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# How to Help Me Get Out of a Gang: Youth Recommendations to Family, School, Community, and Law Enforcement Systems

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## Abstract

Research on juvenile gangs has focused predominantly on why adolescents are members of gangs rather than on how youths desist from gang involvement. Participants were recruited from a camp facility in central California. Using the Consensual Qualitative Research approach, four researchers reviewed 58 adolescent males' responses to six open-ended questions regarding how to help youths get out of gangs. These youths made six overarching recommendations: overall recommendations and those relating to school, family, community, law enforcement, and gang interventions. This article concludes with practical implications and future directions based on the integration of study results with the research literature.

## Introduction

Many communities face the harsh realities of gangs and the subsequent societal difficulties they bring (Gilbertson, 2009). In 2010 there were an estimated 756,000 members of 29,400 gangs across 3,500 jurisdictions in the United States (Egley & Howell, 2012). Although previously assumed to be only an urban challenge, research has shown a shift in gang territory into suburban communities. Despite a decrease in youth crime rates over the past decade, gang activity continues to cause violent and serious crime at high levels; the 2010 National Youth Gang Study found that rates of gang activity reported by agencies nationwide remained stable over the previous 5 years (Egley & Howell, 2012). All social institutions must examine their role in this negative developmental trajectory and determine how they can help youths re-engage in healthy systems, such as schools, to get out of the gang life

(Sharkey, Shekhtmester, Chavez-Lopez, Norris, & Sass, 2011).

Unfortunately, research investigating the effectiveness of interventions to reduce violence and increase healthy life outcomes for youths in gangs is limited. There are many reasons for this dearth of scholarship. First, identifying exactly who is in a gang is a challenge. The label of being a gang member carries serious consequences, including being targeted by law enforcement for noncriminal offenses, being treated with less respect by school and community members, and being targeted by gang members for recruitment or retaliation. Thus, valid methods for identifying gang membership are limited to self-identification (Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001). Second, given the complexity of gang members' involvement in risk behaviors, interventions tend to be multidimensional and poorly tracked; it is difficult to isolate which interventions have helped the youths and in what way, as compared to what has not helped or even done harm (Klein, 2011). Third, rigorous methodology is challenged by the ethical mandate to intervene with all youths, making random assignment to treatment infeasible. Fourth, agencies are not able to share sensitive and protected data without overcoming collaboration and permission challenges. Moreover, once sensitive data are shared they may be used against participants who are brought to trial. Youths who are involved in gangs may hesitate to allow sharing of their personal information for fear of how it might be used against them by institutions they already distrust. Fifth, gang risks and behavioral patterns may differ: what works in a large urban environment may not be the best fit for a smaller suburban community (Klein, 2011). All of these factors affect the course of gang research that has, for the most part, focused on risk factors and negative outcomes rather than resilience (Sharkey et al., 2011).

It is important to examine gang desistance as distinct from joining, as reasons for leaving a gang are not simply the opposite of those for joining

(Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). For example, if lacking prosocial activities during free time is a motivation to join a gang, providing members with prosocial activities may not motivate them to leave the gang. Scholars have recognized that desistance from gangs can take one of two pathways: either an immediate departure that involves eliminating gang activity or a gradual disengagement from the gang (Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2010). However, a deeper understanding of how these pathways are initiated and which ones lead to greater success is not yet available (Pyrooz, Sweeten, & Piquero, 2013). Literature on desistance from various organized groups, including racist, terrorist, and criminal groups, has identified leaving as motivated by "push" and "pull" factors (Bjorgo, 2009; Petersilia, 2003). Factors that push individuals out of such groups include disillusionment with the group ideology or functioning, whereas factors that pull individuals away include family responsibilities, maturation, or a desire for a mainstream life. In the adult criminal justice literature, romantic relationships and employment have been found to be key motivations for people who have transitioned from crime to conformity (Petersilia, 2003). Although research with adults may provide some insight into desistance patterns, juveniles involved in gangs are in a different developmental stage and may have specific motivations for desistance from gang involvement that need to be studied (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).

Studies of youth gang persistence and desistance have only recently emerged, but share some consistent findings. For example, Melde and Esbensen (2011) examined correlates of gang involvement and desistance with 1,686 youths originally recruited for the evaluation of a school-based program. Of these, 181 (11%) reported involvement with a youth gang at some point in the first two waves of data collection. Desisters had less frequent delinquency, more prosocial peers, less negative peer commitment, less unstructured socializing, and less anger identity than youths who persisted in a gang. Similarly,

Pyrooz et al. (2013) examined longitudinal data from the Pathways to Desistance study of 1,354 youths ages 14 to 17 years who had been adjudicated in Philadelphia or Phoenix. They found that youths deeply embedded in gangs, with more antisocial ties (e.g., their peers had been arrested and incarcerated) and fewer prosocial opportunities (e.g., youths who come from low-income backgrounds) desisted from gangs at a slower rate than those who did not belong to gangs. They also found that lower levels of self-control were related to persisting in gangs for longer periods, indicating that perhaps those youths lacked the skills to transition into alternative opportunities. Results of both studies suggest that engagement with prosocial peers, school engagement, anger management, and structured activities are potential interventions for youth gang members. However, it is unclear whether these factors caused, or were merely associated with, desistance from gangs.

The reasons, methods, and perceived and real consequences of leaving a youth gang have also been examined in several studies. O'Neal, Decker, Moule, and Pyrooz (2014) examined the actual process of desistance from gangs, with a specific focus on gender differences. Former gang members, both adolescents and adults ( $N = 143$ ) from Los Angeles and Phoenix, were interviewed about their gang involvement. The most common reasons cited for leaving a gang for males and females, were becoming tired of the gang lifestyle/deciding to grow up and beginning a family. Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen (2013) conducted secondary data analysis with data drawn from the national evaluation of the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program. Their final pooled sample size across several cohorts and waves of participants was 15,298; among gang desisters ( $n = 1,185$ ) the most common reason for leaving a gang was disillusionment (e.g., "It wasn't what I thought it would be"). Findings suggest that leaving a gang typically occurs because of natural transitions or other nonspecific reasons.

One potential consequence of leaving a gang that may discourage desistance is the fear of retaliation or violence. However, in several studies the actual experience of violence is typically low. For example, Pyrooz and Decker (2011) conducted a cross-sectional study that included 84 youths in juvenile facilities in Arizona who were recently detained in the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring program. They found that gang members who had external motivations to leave the gang, such as family or work obligations, did not experience resistance to desistance from fellow gang members. Conversely, almost one-third of members who left because of reasons internal to the gang, such as to avoid violence or crime, experienced some violence when leaving. Overall, only 20% of participants experienced any kind of violence when leaving the gang. Pyrooz et al. (2013) also found that for both males and females, being attacked by one's own gang was uncommon (14% to 17%), but being attacked by a rival gang was somewhat more common (35% to 40%). Taken together, findings imply that helping youths leave gangs may be both acceptable and successful.

The question remains how various social institutions can engage youths who are embedded in gangs. Recent studies have done important work in examining, retrospectively, how former gang members experienced the process of desistance. However, studies exploring and considering what might work, proactively, to help youths get out of a gang, are needed. In a study by O'Neal et al. (2014), both males and females cited family members as the most important source of social support in leaving a gang; formal institutions such as workplaces and social service agencies have not been noted as particularly important in the desistance process. This lack of credit to formal institutions or programs for helping youths desist from gangs is consistent with the findings of the study by Carson et al. (2013), in which the most common method of gang desistance was passive ("simply asked to leave or just left the gang"). Since youths rarely credit formal

institutions with helping them to leave a gang, more information is likely to be gained by asking youths what such institutions could or should do to help them leave a gang.

The current study was an exploratory analysis of youths' perspectives on how various social institutions (e.g., law enforcement, schools) can help youths get out of gang life. The methods rely on a convenience sample recruited by an external agency and given to researchers after data collection was completed. Although there were methodological limitations, these were balanced by the value of these youths' perspectives in an area of inquiry that has yet to be extensively examined; tapping youth perspectives may yield more innovative and practical solutions than those borne of developmental theory. The aim of the open-ended questions, outlined below, was to aid in understanding how various community members can help a youngster get out of a gang.

## Methods

### Participants

On a single day of data collection in December 2011, the Coordinator of a local task force on youth gangs administered surveys anonymously, without any demographic information, to all 58 boys housed in a 24-hour minimum-security camp for males on probation who were between the ages of 13 and 18 years. The Coordinator prefaced the survey with an introduction detailing the importance of the boys' input to help the community; no other incentive was provided and all youths complied, providing responses ranging from a few words to multiple paragraphs of written feedback. These boys were recruited for participation because of their knowledge of and involvement with gangs; youths in the facility were in or associated with gangs. The goal of the program, which was assigned for 120 or 180 days, was to help youths on probation gain the skills to become successful members of society upon release. Programs included counseling, education, vocational training, drug and alcohol

intervention, religious and spiritual expression, and community service.

### Measure

The survey was a compilation of short-answer, open-ended questions crafted by the Coordinator of the community's Task Force on Youth Gangs solely for the purpose of this study. The instructions asked the participants to answer questions to help community members develop better approaches to assisting youths who were committed to getting out of gangs. The answers to the following questions analyzed for this study were:

- (a) As community leaders, what can we do to motivate a youngster to make the commitment to get out of his street gang?
- (b) As community leaders, what can we do to help a youngster secure the help of his family members to get out of a gang?
- (c) As community leaders, what can we do to secure the support of the youngster's homeboys to get out of a gang?
- (d) As community leaders, what can we do to ensure the support of the youngster's enemies to get out of a gang?
- (e) As community leaders, what can we do to secure the support of law enforcement officers to help the youngster get out of his gang?
- (f) What can teachers do to support a student who has made the commitment to get out of his gang?

