

**New Jersey Senate  
Law and Public Safety and Veterans' Affairs Committee  
Hearing on Youth Violence Prevention  
Testimony of Craig Levine, New Jersey Institute for Social Justice  
November 20, 2006**

Good morning. My name is Craig Levine and I am the Senior Counsel and Policy Director at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice. I want to thank Chairman Girgenti and members of the Committee for the opportunity to participate in this important discussion. We have been asked to address what research has shown to be promising strategies for preventing youth violence, particularly violence that is gang-related.

The New Jersey Institute for Social Justice is an urban research and advocacy organization based in Newark, New Jersey, which focuses on addressing systemic barriers that prevent urban residents and areas from reaching their potential. We pursue this goal through a variety of approaches including research and writing, model program development, consulting to government, and advocacy. We have undertaken a body of work involving New Jersey's troubled youth and families, including contributing both statewide and in Essex County to the Juvenile Justice Commission's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative ("JDAI," which aims to reduce pretrial juvenile detention, consistent with public safety and court appearance) and serving, as consultant to the State, as a principal author of the child welfare reform plan required by the federal court settlement (a plan that calls for greater programmatic partnership among the child welfare, child behavioral health and juvenile justice systems). The Institute has another body of work involving prisoner reentry, in which context we have begun investigating the impact of gang membership and activity on reentry policy and planning.

The challenges of preventing youth violence and gang activity have received significant attention in recent months. Empirical understanding, however, not only of effective policy and program responses but also of the scope and scale of the problem itself, is limited. While we will address some of what we do know, we would respectfully submit that the Committee might consider approaches to obtaining more information, so scarce public resources can be allocated strategically and cost-effectively, and so the law of unintended consequences does not undermine efforts to make things better.

#### Promising Strategies

Turning first to the existing data: regrettably, it is relatively limited. From the youth violence prevention and reduction programs that are evidence-based and have been rigorously evaluated, two key themes underlying success emerge: (1) the application of comprehensive community-wide strategies and, within this framework, (2) the promotion of family engagement.

An example of such a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder strategy is the US Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP) Comprehensive Community-Wide Approach to Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression<sup>1</sup>, which has demonstrated early success in reducing gang-related arrests. The Approach encompasses five core strategies: (1) community mobilization (the involvement of local citizens, formerly gang-affiliated youth, and community groups and agencies); (2) provision of opportunities (education, training, and employment programs targeted at gang-involved youth); (3) social intervention (youth-serving agencies, schools, grassroots groups, faith-based organizations,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.popcenter.org/Library/ConferencePapers2006/ErrikaJonesAnalyzingGangs.ppt#1>

police, and other criminal justice organizations reaching out and acting as links between gang-involved youth and their families and the mainstream world and necessary services); (4) suppression (formal and informal social control procedures, including close supervision or monitoring of gang youth by agencies of the criminal justice system and also by community-based agencies, schools, and grassroots groups); and (5) organizational change and development (development and implementation of policies and procedures that result in the most effective use of resources within and across agencies).

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) sponsored an evaluation of the model's application over a four-year period in Mesa, Arizona, a community with a history of significant gang-related youth violence.<sup>2</sup> The majority of the 258 participating youth were gang members on probation but were not violent offenders. At the heart of the effort was a community-wide, multi-stakeholder collaboration among the police department – the lead agency – and the city's probation department, school district, social service agencies, faith-based and community organizations, and the city council. The program emphasized the provision of 'social-intervention' services, including individual and family counseling, group discussions (including family members), referrals to a variety of community agencies, and surveillance, supervision, and monitoring. In a multivariate, statistically controlled comparison of participating with comparison youth (who received no program services), over the four-year period the participating youth were arrested 18% less than the comparison youth. The researchers attributed the project's relative success to three interrelated factors: (1) institutional collaboration involving a diverse range of stakeholders, including law enforcement, school administrators and teachers, social service agencies, community organizations, parent groups, and local government (the same approach that has proved effective in the JDAI context); (2) the program's social-intervention services (e.g., individual or family counseling and group discussion) – whether provided by probation officers, case managers, or outreach youth workers; and (3) the targeting of moderately delinquent, non-violent, at-risk youth.

A common national model of a pure prevention approach is the Bureau of Justice Assistance's (BJA) Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) Program.<sup>3</sup> The G.R.E.A.T. Program is a school-based, law enforcement officer-instructed classroom curriculum intended as an immunization against delinquency, youth violence, and gang membership. The G.R.E.A.T. curriculum focuses on providing life skills to students to help them avoid delinquent behavior and violent responses to problems. The Program consists of four discrete, age-specific modules: a 13-week middle school curriculum, an elementary school curriculum, a summer program, and family training. Five regional training centers provide training to law enforcement officers to teach the G.R.E.A.T. curriculum in elementary and middle schools across the country.

