

Collaboration between law enforcement and community-based organizations offers Hispanic youth creative local alternatives that prevent violence.

Peace Signs

By Marcela Salazar and Nancy Wilberg

When he was 8 years old, Juan Pacheco and his family moved from their war-torn country of El Salvador to start a new life in Northern Virginia. But by age 14, his involvement with gangs had set him on an even more treacherous journey—a battle with himself. “At that time, I didn’t care about anything. I didn’t feel any connection with school, church, or the community. And my parents both worked two or three jobs to support the family, so I was unsupervised most of the time,” recalls Pacheco, who grew up in a Section-8 housing complex with his two younger siblings. “Being in the gang felt good because I belonged to something. It became my surrogate family,” he explains.

Pacheco’s story is simultaneously familiar and unique. According to estimates from The Associated Press, there are hundreds of thousands of Hispanic youth like Pacheco involved in gangs in the U.S. As a result, Hispanics are twice as likely as other ethnic/racial groups in the country to be victims of gang crime, which can carry life-long consequences due to current juvenile justice practices.

Crime and Punishment

Those numbers could rise substantially based on the broader definition of a “gang” included in the “Gang Deterrence and Community Protection Act,” also known as the “Gangbuster Bill.” Introduced by Rep. Randy Forbes (R-VA) and approved last year by the House of Representatives, the bill contains mandatory minimum prison sentences for a wide range of offenses and would impose the death penalty for youth involved in crimes that result in death. The Senate’s version is expected to be a more positive but far-from-adequate response to the problem in many opinions.

“Any legislation that attempts to respond to gang violence must include a long-term plan that gets at the root causes of youth violence,” says Angela Arboleda, Associate Director of Criminal Justice Policy at the National Council of La Raza (NCLR). “Punishment and suppression is part of the strategy, but should be reserved for

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Latin American Youth Center,
an NCLR affiliate that works to
deter gang violence in
Washington, DC, engages
students at William B.
Powell School.

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Milton Javier Herrera, an LAYC media program participant, showcases his artwork.

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Left: LAYC's Arts & Media House conducts a Radio Basics course. Below: Juan Pacheco, Program Director for Barrios Unidos.



only the most serious crimes so that imprisonment does not lose its effect as a deterrent of crime.”

Instead, Arboleda and NCLR advocate for increased investment in sustainable community prevention and intervention programs as the most effective responses against gangs.

In Pacheco’s case, incarceration did not provide him with life-enhancing alternatives. It was counseling and job training at a local community organization that impacted his life while integrating his cultural background, he says.

“Gang violence is a complex problem which merits a comprehensive response that includes social services, law enforcement, schools, parents, and youth,” Arboleda says. “The Latino community also needs to be a part of the solution, since they are directly impacted by the problem and will be impacted by the response. They understand the context in which such violence occurs.”

Although there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to deter youth

violence, there are several models for successful intervention and prevention. In general, gang activity is a local problem, and local solutions have been proven to work best to reduce and deter gang activity.

Jobs, Not Jail

Homeboy Industries is an intervention job-training program headquartered in East Los Angeles. Currently, Homeboy serves more gang members than any other organization in Los Angeles.

The program emphasizes recovery over incarceration. By offering employment in Homeboy’s own silk-screen shop, bakery, and office, the program offers Hispanic gang members a sense of community and hope. Homeboy Industries has helped the city’s youth plan a “future rather than their funerals,” says Father Gregory Boyle, the Founder and Executive Director of Homeboy Industries. Many members have spent

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their adolescence in the juvenile justice system and, unlike gangs in smaller cities, are deeply entrenched in complex crime networks that extend beyond their neighborhoods, making leaving the gang and associated lifestyle that much harder, or even impossible.

To help extricate former members entirely, Homeboy provides counseling and tattoo removal, which is a crucial turning point in the transition out of a gang.

“Removing tattoos is a big [deal],” says Homeboy Development Director Kaile Shilling. “They are physically removing their affiliation with their gang,” she says. To date, more than 1,500 individuals have had their tattoos removed—and the waiting list is even longer.

In providing employment services, Homeboy focuses on that segment of the community that finds it most difficult to secure employment on their own—former gang members, parolees and at-risk youth. “Nothing stops a bullet like a job,” says Father Boyle, who won the 2005 NCLR Maclovio Barraza Award for Leadership. Boyle’s vision translates into a success story for the 150 to 200 trainees hired every month.

Homeboy also provides services for women in the gang culture. Homegirl Café was opened in April 2005 to offer opportunities to women who are ex-gang members and women or are affected by the gang climate. “The gang violence has had a real impact on the women. Even if they themselves are not with a gang, they are the sisters, mothers,

girlfriends, friends of gang members so they feel the effects of the violence and the gang lifestyle. Homegirl Café gives them an alternative, a chance to make a positive change in their lives,” Shilling says.

A Holistic Approach

In the mid-1990s, the Boston Police Department developed a city-wide intervention strategy—Operation CeaseFire—to deter juvenile and gang violence. The success of this initiative inspired other cities to take up the cause, such as Chicago and, more recently, Newark, N.J.

CeaseFire’s primary objective is simple: to stop the cycle and culture of violence that affect the lives of young Hispanics caught up in dangerous street-life behavior.

“Gang violence destroys families, neighborhoods, and communities,” said NCLR’s Arboleda. “It deprives the Latino community from having peaceful and productive lives; instead, parents constantly worry about their children and youth fear for their lives. The focus should be on education and building a brighter future.”

The CeaseFire program focuses on five core interventions: criminal justice and social service collaboration, outreach, clergy partnerships, community mobilization, and public education.

