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Locating “Community” in Community Gang Reduction

Astin Scholar Research Project

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Introduction

Only twenty years ago the Mar Vista Gardens public housing project located in Del Rey, California, served as the place of operation for one of the most brutal gang organizations in Los Angeles—the Culver City Boys (CXC) gang. Although gang violence in the Del Rey area has since then decreased, this change was achieved not through addressing underlying community structures that provoked a growth in gang activity but instead through heavy policing, highly restrictive housing rules and rising housing prices (“On Site”, 2000; Schnell, 2015; Braga, Welsh, Howell, Lipsey, Wilson, 2014). The Mar Vista Family Center, located less than a mile from the housing project, however, took a very different approach to the gang community in establishing with them a unique relationship that gained the center a reputation as a safe place for this gang community (Romero, 2003; “On Site,” 2000; Moore, 1995). And although gang members sometimes use the center’s facilities today, the Center staff recognize they no longer have the same relationship with the current gang community, and wish to cultivate it once again.

This study thus poses the following question: How did MVFC cultivate their unique relationship with their gang community, and what are the implications of this established relationship for the gang community, the larger Del Rey community, and the structure of gang reduction programming? This overarching question implies various detailed questions such as (1) What was the nature of the relationship that MVFC cultivated with its gang community? (2) How did MVFC cultivate this relationship? (3) What have the implications of having established this sort of relationship been for MVFC, the gang community, the larger neighborhood community and gang reduction programming? (4) How can this relationship be cultivated once more and be maintained?

Literature Review

The impacts of establishing a relationship of trust and respect with a gang community, whether for the purpose of gang reduction or otherwise, has been little addressed in existing literature. For example, although the Comprehensive Gang Model comprised by the United States Department of Justice discusses the importance of establishing relationships of respect between various community partners when implementing a gang reduction program, it does not address the relevance of establishing a similar relationship with the gang community itself (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency). And although several gang reduction organizations such as the National Boys and Girls Club of America and the more local Los Angeles GRYD program note the importance of cultivating a relationship of trust with their gang communities for program’s success, they provide very little insight into the complexities of how such a relationship is established and the various impacts the cultivation of such a relationship has (Abreton, 2002, p. 32; Kraus et al., 2017, p. 12). In addition, current scholarship does not address various other details that make MVFC a very unique and fascinating case in regards gang reduction scholarship. Current literature does not address the impacts of an organization establishing a relationship of trust and respect with a gang community *prior to*, and not for the purpose of, implementing gang reduction strategies, it does not address the impacts of a community organization whose primary mission is *not* gang reduction establishing such a relationship, let alone the implications of the such a relationship for community outcomes, whether related to gang reduction or not. Furthermore, current scholarship does not address the means by which an organization can establish and sustain such a relationship successfully, and how such a relationship can be utilized for the benefit of the community. It is precisely these gaps in literature that my research study aims to address.

Methods and Limitations

To carry out this research study, a series of seven in person interviews were conducted across six participants. Participants were recruited with the help of a Mar Vista Family Center (“the Center”) staff member, a member of UCLA faculty, and the staff of a gang reduction organization serving the neighborhood surrounding the Center. All potential participants were contacted by either phone or email, and explained the basis of the research study, that their role would be primarily sharing about their experience, and that their participation in the study would serve to inform not only the Center’s future programming, but also potentially academic literature on gang violence reduction. Interviews were conducted with a member of the MVFC staff, a former gang member who interacted with the MVFC, a staff member of a gang reduction organization serving the Del Rey area, and former gang members who have interacted with the gang reduction organization Homeboy Industries, located in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles.

A community based research approach was utilized to incorporate the active voices of community members, organization representatives, and fellow researchers working with the Mar Vista Family Center (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 2001). The snowball sampling method was used for the purpose of acquiring research participants, and interviews with participants were of a semi-structured, open ended, style. This interview style was utilized with the intention to ensure that data and research findings would be informed by the voices of participants—their stories and experiences. Structured largely according to the constructivist grounded theory, data was interpreted concurrently with the process of data collection for the purpose of utilizing findings to focus further data collection (Fontana and Prokos, 2007, p. 61). All interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participants and later transcribed word-for-word.

Participants involved in the data collection were given pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality.

