

National Gang Center Newsletter

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Improving Understanding of and Responsiveness to Gang-Involved Girls

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I “know how you [are],” Dana recalls a neighbor telling her.¹ “I remember your dad.”

A bright, social 18-year-old from the San Francisco Bay Area, Dana grew up in a gang-involved family and has been perceived as a gang member all of her life. While Dana’s own family would consider her a gang member, Dana prefers the term “gang associate.” She explains: *“It’s like, I never signed up for this. Sure, I do things for them. They’re my family, you know, but it is not like I ever wanted to claim anything. That would be unlike me.”*



Gang-Involved Girls (continued)

Dana was interviewed for a study on girls and gangs led by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD), a research and policy organization. The goal of the study was to better understand gang-involved girls' experiences, including identifying girls' reasons for joining and leaving a gang, their roles in gangs, and strategies for desistance. Through the study, NCCD researchers also sought to provide useful information to help guide practitioners, programming, and policy related to gang-involved girls.

This project had two phases of data collection: individual, qualitative interviews with key stakeholders (including outreach workers and former gang members) and individual interviews with gang-involved girls to collect quantitative and qualitative data. Funding for research and for the dissemination of research findings was provided by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the California Wellness Foundation, respectively.

The following summarizes selected key findings from NCCD's interviews with gang-involved girls. It also includes several recommendations, drawing on the study findings, for service providers and others who want to help gang-involved girls.

Who are the girls NCCD interviewed?

Demographics

- » Staff members interviewed 114 girls and young women in eight California cities.²
- » Interview participants ranged in age from 14 to 25 years. About half (48%) of participants were between the ages of 17 and 19.
- » Participants identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino (44%), black/African American (36%), mixed race (14%), Native American (3%), Pacific Islander (2%), or white (1%).
- » About two-thirds (62%) of participants identified as straight and a quarter (25%) as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning.
- » More than one-third (40%) of participants were pregnant and/or parents at the time of the interviews.

Justice System Involvement of Participants

- » Nearly three-quarters (71%) of participants had been arrested at some point in their lives.
- » About half (49%) of participants had been on probation.
- » About half (51%) of participants had been in detention or placement.

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Justice System and Gang Involvement of Participants' Families

- » Most (96%) participants reported that they had at least one family member who had been arrested.
- » Most (92%) participants reported that they had at least one family member who had been in jail or prison.
- » Most (86%) participants reported that they had at least one gang-involved family member, which may include extended family or close friends.

Why do girls join gangs?

The study shows that interview participants' families, neighborhoods, and peer situations impact their involvement in gang activities. In addition, motivations for joining or being involved with a gang are often a result of multiple factors and may not reflect an active choice to pursue gang involvement.

Family involvement in gangs was not only a reality among the majority of interview participants, it also was one of the most common reasons given for joining or being perceived as being part of a gang. Some participants with gang-involved families felt that they did not have a choice regarding being part of a gang or being labeled as gang members. One participant said, "It was my family. I wouldn't have said no." Another common response related to participants' neighborhoods or environments, with some stating that they became associated with a gang because of where they lived. Other girls said their involvement was driven by a desire for belonging and acceptance, often describing their gangs as "family," or was due to having gang-involved peers and/or romantic partners.

What are girls' roles in gangs?

When asked whether they had a particular role in their gangs, interview participants' most frequent initial response was that they did not have a specified role. However, many subsequently provided information about tasks they conducted in their gangs, while a small group of participants reiterated that they did not have a role.

Of the participants who said they had a specific role in their gangs, the most common response was having an auxiliary position, which included "being loyal" and "do[ing] what you're told." Another main role was "being a fighter," which included disciplining other girls in the gang or confronting girls from rival gangs. Finally, participants reported the common role of leadership. A girl in this position tended to describe herself as a "female general" and "in charge of other girls."

Why do girls leave gangs?

The majority (80%) of interview participants self-identified as being inactive in a gang at the time of the interview. Since many participants were interviewed through intervention and street outreach programs that provide gang desistance services, this may have contributed to a large proportion of the study sample considering themselves inactive. For most participants who described themselves as inactive, exiting their gangs did not require formal steps such as being "jumped out" or "put off" of the gangs. Instead, inactivity was typically a gradual process of continuously rejecting gang activity.

