

Gang Violence

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The teen years are a hard time in most people's lives. The majority of adults can look back and vividly remember that awkward time. This was the chapter where they did not yet know who they were or who they were going to become. They did what they could to fit in. Many of those that did not hang with the "popular crowd" did what they could to merely blend in and not draw any attention to themselves. These were the ways to avoid the hurled insults, the head-in-the-trashcan moments, the all-too-familiar swirlies, and the disapproving glances given to them by those who were viewed as being the bigger and better people on campus. Yes, junior high and high school were rough patches in many people's lives. But, what if it was promised to you that it did not have to be that way? What if you, the social outcast, were promised a group of friends that would never let you down? One that would always look out for you? This group of friends would be like a second family. These friends would pledge to always take care of you. There may even be some money involved. Would this sound good in the insecure world of middle school and high school? Would you want to join this group of friends? When being honest, most people's answer would have to be yes.

The amount of gang violence in the United States has increased exponentially over the years. Even the percentage of teens involved in gangs in rural communities, the areas that seem the safest, increased from 1.5% in 2001 to 14.9% in 2006. This is a huge increase! Why is it that these numbers are continually on the rise? What would make young people so interested in joining a gang? As previously stated, gangs can give these teens a sense of security. In an unsure world, it seems like there would be nothing better than the opportunity to have a group to spend your time with. To have a group that accepts you and will always stand up for you.

One common reason for children on the younger end of the spectrum to join a gang is boredom. This is especially common in the inner city. Often, in these families, one or more family members have a job. This leaves the younger family members at home much of the time by themselves. They are too young to drive, so they are forced to either sit at home alone or find something more creative. These gangs provide them with something to do. They have a sense of excitement. They allow them to try things and take risks that they usually would not. It gives them people they can spend their time with. Another reason that accompanies this is that it gives them a sense of purpose. The gang gives the youth realistic plans and goals that offer them an opportunity to feel an often much-needed sense of accomplishment.

According to the Violence Protection Institute's website, there are four main reasons that young people join gangs. These include reasons such as identity, protection, fellowship, and intimidation. Many times, these young people do not feel like they can achieve their own identity in the world. They do not know who they are or who they want to be. Instead, they choose to gain their identity in this group. They choose to see life as the gang against the world. Also, sometimes, when youth are feeling threatened, they will join gangs to gain a level of protection. They will then have a group that will look out for them and stand behind them no matter what the circumstances. Studies also have shown that gang membership goes hand-in-hand with families lacking structure. The gang will offer that fellowship and intimacy that they do not have in their biological family. More rarely, members are forced or intimidated into joining the gang through the ways of threats and violent beatings. However, the main reason for teens feeling that they need to turn to gangs is a lack of love and support from their families. They instead try to gain that from this family of gang members. Unfortunately, through this, they are often forced into dangerous, criminal actions and it is often even more dangerous for them to try to leave the gang after pledging membership.

There is no denying that gang violence is a problem in America. It is a problem that is becoming increasingly more relevant with every passing year. Knowing this information does not change the fact that it is an issue. Knowing does not change the fact that thousands of Americans are being injured or killed by these teen gangs annually. What can be done to slow down, or better yet, to stop the violent actions of these youth? This is not a situation where people can donate money and hope the problem will just go away. No, this is not something people can help with by passively sitting by and writing a check. It involves effort, it involves willingness to do the dirty work, it involves risk, but, most importantly, it involves love.

Aside from the desperate need for love within the family, it is also possible to help these teens from the outside. A mentoring program is a great opportunity to help these young people. Investing some time and love in these children may be all they need. They may solely be in need of someone to care for them and to set a good example for them.

In a dangerous Washington D.C. neighborhood, an elderly woman, Hannah Hawkins, has taken it upon herself to help these teens. A couple of years ago, her husband was stabbed to death by a group of teens. While she could have become bitter and vindictive, this woman took it upon herself to make a difference instead. Across the river from downtown Washington D.C. lies the Anacostia neighborhood, the most

dangerous area of Virginia. It is here that Hannah Hawkins has poured all of her time and money into a home in which these youth can spend their time. It is called "Children of Mine." This ministry began in her two-bedroom apartment and has escalated to an average-sized house. Approximately eighty teens are lovingly welcomed into the home each day by Mrs. Hawkins and are encouraged to use the facilities and equipment that are provided there. She offers them a hot meal, tutoring, a computer lab, Bible studies, sex education, sports activities, bus tokens, clothing, and toiletries. Through this ministry, she has provided these underprivileged adolescents an alternative to the gangs and the violence that many of them would be involved in otherwise. Although she did not have the funds or the energy to do this on her own she, as a Christian, trusted God to provide for this ministry. In turn, He has brought many volunteers to her doorstep. In addition to the generous volunteers, the NBA team, the Washington Wizards, heard about her involvement and offered to help her out as well. They came to the house and assisted in the manual labor that needed to be done. They donated a large sum of money to pay for the computers and sports equipment and they also volunteered to install a full-size basketball court free of charge. Through the efforts of Hannah Hawkins and other like her, the crime rates involving teen gangs have decreased dramatically in Anacostia.

As you can see through this woman's example, people can do something to help decrease gang violence. Even though you may not be able to stop the violence entirely, it is possible to aid in the reduction of these violent acts. Through the volunteering of your time, effort, and your love, you can show these youth that they have more potential than most of the world sees. They are capable of accomplishing so much and have been blessed with gifts that are yet to be discovered. Show these kids that they do not have anything to prove. Show them that you love them for who they are. Show them the extent of who they can become. Set a good example and make a difference. Through these things, it can be proven to these young people that they do not need a gang to truly find themselves. They are loveable just as God made them and they do not need a gang in order to prove anything otherwise.

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