession

The hope is that this project starts educators on a journey that will dismantle implicit biases, misunderstandings, and systemic injustices that harm and disadvantage so many of our students. There needs to be a mindset shift that many educators hold. These students do not need to be saved, instead they need to be provided with basic educational resources and experiences that they are often not provided due to systemic problems within the education system. While one teacher cannot change the educational system, the change must start somewhere.

The hope is that this project will help educators have a broader understanding of what gangs are, who joins them and why, what factors put adolescents at high risk for

joining or being affiliated with a gang and what schools can do about this. The research I completed and the reflection that accompanied my research brought forth the idea that gang prevention and intervention is not one size fits all. School communities all have different needs based on location, school population, educator biases and training and many more things. So, with this project, it is my hope that educators and school communities can begin to think about how they can create a plan that works best for them and their students.

On a larger scale, implications for the future of the educational system are at stake. Perhaps with further research and the more that educators dismantle their biases, look at students holistically and continue to provide spaces where all students have access to educational resources and opportunities, the education system as a whole will change. The way in which students of color move through school currently does not allow them to access the same education as white students or non-students of color. As educators continue to work and change the system, one day students will not be pushed out of the classroom.

Limitations of the Project

The intention of the project is to provide educators opportunities to expand their knowledge on gangs, think about how their biases and backgrounds are affecting all students but especially those who are at high risk of joining a gang or who have already joined a gang, and then use this knowledge to create a plan that is best fit for their students and their school communities. Realistically, every educator that takes the professional development that was created for this project will come out with a changed mindset and some new ideas for how to better their school community. Unfortunately,

this cannot be a reality for everyone. This professional development may not resonate with some educators, and if all stakeholders are not on board with the plan that would be created as a result of the professional development, it likely will not be successful.

Another limitation of this project is that educators may begin to feel the need to save students from joining a gang. This is specifically addressed in professional development, but if a school community implements a plan, there may be an unintentional shift in how educators are engaging with the new knowledge and the newly created plan. White educators especially must be sure to frequently check in with themselves to be sure that they are not attempting to save these students from anything. This mindset can be extremely detrimental to students and may even have adverse effects.

Lastly, because schools are left to implement a plan or two that they create on their own, a possible limitation is that the school does not follow through with their implementations. Making large scale changes can be difficult, especially when educators have many things on their plates especially in a post-pandemic world. Therefore, a reality is that educators and school communities may fail at implementing a new plan. Hopefully, even if this does happen, the educators that engaged in the professional development can still use the new knowledge and make small changes to how they interact with students.

Future Project Use and Communication

This project is intended to be used with educational communities in or near Saint Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota. School communities that see a need to discuss gang violence and/or affiliation within their community would be a great fit for the series of

professional developments that this project has created. I intend to implement the professional development sessions with my current school community to start. As of right now, I would be the only individual who could present the first professional development sessions, but there may be a way for schools to only use the second and third session without requiring a presenter. However, I do not believe that would be as powerful as having an expert in the subject area facilitating all of the sessions.

Future research may want to look into how schools who have used this project have seen a difference in their student body. There is current research on the outcome of prevention and intervention programs, so perhaps someone could research a school's program and its outcomes after having completed the professional development sessions from this project.

Summary

This chapter reflected on the completion of a Capstone project as well as the ability to answer the research question, *how can schools holistically discourage gang affiliation and/or violence within school aged students?* I believe that this project plays a positive role in schools and educators beginning their journey to viewing students holistically and understanding how the education system plays a role in young adults choosing to join a gang. While there may be some limitations to the project, the possibilities of how this can impact school communities in the future are endless.

The creation of this Capstone project has taken a lot of time and effort, but the information gathered, analyzed, dissected and created has been powerful. I hope that the materials created through this project positively impacts students and ignites a journey

and mindset shift for educators. Being able to research a topic that I am passionate about and that is highly relevant has been an exciting journey.

