



Trauma in the Lives of Gang-Involved Youth: Tips for Volunteers and Community Organizations

Gang-involved youth in your community have often experienced trauma.

Consider Enrique.

By the time Enrique turned 12, he had witnessed his mother attacked numerous times by the men who came in and out of his home. Unable to protect her from this abuse and often fearing for his own safety, Enrique began having a variety of problems at home and at school. He found it difficult to pay attention in class and often missed what his teachers said. He became increasingly defiant of rules and his frequent outbursts of anger got him into trouble with teachers and peers. He avoided spending time at home and was increasingly absent from school. When he talked to the school counselor about his difficulties, Enrique showed little emotion and downplayed concerns that his behavior was a problem. Failing in school and feeling helpless to control events at home, he started to hang out with several older gang members. Lured by the offer of both protection and a sense of empowerment, Enrique had become fully involved in the gang by the age of 14.



Another example is Jordan.

When he was 16, Jordan joined a gang with several of his friends. He began to get into numerous fights and often carried a knife for protection. One evening as he rode in a car with his gang, another car drove by and sprayed the vehicle with bullets. While not hit, Jordan watched helplessly as his seriously injured friend sitting in the back seat screamed in pain, and then passed out from loss of blood. Afterwards, Jordan was jumpy all the time, startled at any loud noise, and had difficulty sleeping. Reminders of the shooting, such as going by the place where it happened, would sometimes cause him to re-experience the events of that horrible night. He began to feel that he had no real future and that he would not live to become an adult. Attempting to relieve his distress, Jordan began carrying a gun and participating in increasingly risky activities, such as driving through the rival gang's turf.

Although the specifics are different, each of these youths experienced traumatic events. Trauma is defined as an experience that threatens life or physical well-being in such a way that it overwhelms an individual's ability to cope. Witnessing such a threat to another person can also be traumatic. Typically, traumatic events evoke feelings of extreme fear, horror, and a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. The physical reactions that happen in the face of trauma – racing heart, clammy extremities, loss of bowel or bladder control – can be extremely distressing to youth.

Gang-involved youth have greater trauma exposure than their non-gang peers.

Whether the trauma precedes a youth's involvement in gang activity as it did for Enrique, or comes, as did Jordan's, from direct gang activity, research indicates that:

- A high number of delinquent and gang-involved youth have experienced abuse, neglect, maltreatment, as well as exposure to domestic and community violence.
- Exposure to community violence has been specifically shown to increase the risk of gang involvement.
- Incarcerated youth who profess gang involvement have been exposed to more violence and more severe violence than their peers who are not affiliated with gangs.

Here are some examples of potentially traumatic situations:

Physical/sexual abuse

Witnessing community or domestic violence

Neglect or abandonment by a parent or caregiver

Automobile or other types of accidents

Physical violence, including bullying

Witnessing police activity or having someone close arrested

Witnessing another person being killed or seriously injured

Death or loss of someone close, especially in an unexpected or violent manner

Youth respond to trauma in a variety of ways.

Individual reactions to trauma can vary dramatically. A youth's subjective response to a traumatic event depends upon a number of factors including individual temperament, coping style, prior trauma, social and family support, and the culture and environment. What is devastating to one youth may be less so for another.

Traumatic stress often causes these reactions: 1) nervousness, jumpiness, and a heightened startle response to any loud noise, sudden movement, or other surprise; 2) re-experiencing of the event as intrusive memories, images, sensory impressions; 3) trouble sleeping or nightmares; 4) withdrawal from others and avoidance of activities, partly as a way of avoiding trauma reminders that can bring back distressing images and memories; and 5) difficulty concentrating or paying attention in school. Among gang-involved youth, traumatic stress may frequently result in behavior problems, but can also take the form of depression, a sense of despair about the future, and disengagement from ordinary activities.

Other common traumatic stress reactions include:

- Excessive worry about the safety of self and others
- Angry outbursts, aggression and/or defensiveness
- Indifference or emotional numbing – acting as if nothing matters or has an emotional impact
- Defiance of authority or rules
- Negative belief systems such as; the world is violent, unfair, and/or unsafe
- Change in academic performance
- Hypervigilance – constantly surveying the environment for danger or threat
- Repeated discussion of the event and the details of the event
- Increased impulsive and risk-taking behaviors
- Attempts to alter feelings through substance abuse

Gangs appeal to traumatized youth.

Early trauma and traumatic stress reactions can increase a youth's susceptibility to becoming involved with a gang. Abuse and neglect can undermine a child's ability to succeed in school or to form long-term healthy relationships. A child who has been abused and neglected may not trust authority, schools, or other social institutions to protect or take care of people.

Physical/sexual abuse and neglect have been shown to negatively impact normal child development, including the development of the brain, and the body's ability to cope with stress. Children and youth who have experienced abuse and neglect are sometimes unable to identify and name their internal states and feelings, have difficulty managing or regulating strong feelings such as anger and fear, and often blame their feelings on others.

While traumatic stress is certainly not the sole cause for gang involvement and delinquency, it can increase a youth's vulnerability to a gang's appeal. Gangs can offer a sense of safety, control, and structure often missing in the lives of traumatized youth. Gangs can also provide a place for youth to re-enact learned patterns of behavior such as violence. Faced with school failure and a lack of positive options, traumatized youth may find some semblance of success, belonging, and affirmation through gangs. Gangs may also provide these youth with an outlet for their often pessimistic or cynical beliefs that their parents, adults, or society in general cannot keep them safe or provide for their basic needs.

Early childhood trauma, particularly abuse and neglect, is common among gang-involved youth.

Caring adults can make a difference.

There are many ways that caring adults can help youth who have experienced trauma, whether that trauma preceded or resulted from gang involvement:

- Show a genuine interest in and be protective of the youth.
- Create safe environments for youth that include normal routines and predictable outcomes.
- Provide choices that give them a sense of control and personal responsibility.
- Instill a sense of hope and optimism about the future and help the youth set and achieve personal goals.
- Set clear, firm limits on behavior that provide for positive rather than punitive consequences.
- Recognize that even the most disruptive behaviors are often the result of fear and anxiety associated with the trauma.
- Provide opportunities where the youth can talk safely about experiences and be reassured that his or her reactions are normal.
- Help youth become re-engaged with school and provide supports to improve school success.
- Anticipate reminders such as anniversaries or the recurrence of events and provide additional support.
- Teach techniques, such as deep breathing, to help manage overwhelming emotional reactions.
- Get the youth involved in a positive community cause or social justice issue.

When to seek professional help

Effective mental health interventions are available to help youth overcome the impact of traumatic stress. If a youth experiences symptoms which significantly impair the ability to function over a period of several months, referral to a mental health professional experienced in trauma treatment is recommended.



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Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.