

## **Asian Gangs in America: Why Should They Matter to Education?**

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### **Abstract**

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*The prominence of gangs in America is a growing concern. Gangs have penetrated into the heart of communities across America. Their presence has had a measurable effect on society. Gang influence infiltrates into public school systems, where violent activities occur due to gang presence. As a result, many school districts have taken action to reduce gang involvement and violence, including the implementation of gang prevention programs. This paper allows the reader to understand the background of Asian gangs in United States and their impact on our schools.*

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Key words: Asian gangs, gang membership, model minority, gang prevention instruction

### **Introduction**

The prominence of youth gangs is a growing and critical concern in education in the United States of America. In this article will address the key causes and effects of youth gangs, especially among Asian American students and suggest effective strategies to implement the gang prevention programs.

### **Factors of Gang Membership**

There are prevailing factors that influence why juveniles are involved in gangs. The first factor is insufficient education. According to Hawkins and Lynch (2006), youths who have inadequate education typically have a low degree of commitment to school. Duran (2006) reports that truancy, lack of focus, and poor grades are evidence of minimal dedication to school. Gang members tend to drop out of school because of these reasons. They do not pursue a higher education such as community college or four year university, as reported by Rodriguez (1994). Evidence of this can be found in a study of 15 gang-affiliated members from South Central Los Angeles. All of them, as identified by Rodriguez in his study, lacked a high school diploma. Currently, a high school dropout in 2013 earns an average of \$19,000 a year. This is far less than the \$28,000 a high school graduate makes a year and a college graduate who makes \$51,000 (Davis, 2013). Howell (2010) reports that the absence of job opportunities contributes to the presence of gangs. Without employment, gang members can resort to vehicle theft, extortion, drug dealings to provide for their survival needs (Howell, 2010). This type of juvenile delinquency is a cause of concern for communities.

The second factor that increases the chances of youth joining gangs is the breakdown of the family structure (Howell, 2010). Youth are facing problematic issues at home. A few examples that juveniles face at home are sexual abuse, conflict with and abuse from parents, child abuse, family member's alcoholism and drug addiction, and family trouble with the police. Howell (2010) believes that this breakdown comes from weaknesses in family structure such as single-parent household, multiple family transitions or caretaker changes.

This includes the lack of supervision afterschool, inconsistent discipline from caretakers, highly disciplinary or abusive treatment, and failure to reinforce positive, pro-social behavior. There is also an emotional side to why youths join gangs. They join gangs due to peer pressure and/or a sense of belonging or protection.

As long as gangs remain prominent, neighborhoods are affected by them. Residents who live in communities with a large incidence of street gang activity are at significant risk of injury and death due to gang violence (Bidwell, 2014). According to Axelrod (2015), gangs are responsible for 16 percent of all homicides, but 25 percent in cities with a population of over 100,000. Los Angeles is a city that fits has a booming population of 18.5 million people as of 2014. A report by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department in 2012 states that "60% of homicides are gang related and that the largest number of gang-related homicides reported occurred in the city of Compton." Axelrod (2015) believes that gang-related violence continues to be prevalent with no signs that it will let up anytime soon.

### **Asians as the Model Minority**

Asian Americans are often called the 'model minority' due to the fact that many of them are well-educated, have a high occupational status, and earn more money than those from other minorities (Banks, 2009). Many believe that Asians are hard workers and that Asian students get good grades, depicting them as star students (Liu, 2010). They have been educationally and economically successful in securing prosperous positions in the workforce. For example, Asian and Caucasian students graduate from high school at the same rate, approximately 90%, but Asian students are more likely than Caucasians to complete two or more years of college and to earn graduate and professional degrees (Moule, 2010). In addition, Asian students outperform whites by an average of 40 points on math SATs (Thernstrom &Thernstrom, 2004).

However, the model minority argument can divert attention from the racism and poverty that Asian Americans and other people of color in America still experience. Many Asian Americans are wage workers and have difficulties surviving economically (Pang, 1997). Furthermore, to some extent, the image of the model minority impacts Asian American students' school experiences negatively. It brings a tremendous amount of stress upon them. Lee (1996) stated that both high- and low-achieving Asian American students experienced anxiety to live up to the model minority status. Those who were low performers experienced depression and avoided seeking help to avoid embarrassment. In addition, the model minority image can be difficult to deal with for the students who may not be academically inclined. These students are trying to deal with the powerful process of assimilation, and mixed messages regarding their acceptance into mainstream society can be a heavy burden to carry (Pang, 1997).

