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Exploring anti-gang advertising: Focus group discussions with gang members and at-risk youth

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Exploring anti-gang advertising: Focus group discussions with gang members and at-risk youth

Peterson, Kristin M., M.A.
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1994
EXPLORING ANTI-GANG ADVERTISING:

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS WITH GANG MEMBERS AND AT-RISK YOUTH

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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in

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ABSTRACT

The use of advertising to discourage gang membership is an issue that has been heavily debated, but the controversy has continually overlooked the children for whom the ads are intended to help. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the use of anti-gang advertising by seeking the opinions of young people living in a gang environment. The results of this study provide a detailed account of discussions about anti-gang messages generated from focus groups with gang members and at-risk youth and suggest two main contributions that anti-gang advertising can make to larger gang reform efforts. In addition, the conclusions offer insight into how gang members and at-risk youth perceive themselves and their environment and how others can effectively communicate with them.
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I would like to thank the Clark County Department of Family and Youth Services for allowing me to conduct group discussions with youth in their programs. More importantly, I would like to thank the youth themselves for their participation and honesty.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The image of a skinhead giving a Nazi salute appears on the television screen. An announcer says, "If they were giving medals for killing black people, this guy would win a bronze." The picture changes to a hooded Ku Klux Klansman. "This guy, the silver." Finally, the screen flips to a black youth dressed unmistakably as a street gang member, and automatic weapons fire echoes in the background. "But this guy would win the gold. If you're in a gang, you're not a brother. You're a traitor." The commercial fades out with the sound of a prison door slamming (Hilkevitch).

The advertisement described above is clever, powerful, and thought provoking. But, is the ad clever, powerful, or thought provoking enough to discourage a young person from becoming or remaining a gang member?

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the use of advertising to
discourage gang membership by seeking the opinions and responses of
gang members and at-risk youth. The goal of this study is to generate
information that will aid in assessing the potential effectiveness of anti-gang
messages and incite new anti-gang themes that may appeal to America's youth.
In addition, this thesis will also identify the role of anti-gang advertising in
relation to the larger issue of gang reform and suggest what contribution, if any,
mediated messages can make to reduce gang membership.

There has been considerable research on both advertising and gangs, but
this study, perhaps for the first time, seeks to bring the subjects together. The
lack of research regarding anti-gang messages, however, should not be
mistaken for lack of discussion over the issue. The controversy which has
followed anti-gang advertisements from their onset has raised many questions
and concerns regarding anti-gang messages. More important to this study, the
controversy has illuminated the need for research of anti-gang messages in light
of the young people for whom they are intended.

Controversy Surrounding Anti-gang Advertising

The advertisement described in the opening paragraph of this thesis
which compares the violence caused by street gangs to that of racist hate
groups is the most controversial anti-gang advertisement yet created, despite
the fact that it has never appeared on television. The commercial, created by
the Evanston Human Relations Commission, was designed as a sincere attempt
to de glamorize youth gangs in the eyes of twelve, thirteen, and fourteen year
olds living in the Chicago area. The initial screening of the ad, however, ignited
such heated debate among public officials and community leaders that
independent stations and network affiliates deemed it unfit for television before a
single young person ever saw it.

Groups like Mothers Against Gangs and the United Neighbors Coalition
rallied in support of the advertisement against such fierce opponents as the
Consolidated Committee of Concerned Black Men and rap singer Sister Soljah.
Messages of support and objections to the ad were expressed through a series
of articles and editorials which appeared in Chicago area newspapers and
magazines. The advertisement even gained national attention as a topic for
debate on both CNN and National Public Radio.

Those opposing the ad argued that it was "illogical and historically
incorrect" (in Claessens), trivializing the murders and intimidations that the Ku
Klux Klan and neo-Nazi cults have committed against African Americans. A
Chicago City Council member, for example, was "offended by the simplistic
equating of skinheads and Klansmen who killed blacks because of hate with 'our kids' who fall into crime because of family and social systems' failures" (in Page).

In response, a Chicago Tribune editorialist wrote, "it offends me, too, to think of skinheads and Klansmen as the moral equivalent of black street gangs, but it offends me more that it happens to be the truth" (Page). A fellow editorialist for the Pioneer Press elaborated, "I see no difference between gang colors and skin color as a basis for murder" (Brown, C.). Still, other defenders of the ad simply felt that "motivations are irrelevant in regard to loss of life" (Kent).