"Maturing out"—including wanting a better lifestyle—was the most common reason cited for participants' gang inactivity. For those who were pregnant or had children, this involved a desire to raise their children in a healthy environment. Others reported growing weary of what gang activity entailed, including constant vigilance, worrying their family members, and losing loved ones to gang violence. Some stated that as they matured, they wanted to follow different life avenues, such as pursuing education, finding legitimate employment, and living a drug-free life.



Gang-Involved Girls (continued)

Another frequent reason for becoming inactive was a fear of incarceration and subsequent retraumatization in the justice system. The prospect of having another blemish on their criminal justice records or, if incarcerated, having limited or no opportunities to see their families, served as a deterrent to remaining active.

What are girls' strengths?

When asked to identify some of their strengths, interview participants indicated several key areas. They most commonly described themselves as strong and resilient. For example, one participant said she was able to effectively rebound from problems or setbacks. Other recurring responses included strong interpersonal skills and intelligence, with participants describing themselves as “communicative,” “outgoing,” “quick and smart,” and “brilliant.” Another common strength reported was independence. One participant said, “I don’t ask for help, I do things myself.”

Recommendations

To further support organizations and individuals working to help gang-involved girls desist and transition away from gang activity, NCCD recommends the following.

Place Intersectionality at the Forefront

Services should consider the intersectional linkages among participants’ races/ethnicities, genders, classes, citizenship status, gender identities, sexual orientations, and other factors. This can include understanding and acknowledging how these defining characteristics influence the choices, viewpoints, and experiences of young women involved in gangs.

Understand Girls’ Entrenched Lives

Many interview participants were entrenched in lifestyles in which gang involvement was prevalent. As they transition out of gangs, girls need assistance and support in successfully addressing complex relationships with their gang-involved family members, friends, and neighborhoods.

Provide Tailored Services

Many participants decided to exit their gangs because they were pregnant or parenting, which indicates the need for specific services. In addition, as girls transition from gangs, they continue to experience high levels of trauma, need to locate sustainable employment and reliable housing, and may struggle with addiction issues. This information demonstrates the need to offer a range of services and support to young women exiting gangs. Moreover, these resources should be provided to women further into adulthood.

Build on Girls' Strengths

Service providers and others should use an asset-based approach—such as positive youth development—to recognize and build on girls' strengths, such as those endorsed by study participants: resiliency, interpersonal skills, intelligence, and independence.

Please visit www.nccdglobal.org for more information about NCCD's study on girls and gangs.

¹ Name and other identifying details have been changed to protect privacy.

² Participants were interviewed in the following California cities: Hayward, Los Angeles, Oakland, Richmond, Salinas, San Jose, San Francisco, and San Leandro. Participants did not necessarily live in the cities where their interviews took place; these data were not collected to protect confidentiality.

Success Stories

- » **The News & Observer**—Former Raleigh gang 'First Lady' tells kids that women in gangs 'get no respect': <http://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/crime/article92483747.html>
- » **Homegirl Café & Catering**—Assisting high-risk and formerly gang-involved young women to become contributing members of community through training in restaurant service and culinary arts: <http://www.homeboyindustries.org/what-we-do/homegirl-cafe/welcome/>
- » **Homeboy Industries Transformation Stories:**
 - **Mariana Enriques**—A Moment of Clarity: http://www.homeboyindustries.org/site/transformation_stories/P7
 - **Amie Zuniga**—How an Accidental Transformation Led to a Life of Purpose: http://www.homeboyindustries.org/site/transformation_stories/P6
 - **Glenda Alvarenga**—Hungry for Empowerment: http://www.homeboyindustries.org/site/transformation_stories/P12
 - **Rasheena Buchanan**—"You Can't Get This Kind of Love Anywhere Else": http://www.homeboyindustries.org/site/transformation_stories/P13
 - **Ruth Butler**—"Now I Love My Life": http://www.homeboyindustries.org/site/transformation_stories/P15
 - **Brandy Harris**—"Recognize Who You Are": http://www.homeboyindustries.org/site/transformation_stories/P16
 - **Valerie Copeland**—"Homeboy is a Place Where it is OK to Be Myself": http://www.homeboyindustries.org/site/transformation_stories/P26
 - **Brazil Jackson**—"Laugh a Little Harder, Live a Little Longer": http://www.homeboyindustries.org/site/transformation_stories/P29