### Procedures

The coordinator gave the completed surveys to the researchers, who used Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill, 2012) to analyze the responses. CQR is a structured format for examining responses to open-ended questions, requiring multiple judges to come to consensus on the meaning of content. These procedures assure reliability through consensus coding, and validity



through auditing, of the method. Reviewing 10 surveys at a time, content codes were independently developed for all responses by three team members and confirmed through consensus procedures in weekly meetings. With subsequent sets of 10 surveys, codes were added independently by each of the three coders as needed and the list was finalized by consensus. Once all 58 surveys were reviewed to generate the complete list of codes, all were coded a second time to ensure that the entire code list was applied to all surveys. Finally, responses were grouped by code, the code name was removed, and the auditor assigned a new code name to each group of responses. The auditor also noted any responses that seemed to not fit the group. The first author implemented changes based on results of the audit.

Four research members affiliated with the university participated in the CQR process. CQR requires that researchers disclose personal perspectives and influences that may impact the data analysis. All team members were female, three members were White and one was Mexican American. Ages of team members ranged from 24 to 37 years. One team member had a Ph.D. and the other three had master's degrees in education; all team members were trained as school psychologists. Broadly, team members were influenced by their shared perspective that schools and other institutions should engage all youths in positive ways to help them achieve prosocial goals regardless of cultural diversity, emotional concerns, learning difficulties, or other environmental constraints. Team members also believed that schools and communities have a responsibility to promote social justice, which ideally is promoted through comprehensive services that address the needs of youths in family, school, community, and socio-political contexts. These perspectives may have influenced the findings; the CQR process is designed to maximize objectivity and decrease biases or compromises that may have emerged as a result of group dynamics.

## Results and Discussion

Overall, 27 content codes (recommendations) within six themes were generated by the research team based on youths' responses (see Table 1). We analyzed each of their recommendations in the context of existing research on how to get youths out of gangs. Herein we describe each recommendation with examples of quotes, transcribed verbatim to exemplify the researchers' rationale for each theme and category (if fewer than 5% of participants recommended a theme it is included in the Table but not the text). A full list of quotes is available from the technical report (Sharkey et al., 2012) by contacting this paper's first author. The percentage of the total participants who provided each recommendation is included in parentheses next to each recommendation.

### Overall Youth Recommendations

Four recommendations fell within an overarching theme of overall youth recommendations and can be supported by any organization interacting with the youths.

**Promote future aspirations for life, school/college (50%).** One of the most common responses was that adults should promote positive future aspirations, including attending college, for youths in gangs. Examples of quotes include, "Motivate the kid to go to college and learn new things," "Make the kid see how good life is with an education," "Show him that if he change his life is going to be something better for him and his family," and "Tell them that school is more important. That education takes them farther in life than gangs do."

Future research may benefit from including the aspirations of gang-involved youths to understand the way in which the promotion of future goals impacts youth gang desistance. Research provides evidence that hope (i.e., confidence in one's ability to overcome challenges and a positive outlook) is protective against the development of both internalizing and

Table 1. *Summary of Youth Recommendations*

Recommendation	% Endorsed
<i>Overall Youth Recommendations</i>	
Promote future aspirations for life, school/college	50
Discuss negative impact of gangs	43
Move to a different town, witness protection, change name	22
Ensure kids are safe/have a safe place to hang out	17
<i>Family Recommendations</i>	
Family classes, counseling, communication	46
Impact on your family/family is more valuable	29
Family unconditional love, support child in getting out	25
Family keep track of youths, take them to work, spend time with them	21
Family members need to get out of the gang themselves	9
<i>Community Recommendations</i>	
Keep youths busy/positive outlet for emotional release: sports or other activities	47
Community support: youth counseling, support, drug programs	47
Help youths get a job	28
Give youths money, food, toys, material goods	10
<i>School Recommendations</i>	
Teachers can provide emotional/relational support	41
Teachers should provide extra school help/assistance	24
Teachers can help youths stay in school, graduate	22
Teachers can make school more fun and relevant	12
Change teacher's attitudes toward gang members, show respect, treat same as others	10
<i>Law Enforcement Recommendations</i>	
Stop harassing youths	10
Improve relationships between law enforcement and youths	34
Law enforcement should stay on top of what kids do	14
<i>Gang Interventions</i>	
Work with the whole gang together	40
There's nothing you can do	38
Call for peace between rivals	33
Develop friendships outside of gangs	22
You can't change enemies—they don't care about each other	14
Beat them up	6

externalizing problems in children (Hagen, Myers, & Mackintosh, 2005), providing support for the possibility that a positive future orientation can help with gang desistance.

**Discuss negative impact of gangs (43%).** Forty-three percent of the respondents recommended that individuals and groups, including community members, law enforcement, families, peers, and teachers, should tell youths about the negative consequences that can result from gang involvement in an effort to help youths leave gangs. These recommendations included telling and showing youths where they may end up (e.g., jail) and/or trying to “scare” them out of gang life. Youths wrote, “Tell them what waits them if they keep banging [participating in gang activity] which is die or in prison,” “Take them to a tour on jail and show them what kind of lifes they will have if they continue to bang,” “Teach him or her it makes your life more complicated,” and “Tell him that you could end up dead or life in prison.”

Research suggests that programs attempting to scare youths out of crime through visits to prisons and with inmates are not effective. Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino, and Buehler (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of nine experimental studies that evaluated programs like Scared Straight, which take youths who are at-risk or delinquent to prisons and jails in an attempt to deter them from criminal behavior. Results of the meta-analysis showed that youths who participated in these programs were either more or equally likely to criminally offend in the future than no-treatment control groups, suggesting iatrogenic effects. On the other hand, Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.), an evidence-based gang prevention program shown to be effective in reducing gang membership (Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, & Osgood, 2012), includes a lesson on harmful consequences of gangs on the individual and community. However, without a components analysis, it is unclear whether this was one of the components responsible for the program's positive effects.

**Move to a different town, witness protection, change name (22%).** Participants recommended moving youths to different schools or communities to help them leave gang life. One boy stated, “The best way to secure a youngster’s family is taking them to different city or placed so they could stay there and don’t worry about whats is going to happen.” Another wrote, “...give them new identities when they get moved out of town or even out of state so that the other gang members who don’t want help don’t track them down.” Other quotes include, “To get out of a gang you would have to go to a different town or state” and “Move out of town, go somewhere far so they can leave their gang.” Police involvement and support in the form of protective custody was mentioned as well: “Tell the police to be put in protective custody to protect your family.”

To date, research examining the impact of moving youths to get them out of gangs is limited and primarily relies on reports from law enforcement agencies. Additional study of this strategy would help to determine whether youth migration could be a positive intervention for youths who want to leave gangs.

**Ensure youths are safe and have a safe place to hang out (17%).** Several participants noted the importance of having safe spaces for youths to hang out in their neighborhoods, suggesting that a sense of safety would increase youth gang desistance. Respondents shared, “Teachers should watch out for a student. It’s mostly a problem to a student who gets out of a gang because they got no one to count on and are always afraid of getting rushed [attacked],” “Try to keep safe from the gang he got out of,” “Get the youngster and his homeboys protection and make sure their safe when they get out,” and “I myself would move to a safe environment were you and your family could be safe.” Virtually no research has examined the process of youths leaving a gang and the real and/or perceived threat to safety involved in this process.

Of the few studies that have been conducted, it is unclear whether leaving a gang results in victimization. Pyrooz and Decker (2011) found that violence was uncommon when members left the gang, particularly when they left because of external reasons, such as a job or family commitment. Few interventions directly address the fear of violent retaliation associated with leaving a gang. A comprehensive school safety plan may be helpful in protecting youths who decide to leave their gang while they are in school (Sharkey, et al., 2011).

### Family Recommendations

Another overarching theme among the participants’ responses was recommendations pertaining to the family of gang members.

**Family classes, counseling, communication (46%).** Family counseling and classes were repeatedly recommended as ways to facilitate youths getting out of gangs. The youths’ recommendations suggested that by getting the family together and/or providing the families with the tools to help the youths, the youths would be more likely to successfully leave the gang. For example, boys wrote, “To secure the help of his family members you can counsel them and keep them together,” “I think they should have classes with the kids and there family and see why they do what they do,” “The family needs to take a class about gang stuff so they can learn about street stuff,” and “Family counseling.”

Several family-based therapies are empirically supported as treatments for adolescents with conduct disorder and delinquency: multi-systemic therapy, functional family therapy, multidimensional treatment foster care, and brief strategic family therapy (Henggeler & Sheidow, 2012). These therapies focus on bringing families together to better understand patterns of behavior, increase communication between family members, and solve problems relating to specific issues. A meta-analysis of the efficacy of family therapy treatments for adolescent delinquency and substance abuse found that family therapies



are more effective in treating adolescents with delinquency issues than individual adolescent treatments without a family component (Baldwin, Christian, Berkeljon, Shadish, & Bean, 2012).

**Impact on your family/family is more valuable (29%).** Almost one-third of the youths responded that youths need to make a commitment to get out of a gang because of the importance of family. One participant stated, “By helping them to realize the pain their causing to there family.” Both direct (e.g., “Make them see that...the family are also going to pay the consequences;” “Is it worth it to put your family in danger by putting yourself out there in a gang?”) and indirect (e.g., “They will see the pain that the family has when they get in trouble;” “You can try to make them think about their family and what they go threw because of them”) influences on the family were reported. Some participants included recommendations about the importance of youths seeing their families as being more valuable than gang life (e.g., “Make them realize how much they can lose of family if they keep taking the same route;” and “Tell them that family is more important because they are the only ones who will be there, not their homeboy, because they come and go”).

This advice is empirically supported. A year-long qualitative study of Latino, low-income youths involved in gangs found that participants who left their gangs reported doing so because they realized the negative effect their gang involvement had on their families (Halpern, Barker, & Mollard, 2000). Moreover, the youths cited not wanting to continue to put their family through the pain and challenges as a motivation to stay out of gang life.