The Evanston commercial was also accused of unfairly depicting gangs as solely a black problem when they are "an equal-opportunity menace that threaten the future of whites, Hispanics, and Asians too" (Hilkevitch). In particular, several African American leaders were concerned that the ad's portrayal of a black gang member "feeds into mainstream America's stereotypes that all black males are either gang members, criminals, or at least suspects" (in Cox). Yet, many blacks living amid the gang violence continued to defend the advertisement that boldly "educates viewers of the reality that those who are committing such hideous crimes, without knowing, are destroying their future" (Murphy).

Lastly, the Evanston anti-gang message was attacked by those who felt
that the ad could easily cause an uproar among gang members, leaving their families and neighborhoods to deal with the adverse effects. One critic explained that gang members "don't need to be told how bad they are" (Brown, C.) while another added that what is needed is a message that "will bring young males in so we can help them" (in Cox). Unfortunately, a common problem is reaching that audience. Supporters of the Evanston commercial felt that a direct, clever, and powerful advertisement was one way to do so. In fact, the ad's creators reminded skeptics, "this is not an ad to be liked" (in Freeman), but one to provoke thought and discussion about gangs and black-on-black homicide. The discussion, said other supporters, should be provoking solutions to problems and not objections to the ad by people who were previously unconcerned. "Everyone was crying out that 'something' needed to be done. When this 'something', the ad, is done, there is a hue and cry about it not being sensitive and fair" (Offutt).

While the Evanston Human Relations Commission's campaign was the most controversial, it has not been the only anti-gang message to draw attention. Motivated by the gang-related death of their account manager, the creative team of Los Angeles ad agency Frankel & Anderson produced a print ad similar to the Evanston television spot. The design consisted of a large swastika above the
text which read, "It started out as gang graffiti too" (Hinsberg 1990). The ad agency believed that its design delivered a strong message that would generate discussion about the future of gangs. But, additional sponsors of the campaign "judged the ad's visual as raising associations too intensely negative" and worried that it might offend gang members. As a result, the advertisement was shelved and replaced with one that consisted of a page full of spray-painted graffiti above the headline, "The next thing they spray is bullets" (Horowitz, "Agency").

In addition to the public service ads by Frankel & Anderson and the Evanston Commission, several companies have incorporated an anti-gang message into commercial advertising. The National Football League, for example, devised the "NFL Chill" slogan to discourage gang membership as well as existing associations between Raiders merchandise and gang affiliation (Hinsberg, "Homeboy"). Conversely, the Soviet Clothing Company decided to use advertising to link their blue jeans with an anti-gang stance in an attempt to imitate labels like Benetton and Esprit that have previously produced issue-oriented commercials. The Soviet television ad featured two gang members in conflict followed by the message "Work it out." The Soviet spot, like the NFL slogan, was produced with the intention of deterring gang violence. However,
many critics insist that Soviet and other companies which incorporate anti-gang messages into commercial advertising are "capitalizing off gangs" to sell products and unintentionally glamorizing gang life by portraying gang members on television (Brown, K.; Horowitz, "New Jean").

Regardless of whether attempts have been for public service or commercial profit, the mixture of gangs and advertising has always appeared to result in controversy. This controversy has raised important issues about using the media, already so often criticized for contributing to the rise in crime and violence, as a vehicle for gang reform. Community leaders, ad executives, TV and radio sponsors, public figures, and CEOs have openly aired their opinions about the debate. However, few of those professionals are at risk of becoming gang members, and, as the controversy persists, they continue to overlook the opinions of those who are.

**Significance and Scope of Study**

The crime and violence associated with gang activity are, perhaps, justification alone to warrant exploration into innovative efforts to reduce gang membership. However, the significance and uniqueness of this study lie in the fact that it gives gang members and at-risk youth the opportunity to contribute to
a debate in which their voices are often unheard even though they are both the ultimate targets of the controversy and the experts in the field. While this study seeks to take the discussion of anti-gang advertising out of the board room and onto the streets, no simple answers to the advertising debate are expected. Unfortunately, there are no simple answers when it comes to gangs. For this reason, three assumptions regarding this research must be clarified before continuing.