Female Delinquency and Effective Programs

In 1899, the first juvenile court was created by the Chicago Women's Club, bringing a dual emphasis on gender. However, since the main goal was removing juveniles from adult prisons over time, mainly males were served (in houses of refuge and asylum for children). During the past 20 years, the number of juvenile females arrested, detained, and placed on probation has increased. Yet there remains a lack of gender-specific treatment available to these girls, and more research is needed in this area. Further, Petersen and Howell (2013) note that few gang prevention and intervention programs have been designed with girls in mind and emphasize the need for both female-specific and gender-neutral programming.

Over the past 20 years, the number of juvenile females arrested, detained, and placed on probation has increased. Yet there remains a lack of gender-specific treatment available to these girls, since the juvenile justice system was designed primarily to deal with male delinquents.

While boys and girls involved in the juvenile system have experienced many of the same risk factors (emotional neglect, household substance abuse, emotional, and physical abuse), there are issues unique to females. Girls are three times more likely to experience sexual abuse in the home and are at greater risk for sexual assault outside the home (Sheldon, 2001). In fact, it is estimated that 70 percent of female delinquents have a history of sexual abuse. A growing body of research also has shown a link between victimization (rape, incest, and battering), trauma, and girls' delinquency.

In recognizing the developmental pathways that lead girls to offending behavior, there is also an opportunity to understand the challenges that place them at higher risk of delinquency. Research studies on female gang members reveal that many come from homes with a high incidence of sexual abuse, domestic violence, and family dysfunction. Girls and young women may be attracted to gangs as a way to fulfill the basic needs of safety, protection, and belonging. However, membership in gangs often places females in potentially negative and dangerous situations. Involvement in gangs may lead to sexual abuse, promiscuous sexual activity, substance abuse, unprotected sex, and violence (Miller, 2001, Moore and Hagedorn, 1996).

The pathway to delinquency for girls and boys is different. In addition to their early experiences with sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect, loss of a primary caregiver, family dysfunction, and

other traumas often contribute to girls' later behavioral problems. In addition, a disproportionate number of female juvenile offenders have learning disabilities (Chesney-Lind and Sheldon, 2004). Girls who experience challenges in school may shut down in the classroom, skip school, or drop out entirely. Their academic failure follows them in their life courses, since they often end up underemployed or unemployed. These risk factors are compounded by institutional sexism, racism, and classism. On the other hand, protective factors such as the involvement of a caring adult, school connectedness, school success, and religiosity can play an important role in strengthening girls' abilities to be resilient in light of these challenges (Hawkins, 2009).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in addressing issues affecting female delinquents and identifying effective treatment programs for them. One of the main justifications for gender-specific programs is that they are more responsive to the distinct needs of girls, which are the result of developmental and socialization differences in a gendered society (Hubbard and Matthews, 2008). In response to these concerns, a number of evidence-based promising and model programs are available to girls today. A promising practice has strong quantitative and qualitative data showing positive outcomes but does not yet have enough replication or research to support generalizable positive outcomes. A best practice or model program results from a rigorous process of evaluation and peer review that shows effectiveness in improving outcomes for the target population. Some model and promising programs for girls are listed below.