### **Asian Gangs and Academic Achievement**

There are virtually no studies that have explored the relationship between Asian and Asian American gangs and academic achievement. However, Choi (2007) examined data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and found that academic performance is a significant predictor of problem behaviors among Asian Pacific Islander American adolescents. In her article she named the problem behaviors as "aggressive and nonaggressive delinquent offenses, gang initiation, sexual behaviors, and substance use." (Choi, 2006, p. 403) Chhuon explored the problematization of Cambodian male youth in U.S. schools and concluded that while there are complex representations of Cambodian students, the Cambodian male youth was represented in the discourse of high school educators as "apathetic students and/or gang members." (Chhuon, 2014, p. 233) In Ngo and Lee's review of Southeast Asian American education they challenged the stereotype of the Southeast Asian American students as either academically successful model minority students or as academically unsuccessful high school dropouts involved in gangs (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Their work revealed that when various Asian ethnic groups are lumped into the Asian American category, the variation in academic achievement across the groups is hidden. For instance, the fact that Vietnamese American students are achieving at a higher rate than the Cambodian, Hmong, and Lao American students, is revealed when the data is disaggregated. While there is a attention in the literature Asian and Southeast Asian students, there is little which examines the relationship between Asian and Southeast Asian gangs and academic achievement and attainment.

## Asian Gangs

Asian gangs have made a name for themselves in California and other parts of the nation. The Wah Ching is a Chinese street gang that was formed in San Francisco's Chinatown in 1960. Wah *Ching* in Cantonese means "Chinese youth" and members were primarily from Hong Kong. Chao (1999) cited that it was created by a group of immigrant youths who were teased and harassed by American-born Chinese youths. One of the main goal of the gang was to protect members from American-born Chinese. Lane (2005) reported that the Wah Ching ruled the Chinese turf of San Francisco. They would steal guns, chase gangs off their territory, and victimize people with guns and other weapons (Soltau, 2003). The days of violence where people are gunned down have declined (Kamiya, 2016). In present day Chinatown San Francisco, crimes are committed within the underworld of Asian gang. The Wah Ching gang has evolved from a street gang to an organized crime group involved with gambling, e extortion and prostitution (Kamiya, 2016).

The Wah Ching eventually made its way to Southern California. It is estimated that there are over 3,000 Wah Ching gang members located in Northern and Southern California (Tsunokai, 2003). Currently, the Wah Ching is the single largest Chinese gang in California (Chin, Kelly, & Fagan, 1994). Their main rivals are the Asian Boyz, or ABZ, and Vietnamese Boyz, or VBZ.

The California Department of Education (2005) estimated that there could be as many as 25,000 Asian gang members. In California, over 444 Asian gangs have been identified by justice officials (Tsunokai, 2003). In the county of Los Angeles, there are currently 151 documented Asian gangs (Akiyama, 2002). Asian gangs draw upon Vietnamese, Laotian, Hmong, and Cambodian youth (Akiyama, 2002; Yang, 1997).

Yang (1997) reported that each Asian gang has its own distinctive characteristics. Vietnamese gangs in California are known for their mobility and violence. The Black Dragons are known for their violence towards victims and rival gangs (California Department of Education, 2005a). They have committed home-invasion robberies and established prostitution sites (Yang, 1997).

Cambodian gangs are known to be violent (Yang, 1997). The Tiny Rascal Gang (TRG) was identified by Yang as a Cambodian gang. They were established in Long Beach around 1980. According to the California Department of Education (2005a), the TRG were responsible for committing auto theft, extortion, home-invasion robbery, and drive-by shootings. Yang (1997) reported that Cambodian and Vietnamese gangs are much more violent than Hmong youth.