First, this study does not assume that mediated messages are a cure-all to the gang problem but only seeks to provide insights to those who plan to use commercials to help discourage membership. Second, although this study specifically seeks the responses of gang members and at-risk youth, it has not overlooked or disregarded the impact an anti-gang message may have on other viewing populations or the need to educate them about gang activity. On the contrary, this research demonstrates an urgency for such education by illustrating that those who "live" the problem often have the least power and resources to change it (Miller 275; Cummings & Monti 309; Hagehorn 169). That issue, however, is not one that will be directly discussed in this study because it could easily be the topic of an entire thesis. Finally, this study does not assume that conclusions about the entire gang phenomenon can be drawn based solely
on several group discussions, yet descriptions of gang life by focus group members will be used to provide information about their responses to anti-gang advertisements.

Perhaps the worst fear of a researcher is to produce a study that unintentionally trivializes a serious social dilemma by appearing to suggest, for example, that it can be solved by simply targeting vulnerable youngsters with mediated messages. Often, however, the most a researcher can do, as the following literature review will likely reveal, is to begin breaking down the problem into manageable parts.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Because anti-gang advertising has not been previously examined by researchers, this particular study will include a review of past literature on the subjects of advertising and gangs. The summary will provide background for the study of anti-gang messages. In addition, the summary of advertising research and gang research will indicate that anti-gang advertisements which target gang members and at-risk youth must be part of a comprehensive effort to reduce gang activity.

Review of Advertising Research

Shortly after the Advertising Council popularized Smokey the Bear as the leading messenger of forest fire prevention, scholars began to examine the use of advertising to "sell" social causes and its potential as a vehicle for social change. In 1971, Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman proposed that "social advertising has become such a feature of American society that it is no longer a
question of whether to use it, but how to use it" (56).

Kotler and Zaltman's 1971 essay entitled "Social Marketing: An approach to Planned Social Change" first introduced the term "social marketing" and suggested two reasons why the exploration of social marketing strategies was needed. First, the authors believed that social causes stood to gain a great deal by formally incorporating established marketing principles into their objectives. Pollution, mass transit, and drug abuse, for example, were listed as problems that could benefit from new approaches for generating public attention and support for a cause. Secondly, the authors recognized that although the application of marketing principles to social objectives was a natural and promising development, the process deserved special attention because "social marketing typically has to deal with the market's core beliefs and values, whereas business marketing often deals with superficial preferences and opinions" (68). They concluded that it was more difficult to influence the acceptance or adoption of a social message and, therefore, more effort must be put into planning the appeal.

Perhaps, the most important and enduring insight from Kotler and Zaltman's work was the acknowledgment of the unfortunate tendency by social campaigners "to assign advertising the primary, if not the exclusive, role in
accomplishing their social objectives" (56). Rather than targeting audiences with mass media messages and leaving the "response to natural social processes" (58), Kotler and Zaltman suggested that practitioners utilize a social marketing approach which arranges for a "step down communication process" by linking the promotion of social change to useful implementation. A social marketing campaign to encourage prenatal care, for example, would not only involve packaging the idea in a manner that was appealing to the intended audience but also ensuring that resources were readily available if expectant mothers chose to act on the message.

In 1981, William Paisley contributed to the "art" of selling social causes in his book *Public Communication Campaigns*. Like Kotler and Zaltman, Paisley recognized that using mediated appeals to influence social objectives abounded. Like Kotler and Zaltman, Paisley also believed that selling social causes involved much more than advertising. However, he broadened his view beyond the "step down communication process" to show that the effectiveness of messages was inescapably tied to an entire reform effort.

Paisley explained that America had a rich history of reform and reform efforts. Generally, change occurred as a result of one of the social control strategies he referred to as the "three Es" - education, engineering, and
enforcement. In the early 1900s, the leaders of movements for abolition, temperance, and women's rights experimented with education efforts in order to perpetuate reform. These activists began to "refine the art of persuasion" (17) by using the newly emerging mass media to inform people about issues. They created the first public communication campaigns. However, they also used questionable strategies like confrontation and muckraking to force the government to become active in the reform. By the 1960s, Presidents Kennedy and Johnson had popularized engineering solutions by creating federal programs to combat social problems like poverty and illiteracy. By the 1970s, legislative bans, antitrust bills, laws regulating the workplace, and other enforcement strategies were the most common methods of reform.