This study has major limitations for informing current literature on gang violence reduction. A major barrier is the interview population. I have only interviewed one member of the Mar Vista Family Center staff, a single staff member of a Los Angeles based gang reduction program serving the Del Rey community, and four former gang members, only one of whom had direct contact with the Mar Vista Family Center. Many potential participants chose to not participate in the study because of the sensitivity of the research topic. This limitation informed the interviews conducted with former gang members that interacted with Homeboy Industries, which served to provide insight into the implications of the MVFC model of serving the gang community otherwise largely limited. The interview with the staff of the LA based gang intervention organization serving the Del Rey community was conducted with the intention of learning about the experience of current active gang members in the Del Rey area, as well as to gain insight into implications of the MVFC model with regards to gang reduction services currently available to the gang community in Del Rey. A significant limitation lies in the fact that my race, culture, lack of personal experience with gang communities, let alone Latino gang communities, made me an outsider to the community with whom I interacted for the purpose of this study. My role as outsider to this community likely limited the amount and type of information participants were comfortable sharing with me, and limited my own process of conducting and interpreting data. Finally, my qualifications as an undergraduate are limited for conducting qualitative research.

Research Findings

Despite the presence of significant limitations, this study generated an abundance of findings that have proven to inform and build upon one another. I will begin by discussing the findings relating to the nature of the relationship cultivated between the Center and members of the CXC gang.

Finding 1: The Mar Vista Family Center cultivated a relationship of mutual respect and trust with community gang members.

Within the context of the relationship cultivated between the Center and members of the CXC gang, the term “respect” implies various dynamics of respect. This complexity is, I believe, best explained through reference to the various forms of the term as defined in literature on moral and political philosophy. The first notion of “respect” rests on the idea of fundamental moral equality among persons— all persons have equal worth and dignity and are therefore equally worth of respect regardless of individual characteristics, achievements, or moral merit, simply because they are persons (Dillon, 2018). The finding that the Center staff offered the gang community “respect” in this regard is supported by the account of a MVFC staff member who described the Center’s approach to the gang community by the following words, “I was doing what I was doing without thinking about it. People are people. That’s all we see. If they have a need and we can support them, we will be happy to do it.” Although the staff’s perception of people as inherently deserving of respect and support regardless of their identity served as the basis of the relationship of “respect” established with the gang community, the Center also offered the gang community “respect” of a somewhat different nature as well. This second notion of respect is best explained by the Kantian notion of respect as the respect of a person’s autonomy—the view of an another as someone with the same right to their judgements, decisions, and their pursuits of the ends they value as we have to our own (Dillon, 2018). Rather than something offered *regardless of* the various aspects that make up one’s identity, this form of “respect” is attributed

precisely to those very aspects of identity, one’s individual decisions, and values. This “respect” places value and legitimacy in another’s distinctiveness, makes space for the person to be themselves, and, in result, is the act of considering another’s interests and feelings attending to their needs (Lysaught, 2004). Acceptance is a facet of the notion of “respect of autonomy,” for it implies that one respects others by not interfering with their autonomous decisions and their pursuit of the ends they value, by not coercing or deceiving them or treating them paternalistically” (Dillon, 2018). The Center staff offered the gang community respect in this regard by accepting the values and various other facets of the gang community’s identity. MVFC staff noted this form of “respect” to have played a crucial role in establishing their relationship of respect with the gang community, defining their past relationship with the gang community as one of “acceptance without judgment of who they [gang members] were.” Lastly, the Mar Vista Family Center offered members of the CXC gang the notion of “respect” defined as an appreciation of an individual as having value and importance, apart from the value inherent to them (Dillon, 2018). The Center offered the gang community this form of respect in conveying their perception of CXC gang members as valuable and important to the community, in other words, as possessing skills and attributes with the capacity to contribute something of value to the community.

The element of “trust” within the context of the relationship between the organization and the gang community signified a belief in the reliability of the other, a sense of comfort in allowing the other to look after one’s own well-being. And although distinct from “respect,” this element of “trust” was nevertheless rooted in the notion of respect of autonomy which encourages individuals to take responsibility for their actions, for the Center established the understanding that “trust” did not extend to the center protecting illegal activities.

The relationship of respect and trust was mutual between the MVFC and the gang community to a large extent. This study found the gang community to have returned the respect extended to them by the MVFC staff in demonstrating respect of the identity and values of the staff in return. This finding derives from an account provided by a member of the MVFC staff, who shared during an interview that, “as they [the gang members] started building respect, they started choosing not to say certain things or do certain things [that might disrespect the values of the staff].”