**Family keep track of youths, take them to work, spend time with them (21%).** Several participants recommended that family members keep track of and spend time with youths in order to help them get out of the gang: “You can also have family activities to help them stay busy;” “They should spend more time with his family

than him being in the streets of his hood;” “To spend more time with his family;” and “Mom and dad should take them with them to work.”

Kerr, Beck, Shattuck, Kattar, and Uriburu (2003) examined the association between family factors and behavioral outcomes for Latino youths. Their research found that parental monitoring and family connectedness were strongly associated with less problem behavior among the youths and family; cultural support was associated with prosocial behavior.

**Family unconditional love, support child in getting out (25%).** One-quarter of the youths recommended that families should provide their children with unconditional love and support as a means of helping them get out of gangs. Similar to the previous category in this theme, these quotes reflected the need for youths to know that their families care about them and want them to get out of the gangs. For example, participants stated that the family can support the child in leaving a gang “By helping the kid in any way;” “By simply having the family know that no matter the situation you need to help out the daughter or son by any meens necessary;” “Be helpful by telling the family to encourage the kid too. And by helping him in a good way;” and “Tell our family members that there is a better way for us and all we need is there support. Give us opportunities to show our family members that we could change with there help.”

In the year-long qualitative study of Latino low-income youths by Halpern et al. (2000), the youths also reported that not having enough guidance, support, and attention from their families was a major factor in their decision to join gangs.

**Family members need to get out of the gang themselves (9%).** Five youths included family gang affiliation and involvement as a factor influencing youth involvement in gangs and subsequent difficulty in getting out of the gangs. For example, youths stated, “The family members need to be already commited to get out of the

gang then let them talk,” and “Well most of the gang members I know there families are gang members also so that’s all they know.” One teen expanded this theme to other family issues, such as parental drug and alcohol problems, which may be affecting youths’ ability to make positive changes in their lives.

As it is common for more than one family member to be in a gang, future research should focus on the effect of family gang members’ desistance on youth gang desistance.

### Community Recommendations

The importance of the community in helping youths get out of gangs was a recurring theme in the youths’ responses.

**Keep youths busy/positive outlet for emotional release: sports or other activities (47%).** Nearly one-half of the participants reported the need for youths to stay busy in positive, non-gang related activities. Sports were commonly discussed as having multiple positive influences on youths trying to leave gangs (e.g., outlet for aggression, social activity, school-based activity). One youth wrote, “Sports like boxing to get all there anger out on one another.” Other school and community activities were also noted as ways to occupy youths’ time, especially after school. For example, one youth wrote, “Provide him with things that will keep them busy also make sure he likes it.” Among all the responses, the need for these activities to be fun, positive, and appropriate outlets for youths was repeated (e.g., “Bring us more fun things in the community,” “Get them involved in other productive activities.”) that are not cost prohibitive (e.g., “All we need is thengs that we like to do for fun that our parents can’t prvide for us because of financial situation”).

Keeping youths busy through extracurricular activities (e.g., sports teams, clubs, organizations) is commonly viewed as a community-based protective factor for youths (Bynner, 2002). A wide range of activity involvement, rather than the level of intensity of participation, has been

shown to be positively associated with fewer delinquent behaviors (through the process of more community adult support leading to improved decision-making skills; [Crean, 2012](#)).

**Community support: youth counseling, support, drug programs (28%).** Many participants stated that community-based programs, such as drug treatment groups and mentorship opportunities, are potential ways to assist youths in choosing to leave gang life: “Help them get into a program and help them stay away from drugs if it’s possible,” “Incouraging the youngster and the homeboys by making like places where teens can hang out and get help with school and family problems and how to live a better life,” “Put them in programs and get people to talk to them so they can realize the benefits of not gang banging, maybe it will help,” and “I think the community leaders can motivate a youngster to make the commitment to get out of his street gang by having afternoon job programs.”

Several community programs that target youth violence prevention and intervention have been researched and developed into evidence-based models ([Edberg et al., 2010](#)). Community programs provide youths with things to do and places to be other than being on the streets and/or with potential street gangs ([Halpern et al., 2000](#)). Although concerns exist about the potentially negative effects of grouping together youths at risk for delinquent behavior (Cecile & Born, 2009), community-based programs have demonstrated success in helping these youths. One example of such a community program is the Juvenile Intervention and Prevention Program (JIPP) in the Los Angeles Unified School District. JIPP takes a whole-child approach to school-based gang intervention and prevention for children identified as being at risk; students involved in JIPP were more involved in their communities and had better attitudes about themselves, their parents, and law enforcement after receiving and participating in the program ([Koffman et al., 2009](#)). Other community efforts, such as the National Youth Gang Suppression and

Intervention Program (Decker & Curry, 2000) have also shown promise for helping youths desist from gangs.

**Help youths get a job (47%).** Many participants shared the idea that getting jobs was a good way for youths to stay out of gangs. For example, youths wrote, “Maybe work on getting more jobs for younger kids so they won’t have to stay on the streets,” “I think community leaders can motivate a youngster by having something to do with a job,” and “Well I think a good way to help out someone get out of a gang is by helping them get a job.” The financial benefit of employment was also noted within these responses, such as “Offer us jobs because then we don’t have to sell drugs to get money and if we get drugs we fight.”

Studies have demonstrated that employment is related to reductions in general offending. For example, in one study, even just temporary employment was related to a reduction in offending for high-frequency chronic offenders (van der Geest, Bijleveld, & Blokland, 2011).

**Give youths money, food, material goods (10%).** A few recommendations provided by youths suggested that material assistance would motivate youths to get out of gangs: “maybe give them money” or “give them food, money.” More than half of these responses referred to the money being used for college scholarships for youths, e.g., “They [law enforcement] should advice the youngster to do well by paying for college if they are willing to get out” and “They [teachers] can offer them oportunties like scholarships for colleges...”

Although providing youths with scholarships to college is a common practice, direct effects of this practice on gang desistance is unknown.

## School Recommendations

Five categories were derived from the responses that focused on school recommendations. The responses reflect a general sense that teachers have an important and powerful role to play in

youth development and future opportunities for success.

**Teachers can provide emotional/relational support (41%).** Many respondents wrote that teachers should provide emotional and/or relational support in the form of advice, such as “give advice,” support youths’ choice to get out of the gang, such as “...do something big for a kid cause it’s hard to get out a gang”; encourage youths’ efforts, such as “Teachers could only help us by being faithful and encouraging to leave the gang life,” “Teachers can keep supporting him,” “Talk to them and see they are successful in life also motivated the kid,” and “I think the only thing [teachers] can do is keep supporting them and keep having them to not going back to the gang and start doing the wrong thing.” The importance of trust in helping relationships seemed to underscore many of the recommendations the youths made.

The research literature has not directly addressed the association between trust in relationships and youths leaving gangs, but there is evidence that trustworthiness in student-teacher relationships is important to adolescents, particularly adolescents from minority groups. For example, [Gregory and Ripski \(2008\)](#) examined the relation between adolescent student discipline, students’ defiant behavior, and students’ perceptions of their teachers as trustworthy through interviews and surveys. They found that having a relational approach to discipline decreased student defiance, but that this association was explained by student perceptions of teacher trustworthiness. Relationship building and trustworthiness are thus important in deterring behavior problems in school.

**Change teacher’s attitude toward gang members, show respect, treat same as others (10%).** There was a general sense that youths perceive teachers as treating gang-involved youths differently from non-gang involved youths, which was not perceived as helpful for youths trying to get out of a gang. For example, youths wrote,

"[Teacher] to not give up on the kid just cause he was into gangs don't matter nothing," "[Teacher] don't put the kid down," "[Teachers can] show more respect," and "Gang banger students and non-gangbanger students should be treated the same."

Research literature has supported the importance of positive teacher-student relationships in preventing and/or decreasing youth delinquency. Rudasill, Reio, Stipanovic, and Taylor (2010) found poor student-teacher relationships predict students' risky behavior. Similarly, bonding with teachers has been found to act as a buffer against the negative influences of associating with deviant peers (Crosnoe, Erickson, & Dornbusch, 2002). Positive student-teacher relationships can significantly impact adolescent students' behavioral and emotional trajectories over time. In a longitudinal study of student depression and misconduct from ages 13 to 18 years, Wang, Brinkworth, and Eccles (2012) found that positive teacher-student relationships at age 13 protected students against depression and misconduct from ages 13 to 18. In addition, these researchers found that positive teacher-student relationships moderated the effect of poor early parental control and negative parent-child relationships on misconduct throughout adolescence. However, other studies have found that school personnel supportiveness is not related to gang involvement (Ryan, Miller-Loessi, & Nieri, 2007). The influence of teacher-student relationships on gang desistance is a promising area that needs further research.

**Teachers should provide extra school help/assistance (24%).** Several youths wrote that teachers should provide extra help and assistance in school to youths who are trying to get out of a gang. Responses coded in this category ranged from specifically assisting youths with their schoolwork: for example, "[Teachers] could help them with their school work," "extra help," and "try to help them out in school" to "don't overwhelm them with work," and "Get them and there homies together in school find out whose smartest and let him tutor the group."

Crosnoe et al. (2002) found that youths were less likely to join a gang if they had good feelings about their academic skills, believed education leads to future career success, were bonded to school, and had positive relationships with peers and mentors. Dishion, Nelson, and Yasui (2005) were able to explore the relation between various risk factors in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and their impact on gang affiliation in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Results of the study indicated that peer rejection, academic failure, and antisocial behavior in 6<sup>th</sup> grade predicted gang involvement in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The authors suggested that school failure should be addressed in interventions aimed at reducing gang involvement for at-risk middle school students.

**Teachers can help youths stay in school, graduate (22%).** Youths' recommendations also encouraged teachers to help students stay in school, get good grades, and graduate in an effort to help youths leave gangs. One youth wrote that teachers can "help the kids with all the necessities to graduate from high school." Others wrote, "Teach the youngster the importance of learning and how difficult life will be without a diploma," "Help him stay in school and get his education," and "help him graduate high school."