	Program	Web Site
MODEL	Functional Family Therapy	http://www.functionalfamilytherapy.com/about-fft/clinical-model/#.WATeWBRpww
	Multidimensional Treatment, Foster Care	https://www.crimesolutions.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?ID=141
	Olweus Bullying Prevention Program	http://www.violencepreventionworks.org/public/index.page
	Trauma Affect Regulation: Guide for Education and Therapy (Target)	https://www.crimesolutions.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?ID=145
PROMISING	Brief Strategic Family Therapy	http://archives.drugabuse.gov/TXManuals/BSFT/BSFT2.html
	Athletes Targeting Healthy Exercise and Nutrition Alternatives (ATHENA)	http://www.ohsu.edu/xd/education/schools/school-of-medicine/departments/clinical-departments/medicine/divisions/hpsm/research/athena.cfm
	Home-Visiting Program for Adolescent Mothers	https://www.crimesolutions.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?ID=485
	Keep Safe	http://www.blueprintsprograms.com/factsheet/keep-safe
	Movimiento Ascendencia	https://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/spt/programs/94
	Risk Detection/Executive Function Intervention	https://www.crimesolutions.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?ID=472
	Taking Charge	https://www.crimesolutions.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?ID=340
	The Women's Program	https://www.crimesolutions.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?ID=439
	Social Learning/Feminist Intervention	https://www.crimesolutions.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?ID=471
SNAP	https://www.crimesolutions.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?ID=456	

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- Shelden, R. G. (2001). *Youth Gangs in American Society*. 2nd ed. Australia: Wadsworth Thomson Learning.

RESOURCES

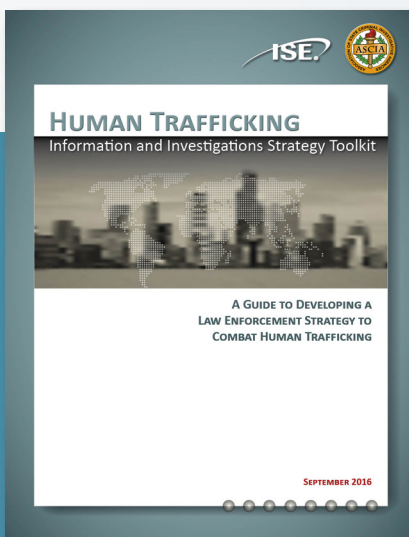
Human Trafficking

- » **National Human Trafficking Resource Center and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Online Trainings**
Page: <http://traffickingresourcecenter.org/nhtrc-hhs-online-trainings>
- » **National Human Trafficking Resource Center—Gang-Involved Sex Trafficking Online Training:**
<https://traffickingresourcecenter.org/resources/gang-involved-sex-trafficking>
- » **The National Center for Victims of Crime—The Lost Victims: Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Youth** (Webinar Slides): <http://victimsofcrime.org/docs/default-source/Trafficking-Trainings/lost-victims-slides-for-web.pdf?sfvrsn=2>
- » **Center for Court Innovation—Youth Involvement in the Sex Trade: A National Study:**
<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/grants/249952.pdf>
- » **The Protection Project Journal of Human Rights and Civil Society—Sold for Sex: The Link between Street Gangs and Trafficking in Persons:** <http://www.globalcenturion.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/Sold-for-Sex-The-Link-between-Street-Gangs-and-Trafficking-in-Persons-1.pdf>
- » **University of San Diego and Point Loma Nazarene University—The Nature and Extent of Gang Involvement in Sex Trafficking in San Diego County:** <http://www.abolishhumantrafficking.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Executive-Summary.Final-Technical-Report.NIJ2016.pdf>
- » **InvestigateWest—In Oregon, Gangs Take Over as Sex Trafficking Goes Offline:**
<http://invw.org/2014/10/16/portland-gangs-trafficking/>
- » **KGW News—The Game: Gangs in Portland:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-qznhttafE>
- » **Portland State University—Groundbreaking Portland State University study sheds light on child sex trafficking:**
<https://www.pdx.edu/news/groundbreaking-portland-state-university-study-sheds-light-child-sex-trafficking>
- » **Portland State University—Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the Portland Metro Area:**
https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/usao-or/legacy/2013/10/29/the_csec_report.pdf
- » **National Center for Missing & Exploited Children Web site—Child Sex Trafficking:**
<http://www.missingkids.com/CSTT>
- » **Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation—Treating the Hidden Wounds: Trauma Treatment and Mental Health Recovery for Victims of Human Trafficking:** <https://aspe.hhs.gov/report/treating-hidden-wounds-trauma-treatment-and-mental-health-recovery-victims-human-trafficking>

