



## **Gang Violence**

### **Steve Martinez, LCSW, LSOTP**

For the past two decades, gang violence has slowly crept into every community in the country. Once a problem that only affected the larger cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago has now become a problem that affects the smaller cities and rural communities as well. San Antonio is no exception. In September 2008, it was estimated that there were 1 million gang members throughout the country. The National Gang Threat Assessment 2009 stated that there are more than 147,000 documented gang members incarcerated in prison and roughly 900,000 gang members residing within local communities around the country. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) claims that on average gang members commit roughly 373,000 violent crimes a year. The BJS also reports that 10% of all homicides are gang related. Gang violence in our community is now part of our everyday life. To develop a plan on how to alleviate the problem of gangs it is necessary to understand how gangs get their members.

Many studies have been conducted to determine why a person joins a gang and all have led to same basic characteristics. The most common characteristic of a gang member is that are prone to be violent and delinquent prior to even joining a gang. They are recruited due to their already violent and delinquent behaviors. Another characteristic is socialization into gangs and violence which begins early when gangs have a strong presence in the community. A child will grow up seeing this lifestyle as a “norm” or as the “only way to be accepted”.

Typical gang members are between the ages of 10 and 21 and have very poor social skills. They have done poorly in school and many are drop outs. A majority of gang members come from single parent households. Also, these individuals usually have a parent that has served time in prison. With little adult supervision, these children will gravitate to other children with similar problems and attitudes. This is where recruiting takes place. Like any predator, the gang members lure the prospective member with promises of money, protection, friendship, and a better lifestyle.

Local conditions can contribute to gang involvement and gang development. The majority of gangs develop in the inner city where poverty is high and there are little job or recreational opportunities for young people. With little hope for progress, gangs develop a stronghold on the youth by providing companionship, a chance to increase one’s status, and financial gain. For many, gang involvement is the only way out.

When a gang presence becomes evident in a community, there are steps that can help alleviate the problem. The first would be to increase opportunities for the children in the area. This begins in the school with better academic support systems and positive extra-curricular activities. More accessible recreational activities also need to be provided. Community centers need to be utilized and encouraged to bring in the youth to offer an alternative to a gang lifestyle. Community centers can offer recreational activities, companionship, and mentoring. This also provides the younger children with a safe place to play with adult supervision. Most importantly, this is where the Church can become involved. Many gang members rarely attend church. The youth are a part of our community, they should be embraced. The academic support, the recreational activities and the companionship can all be provided by a local Catholic church. There is no better place where a child or youth can become a part of a “family” and can learn about the value of life and love. The Catholic Church is a place of peace and love. By helping the troubled youth, the Church can do wonders in illuminating the gang problems that have gripped our community.