Findings regarding the relation between academic achievement and gang affiliation have been mixed. For example, Tapia, Kinnier & MacKinnon (2009) compared grade point average, attitudes toward teachers, and attitudes toward school between Mexican American youths in gangs and those not in gangs and found no significant differences in these variables for the two groups. However, Choi (2007) found poor academic performance to significantly predict delinquency and gang initiation for Asian and Vietnamese American youths. Additional research should examine the effect of teachers helping youths to graduate and youths' desistance from gangs.

**Teachers can make school more fun and relevant (12%).** Some participants noted that teachers should make school more meaningful,



engaging, and fun. This included tailoring activities to the interests of the youths. For example, one youth wrote that teachers can “give him something that he likes to do that would encourage him to keep doing good and not get back into his normal ways.” Other youths wrote, “Do fun things in class to get the youngsters’ attention to the lesson,” “Teach in school what you can do in life,” and “That teacher should get the student more fun stuff that you could have fun.”

Although few studies have directly measured the impact of making school more meaningful for at-risk youth to encourage gang desistance, one study presents a theoretical discussion of the role schools can play in preventing youth gang involvement. Sharkey et al. (2011) suggest that although gangs may meet youths’ needs for improved self-esteem, schools may be able to meet this need by making school material more relevant to youths and by designing curricula to play to the strengths of each student.

### Law Enforcement Recommendations

When providing recommendations regarding what law enforcement can do to help youths get out of gangs, three themes emerged from participants’ responses. Two of these—stop harassing youth and improve relationships between law enforcement and youth—indicated a negative relationship between youth and law enforcement. In contrast, the third category of law enforcement recommendations, “staying on top of what kids do,” called for greater law enforcement management of youths’ daily lives. Overall, this theme highlights a perceived need to improve the way in which law enforcement interacts with and manages youths involved in gangs as a means of supporting their transition out of gangs.

**Stop harassing youths (40%).** The largest theme regarding law enforcement was the need for law enforcement to stop harassing youths and leave them alone. Comments included stopping restrictions, gang lists, and arrests of youths affiliated or thought to be affiliated with gangs. One

participant wrote, “Law enforcement officers need to stop harassing the gang bangers and make peace.” Others shared, “Law enforcement needs to be willing to actually help before helping, not just out trying to arrest a gang member,” “Stop harassing us like everytime they see me they stop me and ask me stupid questions,” and “Stop harassing people who look like gang members and stop stereotyping.”

In response to gang and youth violence, police have reacted with tactics based on zero tolerance policies designed to punish youths. Some surveillance strategies involve profiling, which can result in disproportionate minority contact (Borrero, 2001). Repeated harassment or stops by police of youths who fit a gang member profile may serve to push otherwise innocent youths into gangs due to resentment from repeated stops and searches based on appearances (Densley, 2011). Borrero (2001) recommends facilitating a safe forum for sharing issues, a youth-police relations committee, and intervention with and advocacy for youths by other providers and community members.

**Improve relationships between law enforcement and youths (34%).** Within the category of improving relationships between law enforcement and youths, many participants reported that law enforcement officers should talk to them as a means for law enforcement to get to know their struggles. These responses reflected the importance of working on the relationship between youths and law enforcement by changing both sides’ perceptions of each other; that is, having law enforcement better understand the youths, as well as having the youths better understand that law enforcement is there to help. For example, youths stated, “Have them talk to each other and the officers don’t even know what the people go thru,” “To secure the support of law enforcement officers to help the youngsters get out his gang... they could also interact with them and get to know the kids,” “[Law enforcement] should have classes with the kids and there family and see why they do what they do,” and “Not give up on him and help him get out the gang.”



The *Effective Police Interactions with Youth* curriculum (LaMotte et al., 2010) was developed to train police in effective methods of reducing disproportionate minority contact. A study of patrol officers who participated in this training found that the training enhanced patrol officers' knowledge of youth behavior, reduced disproportionate minority contact, and increased the use of strategies to work with youths effectively (LaMotte et al., 2010). Such training may help law enforcement officers respond more effectively to youths in gangs, but more rigorous research is needed to determine its effects on officer behavior and youth outcomes.

**Law enforcement should stay on top of what kids do (14%).** This theme indicated that law enforcement officers should monitor youths. Most of these responses suggested that law enforcement use arrest and/or other legal action to show youths what happens when they are involved in gang life. Two responses in this section had specific suggestions for ways in which law enforcement can better monitor the youths: "What police enforcement should consider doing is to get a gang injunction because that will really help the community and it's gang problems. They should support the youngster by watching out for him if he/she ever tries to get out," "Well when I get out I have to register as a gang-member. I feel like they are doing a good job on breaking down on that. Because I know now that I'm not even going to walk down the street with a homie because I would get locked up for a while," and "What law enforcement officers can do to help youngsters get out of gangs is they can increase the no gang tolerance and encourage youngsters that gang are good for nothing and cause them to arrest youngsters at young ages."

Generally, studies have shown that legal sanctions do little to deter crime, and gang members may be less susceptible to threats of punishment than non-gang member criminals (Maxson, Matsuda, & Hennigan, 2011). In a cross-sectional study involving interviews with 744 gang and non-gang youths with criminal histories, Maxson

et al. (2011) found that morality (reported by youths on a Likert scale of how "right or wrong" it was to commit three types of crime) was the strongest predictor of intention to commit future crimes, whereas severity of the consequences had a weak effect on the prediction of crime for non-gang members.

## Gang Interventions

Six categories were derived from the youths' responses, yielding a gang intervention theme.

### **Work with the whole gang together (40%).**

Youths recommended that gang members or ex-gang members talk to and support each other to get out of the gang as reflected in the responses, "Get [the homeboys] together and talk about stuff like reality and how to move on," "[the homeboys] should talk to one another and give each other advice so that they want to stop being from the neighborhood," and "Get [the homeboys] together and talk about stuff like reality and how to move on." Some also suggested that community leaders "Find a way to eliminate the whole gang."

Some research has focused on working with gangs to reduce violent and criminal behavior but, in general, research suggests it is more important to focus on deterring crime than it is to target gangs or gang membership alone (Bullock & Tilley, 2008). The Boston Gun Project, for example, focused on deterrence as a response to gang-related violence (Braga & Kennedy, 2002). Police threatened intensive and sweeping enforcement when specific, predetermined crimes were committed. Such communication with gang members allowed gangs to acknowledge their role in gaining the attention of law enforcement. At the same time, service providers offered programs to help gang members engage positively in the community. When this project was replicated in Manchester, England, the purpose drifted to a focus on getting individuals out of gangs and cooperating with service providers. This caused many unintended negative consequences, including a focus on labeling youths as gang members,

disagreement among providers on criteria for the gang label and subsequent intervention eligibility, and too large a target population (Bullock & Tilley, 2008). Thus, evaluators concluded that effective deterrence should focus on criminal behavior, not gang membership status.

**Call for peace between rivals (33%).** Other responses discussed bringing the rival gangs together to help youths get out of gangs. Some responses discussed having a peace or truce made between gangs such as, “Tell them that we call peace between them and that we don’t want no trouble.” Other responses further reflected the need to connect enemies with the aim of showing both sides they are no different from one another, for example: “By showing them [rivals] that were pretty much the same. And also by helping them to start knowing there enemies;” “Make rivals try to connect to each other then make them realize that now since they don’t have rivals theres no need to gang bang,” and “Tell [the enemies] that if there wasn’t sides and you guys knew each other you would probably be best friends. You are all alike.” Some responses specifically noted that the call for peace would need to be between the individuals who want to get out of their gangs. One participant shared, “You can show and or tell them it is not worth losing your life in a gang fight or shoot other gang members just because their in another gang or they live on the wrong side of the street.”

Research on peace treaties is limited; in 1992 rival gang members in Los Angeles signed a peace treaty that promised a cease-fire against enemies and focused on addressing social problems in the community (Streetgangs.com Staff, 2012). The *Street Gangs* website attributed a 40-year low rate of gang-related violence to this peace treaty. Additional media support this conclusion: *The Final Call*, the original newspaper of the Nation of Islam, reported a 44% drop in gang homicides in the first 2 years after the gang truce (Muhammad & Muhammad, 2012). It is difficult to isolate the direct impact of peace treaties. Although consensus indicates they are

an effective tool to stop gang violence, more rigorous research is needed.

**Develop friendships outside of gangs (22%).** Several participants suggested that youths develop friendships with individuals not in their gangs. A few responses within this theme included the idea of getting new friends and realizing that gang members are not real friends. One participant wrote, “You have to make them convince themselves that gangs is not the only sign of friendship because they cant see that on their own.” Others wrote, “Ask them if they are willing to get out and start hanging with the right crowd;” and “By helping him get new friend.”

Recent studies of youth gang desistance have found that family obligations and prosocial opportunities were related to youth desistance from gangs (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2013), which suggests that helping youths form healthy friendships outside of gangs could help support their abilities to leave a gang.

**There’s nothing you can do (38%).** Unfortunately, many youths suggested that there was nothing to be done to help “homeboys” help each other get out of gang life. Some of the responses indicated there was nothing community leaders could do because the youths themselves may not want to get out of the gang or their “homeboys” do not want them to leave the gang. For example, “There is not much you could do because it’s their choices and there is nothing anyone can do to change the choices they make” and “I don’t think there’s anything you can do to make him change his ways because he is gonna be into his gang so much that he won’t listen to anybody but his gang.” Another common sentiment of the youths was that “The youngster might not want to get out of his gang” and “We can’t do anything unless they are willing to. We can’t force them.”

Fortunately, there is enough evidence to suggest that family, school, community, and law enforcement interventions can be successful in disengaging youths from gangs (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2013).