When Paisley published his book in 1981, however, he wrote that "dissatisfaction with both the engineering and enforcement solutions to social problems is evident" (26). His work suggested that social activists were likely to return to a reliance on educational strategies of reform for two important reasons. First, the number of problems which have neither engineering nor enforcement solutions appeared to be growing. For example, there are few services or laws that could realistically be implemented to reduce the risk of
heart disease. Ultimately, individuals are responsible for their own behaviors, but they can be educated in ways which may influence their decision making.

Second, activists were beginning to realize that reform efforts could benefit from a combination of the three Es. "If the engineering or enforcement strategy seems to be sound but fails to achieve utilization or compliance, the communication campaign may focus on changing the public response. In this role, public communication may become an integral part of an engineering or enforcement strategy" (36).

Paisley speculated that the future would be characterized by belief in a comprehensive approach to social reform. His prediction is true in the 1990s as evidenced in the literature which repeatedly encourages a multifaceted method of dealing with gangs and the problems that have resulted from them. Several agencies, including the California Department of Justice and National Crime Prevention Council, have collected research about gangs by sociologists, criminologists, task forces, etc. Their reports suggest that reform will occur as a result of many different types of programs and actions. Figure 1 lists several strategies that should be implemented to reduce gang membership. The diagram emphasizes how various strategies work simultaneously with the common goal of gang reform. In particular, a communication campaign is only
Figure 1 Gang Reduction Strategies
one component of a reform effort. Social advertising is only one component of a communication campaign, and advertisements targeting at-risk youth are only one component of social advertising. Unfortunately, however, the diagram also depicts gang reform as a complex and overwhelming task, but one that is approachable if experts in each area undertake the strategy most familiar to them while remaining aware of its position in the larger reform effort.

The need to dissect individual components of a massive reform effort was inferred when Paisley noted that once communication is accepted as a viable means of reform, it is no longer viewed as a control strategy. Instead, he explained, "attention shifts to the level of technique - that is to the process of communicating" (26). The role of the campaign designer is then to create the most effective message possible. The Evanston Commission and Frankel & Anderson ad agency which created anti-gang advertisements probably intended to do just that. However, how does one create or judge whether a campaign is effective?

An advertising campaign designer might begin by looking at past campaigns. "America Responds to AIDS" was considered to be a controversial, yet successful campaign which consisted of five phases. Each phase targeted a specific subpopulation with carefully planned and pretested messages (Woods,
Davis, & Westover). An evaluation of the "Taking a Bit Out of Crime" campaign revealed that it successfully promoted crime prevention by using the McGruff dog character in a series of public service announcements (O'Keefe). While analyses of these campaigns and many others offer insights into the creation and potential of social advertising, they also report that "the degree to which persuasion may occur is highly dependent upon existing audience dispositions concerning the issue at hand" (O'Keefe 152). The types of appeals that promote crime prevention, for example, will not necessarily promote protection of the environment.

Alternatively, an aspiring designer may approach a campaign by turning to media effects research in order to better understand how advertising can persuade people to change their attitudes and actions. However, an overview of such research "reveals a literary corpus so expansive and dense that one risks getting lost in the labyrinth" (McGuire 43). While general theories have been established which may suggest when to use emotional over logical appeals or when to target attitudinal rather than behavioral change, scholars stress recognizing the limitations of applying general theory to specific situations (McGuire 42).

According to Brenda Dervin, a contributing author in Paisley's Public
Communication Campaigns, difficulties in applying past research to present campaigns can be attributed to the volatile nature of information exchange. Like Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman who argued that "reality" and "knowledge" are socially constructed, Dervin proposed that messages are constructed by the individuals who interpret them. Consequently, she questioned the common assumption that the information in a message can be transferred from source to receiver without change, suggesting that a "view of audiences-as-receivers of messages constrains our vision" (73) and perpetuates the fallacy that "information is a thing rather than a construction" (74). Instead, information should be viewed as a product of individual human observation, and an audience member should not be depicted as the receiver but rather the creator of the message. Ultimately, information is a "creation inexorably tied to the time, place, and perspectives of its creator" (75).

Ironically, Dervin's conclusions are not as discouraging as they appear. She did not imply that a campaign designer promoting a particular social cause is defenseless against how any one audience member will interpret his or her message. Rather, Dervin's view of "information-as-construction" suggested that "there are ways of researching audiences that allow them to tell us what they need if they are to make connections between our messages and their worlds".
(84). For the designer of anti-gang advertising directed to at-risk youth and juvenile gang members, that process would involve assessing what is known about that group and using that information to determine the types of appeals that may be most effective in discouraging gang membership.