I will now move on to discuss how the Center cultivated a relationship of mutual trust and respect with members of the CXC gang. These findings are based on an interview with a MVFC staff member, unless stated otherwise.

Finding 2: The Mar Vista Family Center cultivated a relationship of mutual trust and respect with its surrounding gang community through the use of the following strategies:

1. Vocally expressing and demonstrating through action their desire to serve the needs of the gang community.
2. Vocally expressing a need for the gang community’s help and targeting them for community projects that required assistance.
3. Not expressing judgement of the behavior or appearance of the gang community.
4. Verbally expressing the center’s desire to be an entity the gang could depend on and trust.
5. Changing the mindset of the community about gang members as being “bad” and “dangerous” by integrating community gang members into community events and projects.
6. Being intentional about attributing responsibility and control to the individual, both within and outside the context of their relationship to the Center.

The Mar Vista Family Center utilized strategies (1) and (2) in conducting personal outreach with the gang community, and these strategies were successful in encouraging the gang community’s participation with the Center. Describing how the Center staff conducted outreach, a MVFC staff member noted: “We would start talking to them, having a conversation with them. Ask them what I can do for them. But I would also make them feel like we needed their help. I would always say, ‘I need *your* help doing this.’ ” According to the staff member, these strategies

facilitated a relationship of respect and trust with the CXC gang community because it made them feel valuable and important to the community. The staff continued to utilize tactics (1) and (2) as members of the CXC gang began to engage with the Center. The staff of the Center did this by creating activities specifically for the gang community and creating programming for the gang community such as job training and life skills programs and programs meant to support the CXC gang community in securing jobs. The staff continued to demonstrate their need for, and value of, the gang community by continuing to ask for their assistance on a various community projects as well as by hiring them to build an addition to the Center.

A big role in establishing a relationship of trust and respect with members of the CXC gang was played by the Center’s intentional decision to not express any judgement of the gang community. Mar Vista Family Center staff would never ask members of the CXC gang to dress or speak a certain way, seeing this decision as a way to give the gang community “control and responsibility.” Of this strategy, a MVFC staff member shared, “For me, that’s part of the respect, giving them their space and accepting them as who they were, so they can accept me.”

The MVFC conveyed to the CXC gang their intention to be someone the gang community could always turn to and explicitly assured the gang community that what they shared with the Center would remain private and not be conveyed to the LAPD. This relationship of trust was then solidified when MVFC kept their word, refusing to share private information about CXC gang members that interacted with the Center when approached for information by the LAPD, and then ridiculed by them for not sharing it. The MVFC staff also stressed that this relationship of trust relied heavily on the Center’s established position of transparency—the staff made sure the gang community knew that they would not protect them against illegal activity. According to the staff, their transparency with the gang community about the limits to which

they could trust MVFC staff to protect their privacy produced a stronger sense of mutual trust between the Center and the gang community.

Integrating the gang community into community events and projects played a crucial role in establishing a relationship of trust and respect between the Center and gang community as well. In integrating the gang community into community events and projects, the staff did not bring any attention to the fact that the gang members were gang members. Consequently, community members would often not learn about the fact that a gang member was a gang member until after they had interacted and gotten comfortable with them. In result, community members would realize their perceptions of gang members as inherently “dangerous” and “bad” to have been inaccurate. This recognition was achieved by community members who knew of the gang members’ status as gang members prior to engaging with them as well. Although MVFC staff pointed out that achieving a point at which the larger community felt comfortable with the gang community took time, this result was achieved rather organically—both community gang members and members of the community grew comfortable with one another and shed perceptions based on stereotype simply by interacting with one another. Staff expressed that this integration with the community served to make the gang feel a true part of the community, to see in the Center as a “second home.”

The MVFC staff made an intentional effort to attribute to the gang community a sense of control and responsibility, and this goal was achieved in various ways. Center staff was careful to not pressure gang members to participate in the programming, and, if they did participate, engage in specific activities or share anything they did not wish to. The staff was also intentional about instilling in the gang community a sense of personal control and responsibility in regards to changes they made in their lives. In the words of a MVFC staff member,

“Some of those in jail would write to me and call me...They would say ‘when I come out I’m gonna be different ...I will do this, I won’t do this, I promise you’ and I would say “do not promise me anything. Not to me, to yourself.”