**You can't change enemies, they don't care about each other (14%).** There was a similarly hopeless sentiment in answer to the question about helping a youngster's enemies get out of gangs, with youths reporting that there is nothing that can be done. All of these responses noted that enemies neither like nor care about each other and thus enemies will not help each other. Responses included, "Enemies are enemies if you don't like somebody that's called a enemy. You just don't like them for a reason. So I don't think anything can change that," "I think that there is no way that the youngster can give his enemies advice to get out of a gang because they are rivals and rival gangs don't give advice to each other," and "You can't because they chose the route they wanted and their enemy already has built hatred toward him."

### Strengths and Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that warrant discussion. First, we obtained this sample after responses had been collected anonymously; thus, important demographic and gang participation data were unavailable. Although all youths referred to the facility have significant juvenile delinquency histories and most are gang members, it is possible that some participants were not gang members. It would have been ideal to survey youths who were gang members and had been successful in leaving the gang lifestyle. Moreover, youths were required to complete the survey; thus, it is possible that not all youths responded honestly. However, it was clear from reading youth responses that most youths took the questions seriously enough to write lengthy answers. Despite these shortcomings, the findings are comprehensive and provide meaningful inspiration for more rigorous future empirical research regarding specific ways families, schools, communities, and law enforcement can help youths get out of gangs.


### Implications for Interventions

The recommendations made by youths highlighted in this article underscore the responsibility

of everyone in the community to intervene with youths who are in gangs or may be at risk for joining gangs. Families, teachers, service providers, law enforcement, and other community stakeholders can all contribute. Although individual efforts to enhance youth success are important, research has identified comprehensive and coordinated gang interventions to be the most effective. Most importantly, these youth reports reflect that participants would like to be treated with respect by the authorities with whom they interact. These results indicate that youth prevention and intervention efforts do not necessarily need to be specifically designed for members of gangs but, rather, that interventions addressing the basic needs of youths, such as security, belonging, and means to success, may be the most powerful ways to engage youths in prosocial rather than antisocial groups (Sharkey et al., 2011). This is an important point, as gang membership is a concept that is elusive and difficult to measure (Densley, 2011), and gang members enter and desist from gang activity within short periods of time (Carson et al., 2013). Thus, the main point for interventions is that youths who appear to be associating with gangs should not be excluded from services and supports available for all youths. On the contrary, such youths need to be engaged in structured activities in school and community settings by adults who will take the time to understand their needs, risks, and strengths, and intervene accordingly.

### Conclusion

The recommendations made by youths and identified in this study should be taken into consideration when planning a continuum of services to address youth gang involvement. Directions for future research could include systematically mapping a continuum of services to match established gang intervention models, identifying where gaps exist, and filling those gaps with evidence-based interventions—particularly those identified by participating youths as to what might be helpful to them. Professionals who work



with youth gang members need to get to know the unique risks and strengths of each adolescent in order to understand why they joined a gang and why they want to get out; a single approach is unlikely to solve such a serious and complex problem. Continuing to enhance coordination between agencies is critical so youth referrals can be tracked to ensure timely intervention, and so youth services can be evaluated to ensure they are as efficient and effective as possible to avoid redundancy and address youths' needs. Data need to be collected to investigate the effect of individual services, as well as the collective effort. Over time, research can examine which of these recommended and sometimes popular interventions, such as extracurricular activities, job training, and educational interventions, are most effective in helping youths to get out of gangs.

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# EXPLORATORY RESEARCH COMMENTARY:

## How Do Parents and Guardians of Adolescents in the Juvenile Justice System Handle Adolescent Sexual Health?

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*Keywords: adolescent development, parents, high-risk behaviors, needs assessment, juvenile probation*

### Abstract

This study explores the perceptions of guardians of youth involved in the juvenile justice system regarding sex education content and implementation, challenges, clinic access, and contraceptive use. Nine guardians participated in a focus group at the Bexar County Juvenile Probation Department (BCJPD), San Antonio, Texas. Data were analyzed using an inductive approach. The guardians strongly endorsed sex education for youth. They believed that, ideally, sex education should be communicated from parent to child but that in reality this tends not to occur. Even guardians who communicate with their teens said they feel unequipped to do so because they lack accurate information. They said they support sex education implementation in schools as well as under the terms of juvenile probation. Guardians proposed that bolstering life skills was a worthwhile measure to reduce risky behavior and said that peer pressure, social media, and gang activity influence risky teen behavior. Guardians identified religious beliefs and a reticence to accept sexual activity as issues

for the juvenile justice system to consider when providing access to contraceptives. Research documents that guardian involvement during youths' experiences with the juvenile justice system is crucial. Results of this study point to guardians' need for further resources and expansion of sex education programs among BCJPD services.

### Introduction

#### Minorities in the Juvenile Correctional System

In the United States, millions of adolescents enter the juvenile justice system each year. The juvenile offenders comprise a special group of the nation's youth who have their own unique challenges. Juvenile offenders are a high-risk population with special needs and they experience health problems at a higher rate than the general population (Committee on Adolescents, 2011; [Golzari, Hunt, & Anoshiravani, 2006](#)). Adolescents in the Texas juvenile justice system range in age from 10 to 17 years and represent all races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Despite the representation of various races and ethnicities, researchers have found that Hispanic and African American populations are disproportionately represented in the Texas juvenile justice system (Carmichael, Whitten, Voloudakis, 2005). In Texas, all minorities comprise 55% of the general adolescent population: 13% identify themselves as African American and 40% identify themselves as Hispanic. However, of the detained juvenile population in Texas, approximately 32% identify as African American and 39% identify as Hispanic (Carmichael et al., 2005). In the United States, whereas all minorities combined contribute to 37% of the adolescent population (Carmichael et al., 2005), minorities constitute 60% of the detained juvenile population, according to data collected in 2001 (Carmichael et al., 2005).

The population of adolescents entering the juvenile justice system, who generally comprise high-risk minority populations (Armour & Hammond, 2009; Lauritsen, 2005; The Sentencing Project, 2014), have special health needs (Committee on Adolescents, 2011; Golzari et al., 2006). Specific strategies call for a variety of studies to understand best practices in order to address the special needs of these high-risk youth (Chassin, 2008; Greenwood, 2008; Kelly, Owen, Peralez-Dieckmann, & Martinez, 2007; Lauritsen, 2005; Liddle, 2014; Marvel, Rowe, Colon-Perez, Diclemente, & Liddle, 2009).

The purpose of this paper is to explore how parents and guardians of children involved in the juvenile justice system handle the children's health needs, including sex education. Better understanding of the needs of juvenile offenders and their parents' beliefs may pave the way for determining best practices and more effective strategies for reducing high-risk behavior, such as sexual activity. The demographics of the individuals who participated in the focus group described in this article reflect the minority populations that make up the juvenile justice populations of Texas (where the focus group took place).

## Risk Indicators

Adolescents in the juvenile justice system report a higher rate of engagement in high-risk behaviors than adolescents in the general population (Committee on Adolescents, 2011; Golzari et al., 2006). This led the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Commission on Correctional Health Care to declare a policy on the health care of adolescent populations in correctional facilities (Committee on Adolescents, 2011; Rizk & Alderman, 2012). The policy recommends a complete medical history and physical, including a gynecological assessment as indicated by gender, age, and risk factors (Committee on Adolescents, 2011; Rizk & Alderman, 2012), as well as sexually transmitted disease (STD) and pregnancy testing for youths entering a detention center (Committee on Adolescents, 2011; Rizk & Alderman, 2012; Spaulding et al., 2013). The high-risk behaviors of this population include sexual debut at a younger age, having multiple sexual partners, and drug/alcohol use (Chassin, 2008; Rizk & Alderman, 2012). Of the adolescents involved in the United States juvenile justice system in the year 2000, 56% of boys and 40% of girls tested positive for substance use (Chassin, 2008).

Substance use substantially increases the likelihood of engaging in other risky behaviors, especially using substances during sex, engaging in unprotected sex, and having multiple sexual partners, which puts youth at higher risk for acquiring an STD, including human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Chassin, 2008; Teplin et al., 2005; Tolou-Shams, Hadley, Conrad, & Brown, 2012). According to a mini review conducted in the United States in 2012, chlamydia infection rates among detained adolescent females ranged from 14% to 22%, and for gonorrhea, from 5% to 6% (Rizk & Alderman, 2012; Spaulding et al., 2013). Other studies have found that in addition to being twice as likely to contract an STD as their nonincarcerated peers, incarcerated female adolescents are also more likely to become pregnant and to endure high-risk pregnancies (Gallagher, Dobrin, & Douds, 2007).



Unplanned pregnancy has been a widespread consequence of the risky sexual behaviors of this population, leading some to recommend that teens be screened for pregnancy on admission to detention centers (Committee on Adolescents, 2011; Rizk & Alderman, 2012). Although birth rates among adolescents in the United States have continued to decline since the peak in 1991 (61.8 births per 1,000) to a record low in 2012 (29.4 births per 1,000) (Finer & Zolna, 2011; National Center for Health Statistics [NCHS], 2013), adolescents with a history of entering into correctional facilities are more likely to become pregnant or already be parents than their peers in the general population. For example, 15% of incarcerated teen males are likely to be fathers compared to 2% of nonincarcerated teen males, and 9% of incarcerated teen females are likely to have had children compared to 6% of nonincarcerated teen females. (Committee on Adolescents, 2011).