REFERENCES

- Bačák, V., DeWitt, S. E., & Reid, S. E. (2021). Gang membership and mental health during the transition to adulthood. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, doi:10.1007/s10940-021-09502-z
- Buckle, M. E., & Walsh, D. S. (2013). Teaching responsibility to gang-affiliated youths. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 84(2), 53-58.
- Clark, C., & Jenkins, M. (1993). *Multiculturalism as a policy for disarming gang violence in communities at large and in schools*.
- Connolly, E. J., & Jackson, D. B. (2019). Adolescent gang membership and adverse behavioral, mental health, and physical health outcomes in young adulthood: A within family analysis. *Sage Journals*, (11).
- Donlin, M., & Washington Office of Superintendent of, Public Instruction. (2019). *Update: Gangs in schools task force. report to the legislature*. (). Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.
- Drury, A. J., & DeLisi, M. (2011). Gangkill: An exploratory empirical assessment of gang membership, homicide offending, and prison misconduct. *Crime & Delinquency*, 57(1), 130-146.
- Estrada, J. N., Jr., Gilreath, T. D., Astor, R. A., & Benbenishty, R. (2014). Gang membership, school violence, and the mediating effects of risk and protective behaviors in california high schools. *Journal of School Violence*, 13(2), 228-251.

- Estrada, J. N., Jr., Gilreath, T. D., Astor, R. A., & Benbenishty, R. (2016). A statewide study of gang membership in California secondary schools. *Youth & Society, 48*(5), 720-736.
- Freng, A., & Taylor, T. J. (2016). Race and ethnicity: What are their roles in gang membership? *Changing course: Preventing gang membership* (pp. 134). CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Garot, R. (2010). *Who you claim: Performing gang identity in school and on the streets*. New York City, NY: New York University Press.
- Gass, K. M., & Laughter, J. C. (2015). "Can I make any difference?" gang affiliation, the school-to-prison pipeline, and implications for teachers. *Journal of Negro Education, 84*(3), 333-347.
- Gebo, E., & Sullivan, C. J. (2013). A statewide comparison of gang and non-gang youth in public high schools. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*.
- Gilman, A. B., Hill, K. G., & Hawkins, J. D. (2014). Long-term consequences of adolescent gang membership for adult functioning. *American Journal of Public Health, 104*(5), 938-945. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2013.301821
- Hagedorn, J. M. (1998). *People and folks: Gangs, crime and the underclass in a rustbelt city* (Second ed.). Chicago, IL: Lake View Press.
- Knowles, Malcolm S. "Applying Principles of Adult Learning in Conference Presentations." *Adult Learning (Washington, D.C.)*, vol. 4, no. 1, SAGE Publications, 1992, pp. 11–14, doi:10.1177/104515959200400105.
- Koffman, S., Ray, A., Berg, S., Covington, L., Albarran, N. M., & Vasquez, M. (2009). Impact of a comprehensive whole child intervention and prevention

program among youths at risk of gang involvement and other forms of delinquency. *Children & Schools*, 31(4), 239-245.

Lenzi, M., Sharkey, J. D., Wroblewski, A., Furlong, M. J., & Santinello, M. (2018).

Protecting youth from gang membership: Individual and school-level emotional competence. *Journal of Community Psychology*.

National Gang Center, (. & US Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and

Delinquency Prevention,(OJJDP). (2019). *Responding to gangs in schools: A collaborative approach to school safety*. ().Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Randell, S. T., Smith, A. E., & Steinman, B. A. (2015). Creating opportunities for

mutual affiliation: Gang prevention and relational-cultural theory in project YES. *Afterschool Matters*, (22), 13-23.

Sepic, M. (2021). A year after George Floyd's death, plans for Minneapolis police

reform. *NPR*. Retrieved August 25th, 2021, from

<https://www.npr.org/2021/05/25/1000298293/a-year-after-george-floyds-death-plans-for-minneapolis-police-reform-have-soften>

Shoho, A. R. (1996). *The alienation of rural middle school students: Implications*

for gang membership.

Trump, K. S., & Cleveland State Univ., OH. Urban Child Research Center. (1993).

Youth gangs and schools: The need for intervention and prevention strategies. occasional paper #1.

Watkins, A. M., & Melde, C. (2016). Bad medicine: The relationship between gang

membership, depression, self-esteem, and suicidal behavior. *Sage Journals*, (8).

Western Governors University. (2020, October 20). *Adult learning theories and*

principles. Western Governors University.

<https://www.wgu.edu/blog/adult-learning-theories-principles2004.html>.

Williams, B. (n.d.). *MPD offers theories behind crime spikes in 2020*. MPR News.

<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2021/01/21/mpd-offers-theories-behind-staggering-increases-in-gun-violence-and-carjackings>.