There have been few rigorous evaluations of pure prevention approaches. One of the most thorough, an NIJ-sponsored 5-year longitudinal evaluation<sup>4</sup>, found that the G.R.E.A.T. Program has modest positive effects on adolescents' attitudes and delinquency risk factors, but no effects on their involvement in gangs or actual delinquent behaviors. The evaluation

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<sup>2</sup> "Evaluation of the Mesa Gang Intervention Program," Irving A. Spergel, Kwai Ming Wa, Rolando Villarreal Sosa, University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration, 2005, <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/209187.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.great-online.org/>

<sup>4</sup> "Evaluating G.R.E.A.T.: A School-Based Gang Prevention Program," Dr. Finn Aage Ebbesen, Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Missouri-St. Louis, 2004, <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/198604.pdf>

revealed that the Program was able to affect several risk factors associated with delinquency and gang membership (including peer group affiliations and attitudes about gangs, law enforcement, and risk-seeking behaviors). The researchers attributed this success to the Program's "focus on and encouragement of pro-social activities that lead youth away from involvement with delinquent peers and toward involvement with peers who exhibit more socially acceptable behavior." In doing so, G.R.E.A.T. accomplished two of the three stated program objectives: more favorable attitudes from students toward the police and greater awareness of the consequences of gang involvement as indicated by more negative attitudes from students about gangs. However, despite this success in addressing risk factors, the third, and most critical objective – reducing gang membership and delinquent behavior – was not met.

Another approach was implemented in the Little Village neighborhood of Chicago, a low-income and working-class community that is approximately 90 percent Mexican-American.<sup>5</sup> Called the Gang Violence Reduction Program, it was administered by the Chicago Police Department. The program targeted mainly older members (ages 17 to 24) of two of the area's most violent Hispanic gangs, the Latin Kings and the Two Six. The program targeted and provided services to youth involved with these two gangs, rather than to the gangs as groups. These two gangs accounted for about 70 percent of the serious gang violence in the Little Village community.

The Gang Violence Reduction Program consisted mainly of two coordinated strategies: (1) targeted control of violent or potentially violent youth gang offenders in the form of increased supervision and suppression by the probation department and police, and (2) provision of a wide range of social services and opportunities for targeted youth to encourage their transition to legitimate behavior through education, jobs, job training, family support, and brief counseling. The program was staffed by tactical police officers, probation officers, community youth workers from the target neighborhood, and workers in Neighbors Against Gang Violence, a community organization established to support the project. This organization included representatives from local churches, a job placement agency, youth service agencies, the local alderman's office, and local citizens. The program incorporated a comprehensive set of integrated and coordinated strategies: suppression, social intervention, provision of alternative opportunities, and community mobilization.

Evaluation results, covering 3 out of 5 years of program operations, were positive<sup>6</sup> and included a lower level of serious gang violence among the targeted gang members than among members of comparable gangs in the area, who had been exposed to a traditional approach based mainly on suppression. Specifically, there were fewer arrests for serious gang crimes (especially aggravated batteries and aggravated assaults) involving members of targeted gangs in comparison with a control group of youth from the same gangs and members of other gangs in Little Village. It appears that the coordinated approach of carrots and sticks was more effective with more violent youth, while the sole use of youth workers was more effective with less violent youth. Social interventions included counseling, crisis intervention, gang homicide intervention, job placement, and family, school, and special education programs and services. There also was notable improvement in residents' perceptions of gang

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<sup>5</sup> Spergel, I.A., and Grossman, S.F. 1997. The Little Village Project: A community approach to the gang problem. *Social Work* 42:456–470

<sup>6</sup> Spergel, I.A., Grossman, S.F., and Wa, K.M. 1998. The Little Village Gang Violence Reduction Program: A three year evaluation. Unpublished report. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration

crime and police effectiveness in dealing with that crime. The Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority concluded that “the project appears to have been a success” and that “the cohesive team approach was probably at the heart of the project’s success in reducing gang crime, particularly gang violence.”<sup>7</sup>

In addition to such evaluations, OJJDP has made recommendations based upon a review of the national landscape of gang-related youth violence prevention and reduction strategies.<sup>8</sup> The report emphasized the importance of thorough assessment of gang involvement and activity before deciding upon a course of action; avoidance of both denial of and overreaction to gang-related youth violence; the importance of broad-based, institutional collaboration among law enforcement, the justice system, and community-based organizations; the presence of an interagency management information system for tracking and evaluation purposes; in-school anti-gang curricula that are reinforced outside of the classroom by multiple community stakeholders (including but not limited to the police); and, after choosing a course of action, implementation balancing prevention, intervention, and suppression.