### Cultural Influence

Studies suggest that cultural values may explain why Hispanic women desire marriage and children at a younger age than do African Americans, Southeast Asians, and Whites (Caal, Guzman, Berger, Ramos, & Golub, 2013; Romo, Berenson, & Segars, 2004; Russell & Lee, 2004). Cultural values may influence behaviors such as educational attainment and contraceptive use, which in turn affects pregnancy outcomes (Caal et al., 2013; Romo et al., 2004; Russell & Lee, 2004). Studies have found that attitudes toward contraceptives are not the only issue as parent-child discussions about sexuality are also taboo in this culture (Russell & Lee, 2004). The Hispanic culture values family and a traditional family model beginning at a young age, resulting in Latinos being more likely to experience their sexual debut at a younger age (Romo et al., 2004; Russell & Lee, 2004). One qualitative study explored the role of young women's perceptions of their parents' opinions about reproductive health services. The study found that parents played a significant role in the reproductive health-seeking behavior of their teens, often times preventing the women

from seeking reproductive health services such as STD screening/treatment, as well as contraceptive counseling. The majority of the women reported that their parents did not support having access to reproductive health services and even reported hiding contraceptive use from their parents (Caal et al., 2013). The fear of parental criticism could pose an obstacle to adolescents seeking reproductive health services. Despite the challenge of gaining the support of families, professionals working to prevent teen pregnancy (e.g., school staff, health or social services agencies, and non-profit organizations) believe that the involvement of the family is critical in Hispanic teen pregnancy prevention among Hispanic youth (Burke, Mulvey, Schubert, & Garbin, 2014; Russell & Lee, 2004).

### Parent Involvement

Parental/guardian attitudes toward their adolescent's health care, including pregnancy prevention and STD screening, is important because studies have shown that parental/guardian involvement in an adolescent's development can have a crucial impact in the success or failure of that individual (Burke et al., 2014; Jerman & Constantine, 2010; Kim, Gebremariam, Iwashyna, Dalton, & Lee, 2011). The literature on the power of parental influence and connectedness to youth is extensive and points to communication between parents and their children as a fundamental process through which youth's ideas, values, beliefs and expectations around sexual health are established (Burke et al., 2014; Caal et al., 2013; Huebner & Howell, 2003; Jerman & Constantine, 2010; Kim et al., 2011; Markham et al., 2010). Douglas Kirby and colleagues have found that parental connectedness proves to be a protective factor that promotes healthy decision making, which reduces risky behaviors (such as sex without contraception and sex with multiple partners) and therefore increases the likelihood of avoiding negative outcomes, such as pregnancy or contracting an STD (Kirby & Lepore, 2007). Other studies highlight the notion that parental monitoring, parent-adolescent communication, and parenting style are all important variables to

consider when understanding sexual risk taking among adolescents (Huebner & Howell, 2003). A national survey was conducted in the general population in order to assess attitudes and opinions of parents regarding sexual behaviors among adolescents (Abt Associates Inc., 2009). The survey results indicated that the majority of parents surveyed were opposed to premarital sex both in general and for their own adolescents (Abt Associates Inc., 2009). It also found that there were differences in opinion among minority parents compared to non-minority parents in that patterns of permissiveness among minority parents varied by specific context (Abt Associates Inc., 2009). Parents were more in favor of sexual activity among adolescents when contraception was used, and if their adolescent was likely to marry their sexual partner (Abt Associates Inc., 2009). Abt Associates Inc. (2009) found that parents/guardians were more opposed to sexual activity “if the adolescent and his or her partner think that it is okay” (p. 9). The survey revealed that general parent/guardian views about sex and abstinence were more conservative among non-Hispanic blacks, Hispanics, parents from lower-income households, and parents attending religious services more frequently (Abt Associates Inc., 2009). The majority of parents surveyed were in favor of their adolescent receiving sex education messaging and had preferences about where the message came from (Abt Associates Inc., 2009). Abt. Associates Inc. (2009) found that survey responses indicated that parents preferred sex education information come from (in order of preference): “a place of worship (85%), a doctor’s office or health center (85%), school (83%), a community organization (71%), and the Internet (55%)” (p. 9). While these results shed light on the attitudes of parents from the general population, attitudes of parents among special populations, such as juvenile offenders, are unknown due to a lack of research on the topic.

Lack of family involvement is identified as one of the most important issues faced in the juvenile justice system. There is also a lack of validated

tools to measure the family involvement construct (Burke et al., 2014). Despite the widespread research of increased risky behaviors and outcomes associated with juveniles involved in the juvenile justice system, as well as the proven importance of parental opinion and involvement, little research has been conducted to explore the opinions and attitudes of parents and guardians of adolescents involved in the juvenile justice system. While studies have been conducted on access to sexual health services in the juvenile justice system, as well as the high-risk behaviors that necessitate these services, literature reviews point to the fact that there is a dearth of research regarding parent/guardian attitudes toward access to sexual health services for adolescents in the juvenile justice system. This paper describes a qualitative study that assessed the attitudes and opinions of parents whose teens are involved in the juvenile justice system. Its results highlight parents’ attitudes on youths’ information-seeking behavior, sexual activity, pregnancy risks, contraceptive use, clinical visits, challenges, and other specifics regarding sex education programs. The focus group results described in this paper aim to explore how the culture and religion of parents residing in a largely Hispanic community influences juvenile justice-involved youths’ access to contraceptives in clinics and sex education programs.

### Positive Youth Development Programs

Evidence-based programs (EBPs) have been shown to change behaviors in youth after educating them about risky sexual behaviors (Bryan, Schmiege, & Broaddus, 2009; Cronin, Heflin, & Price, 2014; Inman, Van Bakergem, La Rosa, & Garr, 2011; Thomas, 2000). Further, some programs have been specifically tested and proven effective in youth involved in the juvenile justice system (Bryan et al., 2009). These sex education programs offer a range of approaches—from not discussing condoms and contraception to educating on condoms and contraception use (Thomas, 2000). Implementing programs that offer the appropriate approach and are shown to be effective in

promoting healthy sexual behaviors in special populations (such as minority youth in the juvenile justice system) is crucial to successful outcomes (Inman et al., 2011; Thomas, 2000). The focus group conducted for the UT Teen Health initiative was part of a community needs assessment in order to identify an EBP that fit the needs of the population.

## Methodology

### Data Collection

The study described in this paper was conducted as part of a community needs assessment by the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio–UT Teen Health (UTTH). The objective of the focus group was to better understand the perspectives of parents/guardians of youth who have been referred to the Bexar County Juvenile Probation Department (BCJPD) in order to select the best EBP for the department’s goals and objectives regarding teen pregnancy prevention. Parents/guardians were defined as the person responsible for a child’s care, custody, or welfare (Bolen, Lamb, & Gradante, 2002). The focus group session was held on April 10, 2012 using procedures approved by the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio Institutional Review Board and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The stakeholders (parents/guardians) who participated in the focus group were recruited using convenience sampling methods: The BCJPD staff in charge of running mandated parenting groups for parents of youth in the juvenile justice system advertised the opportunity to participate in the focus group to approximately 20 parents/guardians who were participating in the parenting classes at that time. Parents/guardians who participated in the focus group were compensated with a \$20 gift card to a local grocery store chain. Participation was voluntary and did not affect parents’/guardians’ standing in the parenting classes. The focus group was limited to the first 9 parents/guardians in order to promote strong participation among individuals.

Focus group participants (both male and female) were representative of the target population: parents/guardians of youth who had been referred to the BCJPD. The focus group was held on-site at the administrative offices of the BCJPD where the parenting classes were facilitated. To promote candid responses from the participants, the focus group was conducted in a private room without Bexar County staff present. The focus group discussion explored important aspects of sex education curricula, as well as attitudes and beliefs toward contraceptives and condom use.

The UTTH evaluator who conducted the focus group was trained on focus group facilitation and analysis during one-on-one sessions. Training included relevant literature and background information on the scope and purpose of the focus group–based research, and a review and discussion of the moderator’s guide.

An original moderator guide, consisting of 8 questions and 13 sub-questions (see Appendix), was developed by the evaluator of UTTH with the counsel of Jeff Tanner and Associates, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Edward Saunders, associate professor and director of social work at the University of Iowa College of Liberal Arts & Sciences. The semi-structured design guide was developed to identify social norms of the following topics: (a) Challenges facing teens; (b) Information-sharing behavior; (c) Sexual activity; (d) Programming; (e) Clinics; (f) Birth control; and (g) Curriculum.

At the beginning of the session, the participants were asked to complete a demographic form and sign a research study consent form. To promote confidentiality, participants were asked to use only their first names. Questions were posed in an open-ended manner followed by more specific prompts to generate further discussion. The discussion lasted 40 minutes. The discussion was recorded using a hand-held audio-recording device.

## Analysis

After the focus group, discussion recorded on the audiotape was transcribed verbatim by the UTTH evaluator. Transcripts were analyzed using a quasi-inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). The evaluator created preliminary codes based on the moderator's guide. Additional topic domains and subcategories were created inductively during the analysis process. The following codes were used based on the focus group discussion: (a) Challenges for parents of high-risk teens; (b) Consequences of teen sex; (c) Prevention; (d) Contraceptive use; (e) Parent-teen communication; (f) Emergency contraceptives; (g) Clinics; and (h) Sex education. The evaluator coded the raw data (the scripts) using Word documents to organize the data into levels of codes (Thomas, 2006): themes, categories, and subcategories. Each level of code was collapsed to identify broader themes during the analysis process. In a separate document, the quotes were summarized to generate concepts, key themes, and patterns. To ensure validity and strengthen credibility of the results, an investigator triangulation method (Guion, Diehl, McDonald, 2011) was utilized whereby the evaluator and an additional researcher coded the transcript from the focus group discussion independently (using the same cut and paste procedure). The evaluator and the researcher met to discuss the coding process, coding decisions, and the subsequent data organization. Comparison of the analysis summaries reached by the evaluator and the researcher revealed that the findings from the evaluator and

### *Sample description*

There were 9 parents/guardians (6 mothers, 1 grandmother, and 2 fathers) who participated. There were parents/guardians of teens ranging in age from 13 to 16 years old. Two of the parents had teens who were parenting. The group of parents (56% Latino, 22% African American, 22% other) had teens who had been involved in the juvenile justice system at durations from 1 month to more than 1 year.

the researcher were comparable and thus heightened the validity of the findings.