The staff was intentional about encouraging an empowered sense of personal identity in regards to discrimination faced by the gang community as well. For example, when a CXC gang member shared with MVFC staff that they were discouraged by a staff member at their school from applying to college, a MVFC staff member told the gang member: “Are you going to do what people are telling you or are you going to do what you need to do? We would say, ‘believe in yourself, if you believe in yourself you will do what you need to do. You have to say no, this is the path I want to follow.” The staff expressed their belief that the gang community engaged with the center specifically because the Center placed control and power in the individual themselves. Discussing this reality, the director of the MVFC shared, “We offer opportunity, it’s your responsibility to take it. You change your life, we don’t change your life. We learn not because they’re teaching us, we choose to learn. You have a choice. This gives you power.”

The MVFC was able to produce the relationship of trust and respect for reasons other the tactics the staff intentionally employed as well:

Finding 3: The MVFC was able to establish a relationship of mutual trust and respect with members of the CXC gang because of the proximity of the center to the gang community.

This finding was derived, in part, by the perception of MVFC staff, who expressed that the gang community participated with the center because “we are here, were in the middle.” This finding is supported by an account made by a former CXC gang member, who emphasized that the proximity of the center served a crucial role in maintaining the relationship between the gang and the Center. This finding is further solidified by a former gang member unaffiliated with the

CXC gang, who shared that the proximity of a given organization to his home would be a deciding factor for whether they would engage with the organization.

I now move on to discuss the results of the presence of a relationship of mutual respect and trust between members of the CXC gang and the Mar Vista Family Center. The elements of this finding are derived from interviews conducted with MVFC staff, unless stated otherwise.

Finding 4: The establishment of the relationship of mutual respect and trust between the MVFC and the community gang population resulted in the following:

1. Inspired active gang members to stop engaging in the violence and other negative aspects of gang membership.
2. The Center’s ability to exercise influence over the current generation of CXC gang members via members of the former generation of the CXC gang community.
3. The Center’s ability to approach the issue of gang violence and other negative aspects of gang involvement using a systemic approach.
4. The gang’s perception of belonging to the neighborhood community.

Part (1) of this finding is largely derived from an account made by a former CXC gang member that interacted with the Center. This former gang member attended a community meeting with the intention of “doing something bad, something violent.” However, when a MVFC staff member welcomed the gang member in and invited them to participate in the meeting, in the words of the gang member, this “changed my whole spirit.” Of this experience, the former gang member says, “I was blown away by that...from that moment on I was like ‘ok these are good human beings don’t mess with this place again.’” This experience was also among the very first experiences that inspired the individual to consider an alternative version of himself that was not engaged in violence as something achievable. The notion that MVFC’s approach to the gang community would inspire such considerations is supported by a former gang member unaffiliated with the CXC gang and the Center who shared that when he was an active gang member, what would have encouraged him to change to transition away from the violent and other negative aspects of gang membership would be exposure to alternatives to his lifestyle.

Despite the fact that the Center does not personally interact with the new generation of gang members, this new generation nevertheless respects the Center because they learn of its history with the CXC gang from the older generation from CXC gang members. Because of this prolonged respect toward the Center, the Center is never tagged by the CXC gang. Former CXC gang members also have a more direct influence over the current generation. Because the Center maintains communication with former CXC gang members, some of whom now interact with the Center as parents of children who participate in the Center’s programming or preschool, the MVFC staff is able to exercise influence over current generation of gangs through them. The staff pointed to a circumstance in which a lot of private buildings in the neighborhood surrounding the MVFC were tagged by the CXC gang as the sort of incident regarding which they would seek help from the influence of former CXC members who interact with the Center.

Cultivating a relationship of trust and respect with the CXC gang community led the Center to incorporate what they learned about the challenges faced by CXC gang members and what led them to participate in “negative” elements of gang membership, into their programming. Although a MVFC staff member noted that this relationship inspired the Center’s goal to work closely with parents, this study is limited in not having obtained significant insight into how the Center’s relationship with the gang community influenced their programming in a way that supports a systemic approach to gang violence reduction.

As a result of the relationship of trust and respect cultivated by the MVFC with the CXC gang community, the gang community came to see the center as a space within which they belonged. According to s MVFC staff member, “some would say more than their territory, this was a home for them, this was their space.”

To better understand further implications of the relationship the Center established with members of the CXC gang community, it is necessary to consider the experiences of gang members in relation to the gang reduction programming currently available to the CXC gang community.