“This type of a collaborative problem-solving model is changing the way we address crime—moving us away from the criminal justice system’s

Father Boyle, Founder and Executive Director of Homeboy Industries, works with former gang members to reform their lifestyle, including finding jobs and removing tattoos.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY GILEES MINGASSON/GETTY IMAGES

approach to a more holistic community justice paradigm,” says New Jersey Attorney General Peter Harvey.

CeaseFire deters gun violence in high-crime hotspots by communicating to gun carriers that there are swift and severe consequences for violence. After an incident, local outreach workers analyze and mediate the situation, then provide Hispanic youth with “on-the-spot” alternatives to gun violence by connecting them to individualized social services such as job placement and drug treatment.

Data suggest that this strategy has had a dramatic impact on reducing gang violence. According to CeaseFire Illinois, shootings in six Chicago communities dropped by an astounding 42% in 2000—its first year of implementation. A research team from Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government found that, in Boston, in CeaseFire’s second full year of operation, there was a 71% decrease in homicides by those 24 years old and younger, and a 70% reduction in gun assaults by all ages.

Newark officials are optimistic and anticipate similar results in their city where CeaseFire, launched in April 2005, is a collaboration of more than 40 local criminal justice, government, social service, faith-based, and community-based organizations.

Success Through Prevention

The Gang Intervention Partnership Unit (GIP) is a joint venture created in 2003 between the Washington, DC, Metropolitan Police Department, several DC public schools, local government agencies, and Hispanic community leaders which focuses on gang prevention and intervention. The effort was a response to the sudden outbreak of Latino gang-related homicides and shootings in the summer of 2003. The Columbia Heights/Shaw Family Support Collaborative, through federal and local funding by the Mayor’s Office on Latino Affairs, co-convened and facilitated the program.

In the early 1990s, a community partnership analyzed the city’s murder rates and determined that neighborhood group dynamics played a central role in the violence: 61% of all murder suspects and almost 40% of all victims were members of identifiable street groups or “crews,” most of which were small, low-order organizations with little formal structure. A large percentage of these murders were linked to “beefs” between individuals and neighborhood-based groups over turf and “respect.”

“The majority of Latino gang members in DC are underage, even as young as 11 years old, and still live at home and go to school,” says Sgt. Juan Aguilar, head of the GIP unit of the DC Police Department. “Their level of organization might be more informal than that of more established gangs in other cities, but as we have seen, their potential for violence should not be underestimated.”

GIP members, representing law enforcement, community-based organizations, and schools, hold weekly confidential meetings to share information about recent gang activity and to develop diversion and intervention strategies to prevent crimes.

A critical component of GIP’s strategy is the Youth Outreach Team of the Latin American Youth Center (LAYC), an NCLR affiliate. Outreach workers identify critical gang hangouts and assist with diversion and intervention efforts with the most vulnerable young people. LAYC offers various recreational programs such as an after-school and summer drop-in center, and courses including job-readiness and pre-college programs, and a re-entry program for those leaving the juvenile justice system.



LAYC’s Girls Youth Leadership Program provides after-school activities, such as hip-hop dance lessons, to at-risk gang members.





PHOTOGRAPHY BY TYLER MALLORY

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— Raúl Archer, Team Leader, LAYC Recreation and Prevention

“The intuition of this age group is to react violently when they are stressed, without thinking about the consequences,” says Raúl Archer, Team Leader of LAYC’s Recreation and Prevention program. “What we try to do is reach out to them before they get into trouble, step in when they are headed in the wrong direction.”

“When we see school truancy, slipping grades, disruptive behavior, tattooing, and other indicators of gang participation, we immediately track the child’s progress, talk to GIP, teachers and parents, and even find out on the street what is going on,” Archer says.

He explains that team leaders at LAYC have enough trust from the kids that sometimes youngsters tell what is going on, because the reality is that “they don’t like trouble, especially violence.”

Besides building trust, one of the strengths of GIP is also the constant follow-up with troubled Hispanic youth. Communication between parents, police, schools, and community organizations is crucial to the success of the program, which received the Community Agency Award from the DC Courts last October for reducing gang-related violence in the city—there have been no Hispanic gang-related deaths since 2003.

Implementing the Model

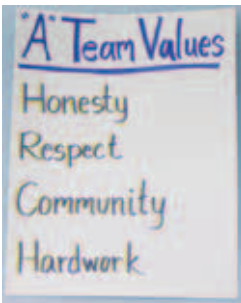
NCLR believes that a one-size-fits-all approach to deterring youth violence is not effective; rather, local solutions are at the heart of addressing the gang problem. Staff from nonprofit community agencies in gang-affected areas have intimate knowledge of their neighborhoods and can integrate existing intervention and prevention models to address the specific challenges in Hispanic communities. However, some youth leaders point out that the first step is knowing how to reach the hearts of at-risk or troubled Hispanic youth.

For Pacheco, it was finding a new positive and healthy surrogate family in Barrios Unidos, a community-based organization in Falls Church, Va., which works to prevent violence among Hispanic youth. Fortunately, he was able to leave the gang—unlike many of his counterparts. He put his prison record behind him and got a job as a counselor at Barrios Unidos.

“They saw that I had potential; [they] treated me with dignity and gave me a chance at a new life,” he says. “The strong relationships I established were the catalyst for my personal change.”

Now 28, Pacheco is double majoring in biology and nursing at George Mason University and plans to attend medical school. He also serves as Program Director of Barrios Unidos. Pacheco says it is his personal duty to reach out to other young people who have fallen prey to gangs.

“By feeling commitment, passion, and acceptance from those around them, these kids get a small glimpse that they are worth something,” he says. “That is all they need to start the transition process.” ■



Far left: Sgt. Juan Aguilar heads up the DC Police Department’s GIP Unit. Near left: Program values posted at the Latin American Youth Center.

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