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**Committee on Education and Labor**

**US House of Representatives**

**Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities**

**Protecting our Youth : Paths to Gang Prevention in our Communities**

**Good Morning Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the committee, thank you for the invitation to appear before you today.**

My name is Isis Sapp-Grant and I am the Executive Director and founder of the Youth Empowerment Mission Inc. an organization based in Bedford-Stuyvesant Brooklyn New York. YEM was founded in 1995 to meet the critical needs of young people affected by gangs, violence and delinquency. We approach this through integrated initiatives that engaged youth, their families, community-based organizations, schools law enforcement agencies and city officials. Over the years YEM has helped human service professionals and community members learn how to work more effectively with in crisis and at-risk associated with street gangs. YEM is dedicated to providing long term solutions that give young people in high risk environments real alternatives to violence and delinquency, while addressing the conditions that create these environments. We facilitate this by providing core early intervention programs like the Blossom Program for Girls ("Blossom"), the Be the Change Advocacy and Leadership Project and the Girls in Business program, these programs incorporate: educational support services and advocacy, counseling, leadership development, life skill development, mentoring, job readiness skills, and community involvement.

In 2000, YEM launched the Blossom Program for Girls ("Blossom") to address the needs of girl's ages 11-21 that are at high-risk or involved in gangs, violence or other self-destructive behaviors. In its five-year history, Blossom has successfully reached hundreds of girls. The Blossom Program currently serves over 70 pre-teen and teen girls. Over 90 percent of the girls we serve are African-American and 95 percent of the girls that come to Blossom are living in poverty. 90 percent come from single-mother led households. Blossom's core components prepare girls to move from crisis to competency by equipping them with skills and information that support their healthy development. Participants also gain an appreciation for the power they possess to advocate for changes in their lives and in their community. Participants are referred to the program by

schools, detention centers, parents and other community-based organizations. In addition we offer workshops and other youth development services to schools and agencies.

Our organization is community based with national influence. We receive calls and support communities and young people around the country in the effort to aid and empower youth facing severe socio-economic difficulties, academic challenges and engagement with the juvenile justice system.

I am here this morning because the crisis facing our youth produces long term damage our communities socially, economically and morally. To many of our youth are joining gangs and in the process losing their lives to violence, losing their freedom to jails and losing their future to bad choices. Our youth can be saved The same energy and commitment that they give to their peers in the gangs can with the right strategies be refocused on changing their own lives and their communities for the better.

I have worked with gang involved and delinquent youth for nearly two decades. I have seen success in young people who were referred to me because they were designated "delinquent" or "beyond help" and I have witnessed these same youth change their lives for the better when given access to needed resources, skills and opportunities for empowerment . This is our work.

I have a vested interest in the success of these young people , I live in Bedford Stuyvesant with many of the youth I work with but more important I use to be one of them and sadly the factors governing the growth of gangs has not changed; Powerlessness, hopelessness, and feeling invisible are at the underlying feelings of most gang members. Cyclical family poverty, poor education, lack of resources, are at the root of the problem.

In the late 1990s many of the youth involved in gangs were from families and communities devastated by crack and HIV/AIDS. Many are young people who were raised by teen mothers or grandparents. I grew up a generation before them in the 1980's my neighborhood was ravaged by crack cocaine and the AIDS epidemic. There were no role models. The only people who weren't living in poverty were drug dealers and the gangsters who we respected out of fear. That was my world. So, as a 15 year old entering high school, the way I saw it, I had one choice - "Am I going to be the predator or the prey?"

I didn't set out to join, let alone start one of the most fearsome girl gangs in the city. At first we didn't call ourselves a gang. But our hopelessness and our need to survive the violence both on the streets and at home became the foundation of our bond. We protected each other and became the family that most of us didn't have. People knew that if you messed with us, we would fight back. And that's how it started. How does it happen? What happens to young boys and girls to make them think it's okay to knock someone out or rob them? There are a number of things but it starts out with kids in poverty feeling invisible. Kids like my friend Lisa who was born in jail and shuttled between an abusive home and foster care. If you messed with Lisa, she would hurt you without blinking. Her thought process was very simple: "I've been hurt. I won't get hurt anymore. I'll get you first." ) When you feel this vulnerable you become the most dangerous person in the world.

Some kids do it for protection Like Nelsa, whose parents were heroin addicts. She took care of her siblings from the time she was 13 by working as a stripper on her lunch break during school. And the gang protected her. We kept Nelsa

safe so she could do what she had to do to take care of her little brothers and sisters.

In Bed Stuy, where our program is located crime has increased by as much as 28 percent at a time when crime rates dropped in other parts of the city. And a rising number of these crimes are committed by young women who now make up 30 percent of youth gang members in New York. In most cases, these young women are perpetuating a cycle of violence that started with their own abuse --an appalling 85% of the girls who enter the prison system have been sexually or physically abused. Once entrenched in a gang, these young women have little hope for a future. Of those that survive, over 75 percent will become pregnant or drop out of school before they're 18.

Today, All Youth are at-risk for gangs and violence, because the threat of violence is so wide spread. Those who attend school or live in a neighborhood with gangs are forced to choose membership. It is a with us or against us mentality.

The situation for girls involved in gangs and delinquency is different now. Not only have girls become more violent, they have also become more victimized. They have accepted rape as a way of showing loyalty to the gang. One girl I recently met shared her experience of being "blessed". She told me that she wasn't in the gang, only a gang affiliate. But she was protected because she had been forced to have sex with all the gang members. And that's what it means to be *blessed*.

Right now, there are girls out there, just like I was, who are counting on someone to see past the bravado. Girls who are looking for someone to listen, girls who don't know there is an alternative to pimping their bodies, who have no role models -- who feel invisible. And that's where YEM comes in. We work with the young people, most of who are in crisis when they reach our doors. If you came to Blossom you would see girls in a small groups being tutored in math, a group of six girls in a sexual abuse survivors group, you would hear Jessica boasting about working at her mentors consulting firm on the weekends, you would see Girlz in Business participants creating designer pillows under their Cozy Comforts pillow business, you would see a group of ten parents in a parent support group , you will find a girl in crisis crying but coming to one of our counselors for assistance, you will hear African drums beating as 75 young women dance across the floor. You will see girls writing and performing their poetry at our Poetry café and if you came today you would see girls organizing for their march and speaking out against the negative impact of the media on girls and young women of color. You will see first hand what happens when we invest in our young people. YEM is genuine community empowerment.

YEM is youth empowerment. We have to stop talking about gangs it only gives it power, instead we have to address all of the bigger issues that gang involvement covers; Poverty, poor education, racism, classism, and violence. As we point the judging finger at youth we also need to look in the mirror and at our leadership for the glorified violence that our children are exposed to on the street, on television and on the radio. We live in a very violent society that forces youth to become desensitized and hardened. We send mixed messages to our children

and are shocked when they express their pain and confusion by engaging in violence, promiscuity and drug abuse.

Our young people are smart and resilient if given the right academic and moral nourishment and support they need, they will succeed but if we continue to attack symptoms rather than the historical diseases of poverty, prejudice, sexism, and classism and look at the surface issue of “gangs” as the enemy as opposed to the real underlying factors that almost force young people to run toward gang involvement, our young people will continue to become statistics, inmates, teen parents, victims and perpetrators of violence.