Finding 6: Latino youth join a gang seeking power and respect in part because experiences of discrimination cause them to formulate a negative self-identity.

Finding 7: Chicano youth derive from a gang a sense of personal identity that is closely linked to the gang.

Finding 10: Gang members are largely left to reach a point of “being ready” to part with the “negative” aspects of gang involvement in order to receive services.

Finding (6) supports existing theory on the experience of Latino youth gangs. According to Cammarota’s *Sueños Americanos*, Latino youth are often seen as incapable, and as destined for a life of crime and drug abuse by their teachers, police, and other members of their larger community (2004, pp. 32). According to USC professor and gang expert, James Diego Vigil, as well as Mark Edberg’s article “Safer Latino Project,” it is, in part, this very discrimination against Latino youth that drives Latino youth to gangs, where the social and monetary capital they are regularly deprived of is made available to them, even if sometimes through illicit means (2010, pp. 2). The barrio group becomes “a substitute for the many caretakers who have failed, a functional equivalent to the family, schools, and other institutions, and provides norms and patterns for emotional stability, social interaction and friendship, protection and street survival” (Vigil, 1988, pp. 4).

This study supports the theory that Latino youths’ experiences of discrimination produce within them a negative self-identity, which, in turn, encourages them to seek such social capital such as feelings of value, respect, and power, within the gang. This finding is derived from the shared experiences of former gang members interviewed for this study. One former gang member shared the following about his experience with the LAPD, “They would pull us over and

they would take off our belts and drop us off where our enemies are...we would have to take off running.” Another former gang member shared,

I started getting messed with by law enforcement when I was about nine years old. I would get arrested and taken to jail for no reason. They would tell me you don't have any rights...and I believed it ...not only did I not only believe I didn't have any rights I also educated people that I didn't have any rights...School was terrible, they [school teachers] were very abusive and racist and I don't think they were interested in teaching me. When I finally graduated from high school I didn't know how to read, I didn't know math, I didn't know how to communicate other than the vocabulary of a gang member...They stuck me in an ESL class and I never spoke Spanish... probably because my last name was Flores...probably what happened was I had a lot of trauma so I didn't talk...they would say things like I don't care if you learn a thing or not I still get a pay check. What I remember most, all you have to do is show up and I'll give you a D...to me that became a goal.”

The staff of the MVFC expressed that many of the gang members who they worked with shared similar experiences of discrimination to those noted above. All former gang members interviewed for the purpose of this study noted that experiences of discrimination and resulting feelings of powerlessness encouraged them to seek a sense of respect and power within the gang. As one former gang member points out, “Once you're a gang member you're different. You can walk down the street and there's respect... or maybe fear.”

The findings of this study also support the theory that Latino youth develop a sense of personal self-identity through the gang. Vigil discusses this theory in his article “Group Processes and Street Identity: Adolescent Chicano gang Members.” In this work, Vigil claims

that, in its broadest sense, society has failed to help certain Chicano youth develop a positive self-identity. To such youth, the barrio gang provides peer group functions that may be otherwise unavailable...the youth gains a sense of protection and belonging (perhaps for the first time). To resolve the dilemma of the lack of a positive self-identity, the ego attaches itself to the barrio (group) ideal, where the self-identity is subsumed under the barrio name. Group associations with group lore patterns and the self becomes the group in the name of the barrio gang. Specific psychological needs for affection, protection, guidance, aggression, and so on, are channeled and mediated through the gang, as the latter becomes an adaptive mechanism. The result is an adolescent “psychosocial moratorium” where concerns about one’s self ideal are suspended as the gang takes over and dominates self-identification. The trade off in making the group one’s ego ideal is group protection, alleviation of fears, a strong sense of emotional bonding, of belongingness, and, of course, if an individual is so included, many group deviant activities to act out one’s frustrations, anxieties and aggressions. Growing up in the barrio and becoming socialized and enculturated to street peer networks and beliefs makes an individual group oriented early in life (Vigil, 1988, pp. 1-9).

