



The original article is written in German. This is an approximate translation of the original article.

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*Lisa, who are you, where do you come from and what is your mission?*

I am a woman who decided at the age of 10 that one person can make a difference and that I was going to work with inner city youth when I grew up. Here I am. I see myself as a translator between the youth in the community and the people in positions of power. Each day I try and translate between these two worlds so one can understand the other. I do this through Expert Witness testimony in gang cases across the United States and also in my work as a professional counselor. I am originally from NY, where I received my master's degree in counseling and then I had the opportunity to go to the cities in Los Angeles and earn my "street degree." My work with gang members began in Culver City, Santa Monica, Compton and South Central LA during the riots (during the LAPD/Rodney King verdict). My mission is to assist youth when and where I can and to encourage them not to give up on themselves, even if everyone else has.

*When and where did you start working with gang related kids?*

I started working with gang-involved youth in 1988 in Santa Monica, Culver City, Compton (all cities in California). Then in 1999 I moved to Connecticut where I continued counseling youth involved in street gang life. I continue to provide counseling for youth aged 6-19 and for many of my former students who are now in their 20's, some of whom are incarcerated. It has been an honor for me to be trusted and accepted by the youth I work with and to be able to enter the housing projects where they live to lend assistance. Their families have been very receptive to the assistance I have given their children and I am privileged to be able to do so.

*How can you differ a real gangster from a wanna be?*

I do not like the term wanna-be. The term wanna-be was coined by law enforcement for children at risk of becoming gang involved. My belief is that not all children who are at-risk will become gang members. I think what you are asking is, "What is the difference between a hard core gang member and an associate gang member." This is a very complex question to answer. First we

have to know what type of gang we are referring to: a supergang (made up of 1,000 or more members and membership crosses state lines) or a hybrid gang (gangs that start up in cities and towns and use some of the culture from the supergangs but they are in not affiliated with them). Once you know which type of gang we are talking about then your question can be answered.

A supergang (MS13; Latin Kings; some Crip and Blood sets, etc) usually has their own strict rules of membership and conduct. Hard core gang members will follow those rules and expectations above all else. The gang is their family and the gang comes first. Most of their actions are to benefit their gang and there is a deep sense of loyalty to their gang and fellow gang members (homies, bros, cuz, B). Most of their life is spent trying to profit their gang, either financially or otherwise. Some gang members will hold a legal job and some will not. I have seen both situations. Hard core gang members live for the gang and die for the gang and will never deny their affiliation or loyalty. The United States is a big country so hard core gang members present themselves differently in different parts of the United States. What a hard core gang member may do is different in New York than Los Angeles.

Those At-Risk for gang membership are young people who have been exposed to gang life due to their neighborhood or their family or their friends. Because of the exposure to the gang life there is a risk they may become gang-involved. However, many do not, or if they do only remain involved for a short period of time (1-2 years). These young people (aged 5 and up) will often dress like the gang members in their area, may use their handsigns and terminology, however, their loyalty is not to the gang. They will participate for a brief while and then move onto other things, often leaving gang life behind.

*You have founded your own company.. Do communities with gang problems call you or do you advise them?*

Lisa Taylor-Austin, MS Ed., NCC, LPC, LMHC, LLC is the name of my business. The website is [www.gangcolors.com](http://www.gangcolors.com) There are a number of services that we provide: individual mental health counseling, mental health evaluations, presentations and workshops, expert witness testimony in criminal court cases across the United States, and consultation. We have been asked to consult with Harvard University, Yale University, and many agencies that serve the public. Anyone who seeks our services may contact us. We only accept work that we feel qualified to assist in.

*Do you work in every community, parts like Compton, South Central, Brooklyn... or do you rather work in small communities?*

I have worked in Santa Monica, CA; Culver City, CA; South Central, CA; Rochester, NY and Bridgeport, CT. These are all cities and very different from one another. I partner with colleagues in other cities like: Leroy Fogle (Rainbow Youth Services, website: [www.rainbowgpp.com](http://www.rainbowgpp.com) ) in Schenectady, NY and Ramont Williams in Las Vegas, Nevada. Both of these men are former gang leaders who are now working to bring positive services to youth in the cities where they live. Partnering with these men is vital as they have first hand experience with gang life, prison and drugs. Through their own hard work, they have become change agents of peace. It is always best to "go to the source" when working with gangs...the gang members and former gang members themselves can be the most helpful at times. I don't believe professionals utilize them enough...after all, gang members are the experts!

*Are organized gangs an all US-American problem or have you any experiences outside the USA with organized gangs?*

**Gangs are not just an American Problem. There are gangs in every part of the world and in most countries. Brazil, Germany and El Salvador are just a few examples of other countries that have gang problems. We are looking to provide training to agencies outside the USA in the future.**

*It's obvious, that you intervene into gang politics. Ain't this field too dangerous for you? I try not to intervene in gang politics but sometimes I am allowed to. I use the word "allowed" because I am only able to do as much intervention as a gang or their leaders allow me to. There are unspoken rules I must follow and respect and trust must be earned. This question is why it is important to know if you are working with a supergang or a hybrid gang. Hybrid gangs are more willing to accept or seek out assistance.*

