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Freeing youth from the grip of gangs Counselors help gang members reconnect with mainstream society

By **Jonathan Rollins**
Editor-in-Chief

Neither Lisa Taylor-Austin nor Ann Hackerman is physically imposing. Neither exudes the gruff, hardened personality of a drill sergeant or a disciple of tough-love tactics. That's why many people are surprised to learn that these two women regularly engage members of one of the most intimidating factions in society - street gangs.

Neither of these American Counseling Association members purposely set out to counsel young people involved in gangs. But both discovered that, in combination with the right skills and a healthy dose of determination, they had a heart for reaching out to young people largely written off as incorrigible, lost causes, menaces to society.

Taylor-Austin, nationally certified and a Licensed Professional Counselor, always had an interest in counseling "at-risk" youth, but when she went to Los Angeles after graduate school in the late 1980s at the age of 24 to serve as a school counselor, she had no idea that her clientele would include roughly 200 gang members. While the initial realization was a shock, the experience proved to be positive and has helped to shape her career. Today, she works as a counselor at an urban school in Connecticut and also has a private practice. In addition to counseling gang-involved youth and youth in the criminal justice system, she also serves as an expert witness on gang culture and issues in court cases across the nation.

Hackerman's interest in counseling gang members also took root in the late 1980s. At the time she was a psychiatric technician working with inpatient youth in a Memphis, Tenn.-area facility. At the time, there was a surge of young people checking into the facility with wounds, and as Hackerman began talking to the patients, she found out that many of the wounds were the result of gang activity. After she became nationally certified and a Licensed Professional Counselor, she continued to work with gang-involved youth. Today she is a counselor, psychotherapist and clinical team supervisor for Comprehensive Counseling Network, one of five mental health centers in the Memphis area. In addition, she has written a book, *Street Gangs, An Inside Look: A Guide for Professionals and Others Concerned With the Epidemic Plaguing the United States*, used by the Memphis Metro Gang Task Force. Published through an Internet continuing education site in 2004, the book explores why people get involved with



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gangs; the hand signs, lingo and graffiti that are part of gang culture; and methods of gang prevention and intervention.

Why young people are drawn to gangs

The appeal of a gang isn't readily apparent to most adults (or many young people) who cast a wary eye on the whole subculture. But the reasons for joining are "as diverse as the number of kids out there," Taylor-Austin said. One common denominator, she said, is that "All kids want to belong to something bigger than themselves."

Some young people are attracted to the perceived or real power that comes from gang involvement, she said, while others are drawn to the risks involved when committing crimes or carrying out some other gang activity. These thrill-seekers know that they aren't making good choices and even understand the possible consequences of their actions, she said, "but they love the rush of it. It's almost like an addiction."

Other gang-involved youth are simply searching for a way to feel successful, Taylor-Austin said. "If you're not successful in mainstream society - in school, on the job - and you have an opportunity to go out on a mission and your gang tells you how great you did, that's where you'll want to be," she said.

Hackerman pointed out four overarching reasons why young people join gangs:

- **Family issues.** These issues can range from the absence of a male role model to inadequate supervision or an unhealthy level of permissiveness in the home. In some cases, a child's parents may be incarcerated, and he or she looks for a gang to take the place of the family unit. Physical, sexual or emotional abuse within the family also drives many young people to join gangs. "Some kids think it's safer to be out on the streets than in the home," Hackerman said.
- **Personal issues.** These can include having low self-esteem or not knowing how to deal with emotional problems in a positive manner. Drug use and financial need are other personal issues that can make gangs appear more attractive to young people.
- **Education issues.** Bad grades and low expectations, both on the part of the student and his or her teachers, can make school seem intolerable while simultaneously increasing the appeal of gangs. Oftentimes, these students have learning disabilities that haven't been diagnosed or they haven't received the proper assistance.
- **Community issues.** Young people who grow up in neighborhoods where violence is pervasive or where gang association is already prevalent may feel extra pressure to join a gang in hopes of being protected. Communities without many job opportunities or after-school activities are often plagued with high levels of gang activity. Areas going through an ethnic

transition may also see increased levels of gang membership as gangs fight to hold onto old turf or gain new turf, Hackerman said.