- » **Family and Services Youth Bureau**—*Trauma-Informed Approaches to Supporting Domestic Trafficking Survivors* (PowerPoint Slides): http://www.api-gbv.org/files/TraffickingTraumaPPT-APIIDV_01.2015.pdf
- » **Alabama Public Health Training Network**—*Human Trafficking: Trauma-Informed Care and Treatment* (YouTube Video): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkLq5ySFQ8o>

Policy and Programming

- » **Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention**—*National Girls Initiative*: <http://ngi-innovationawards.airprojects.org/Default.aspx>
- » **Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention**—*Girls and the Juvenile Justice System*: <http://www.ojjdp.gov/policyguidance/girls-juvenile-justice-system/>
- » **National Council on Crime & Delinquency**—*It's About Time: Prevention and Intervention Services for Gang-Affiliated Girls*: http://www.nccdglobal.org/sites/default/files/publication_pdf/focus-its-about-time.pdf
- » **The National Crittenton Foundation**—*Gender Injustice: System-Level Juvenile Justice Reforms for Girls*: http://www.nationalcrittenton.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Gender_Injustice_Report.pdf
- » **The Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center**—*Using a Trauma-Informed Approach*: <https://www.ovcttac.gov/taskforceguide/eguide/4-supporting-victims/41-using-a-trauma-informed-approach/>



Human Trafficking Information and Investigations Strategy Toolkit— A Guide to Developing a Law Enforcement Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking

The Association of State Criminal Investigative Agencies (ASCIA), in partnership with the Office of the Program Manager—Information Sharing Environment (PM-ISE), developed the Human Trafficking Information and Investigations Strategy Toolkit—A Guide to Developing a Law Enforcement Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking. This toolkit was designed to help state law enforcement agencies form specialized strategies appropriate for their jurisdictions for combatting human trafficking; however, other law enforcement entities and partners can benefit from this guide as well.

The toolkit is available for download on the ASCIA Web site under the “Publications” tab, located at <https://www.ascia.org/news.php>.

A close-up photograph of a person's eyes, heavily tinted with a green color. The eyes are looking directly forward, and the surrounding skin and hair are also in shades of green. The image has a soft, slightly blurred quality.

***“Shift our lens from what’s wrong with this kid,
to what happened to this kid”***

—Dr. Isaiah Pickens, Assistant Director of Service Systems
The National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, University of California, Los Angeles
“Understanding Trauma in the Context of Juvenile Justice Systems”—Webinar

Breaking the Cycle of Gang Violence

The **Comprehensive Gang Model** and the **Trauma-Informed Care Public Health Model** approach both share the ultimate goal of reducing violence in the community. The two approaches differ in how they achieve this goal. With long-term goals in view, the **Comprehensive Gang Model** offers a framework that can work in tandem with public health programs. When combined, the **Comprehensive Gang Model** and **Trauma-Informed Care Public Health Model** can focus on individual and community factors causing post-traumatic stress. The strength of this collective action further fosters conditions that nurture the well-being of young people, stem youth violence, and ultimately promote safe and thriving communities.

