



FOCUS

Views from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency

Key Findings From the California Cities Gang Prevention Network Process Evaluation

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Introduction

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD), in partnership with the National League of Cities' (NLC) Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, launched the California Cities Gang Prevention Network (the Network) in 2007. The Network is a 13-city initiative that aims to reduce gang violence and victimization, mortality, and morbidity, and to develop a statewide policy agenda to abet promising local efforts. Participating cities (Fresno, Los Angeles, Oakland, Oxnard, Richmond, Sacramento, Salinas, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Francisco, San José, Santa Rosa, and Stockton) pledged to forge and implement comprehensive, citywide plans that interweave prevention, intervention, enforcement, and the community's "moral voice." The Network emphasizes peer-to-peer learning, data-driven approaches, and collaboration among key city stakeholders.

NCCD played a central role in managing, directing, and providing technical assistance to the Network. As part of its work with the Network, NCCD led a process evaluation. The process evaluation was conducted in order to ascertain the role and function of the Network for cities, as well as strengths and areas in need of improvement. This NCCD Focus will present key findings from the process evaluation. It will highlight the successes of the Network, the challenges it faced, and the key to successfully developing and implementing a comprehensive strategy.

Method: NCCD's Approach to the Process Evaluation

The process evaluation explored Network changes during its first three years (2007–2009). Data collected included an assessment of internal and external forces throughout the life of the network; site visits to all the cities; and interviews with 60 team members, stakeholders, and community-based organizations.

Evaluation forms from conferences, conference call notes, and email communications were also reviewed.

NCCD's approach to the process evaluation of the Network followed a paradigm it developed in the analysis of local and national complex, multi-site programs. The process evaluation was organized through a paradigm consisting of the key elements of program development:

- **Context:** The set of environmental forces, organizational issues, and policy assumptions that conceptually define the distinctive features of the Network. Also considered are political forces, fiscal constraints, historical or organizational factors, and legislative or judicial policies on the state and local levels.
- **Identification:** The combination of techniques, procedures, and criteria used to identify gang membership and candidates for intervention.
- **Intervention/Services:** The range of activities and products offered, supported, or created by the Network such as technical assistance, bulletins, conferences, and networking opportunities.
- **Linkages:** Those formal and informal relationships and agreements that may hinder or help the establishment of the Network. They may also include cooperative or conflicting relationships among the leadership organizations (NCCD and NLC), the leadership in participating cities, and the local teams. Linkages also refer to the relationships among non-Network entities and individuals, such as social service agencies, the courts, and former gang members.
- **Goals:** A determination of the measurable outcomes of the Network as defined by the stated objectives of grant proposals, NCCD and the NLC Institute for Youth Education and Families.

By comprehensively recording the circumstances in which major program elements change, the NCCD analytic approach comes closer to accounting for observed outcomes. In short, through the process evaluation, NCCD can speak to the “why” and “how” of Network efforts.

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The Network’s Major Achievements

The Network began as a response to the use of fear and draconian policies to address growing gang problems in California. Missing from the field was an organized, comprehensive, multi-agency approach combined with a systematic way for cities to learn, share, and adopt successful gang strategies with each other, and to help frame state-level policies that assist local leaders. NCCD’s process evaluation of the Network revealed several of its major achievements. First, the Network filled a significant gap in the work of gang violence reduction. Second, the linkages developed throughout the life of the Network helped cities be more productive in their work at home. Third, the technical assistance provided by NCCD-NLC coordinating staff helped cities make great leaps toward achieving their goals. Lastly, NCCD found that the Network excelled at what it set out to accomplish and more: promoting best practices, using peer learning as a strategy to make cities’ efforts more effective, encouraging community collaboration, and promoting state and federal policy.

Filling a Gap in the Work of Gang Violence Reduction

The Network helped promote strategies that had not commonly been used in gang violence prevention, and over the course of five years, propagated these strategies into other cities. When the Network began, each city was at a different phase of its plan development, but all participating cities committed to implementing a comprehensive approach that included prevention as well as intervention and suppression. Cities also committed to forming teams composed of five members from different agencies and organizations, including the mayor (or a representative), the police chief (or a representative), and local community-based organizations. The Network provided these teams with the necessary support to successfully complete and implement their strategic plans: the sharing of strategy papers and successful plans, in-depth conversations with cities about their plans, planning sessions with stakeholders, and several rounds of plan review. NCCD-NLC staff also provided technical assistance to help cities complete city plans. Overall, the Network served as a context for discussion and opportunities for team members to interact collaboratively and in comprehensive ways around the issue of gang violence.