The findings of this study support that some Chicano youth do indeed develop a sense of identity that is intricately linked to the gang to which they belong. During interview, one former CXC gang member expressed, “I never wanted to get out of the gang because that’s like saying you’re not you, you don’t have an identity.” Another former gang member shared, “It was hard to leave the gang because of the sense of loyalty I had to my homeboys. To be there for them. To protect them.” And although this second account does not indicate that the gang member equated his identity with the gang per se, both of these findings demonstrate that, as Vigil argues, gang members have a hard time negotiating a sense of identity that is not totally committed to the

gang group pattern. According to Vigil, for some individuals, full commitment to the gang, for some gang members, lasts throughout their young adult life, even up to and past 30 years of age. The larger majority of the gang members, however, usually find a way to reconcile, or at least live with, the ambiguous nature of their identities, and mature out of the totally committed group pattern (Vigil, 1988, pp. 4).

However, this study also suggests that access to another group with ambitions similar to the gang dynamic such as the dynamics of mutual respect, acceptance and belonging, may help gang members negotiate a positive sense of personal identity and mature out of a full committed to the gang-group pattern. During an interview, a former gang member noted that Homeboy Industries offered him a unique environment of a compassionate, welcoming community of people who cared about his needs, and stressed that being welcomed into such a community really helped him sustain his transition from being fully committed to his gang. However, such programming offered by Homeboy industries is available to gang members who have already arrived at a negotiated identity that has transitioned from full commitment to their gang to a point where they are even ready to sit down and work with the very enemies of the gang to which they belong. And, as the experience of a former gang member who participated in an interview for this study suggests, that process can be a very difficult and time consuming one. As one former gang member shares, it was only after going to prison for the 5th time that they finally felt ready to go to Homeboy Industries, despite knowing of the organization since childhood. This former gang member did not feel comfortable going to Homeboy Industries prior to this moment because Homeboy Industries is respected by gang members as a neutral area, and out of respect for this, the gang member did not go to Homeboy Industries until he had fully decided he was

ready to transition away from his role as a gang member to the point that he could “sit down with his enemy.”

With these realities considered, I now move on to discuss findings regarding the gang reduction intervention programming for which the current CXC gang community qualifies for.

Finding: 10 This study supports the notion that the gang reduction intervention programming for which the current CXC gang community qualifies for, in part, functions according to a structure that alienating gang members from engaging with their services because:

1. Active gang members do not wish to interact with gang reduction organizations because they imply that gang membership is bad, or wrong.
2. Gang members do not wish to interact with gang reduction organizations because gang reduction organizations are associated with law enforcement.
3. Gang reduction programs have attendance requirements, requirements that gang members stick to structure and rules and qualifications to receive services.
4. Gang reduction organizations require gang members to provide sensitive information.
5. Once a gang member “completed” a gang reduction program they no longer have access to services.

This study has found that active gang members are discouraged from interacting with gang reduction organizations because gang reduction organizations, in carrying the label of a gang reduction organization, imply that being a gang member is wrong. Furthermore, this study has found that active gang members are more open to receiving services and interacting with an organization that does not carry the label of a gang reduction organization. A former gang member noted that they would be more interested in engaging with an organization like MVFC, an organization that was not labeled as a gang reduction organization, because “It [their gang status] is not pointed out... now you’re getting education that has nothing to do with pointing out the fact that ‘hey what you’re doing is wrong’”

Furthermore, this study has found that gang members are discouraged from interacting with gang reduction organizations because of the association of gang reduction organizations with law enforcement. When discussing what they, when still an active gang member, would think of a gang reduction intervention worker, a former gang member stated, “He’s a rat. I’m

sure he’s working with law enforcement and if he’s not that’s what my mind is telling me. I don’t want anything to do with him, matter of fact I don’t want him in the neighborhood.” The fact that a gang reduction organization’s association with law enforcement alienates active gang members from their services is supported by accounts made by staff of a Los Angeles based gang reduction organization for who’s services the CXC gang qualifies. However, the association with law enforcement is not, in of itself, the alienating factor. A former gang member discusses this reality during interview, “There are ways of leaving [the gang], if you leave because of what we call ‘dropping out’...you go on the side of law enforcement and take down other gang members that’s a negative way. That’s a death sentence. But you can also leave the lifestyle, the negative lifestyle.” As this account demonstrates, gang members are alienated from interacting with a gang reduction organization not only because of the association with law enforcement itself, but also because of the potential dangers associated with even interacting with an organization that is associated with law enforcement.

