

Youth gangs -- a big issue with many theories but poor research

Youth gangs cause considerable personal and social damage worldwide, yet while there are many theories about how they form and how to prevent young people becoming involved, there is no evidence to back two of the key theories, according to the results of two Cochrane Systematic Reviews.

One review (CD007002) looked to see whether providing opportunities such as after-school clubs prevented gang membership. The other (CD007008) tried to find out if cognitive-behavioural interventions can prevent young people aged between 7 and 16 from joining gangs. Despite studying 2,696 publications relating to youth gangs, the Cochrane Reviewers were unable to find any randomised controlled trials or quasi-randomised controlled trials that studied these issues.

Current estimates suggest that in the USA alone there are currently 24,000 gangs with 760,000 members, and internationally street gangs have been identified in developed and developing countries in South America, Europe, Asia and Africa.

“This lack of research is surprising given the scale of the problem,” says lead researcher Dr Paul Montgomery who works at the Centre for Evidence-based Intervention at the University of Oxford, UK.

“There is an urgent need to rigorously evaluate the various gang prevention strategies that people suggest and try to implement, if we are going to be able to direct resources well and build future gang prevention programmes that have a good chance of working,” says Montgomery.

Source: Wiley

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