Creating Linkages That Help Cities at Home, and at the State and Federal Level

Team members and community stakeholders overwhelmingly agreed that a major benefit of Network participation was the creation of linkages, or connections to groups that enhance cities’ comprehensive strategies. Over the lifetime of the Network, these linkages have engendered city and county level collaboration and organization, fiscal resources, and relationships with external agencies. At the city and county level, participating Network cities have had more success implementing

programs, forming gang prevention offices within mayor's offices, and using local parcel taxes to support community policing and violence prevention programs. Cities also developed working relationships with a number of key external agencies, including the Prevention Institute, a nonprofit institute dedicated to primary prevention research and practice; The California Endowment, a private, statewide health foundation; and the National Forum on Youth and Gang Violence Prevention, an innovative model for federal and local collaboration that encourages its members to change the way they do business through increased communication and coordinated action. Linkages with external agencies have helped cities improve aspects of their plans, like prevention, and secure funding for their strategies.

Helping Cities Make Great Leaps Toward Achieving Their Goals

Participation in the Network and assistance from NCCD-NLC staff allowed cities opportunities to forge multi-sector and multi-jurisdictional efforts for reducing gang violence. In-person learning, access to information on best practices and available research, access to information on grant opportunities, supportive NCCD-NLS staff, relationships with other Network cities, and increased motivation and inspiration helped cities be more effective in reducing gang violence. In particular, annual conferences and site visits, both with NCCD-NLC staff and between cities, proved most beneficial. Conferences allow city representatives the chance to learn about what other cities are doing, share their own activities, brainstorm about common concerns and challenges, and discuss the policy implications of their work. Cities highlight that the Network enabled them to have good working relationships with other cities, allowing them to phone each other often regarding problems and potential solutions.

Exceeding Expectations

The Network's results have exceeded the original expectations of NCCD and NLC. In a short time, it developed into a vital network of urban leaders who work with and learn from peers to advance local comprehensive gang violence reduction strategies. All cities established stakeholder teams led by the mayor or designee and a high-ranking police department official, and submitted citywide strategic gang violence reduction plans. Many cities are interested in spreading the work of the Network to other cities.

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City leaders credit the Network with familiarizing them with best and promising practices, keeping them motivated to pursue challenging work, exerting pressure to address this issue, disseminating information on relevant legislation, and linking them to policymakers and funding opportunities. Before the Network, many of the cities had a very difficult time accessing data on gang violence and finding existing research on best practices. It was also difficult for cities to determine if proposed programs met the criteria of promising or best practices. These cities have relied extensively on Network partners to better access and understand such information.

Because of the Network, city leaders have embraced new ideas presented in the Network or implemented in other cities including innovative prevention and intervention programming. The Network provided a context for discussion and opportunities for city team members to interact specifically around the issue of gang violence. Cities emphasized that peer learning with regards to strategic plans was a catalyst in plan development. Although many stakeholders indicated that each city's gang problem was unique, they also found tremendous value in learning about best practices and modifying other cities' plans to address their own needs. Many team members had opportunities to visit and meet with participants in other Network cities, learn about their plans, and ask questions about their plan development. Cities found these site visits informative and helpful, and felt that other cities were very responsive and encouraging. Additionally, team members indicated that firm deadlines from and accountability to NCCD and NLC was crucial in bringing together relevant stakeholders and giving them a shared purpose and goal.

Through the Network, city leaders also learned about the best ways to collaborate with and include the community in their gang prevention plans. Recommendations to improve collaboration that resulted because of the Network included implementing a transparent proposal process to avoid favoritism of certain community-based organizations (CBOs), establishment of neighborhood-based groups (as opposed to city-wide groups), sustained communication with CBOs after plan development, and using neutral organizations to provide services (e.g., parks and recreation instead of police department). CBOs report that cities are improving on collaborative efforts, though there is still work to be done to bring in the voices of youth and more disenfranchised members of the community.

Network cities also valued the policy dimension of the work. Cities found that the Network allowed them to push for policy changes that could not be realized as individual cities. The collective effort and voice of 13 cities working on a united vision has affected policy in ways that no one city could accomplish on its own. Moreover, policy was considered a huge step toward sustaining comprehensive strategies and moving them to a higher level. Since its establishment, the Network has developed a set of policy principles to guide its legislative work. It has also established relationships with key political figures in Sacramento and Washington DC, allowing Network members to participate in congressional hearings.

Challenges: Improving Comprehensive Strategies

The process evaluation highlighted four areas in which the Network could improve. Cities found it challenging to implement prevention into their comprehensive strategies, to collect consistent gang data, and to sustain comprehensive strategies in a time with drastic funding challenges. Finally, with the restructuring of the state and county detention systems, cities identified a need to respond to formally incarcerated community members as an aspect of their prevention efforts.

