



**Testimony of Mai Fernandez  
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Before the House Committee on the Judiciary  
Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security  
Hearing on Making Communities Safer: Youth Violence and Gang Interventions that Work  
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Good afternoon, Chairman Scott and members of the Subcommittee. It is a pleasure to be before you today to speak on issues related to youth violence and gang interventions that work.

Before I go into the substance of my testimony, I would like to tell you a bit about the Latin American Youth Center (LAYC) where I work. We have been in DC for more than years and a little over a year ago we opened 3 offices in Maryland. We are a community-based, multi-cultural and multi-lingual youth and family development center. We provide educational programs and tutoring to enable youth who are in school to stay in school and go on to college. For young people who have dropped out of school, we provide GED preparation and work-force training. We offer an alternative to incarceration program for youth inside the juvenile justice system and re-entry programs for youth exiting it. Additionally, we provide counseling, substance abuse assistance, foster care and residential placement for youth in need of such services.

Through our different programs, we serve about 3,000 youth annually. I think that it is safe to say that many of them are gang involved or have been gang involved at some point in their life. However, only a small number of our kids are involved in criminal activity.

Let me explain. Many of the parents of our youth immigrated to the United States to find safety and a better way of life for their children. Upon arriving in the U.S., many of these adults find themselves needing to work 2 to 3 jobs just to make ends meet. Keeping the family clothed, fed and housed becomes the priority. Unfortunately, this means that children are not provided the supervision that they need.

The lack of supervision often leads to boredom and a sense of insecurity which cause the children to join gangs. Joining a gang gives a youth a group of friends to hang out with, and a sense of security which they cannot get elsewhere in their lives. These kids are not super-predators – they are kids looking for a sense of belonging. Most youth who are in gangs are not criminals.

Having said this, I am a former prosecutor from Manhattan, and do believe that when gang members get involved in criminal activity there needs to be a decisive law enforcement response. Three and half years ago, Columbia Heights, D.C., where the Youth Center is located, was plagued with a spree of Latino gang-related murders. Law enforcement acted swiftly in their investigation of the cases and apprehended the perpetrators. Several of these young people are now serving life sentences. The law enforcement response sent a clear message to other gang- involved youth -- if you commit crimes you will be punished.

During this gang crisis, both the community and the police realized that they should not only respond to gang related criminal activity, but should also work together to prevent it. As a result the Gang Intervention Partnership – the GIP -- was created. The GIP brings together police, probation officers, prosecutors and community-based social service providers to develop intervention strategies for youth who are at high risk of committing crimes.

GIP has focused not just on reducing violent behavior, but on addressing the myriad social and economic issues, such as family situation, employment status, school attendance, peer relationships, and limited recreational opportunities, which can create environments that lead to violence among young people.

GIP's holistic approach marries prevention and intervention initiatives with intelligence gathering and enforcement efforts, providing a new model for reducing gang violence.

As a GIP community partner, the Latin American Youth Center has focused its efforts on outreach to gang-related youth, working closely with gang-involved young people to offer them arts, recreational and leadership programs as well as other opportunities to help them live healthy lives and connect them to caring adults.

From its inception, GIP has concentrated on a set of core strategies: 1) Conducting intensive and targeted police work and building strong police/community partnerships; 2) Providing targeted outreach to gang-related youth and their families; 3) Educating parents and community members and; 4) Improving and expanding access to services critical to family strengthening and diversion.

What often occurs is that a community member will find out that a youth is in some kind of trouble. The members of the GIP come together to ensure that the youth is supervised and that he/she is involved in

structured activities. In instances where the youth has faced real security problems, arrangements have been made to place the youth in witness protection programs.

This last fall, the GIP program was independently evaluated by the Center for Youth Policy Research. The evaluators found that the GIP's comprehensive approach dramatically reduced Latino gang-related violence in DC. Their findings sited that there has not been a Latino gang-related homicide in the District of Columbia since October 9, 2003.

The numbers of youths shot or stabbed in the Columbia Heights/Shaw neighborhoods dropped from 40 in the four-year period before GIP (summer 1999 – summer 2003) to five in the three years since GIP was created (August 2003 - August 2006). In the four years preceding GIP, 21 young people died as a result of the 40 violent attacks. Since GIP was introduced, just one of the five shootings/stabbings resulted in loss of life and each of the shooting cases has been closed by MPD within 48 hours.

In addition to reducing violence, the evaluation found that GIP achieved each of its other four major goals – decreasing gang membership; reducing the number of gang-related suspensions in targeted schools; increasing the involvement of at-risk youth in recreational and other productive activities; and building community capacity and consciousness about gangs.

The evaluation demonstrates clearly that when there is close coordination and collaboration between law enforcement, government officials, the schools and community partners, there can be great strides in battling youth violence.

Importantly, the evaluation shows that a youth who has been involved in gang-related criminal activity can turn around his/her life.

GIP's success results from not focusing on one piece of the gang equation, but instead dealing comprehensively with the education, prevention and enforcement pieces and then coordinating these activities in a very disciplined manner.

For other jurisdictions working to reduce gang-related violence, the Gang Intervention Partnership offers three years of experience, providing a guide to some of challenges and obstacles that may arise when a community puts together a holistic, multi-agency and highly effective response.

In the past three years, we've learned a lot through the GIP – about the importance of communication, coordination and collaboration. About the need for multiple sectors to work together. About the need to respond quickly and aggressively to even small incidents – so that they're dealt with before they flare up into violence or additional violence. We've also learned how important it is to be in the schools -- to be getting information to the schools as well as back from the schools.

Our community has been able to tailor an effective and appropriate response to gang-related crime in our area. I want to emphasize, however, that different gangs have different ways of operating and, therefore, community leaders need flexibility to respond to the unique gang problems in their area.

Even within a small geographic area such as DC, the types of interventions that will work in Columbia Heights may, for example, differ from the precise intervention needed in Southeast.

The Federal Government should facilitate the process of developing community responses to gang prevention and intervention by providing resources and technical assistance. Congress should not pass legislation that applies a universal solution to all jurisdictions.

Thank you for your time. I am available to answer questions at this time.

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