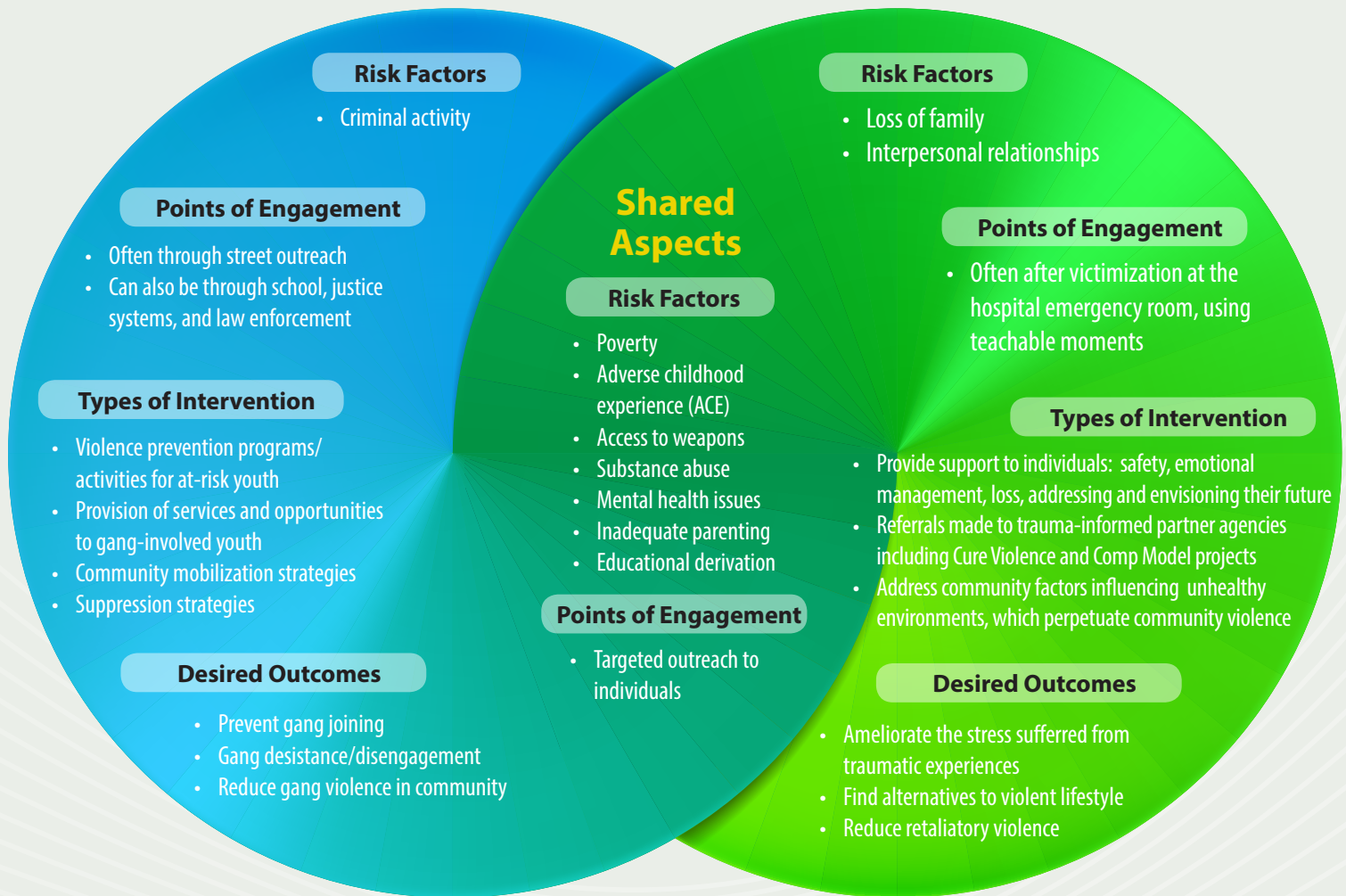
For more information about the **Comprehensive Gang Model**, visit the National Gang Center Web site at <https://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Comprehensive-Gang-Model>.

Breaking the Cycle of Gang Violence

Shared Goals: Reduce Gang and High-Risk Behaviors Among Young People; Reduce Violence in the Community

Comprehensive Gang Model

Trauma-Informed Care Public Health Model



Shared Vision: Safe and Thriving Youth, Family, and Communities

For more information about **Trauma-Informed Care Public Health Model**, visit the National Network of Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Programs Web site at <http://nnhvip.org/trauma-informed-care/>.



ABOUT THE NATIONAL GANG CENTER

The National Gang Center (NGC) is jointly funded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The NGC conducts research on street gangs and serves as a clearinghouse for individuals and agencies seeking information, technical assistance, and training in the areas of gang prevention, intervention, suppression, and reentry.

NGC TRAINING AND CONFERENCES

<https://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Training-and-Technical-Assistance>

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