The current CXC gang is alienated from receiving support from the Los Angeles based gang reduction organization for who’s services they qualify because of certain structural elements the organization has adopted as well. Intervention workers are given a short deadline of six months to enroll active gang members in gang reduction programming. And if, by the six-month deadline, the active gang member has not enrolled in programming, the intervention worker has to “release” them and move on. And although intervention workers still try to service the active gang members who surpass that six-month deadline, such support is not necessarily supported by the structure of the gang reduction program itself. Furthermore, the programming functions according to requirements that gang members adhere to attendance requirements and the requirement that they share personal and sensitive information about themselves at an early

stage of program enrollment. If a gang member does not adhere to such requirements, and is, in result, “dropped” from the program, if they later re-enroll in the programming, all of their prior progress is disregarded. For example, if a client is arrested, gone for 30 days, and thus, in result not able to attend a required meeting with the intervention worker of the gang reduction organization, that client is “dropped” from services. And whether being “dropped” is an active choice of the gang member or the result of circumstance, the intervention worker is pressured by the organization structure to “move on” to working with other potential and active clients. It is, however, important to point out that although intervention workers wish to, and continue to their best ability service all clients in need, despite their technical status in regards to the organization structure, the structure of the organization limits their ability to do so.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that gang reduction programming available to the current CXC gang community, in certain ways, does not support the active gang member’s negotiation of an identity that is not fully committed to the gang. Rather, the structure of such gang reduction programming in certain ways requires the active member to have reached this point on their own, and actually alienates gang members for struggling to negotiating an identity that is not fully committed to the gang, including the “negative” aspects of gang membership. And although the findings of this study suggest that the presence of a community characterized by a sense of belonging, trust, and respect, helps sustain a gang member’s transition away from full commitment to their gang, including violent and/ or antisocial elements of such a commitment, gang reduction organizations that offer this sort of community in many ways require the gang member to have made that transition on their own prior to offering them services. Thus, the findings of this study suggest that community centers like the Mar Vista

Family Center not only possesses the ability to service gang communities alienated by reduction organizations, but that the model by which the Center interacts with active gang members is, in certain ways, better equipped at supporting gang violence reduction. It is precisely because the MVFC is not a gang reduction organization, and does not have to adhere to the structural requirements gang reduction organizations often have to adhere to, that allows the Center to support active gang members in their transition from being fully committed to their gang. The MVFC model produces an environment that arguably supports this transition in providing the active gang member a specific, genuine, and sustainable community characterized by the forms of the monetary capital they find in the gang such as mutual feelings of respect, acceptance, value and trust. And furthermore, this study suggests that cultivating such a relationship of mutual respect and trust between an organization like the MVFC and its gang community extends the sort of respect and trust often cultivated between the intervention worker and active gang members to a larger neighborhood community. Such a relationship, this study suggests, allows for the birth of productive gang violence reduction tactics such as the utilization of the influence of former gang members upon the current generation of gang members and the utilization of the knowledge about the challenges faced by gang youth that encouraged them to join a gang gained through interaction with the gang members themselves, so as to influence programming and structural deficiencies within the community.

Recommendations

- The Mar Vista Family Center should strive to cultivate a relationship with the staff of the gang reduction organization stationed at Mar Vista Gardens. The CXC gang community stands to benefit greatly from collaboration between the organization and the Center and I believe there are

opportunities for collaboration between the two organizations that do not require any monetary support from the Center itself.

- The Mar Vista Family Center might find it important to abstain from pursuing grants requiring the Center to carry the label of a gang reduction organization. Much of the Center’s ability to successfully aid the active gang population lies in the fact that they are not associated with a gang reduction program.
- Gang reduction organizations should move away from a structure that poses requirements that serve to disempower and alienate gang members from engaging with their services.
- Gang reduction programming may benefit from a structure within which funding is allocated to both, a gang reduction organization, and an organization not affiliated with gang reduction and that requires the two forms of organizations to collaborate with, and support, one another.

Areas for Further Research

- The findings of this study are based off of limited data. Further research on the topics explored by this study is necessary in order to draw truly reliable conclusions.
- The impact of programing that explicitly aims to empower a gang member’s feelings of self-empowerment on the gang member’s ability to negotiate a self-identity not fully committed to the gang-group dynamic, and thus their transition away from the negative elements of gang membership is a potentially very significant and impactful consideration largely unexamined in this study and in need of further investigation.
- Further research into how a gang reduction organization and community organization not affiliated with gang reduction can be incentivized to collaborate with one another, and what programming can be feasibly created to support such collaboration, is an area of research with the potential to be very useful for the purpose of shaping future gang reduction programming.

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