Improving Prevention

Stakeholders interviewed expressed two main concerns about prevention. First, in many plans, prevention was a "weak link." Specifically, prevention was not as well-represented in strategic plans as other aspects (e.g., suppression) and not adequately tied into the intervention and suppression strategies. Law enforcement continued to have a large role in the efforts and sometimes provided the most salient leadership, despite genuine efforts to give prevention equal weight. Law enforcement tends to have a more

rooted structure, with programs already tried in other cities and thus easy to adopt; whereas prevention often originates as a grassroots movement. The second issue cited to explain the lack of prevention components was time. Stakeholders mentioned that the public expects immediate “results.” Prevention efforts tend to require more long-term support because they take time to demonstrate results.

Important lessons have been learned here. City teams must reach out to a broad set of stakeholders. Entities working in prevention are not the same entities that are typically working in gang and youth violence reduction such as schools, preschool programming, health care, and community centers. Also, highlighting the need for a prevention component in the planning process is effective at increasing cities’ incorporation of prevention into the planning process. Further, highlighting the successful prevention efforts of some cities has increased the inclusion of prevention efforts in other cities.

Improving Gang Data Collection

A major finding of this process evaluation was that all cities collect gang data very differently. Data collection methods varied not only between cities, but also within cities from year to year. City profiles of gang data created for this process evaluation revealed numerous differences in the ways cities collect their gang data, such as the initial indication an incident is gang-related, the scope of crimes that can be considered gang-related, and the qualifications necessary to be validated as a gang incident. Within a city, uneven data collection hinders the ability to measure progress from year to year; between cities, it hinders accurate comparisons and possible lessons to be gleaned. Across cities, inconsistent data collection is a huge obstacle to affecting policy changes. Moreover, most cities’ gang data is collected by law enforcement. Because of this, cities are unable to provide a complete picture of the gang and violence

issues facing cities. Law enforcement data will not reflect child welfare statistics, school achievement, or truancies.

To improve data collection methods, cities should collect and disseminate data in a way that increases shared engagement of social problems and maximizes services to at-risk individuals. We have learned that, where informal relationships exist, data sharing is possible. Formal relationships can also address data sharing strategies but are often complicated by issues of confidentiality and bureaucracy. Solutions to data collection problems have been addressed in certain cities where funding for analysts and training of designated technical teams is possible. These cities have not only been able to track progress through data, but they also use that information to secure further funding.

Sustaining Comprehensive Strategies During Financially Hard Times

Many Network cities find it challenging to sustain comprehensive strategies during financially hard times. During those times, budgetary decisions commonly depend on providing decision makers with results. In many cases, cities’ comprehensive plans may not be able to provide immediate results for its work, especially its prevention efforts. Comprehensive plans are expensive and hard to evaluate, and the impact of prevention strategies is not immediately notable. Moreover, implementing and coordinating a strategic plan with limited staff and resources may be a challenge even if presenting immediate results is not deemed necessary. Overall, budget cuts make it hard for cities to simultaneously implement and sustain prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies.

Despite funding challenges, the cities have made progress in implementing a comprehensive gang violence prevention strategy. Indeed, the economic

and political climate has provided cities with opportunity and incentive to use Network resources and their comprehensive plans. Oakland, for example, has found its comprehensive plan valuable for acquiring grants, such as an OJJDP Second Chance Juvenile Reentry award and a Second Chance Adult Reentry award, to fund activities anticipated in the plan. Salinas has drawn support from Network

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leaders in San Jose to assist Salinas with community mobilization and with engaging county officials in the development and implementation of a comprehensive action plan.

Improving Reentry

With California's inability to sustain current incarceration levels, more former offenders are coming home to cities with fewer resources. This population has special needs, but covering their basic needs for shelter and job placement is crucial to successful reintegration into society and violence prevention. Though cities did not initially include reentry as a part of their strategic plans, it became clear that reentry is a major piece of Network cities' gang violence prevention strategies. As one of our Network city team members stated, "Reentry must be the fourth prong of our multi-pronged approach toward preventing gang violence." To address this challenge, cities must establish state-city-county partnership, as none can comprehensively address the problem on their own.

Conclusion: Successfully Developing and Implementing a Comprehensive Strategy

The process evaluation revealed the Network's achievements and areas in need of improvement; however, in the past three years, cities have been a great resource to each other. Cities assert that Network membership and its requirements have made such improvements in their work that they are eager to provide assistance to surrounding communities. One of the greatest lessons revealed by the process evaluation was the key to successfully developing and implementing a comprehensive strategy. Team composition was indicative of the effectiveness and comprehensive nature of a city's efforts toward creating and implementing a strategic gang violence reduction plan. Teams that included a range of community, city, and county voices were the most effective in gaining buy-in and credibility from the community. Additionally, city teams with a designated and active team leader had more success completing and implementing plans; those that included the mayor and/or police chief—authorities with power and credibility—had more success in making real change.