## Results

### Challenges for Parents of High-Risk Teens

The parents/guardians in the focus group agreed that peer pressure was the most challenging factor in raising teens. Focus group results indicated that teens experienced peer pressure on a daily basis that led to high-risk behaviors because adolescents desired popularity. The desire for acceptance from their peers caused some teens to ignore the boundaries set by their parents. The parents agreed they had trouble enforcing boundaries on their teens because the teens felt they could do whatever they wanted and they did not have to answer to parents. Parents felt that access to technology had increased peer influence. The accessibility of social media has increased the gap between younger generations who are technologically savvy versus older generations who are unfamiliar with technology. One grandmother of a teen on probation commented, "Peer influence, definitely: my granddaughter wanted to be popular and have tons of friends. Technology allows them to have their network of friends, their database of friends. It's hard because I did not grow up in that generation. I am raising my granddaughter so it's harder even than raising my own daughters." Parents/guardians felt that peer pressure rendered teens susceptible to engaging in risk-taking behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, gang activity, and sexual activity.

Parents/guardians of teens on probation felt that risky behaviors were very likely to lead to detrimental effects on teen health and the family unit. They pointed to the trouble their kids had already experienced as evidence of this. The participants in the group recognized that even though they came from a variety of backgrounds, their shared commonality was facing challenges when raising a teen in today's society.



## Consequences of Teen Sex

The parents/guardians in the focus group unanimously agreed that an incurable disease (such as HIV/AIDS) was the worst thing that could happen to teens as a result of sexual activity. The parents also agreed that teen pregnancy was a grave consequence, but an incurable disease was still worse.

The parents/guardians perceived that teens involved in the juvenile justice system had a greater likelihood of both contracting HIV/AIDS, due to intravenous drug use, *and* becoming a teen parent by engaging in sex while under the influence. They perceived that the risk to their teen of suffering the consequences was great, “Especially because the drug of choice is heroin. And the best high they can get off of it is shooting it up,” one dad stated.

## Prevention

Parents/guardians suggested that education was the best preventive factor for avoiding high-risk behaviors. The parents/guardians thought that sex education should be taught to the teens before issues arose. Some of the parents did not think their teens were getting the life skills they needed while in the juvenile justice system. One mother commented, “I think that a lot of times, the detention doesn’t help them at all. It just sends them to another place.” Where implementation of sex education classes should take place was debatable among the parents: some felt sex education should come from the schools, while others felt it should come from the parents. One mother remarked, “The thing is, it is not the schools’ responsibility to educate them [sex education]... It’s the parents’ responsibility.” Some felt that the schools should integrate sex education into the curriculum and all felt it should be offered as part of the BCJPD services. The parents also suggested that sex education information be promoted using social media such as YouTube.

## Contraceptive Use

The parents/guardians of youth on probation expressed that the hardest thing for most parents to accept was the concept of their teen having sex, especially in a Catholic community. Despite religious ties and willingness to accept teen sexual activity, parents/guardians were in favor of teens using contraceptives to avoid unplanned pregnancy. One mother said, “A lot of parents don’t want to think that ... I didn’t want to think that my daughter was having sex, but it was like a reality check. I had to snap out of it ... I didn’t want her getting pregnant and I didn’t want her to get a sexually transmitted disease. I had to snap out of it and I finally did put her on birth control.” Another mother concurred as she grappled with her religious views, “Because I know myself, I had reservations about birth control. I wondered if I should keep pushing abstinence because we were a devout Catholic family. So, I spoke with a friend who is also Catholic and she told me, ‘I put my daughter on birth control because you don’t want to face with that [*sic*].’ I have regrets about not having put her on birth control.”

Some parents said that other parents may even be open to the idea of a teen seeking access to contraceptives without parental consent, but they agreed that this viewpoint may vary among individual parents. One mother commented, “That is iffy. I would be glad because she is making the step to protect herself. But every parent is different. They would have to accept that their kid is having sex.”

Parents were also open to the idea of teens using long-acting reversible contraceptives, such as an IUD or an implant; however, they wanted more information about long-acting methods. They suggested parenting classes on this topic. They wanted teens to understand that even though they were decreasing their risk of pregnancy by using contraceptives, they must use a condom in order to reduce the risk of contracting an STD. They stressed the importance of conveying



condom use as a necessary part of messaging to teens.

### Parent-Teen Communication

The parents/guardians felt that in general, there was a lack of communication between teens and parents about sex. They observed that there were some exceptions to this generalization, but for the most part, teens went to their friends and to media to learn about sex and relationships. The parents/guardians said that when they were raised, kids of their generation had more respect for parents/guardians, but this did not mean that there was more communication between parents and teens about topics such as sex and relationships. Therefore, the parents lacked role models and other resources for guidance on good parent-teen communication about sexual health topics. Another concern was that parents felt they did not always have accurate information about STDs and birth control to impart to their adolescents. They voiced a desire for more parent education programs in order to equip themselves with knowledge and prepare for conversations with their teens.

### Emergency Contraceptives

Parents said they would only be comfortable with a teen obtaining access to emergency contraceptives without parental consent in the cases of rape or incest. But, for reasons other than rape or incest, they would want more information about emergency contraceptives before they could make statements about parental consent and emergency contraceptive (EC) access. One mother said, "I don't think it [giving parental consent for a teen to access EC] would go over very well. That is controversial." And another mother concurred, "We would need more information about it. The parents should be educated about it."

### Clinics

When parents were asked how they felt about requiring a clinical well-child visit as part of a court-ordered mandate (conditions associated with probation), the parents were open to this

idea. One mother said, "I think having an individual check-up with somebody [a doctor] that is open to them [teens] if they cannot be open to the parent [is a good idea]." All of the other parents agreed. They said that many of their teens were embarrassed to go to the clinic with parents. Other parents said they did not think teens would seek clinical services without the parents escorting them to and from an appointment. Few felt parents should be responsible for taking their teen to the clinic. Parents indicated that perceived barriers about teens accessing clinical services were, in general, that teens were defiant against anything the parents asked of them, and that teens were embarrassed to go to the clinic.

### Sex Education

The parents/guardians agreed that messaging about sex education and life skills in general should come from the parents or the schools. However, they felt that with influences from peers and media, it was hard to establish boundaries and broach conversations. They felt that if messaging was not coming from parents or schools, probation/detention was a good place to address topics such as STDs, healthy decision making, and self-esteem. They felt that society today did not encourage parental support and influence; even when parents attempted to influence their teens, the teens did not abide. Additionally, they felt that schools should offer sex education as part of the curriculum beginning in middle school or elementary school. All of the study participants agreed that sex education should be mandated and consistent in detention/probation programs, rather than mandating it case by case.

Parents felt it was necessary to teach teens to use a condom correctly and unanimously agreed that teens would learn best if they saw a condom demonstration led in person by a facilitator. They unanimously agreed that written instructions would not suffice stating that, "They [teens] are visual and auditory in this generation." They felt that lessons should also include messaging about the consequences of improper condom use.

## Gangs

In addition to topics such as goal setting, pregnancy prevention, STDs, healthy decision making and refusal skills, the parents/guardians felt that sex education curricula should also include information on gangs and sex trafficking. The parents/guardians perceived that much of the teens' behavior could be attributed to gang involvement. The parents felt their teens were drawn to gangs out of curiosity and because they idealized the lifestyle of a gang member. One mother said that she knew that her teen was curious about gangs because her teen had watched movies on Netflix to learn more about gangs.

## Discussion

Few, if any, studies have looked at the perspectives of the parents or guardians of adolescents in the juvenile justice system. This study investigates the opinions and attitudes of the parents/guardians regarding reproductive health education of teens on probation. The parents/guardians, overall, agreed that outside influences from peers, social media, and technology were the biggest hurdles to overcome when raising teens.

Parents believed that many of the teens' external influences, such as friends and social media, led to involvement in drug use and gang activity. Moreover, since gang activity and substance abuse have been demonstrated to increase the likelihood of high-risk sexual behaviors, the beliefs of parents/guardians that much of their teens' behaviors stemmed from involvement in or fascination with gangs are validated by research (Chassin, 2008; Minnis et al., 2008). While social media allows teens to influence one another, other media outlets can also have an influence on the actions of adolescents. Even something as seemingly benign as a Netflix documentary about gangs can start a teen down a path to poor decision making, according to some of the study participants. Ultimately, the concerns expressed by the parents in these focus groups—that the influence of gangs, with their typically high-risk

behaviors—increased teen-pregnancy rates, increased STD rates, and lowered goal planning, has been confirmed (Chassin, 2008; Minnis et al., 2008).

While parents in the general population, as well as parents of juvenile justice-involved youth, shared favorable attitudes and opinions on the importance of providing sex education (Abt Associates Inc., 2009), opinions about where the education should be delivered differed slightly by venue and preference between the two groups. Parents in the general population preferred (in order of preference) that sex education messaging come from: places of worship, health care provider, school, community based organization, and the Internet (Abt Associates Inc., 2009). Parents of adolescents on probation preferred it come from: parents, the probation department, schools, and the Internet.

Parents/guardians of teens on probation perceived that their teens were at increased risk of STDs, unplanned pregnancies, and drug use as compared with the general adolescent population, which previous research in this at-risk population proves true (Chassin, 2008; Committee on Adolescents, 2011; Golzari et al., 2006; Greenwood, 2008; Teplin et al., 2005). Strategic, multi-pronged approaches that include a variety of educational venues should be considered in order to change teen behavior and outcomes regarding high-risk teens involved in the juvenile justice system. Comprehensive approaches should be expanded in the community to include EBPs implemented with BCJPD in addition to school and community-based programs. All parents/guardians agreed that encouraging sex education as a preventive measure before teens are exposed to risky situations was a solution to mitigating negative outcomes. In addition, parents recognized the importance of parent-child communication as an avenue for sex education, but felt limited in their knowledge of the topic and the challenge of competing with outside sources such as peer and media influence. Parents/guardians desired education classes for themselves so

they would be prepared to communicate with their teen and be able to impart medically accurate information. It is likely the parents and teens alike would benefit from an education program designed to provide guidance to parents who want to discuss reproductive health issues with their teens.