I would like to include a word on getting public organizations to work together on these issues. From the Institute’s experience working simultaneously with multiple state and municipal agencies on public safety initiatives - and given the interconnectedness of youth violence determinants - we would recommend that the state’s human service and juvenile justice operations become more highly integrated to achieve better coordinated, more effective responses. Along these lines, it is worth noting that a high percentage of youth who engage in violence have significant mental health needs. On this front, there is more evidence-based success to point to.

Multi-Systemic Therapy (“MST”)<sup>9</sup> is a therapeutic modality developed in the 1970s for addressing the needs of troubled youth. Its features include specialized training for clinicians, small caseloads (4-6 families), a home-based approach, working with the entire family, drawing on “natural helpers” (extended family, neighbors, pastors, coaches), addressing all barriers to youth’s success (e.g., mom’s addiction), clinicians’ 24/7 availability (to cut through bureaucracy of multiple systems), and average of 60 hours of contact during typical four-month treatment stint (much more than traditional therapy). Functional Family Therapy (“FFT”)<sup>10</sup>, while somewhat different, is based on similar principles and approaches. Both have strong records of success in reducing youth violence and arrest rates. Because of their training requirements and small caseloads, they are expensive interventions (though not when compared to the cost of incarcerating a youth for an average stint). These programs exist in some pockets of New Jersey, though not nearly enough. Expanding them would constitute a wise investment.

### Closing

Given the dearth of empirical information, particularly as regards gangs in New Jersey, we recommend further investigation and data-driven analysis before adopting a definitive course of action. Based upon the limited data that do exist, it appears that the most effective program models integrate prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies, supported by

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<sup>7</sup> Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority. 1999. Reducing youth gang violence in urban areas: One community's effort. *On Good Authority* 2(5):1-4

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojjdp/summary\\_2000\\_8/home.html](http://www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojjdp/summary_2000_8/home.html)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.mstservices.com/text/treatment.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.fftinc.com/model.php>

an interagency management information system and rigorous, ongoing evaluation to provide continuous feedback and modification. Appropriate areas for research might include:

1. What is meant by “gang involvement”?
  - a. There is no doubt a spectrum of activity here, ranging from full-blown violent “gang banging” to relatively peripheral, primarily social, involvement. (For some youth, gangs simply fill the gap created by the lack of positive social structures in their struggling families and neighborhoods.) The implications, both prescriptive and diagnostic, would likely differ for people at very different places on this spectrum. Can a meaningful analytic taxonomy that can be developed here?
  - b. However gang involvement is defined by NJ authorities, how, if at all, is it tracked? Does law enforcement attempt to differentiate between, e.g., a crime committed by an individual acting on his own and the same crime committed as part of a gang’s activity? If not, doing so – with methodological care – might prove useful.
2. What is the scale of gang-related criminality in New Jersey? Gang violence is obviously a real and serious public problem, here and elsewhere. That said, it also is a subject that raises a great deal of emotion (child abuse and sexual offending are in this regard somewhat similar). Policy in such areas is too often based on statistically aberrant but emotionally potent individual cases. And policy developed in such contexts is often ineffectual, or has significant unintended negative consequences.
  - a. Where is gang violence in New Jersey focused?
  - b. What are the best data to evaluate here? Arrests? Convictions?
  - c. What are the trend lines over recent years?
  - d. What crimes do gangs focus on?
  - e. Each gang has its own dynamic. What are the gangs operating in our State, and how do they differ one from another?
3. Do programs to extricate those already somewhat involved in gang activity work, or – this “or” could be an “and” – should the focus be on preventative strategies further “upstream,” involving youth “at risk” (a category to be defined with care, lest it encompass everyone in New Jersey’s cities, not all of whom can realistically be reached by a programmatic intervention)?
4. To prevent youth from becoming gang involved, would it be more efficient and effective to focus scarce resources on attacking gangs as entities, in an attempt to reduce their recruiting ability, or on reducing the likelihood that potential “recruits” will join – crudely, on a demand side or supply side approach?

Thank you again for your invitation to participate today. I look forward to answering any questions.