Seeing past the client's gang persona

Taylor-Austin understands why many counselors aren't comfortable working with gang members, and she doesn't push her peers in the profession to do so. "This is a whole culture unto itself that many people don't know about," she said. "Gang members scare people, and they can scare therapists."

But fear isn't the only thing many counselors have to overcome to effectively reach this growing segment of society. Counselors must take special care not to judge these clients before meeting them, said Hackerman, who added that she has never felt threatened while counseling gang members. "If you come across with that attitude," she said, "you're not going to get anywhere. Just like everywhere else, it's all about mutual respect."

Taylor-Austin wholeheartedly agrees. "They're so bombarded by adults in authority positions judging them that they turn off to that," she said. "They're so disarmed by the fact that I'm not judging them and telling them what to do that they'll open up and share. ... Society is already saying that gang members are bad, that they're not human beings. So when people do treat them like human beings, it means a lot to them. ... We (counselors) really have to keep our personal values out of it."

She elaborates further on her website, www.gangcolors.com: "Clients do not need to be told that gang-banging is 'bad.' Rather they need to have their beliefs challenged, and they may need to learn new ways in which their needs can be met in less violent ways. ... I have heard colleagues talk about 'de-programming' gang members. Not only do I believe that approach is dangerous, I also believe it is disrespectful to the client. I believe it is more beneficial to work with a client's self-identity and goals in life (or lack thereof), to explore ways to meet needs in a nonviolent manner and to encourage hope."

Taylor-Austin doesn't gloss over the violence inherent in gang culture or turn a blind eye to its other negative impacts, but she tries to glimpse the world from her clients' perspective and attempts to see the person hidden underneath the gang persona. Many of the gang-involved youth whom she sees are actually smart, gifted kids with wonderful personalities, Taylor-Austin said, but because of where they live or an insecure home life, they are compelled to make choices that they might not make in a more stable environment. "Given the situations they're in, some of them are doing amazingly well," she said, pointing to gang members who choose to stay in school or are helping to raise a sibling.

One of the biggest misconceptions about gang members - even among some counselors - is "that they're not going to change or don't want to change," Taylor-Austin said. "In the end, almost every gang member I've talked to doesn't think that being in a gang is a positive thing. A lot of them don't really want to be doing it." She strongly believes that most gang members are not sociopathic, and if given the right

support and opportunities, can succeed in mainstream society.

When Hackerman begins counseling a gang member, she immediately tries to establish a code of mutual respect. She lets the client know she is not intimidated, but at the same time steers clear of any "might is right" tactics of her own, no matter how subtle, such as raising her voice. She also sets ground rules that the client must follow, or else that particular counseling session is immediately terminated. Some rules seem obvious: Clients cannot bring any type of weapon to the mental health facility and cannot come to the office under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Other rules model healthy relationships. For instance, dishonesty and manipulation are not tolerated during the counseling sessions. After establishing a rapport, Hackerman also won't allow the gang member to use street slang in the sessions or in any of the group activities. "Their response (to the ground rules) is usually, 'That's wack (lame),' " Hackerman said. "But then they say, 'OK, that's cool.'" The message is clear: If they respect Hackerman's rules, she will treat them with mutual respect.

Getting to the root problem

Gang involvement, in my opinion, is a symptom," Taylor-Austin said, "the same way that alcoholism is a symptom of something else. There is some larger problem underlying it. My approach (in counseling gang members) has always been to focus on the underlying issues and not talk about gang involvement all that much in the early stages."

Instead she talks with her clients about the choices they are making and helps them to examine why they are making those decisions. "There just seems to be a lot of pain underneath most people's unhealthy behaviors," Taylor-Austin said. "My belief is that people are people, and we have more similarities than differences." Many young people think joining a gang is a logical step to take to ease the hurt in their lives or to achieve their goal of belonging, she said.