Hmong gangs started in the 1980s in Minnesota as the Cobra Gang. They were the very first Hmong gang, as reported by Straka (2003). The majority of Hmong gangs are now located in California. The first Hmong gang started because many of the Hmong teenagers wished to protect themselves from racism in their neighborhoods. In 1988, a group of 10- to 11-year-old Hmong youths decided to form their own gang, called White Tigers. Straka affirmed that they broke into gun shops in order to obtain weapons, stole cars, and resorted to violence.

Asian gangs are known to be secretive. Many Asian gangs are interested in status or reputation (Chin, 1990). Tsunokai (2003) asserts that Asian gangs form due to social support. Hunt, Klein, and Waldorf (1997) reported that recent immigrants often find themselves falling in between two conflicting cultures or identities. They feel too Americanized for their parents' liking, yet are considered too foreign by their mainstream peers. These conflicts can result in stress in their school and personal life. It can also lead to strains in relationships with family members. For these reasons, it increases the likelihood of youths joining gangs. They desire to feel connected, accepted and respected those who are similar to them while living in a new culture.

Asian gangs are often referred to as organized criminal groups, rather than street gangs involved in criminal activities. These activities are extortion, burglary, weapons violations, home-invasion robbery, and drug sales (California Department of Education, 2005; Soltau, 2003). Chin (1990) notes that Asian gangs have national and international ties to organized crime. Japan, China, Taiwan, Vietnam, North and South Korea, Thailand, Laos, the Philippines are where they have known ties to their motherland (Brunker, 2013). The emergence of Asian gangs has reaped the interest of media, law enforcement, and researchers.

## Addressing Community Gang Problems

It is imperative that at-risk elementary, middle and high school Asian youth who are involved in gangs receive gang prevention instruction and services from school districts or community resources.

An effective strategy includes having after school programs where youth are involved in sports, completing homework or various activities to keep them busy instead of joining gangs. For example, in Southern California, the Jurupa Community Services District offers K-6<sup>th</sup> graders an opportunity to participate in the Kids Zone Program afterschool. Kids Zone provides a safe, fun, and healthy environment for all students in elementary school to develop socialization skills. It is a recreation enrichment program that allows elementary school children to participate in arts and crafts, sports, group games and teambuilding. Having Kids Zone Program available to students at school sites like Eastvale Elementary can deter them from joining gangs afterschool. The prime hour for joining and becoming involved in gangs is when the school bell rings in the afternoon. When there is no adult supervision, youth are more prone to mischief, crime, theft, sexual activity, and joining gangs. Therefore it is imperative that youth stay active and busy with afterschool activities as they promote positive pro-social behavior.

Another effective strategy is Community Mobilization. This “involves local citizens, including former gang involved youth, community groups, agencies and coordination of programs and staff functions across agencies” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007, p.2). One example includes local agencies like the YMCA who provide engaging activities and meaningful programs for at-risk youth to steer away from gangs.

A third strategy is to have Social Intervention. This involves grassroots groups, faith-based organizations, police and criminal justice organizations who are reaching out to gang involved youth and their families. The Drug Abuse Resistance Education or D.A.R.E. is an education program that seeks to prevent use of controlled drugs, membership in gangs, and violent behavior. D.A.R.E. is a non-profit program that seeks to provide elementary and middle schools with a newly adopted curriculum that involves making good decision making skills. This hands on program allows students to build on communication and decision-making skills which they rehearse by role play (Nordrum, 2014). The curriculum is usually taught by an instructor who provides students time to collaborate with classmates on skits to say no to drugs, gangs and alcohol. The D.A.R.E. program has reached out to millions of youth since its inception in 1983 (Nordrum, 2014). It has encouraged students to follow smart and healthy lives and steer away from high risk activities such as gangs (Nordrum, 2014). Moreover, it has encouraged students to be honest, safe and responsible for their actions.

The fourth strategy to curtail gang membership is Suppression. This involves “formal and informal social control procedures, including close supervision and monitoring of gang-involved youth by agencies of the criminal justice system” (Nordrum, 2014, p.2).

## Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed the causes and effects of gang activities among Asian American youth. We also recommended four interventions to prevent them from their gang activities. Without these interventions, many of them would succumb to the lures of crime and violence associated with gangs. Commitment by school districts, schools and the community can ensure the continued success of keeping at-risk youth away from gangs.

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