

Lisa Taylor-Austin, MS Ed., NCC, LPC
Gangologist • Expert Witness • Professional Counselor
Providing Training to Professionals and the Community on Gang Issues

"An Interview with Lisa Taylor-Austin"

By **Kristina Hutch Matthews**

Next Step Magazine, Summer 1997 (23)

In researching this story, we spoke with Lisa Taylor-Austin, who previously spent seven years counseling gang members ("gang-bangers") in the city of Los Angeles. When asked what motivates kids to join, she says, "I think that most people want to get jumped into a gang because they're interested in finding a place where they can feel like they belong. They're looking for love, respect, a bond that they'll have with other people. For the larger gangs, once you've jumped in, you're in for life. The only way out is to die out."

According to Taylor-Austin, some of the larger, more well-established gangs have organizational structures similar to major corporations. "They have a very systematic way of recruiting kids into a gang; and they do that by sending gang members out to different cities. And their job is to settle there, recruit there, and start the gangs there." She adds that, surprisingly, the suburbs can be one of the best places for gang members to recruit. "A lot of people have moved from the cities to the suburbs because they want their children to feel safer," she says. "So its a good place to go get people because there's a good market . . ."

Taylor-Austin says that, although the surrounding circumstances may be different, kids join gangs for the same basic reasons--whether they live in the city or the suburbs. She says that she has seen wealthy kids join gangs, particularly in cases where parents provide lots of materialistic reinforcement, but little physical affection and quality time. "The difference is that in inner cities, kids join gangs because they feel they don't have options," says Taylor-Austin. "In a suburban setting, they see lots of options, but they're not feeling that sense of connectedness."

As Taylor-Austin explains, each gang has its own unique culture. "They have their own language, method of communicating; their own customs and rituals, their own way of writing. Its a way of life," she says.

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