Likewise, Hackerman also focuses on what void her clients are trying to fill by joining a gang. This usually goes back to at least one of the four overarching issues: family, personal, education or community issues. "The main thing is just knowing where they're coming from," she said, but the process of discovering why a young person joined a gang to begin with can be arduous. The level of trust and respect is built gradually over time, Hackerman said, and it can take months before a client is truly open and honest. Until that rapport is built, clients may lie about their experiences, embellish their level of involvement (especially in group settings with other gang members) or direct personal, verbal attacks at the counselor in hopes of shifting the focus off of the real issue, she said.

While Hackerman believes more truth tends to come out in private sessions between the counselor and client, she said that group activities are also useful in getting gang members to reconsider their way of life. She has used reality-based interventions in group settings to paint a graphic picture of where gang life is likely to lead most of its members - prison or the morgue. For instance, Hackerman sometimes has gang members role-play a funeral in which one of them has met a tragic end. The "dead" gang member is carried on a board

(symbolizing a coffin) by his fellow gang members as they sing hymns and reflect on his life. Her clients often become very emotional during this exercise, said Hackerman, who then has the gang members talk about the "funeral" with their parents.

After dealing with the issue of why a young man or young woman is involved with a gang, Hackerman tries to get clients to see the other options that are out there for them, and helps them to make long-term goals and plans, such as earning their GED, high school diploma or college degree, or getting a job. "The big thing is communicating to these kids, 'What do you want out of life?'" Hackerman said. Once her teen-age clients begin focusing on other areas of their life, she said, many fade out of gangs on their own. "For gang members, (seeing other options) is almost awe-inspiring," she said. "Many of them haven't seen past the (neighborhood convenience store)."

Taylor-Austin is also a big believer in helping gang-involved youth explore options they might not have known existed otherwise. Her No. 1 objective with these clients is not to remove them from a gang, she said, but "to find out what their goals are and what they would like to achieve. I don't have an agenda about what I want to accomplish. It's about what they want to accomplish." As she explains on her website: "Our goal, as therapists, is not to tell these youth what to do, but to lead them in examining different aspects of their lives so that they may come to a decision about whether their current way of life is 'working for them.'"

While Taylor-Austin doesn't believe there is any one "right way" to counsel gang members, she said she has found reality therapy to be the most useful theory. The main goal of reality therapy is to help clients reconnect to the people that they need, and gang members are almost always suffering disconnectedness to family members or to society at large. "Addressing those underlying issues is really the key," Taylor-Austin said.

An important aspect of reality therapy is to help clients make specific, realistic and workable plans to better their lives, she said. For example, Taylor-Austin may help a client draw up a plan for getting a job, not just for the sake of making money, but also as a bridge to reconnect the gang member to mainstream culture. The plan might cover where to apply, how to follow up and even how to deal with rejection. Many gang members become dejected when their goals do not come to fruition right away, Taylor-Austin said, so it is vital to remind them that everyone has experienced rejection and discouragement. Drawing up these plans "helps the client feel like they are in control of their life," she said.

Final words of advice

Counselors interested in working with gang-involved youth need to have a good grasp on gang culture, norms and values, Taylor-Austin said. She recommends reading as much on the subject as possible and, as you branch out into counseling gang-involved youth, asking your clients to explain elements of gang life to you. "My clients have been the best teachers for me," she said.

Hackerman preaches patience. Even if you quickly develop a

bond with a gang member you are counseling, it can take months for the client to internalize change, she said. Even after counseling, gang life can exert its pull weeks, months or even years down the road.

However, Hackerman said, she has also been surprised at how quickly - and how fully - some clients have dropped their hard-core gang persona in pursuit of other goals, such as college or a full-time job. Sometimes, ex-gang members will come back to visit her and tell her, "Hey, I heard what you said. (My gang past) is all ancient history now.' It makes it all worth it," Hackerman said.

Gang kids aren't much different than typical kids, Taylor-Austin said. But in her work as a school counselor, she has found that young people who were once enmeshed in gang life seem more appreciative and sensitive to her efforts to help them. Said Taylor-Austin, "(Ex-gang members) will come back two years later and say, 'Remember when you told me about that job possibility? It showed that you really cared about me.'"

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