

### Three Societal Issues Impacting Gang Membership

Broken homes, low income and poor neighborhoods are a trio of interrelated social issues which have a great potential to lead to gang activity. The traditional family structure has broken down in our society and many homes are headed by an unmarried or divorced parent, usually the mother, with an income below the poverty level. As a result, these single parent families live in low income neighborhoods with other families in similar circumstances. Commonly the children are left home alone while the mother goes out to work to support the kids. Some might say, “What’s wrong with that? The kids are old enough to make their own sandwich.” However, while the mother is at work and there is no father in the home, the children lack parental guidance. And, in that absence of guidance, gang membership becomes attractive; perhaps the children may be bored, lonely, and angry or just want to be accepted. (Howell) Thus, broken homes in impoverished neighborhoods unintentionally contribute to youth becoming more vulnerable to joining gangs prevalent within these poor neighborhoods.

In the United States the traditional family has been made up of a married couple who provide and care for their minor children. Sadly, in recent years, “half of all American children will witness the breakup of a parent’s marriage.” (Billota) And, as the traditional family structure has broken down in divorce, statistics show that “90 percent of children whose parents divorced [have gone] into the custody of their mothers.” (Kirby). In addition, statistics demonstrate that among all children in the United States, “40 percent of children growing up in America today are being raised without their fathers.” (Billota) While experts debate whether single parent families are detrimental or a variation of family structure commonly seen in societies since ancient times (Felty), the fact remains that in the last 30 to 40 years there has been a change in our society and the once traditional American homes “have seen a dramatic growth in the proportion of families headed by women. Most of these families are poor and include

1 dependent children--causing the development of a large underprivileged class....” who live in  
2 poverty. (Felty)

3         There are two main factors that trap single mom households in poverty. One cause is  
4 teen pregnancy among unmarried young mothers. The United States Center for Disease Control  
5 and Prevention (CDC) reports that in 2011 “329,797 babies were born to women aged 15–19  
6 years.” (Hamilton) This is the age group that should be in high school preparing for employment,  
7 college, and careers. Having a baby during this time frequently interrupts or stops their  
8 education. These mothers often drop out of school and do not finish because the burden of  
9 having young children was too much to carry alone. The CDC reports, “Pregnancy and birth are  
10 significant contributors to high school dropout rates among girls. Only about 50% of teen  
11 mothers receive a high school diploma by 22 years of age, versus approximately 90% of women  
12 who had not given birth during adolescence.” (“About Teen Pregnancy”) Lacking an education,  
13 the young mothers either cannot get a job or must work at very low paying jobs because they  
14 have fewer employment skills and therefore cannot make nearly enough money to support their  
15 children and meet their other financial needs.

16         Another factor trapping single mom households in poverty is that, for the most part, the  
17 fathers are not involved or are stingy in providing and caring for their children. Teen mothers  
18 are often unmarried and the teen fathers often abandon them to fend for themselves and their  
19 babies. In addition, statistics among divorced families show that, “the custodial mothers’ and  
20 children’s’ standard of living is reduced by 30 percent on average while the non-custodial  
21 fathers’ increases by 15 percent.” (Felty) Although divorced fathers are usually court-ordered to  
22 provide child support, “award levels have consistently accounted for less than half of the expense  
23 of supporting a child, representing about 10 percent of the noncustodial father’s income.” (Felty)  
24 A Census Bureau report states, “28.3 percent of all custodial parents had incomes below poverty

1 in 2009.... Furthermore, they were about twice as likely as the total population to be poor.”  
2 (“Poverty Thresholds 2009”) It is stunning that while the poverty threshold, for example in 2009,  
3 for a head of householder less than 65 years old with one minor child was approximately  
4 \$14,731 (“Poverty Thresholds 2009”), while the “average amount of child support received by  
5 custodial parents who were owed support payments in 2009 was \$3,630, or about \$300 per  
6 month.” (“Custodial Parents...”)

7         Due to their low income, single mom households are driven by poverty to live in  
8 impoverished neighborhoods. It is in these relatively more densely populated areas, usually  
9 found in inner cities in which family disruption as well as limited education and low income are  
10 more concentrated and are often the neighborhood norm. A U.S. Government Juvenile Justice  
11 report on gang membership identifies that family risk factors leading to gang membership  
12 include broken homes, low socioeconomic status and extreme economic deprivation (Howell) --  
13 all of which are factors found in the poor neighborhoods. This report adds that parental  
14 drug/alcohol abuse, troubled families, family members in gangs, lack of adult male role models,  
15 family management problems, as well as parents with violent attitudes and sibling antisocial  
16 behavior are also risk factors. (Howell) And, not only because “children who have a family  
17 member involved in a gang are more likely to join a gang themselves, [but because] children are  
18 greatly influenced by their parents actions and attitudes ... parents who model negative behavior  
19 directly influence their children’s own attitudes towards crime and gangs.” (Maughen) It  
20 follows, then, that in neighborhoods with many families sharing the same background of  
21 disrupted families subjected to low income, gang membership would tend to be more acceptable.  
22 It is in these poorer neighborhoods where statistical analysis has shown gang activity to be more  
23 prevalent. (Li and Rainwater)

1           In conclusion, the trio of broken homes, poverty and poor neighborhoods contribute to  
2 youth, who are trapped in these social difficulties, to become more vulnerable to gang  
3 membership. However, there is some good news. Research suggests that by increasing a father's  
4 interest and involvement in a child's daily life and education, the risks leading to gang  
5 membership can be dramatically reduced. (Russell) A father's participation and assistance in  
6 family life could provide a greater financial stability and contribute to improved living  
7 conditions for all family members. In addition, a father could offer parental guidance and role  
8 modeling to supplement and reinforce the mother's efforts. Then, too, with the father's  
9 participation, the synergistic effect of both parents involved in the care and support of the  
10 children in a traditional family structure would more adequately meet the basic needs children  
11 have for activity, companionship, guidance, love, acceptance, and protection. While gangs might  
12 fulfill some of these needs, membership does not look quite so attractive to the youth when their  
13 families are together. Therefore, a return to the traditional family structure may be the best  
14 approach to reduce gang membership.

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