**Some people come to me for confidential professional counseling. Other clients (schools, professionals) come to me for education about gangs. As an expert witness in court I educate the jury and/or judge about gangs and gang issues. It is the jury and/or the judge who then make the decisions about what the outcomes will be. When gang members I am working with are planning on attacking (green light) a rival gang, I may ask members to think about the consequences of their potential behavior, both for them and their gang. I may ask them to explore other options or possibilities. But ultimately it is their decision to make the choice to be violent or not. I am not trying to change people...just helping them looking at all the options and get them thinking about things. People control their own destiny. I try and serve as a guide or translator between the world of the streets and the mainstream culture.**

*You work with police officials, although every kid in the ghetto knows about police brutality and criminality. That means, you act on both fields, gang related kids and police officials on the other side. How does that work?*

**That is a good question. I have provided training to some police officials, when hired.**

**As you can imagine, counseling has a high degree of confidentiality. In counseling there is a strict ethical and legal process I follow in regard to sharing information. The client has to give me written permission to share any information about them. They control what is and is not shared. I also exercise professional judgment about what is and is not going to be shared. The ethics of my profession are basically to "do no harm" to clients and I take this very seriously.**

*Can you describe, why military families are often major catalysts for gang activities in the US?*

**Often what happens is that military families move from one location to another. It is not the family that is the catalyst for gang activity, but more the fact that the family has relocated. For example, let's say that a family in the military has a teenager. That teenager is in a gang (his or her family may or may not even know they are involved). Then the military relocates that family to another city or another state or another country. The child then takes the knowledge of gang life he already has, and begins a new gang at his new location. So in this way the gang problem spreads from one location to another. It is not the family itself that is actually causing this to happen.**

*It's obvious, that gang members have broken families. How do you wanna involve those families in their kids prevention, if they are broken?*

I don't believe in the word broken when talking about human beings. That word implies that they are somehow "less than." Some gang members come from two parent households and some come from one parent households. Some come from households where they have been raised by a grandparent, or extended family. Some families and family members need professional counseling to help them establish ways of relating that are more helpful to them. Some families need to be educated on gangs and gang issues. Other families might be multigenerational gang members themselves. Each family has to be worked with on a case by case basis. Most of the families I have worked with are families that care about their children. They don't want to see their children "going down the wrong path" but they just do not know how to help their children. I think it is important to have parent support groups where they can hear from other parents how problems can be handled. The professional facilitator of these groups can also provide ideas and support for parents. Counseling is also very important for families. The family members need to learn how to relate to one another with respect and understanding. And sadly, some children might be better off away from their family and living elsewhere. In these cases it is important to support the young person as much as possible.

*You say, kids writing graffiti can be a warning sign for possible gang activities. We know graffiti as part of the hiphop culture. Hiphop has a positive message with no violence. We battle with rhymes, turntables, cans and breakdance moves. So how can graffiti be a warning sign for gang activities?*

**All graffiti is not gang graffiti. We have random youth, taggers, tag-bangers and gang members all writing graffiti. However, some graffiti is gang graffiti. Gang graffiti tells us what gang is at war with whom, what gang is in a control of a neighborhood, who is at risk of attack (green light), and if there are any gang truces in the neighborhood. Once a person can read graffiti it gives them a wealth of information about what is occurring in that neighborhood. Gang graffiti is a way to communicate.**

**If a parent's child all of a sudden starts writing this way when they never did before, that *can be an* indicator they may be gang involved or gang exposed. Graffiti in and of itself does not mean someone is a gang member.**

*Which type of kid is endangered by listening to gangster rap? For a kid in the ghetto, the lyrics are reality. For someone like us, it's an outcry of the ghetto, to be heard.*

**Why do you think kids are endangered by rap? I think our youth, especially in the inner cities, are much more endangered by lack of employment opportunities, lack of affordable housing, lack of quality equal education, lack of medical care and lack of hope. I am not sure what "for someone like us means" in your question but it does bring to the forefront the problem seems to be an "us and them" mentality. As long as it is not "us" being killed daily in street gang crime, then we don't have to address it. As long as it is not "us" being imprisoned at disproportional rates then we won't address the problem. But as soon as these issues start to creep into "our" neighborhood then something will be done. Money will then be poured into programs to help. Rap is not the problem. Rap seems to be telling us what the real problem is. There are very poignant messages being delivered by Kanye West, (West Coast) Kam, Eminem, Dr Dre and other rappers. In the 1960's there was a fear that rock music and Elvis Presley would cause the world to come to an end. It didn't happen. I see the same thing happening with rap music. Rap didn't cause the evil. Evil happens when "good men do nothing" (Edmund Burke).**

Perhaps we should be pouring our money in America more into prevention and intervention efforts for youth.

Rap started out as rhyming and words. It didn't demean people, it didn't degrade people. Because it didn't sell, CEO's of big businesses opted for rap that was more sensationalized and included "bitches and hoes" and violence. We bought that music. Why? Let's not point the finger at rap. Let's look at why we wanted to sell it and buy it in the current form it is in now.

*The last question might be a little bit provoking, but please, don't take it personal. Maybe, you find a nice conclusion for the interview... What would you say, if I would say, you use the gang prevention for your own personal success?*

**I would say, "You sure are underestimating and insulting gang members! You have to earn street cred and a 'hood pass to work with gang members and that doesn't come easy. No professional can ever gain access to a gang or its leaders or it's neighborhood without permission from the gang (this is called a 'hood pass). The one thing I know is that gang members are very perceptive. They smell a phony from a mile away."**