A variety of sex education programs exist that have been proven to be effective in specific populations. Some programs include condom demonstrations, while others do not. The parents interviewed unanimously agreed it was necessary to teach teens correct condom application with an in-person facilitator conducting a demonstration. There are many EBPs endorsed by Office of Adolescent Health, Health and Human Services. Few have been studied in the juvenile justice population except for Sexual Health and Adolescent Risk Prevention (SHARP) and Rikers Health Advocacy Program (RHAP) curricula (MacDonald, 2013; Magura, Kang, & Shapiro, 1994). Both have been shown in randomized control trials to improve condom use and reduce sexual risks. Including acceptable programs that are evidence-based could serve to reduce unintended pregnancy and reduce STDs in this vulnerable population.

Studies support the notion of parents/guardians that adolescents' feelings of embarrassment are a barrier to accessing clinical services (Garcia, Ptak, Stelzer, Harwood, & Brady, 2014). The focus group participants also felt that the reasons teens would not go to the clinic were because they wouldn't follow through with an appointment or would have feelings of embarrassment. Some of the parents had reservations about how distribution of birth control/condoms by clinics would be received in the community because of the strong religious ties to the Catholic Church. Parents drew from personal experience when conveying reluctance to encourage birth control due to religious beliefs, as well as a lack of acceptance that their teen was sexually active. However, most of the study participants felt they would be able to reconcile their religious and personal beliefs with

the knowledge that their teens were seeking and receiving the necessary care they need to prevent any unplanned pregnancies and STDs. These views coincided with those of the parents of the general population who were less likely to disapprove of sexual activity among adolescents if contraception was used (Abt Associates Inc., 2009). There was no consensus on whether access to birth control should be allowed without parental consent because they felt this perspective could vary among individuals. This is consistent with previous findings that patterns of permissiveness for minority parents vary by specific context (Abt Associates Inc., 2009). The only exception was that in the case of emergency contraceptives, parents felt parental approval should not be required in cases of rape or incest because the teen should not be held responsible for the possibility of pregnancy in this case. Parents/guardians were in favor of teens receiving more information about reproductive health care services as long as the parents were also provided with the same information.

## Conclusion

The results of this study confirm the acceptance of sex education within the juvenile justice system by parents and the need for a linkage to clinical services for extremely high-risk youth. It also confirms that parents are supportive of long-acting reversible contraceptive methods and the importance of educating about these methods and condom use. Evidence-based interventions and increased clinical access can be effective approaches to changing behavior and decreasing unplanned pregnancy (Bryan et al., 2009; Eisenberg, Bernat, Bearinger, & Resnick, 2008; Thomas, 2000). This study involved participants that were reflective of a minority community (72% identified as Hispanic or African American) and minorities make up a disproportionately high number of youth in the juvenile justice system. This study truly reflects opinions of parents who are affected by their teens engaging in high-risk behaviors. This study also implies the need for

further research to confirm findings in order to generalize concepts to include all parents/guardians of youth on probation regardless of ethnicity. An increased understanding of parental perceptions and increased programming to include parents and youth within the juvenile justice system could lead to a greater impact in ameliorating the deleterious outcomes associated with high-risk behaviors.

### Recommendations

Based on the feedback from parents/guardians in the study, it was clear they favored offering sex education that included information about contraceptives and condom use. UTTH provided recommendations to the juvenile probation department after sharing the focus group data. First, a strategic teen pregnancy prevention plan was developed to include a basic foundation for sexuality education known as Sex Ed. 101. The Sex Ed. 101 training was attended by over 360 probation officers to reiterate basic anatomy and puberty, and to increase understanding of STDs and contraceptives. Additionally, 55 probation officers interested in teaching the EBP, Reducing the Risk, attended a 2-day training of facilitators and began implementation in 2013.

To date there have been 361 youth ages 12 to 17 years old that have been reached with the EBP, Reducing the Risk. Additional recommendations include identifying probation officers that have implemented Reducing the Risk to become trainers of the curriculum to sustain the program. Further recommendations include providing additional training to all probation officers on answering sensitive questions, engaging parents and students in the topic of sexuality education, and identifying resources in the community for parents and teens. The content in this study explains the parental perspective and contributes to the body of knowledge about this less than visible population. The focus on parents and the importance of factors that influence risk-taking behavior makes this study and subsequent recommendations an important contribution, as

parents are critical stakeholders in health education that affects their children. Until now, their views were rarely studied explicitly. This study reveals how parents of juveniles on probation concur and differ from the parents of the general population.

### Limitations

Several limitations exist: The study was conducted as part of a community needs assessment in Step 1 of the Getting to Outcomes framework. The purpose of the needs assessment was to guide program planning in selecting an evidence-based sex education program that would best fit the BCJPD. It aimed to garner understanding of cultural norms and attitudes of parents whose teens have been referred to the BCJPD. The sample size of the focus group was small ( $N = 9$ ), therefore it is possible that the views of the parents who participated may not be the views of all parents whose teens have been referred to the BCJPD, or in other parts of Texas and the United States. Due to the small sample size, analysis of participant perspectives based on gender, age, and race were not conducted. The preliminary results of this study are compelling; however the matter of parental/guardian perspectives on adolescent sexual health in the juvenile justice system deserves further investigation.

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# Appendix

## Moderator's Guide—Parents (of high-risk teen) Focus Group

- Welcome—the group will be welcomed and reminded that they each represent a portion of the parents in the area. Not all represent the same portion—thus, they should speak their mind as they would if all like them were given a voice.
  - There are no right or wrong answers in terms of what we're looking for.
  - Tonight we're going to talk about teenagers and the challenges of helping them make healthy decisions. We could cover a lot on the topic of parenting, but in order to keep this meeting to the time limit I promised you, we need to lay a few ground rules. This conversation will be audio-recorded. First, feel free to share specifics as to any experiences you've had, but just keep the stories short. If you are uncomfortable sharing specifics, general points are fine too. Second, if someone is talking, please let them finish. Third, no side conversations, please. Finally, do speak up and speak clearly. If you shake or nod your head, the tape recorder doesn't pick that up, so from time to time I will repeat what you said or say things just to clarify for the audiotape. We will ask you to fill out an information sheet, but when this meeting is finished, we will transcribe these tapes and then erase them. Please only use your first name for confidentiality purposes. Anything you say will be held in the strictest confidence. Finally, if there are any questions you do not feel comfortable answering, you don't have to.
  - Please state your name and the ages and genders of your teen(s).
1. **CHALLENGES FACING TEENS:** What are the biggest challenges when raising healthy teens today? (Explore the degree of connection between risks.)
    - 1a. Move from actual risks to parental actions to prevent.
    - 1b. Probe to determine feelings of shortcoming or needs.
    - 1c. If necessary: "Research shows that parental closeness is an important protective factor—not necessarily being their friend, rather, staying a parent but staying close. What are the challenges to that? How is that accomplished?"
  2. **INFORMATION-SHARING BEHAVIOR:** How often do you talk to your teen about sex? Where do you think kids should go for information about sex and relationships?
  3. **SEXUAL ACTIVITY:** What is your impression of your teen's peers? Are most of them sexually active or not?
    - 3a. In general, what do you think are the possible consequences of teen sex?
    - 3b. What do you feel is the worst thing that could happen to a child as a consequence of teen sex? (Follow-up questions for each person: "How likely is that to occur?" Probe for percentages—are half of those who have sex likely to have this happen?) What is the most likely consequence? What is the best prevention?
  4. **PROGRAMMING:** Do you think sex education would be helpful for your child?
    - 4a. How would you feel if making a sex education curriculum became one of the conditions of your child's probation?

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5. **CLINICS:** How would you feel if making a clinic visit for a well-child exam became one of the conditions of probation?
- 5a. Do you know of any clinics in the community that provide family planning services to teens?
- 5b. Have you visited any of the clinics with your teen?
6. **BIRTH CONTROL:** What do parents think about birth control? How comfortable would you be assisting your child with gaining access to birth control? How comfortable would parents be if their children gained access to birth control while on probation or in detention?
- 6a. Are you familiar with long-acting reversible birth control methods such as an implant or an IUD?
- 6b. How do you feel about your teen or your teen's partner being on a long-acting reversible contraceptive like an implant or an IUD? Would you feel comfortable giving consent for your teen to have access to this at a clinic?
- 6c. What are your thoughts about emergency contraception (aka "the morning after pill")? Would you feel comfortable giving your child consent to access this kind of birth control?
7. **CURRICULUM:** There are many parts to a sex education curriculum. One part is teaching teens how to use condoms. We want to know from you what would be the best way to help teens learn this skill and what method parents would find most acceptable. There are three options. I am going to describe the options and I want you to tell me which option you think would be the most useful and the most acceptable to parents:
- Watching the teacher in person apply the condom to a model of a penis while describing the steps.
  - Watching a video of a teacher apply a condom to a model of a penis while describing the steps.
  - Receiving handouts with written instructions (no diagrams or pictures or drawings) describing the steps of how to apply a condom.
- 7a. Do you think it would be useful and appropriate for teens to have a condom demonstration lesson at all?
- 7b. What sorts of things do parents feel teens should learn about?
- If needed, probe:
- Pregnancy prevention?
  - STDs?
  - How to make better decisions?
  - Goal setting?
  - Refusal skills?
8. **Is there anything else you would like to add?**

Thanks very much for attending, and don't forget that you need to fill out the data sheet before you go. If there is any question on the sheet that you would prefer not to answer, that is ok. Thanks again!



## Journal Manuscript Submission

The *Journal of Juvenile Justice* is a semiannual, peer-reviewed journal sponsored by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). Articles address the full range of issues in juvenile justice, such as juvenile victimization, delinquency prevention, intervention, and treatment.

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