**Review of Gang Research**

In recent years, the amount of literature being published about gangs has rapidly increased. Several conclusions about gang members and the environment in which they live can be drawn from the available research. Four general conclusions have particular relevance to the study at hand.

First, gangs usually include relatively young members, often termed "midgets", "pee wees," or "wanna-bes," from underclass minority communities (Hagehorn 25; Monti 8) who because of their age are less committed and less integrated than older career criminals (Miller 265). These youth are often expressive in their use of gang clothing, colors, and graffiti, making them relatively identifiable to community leaders (Miller 266). Because of their age and visibility, many of these youth have the potential to successfully "mature out" of criminal activity (Miller 264-266). However, because the formation and persistence of gangs is tied to underlying breakdowns in such traditional
institutions as the family, judicial system, and local and national economy, many youth become a "product of their life circumstances" (Miller 278). The ability of an individual to leave gang life becomes contingent on factors like community empowerment, increased educational and recreational opportunities, and the availability of legitimate employment in underprivileged neighborhoods (Hagehorn 165; Huff 316; Moore, *Barrio* 9).

Understanding the foundations of gang activity leads to recognition of the second, and often overlooked, conclusion that gangs serve many positive functions for their members. In some instances, gang members "cope with economic distress and social isolation" (Cummings & Monti 311; Hagehorn 164), by creating illegal, yet innovative, avenues of upward mobility within their gang structure (Monti 12). In other instances, the positive functions of gangs are unrelated to deviant behavior and resemble those of many other juvenile groups (Hagehorn 164). Gangs cultivate socialization, courtship, and surrogate families, and gang members learn the value of group responsibility, trust, and decision-making (Monti 9; Moore, *Barrio* 6). Recognition of these positive functions has created problems in the practical application of the term "gang" and whether it is defined by criminal behavior (Moore, "Gangs" 30; Miller 272). However, recognition of these positive functions has also contributed to the
important realization that gangs have the potential to organize in positive ways and may become "the vehicle of their own transformation" (Monti 15). Some members have successfully turned their "gangs" into legitimate businesses that sell tortillas and athletic shoes (Renwick). However, researchers caution that such efforts may backfire if, for example, gangs disrupt the organizations that try to adopt and change them (Monti 14).

A third conclusion about gangs lies in the real and imaginary barriers that exist between gangs and the larger community. Gangs often initiate barriers to distinguish themselves from other groups of "outsiders" and protect territory by using distinct names, colors, clothing, symbols, graffiti, speech, and by using violence (Hutchinson 137; Monti 13). Yet, some barriers are the result of the denial by officials to acknowledge a gang problem exists in order to protect a city's image and economic development or avoid dealing with sensitive issues of race and class (Huff 310; Miller 277). If the gang problem worsens, this denial is inevitably followed with an overreaction by law enforcement and media whose "sporadic panics" then define gang activity as a criminal problem (Hagehorn 23; Huff 312; Moore, "Gangs" 32). This overreaction causes the general public to create erroneous perceptions of gangs and harbor fear towards gang members in general (Hagehorn 160,166). While such fear may be justifiable at times, the
public's failure to understand the complexity of the gang problem exaggerates an "us against the world" mentality within gangs which reinforces group solidarity and causes gang members to construct artificial barriers against teachers and schools or other people and places that they had once turned to for support (Monti 16).

The notion of imagined barriers leads to a fourth and final conclusion which suggests that extreme caution be used when drawing conclusions about gangs. The public and researchers commonly stereotype gangs, often assuming there is no variation between them and that all gangs develop the worst behavior displayed by any one. "A gang is a gang is a gang" (Moore, "Gangs" 28) attitude prevails when gangs actually have diverse traditions and organization and vary between city, community, and neighborhood (Hagehorn 167; Miller 282; Monti 9). This stereotyping is often accompanied by two dangerous side effects. First, when gang members are labeled and treated as though they belong to the most deviant gang, they often act like members of that gang (Huff 313). Secondly, when stereotypes and second guessings are used as the basis for public policy and reform efforts, the wrong treatment is often prescribed to the problem (Hagehorn 169; Miller 282; Moore, "Gangs" 32).

Drawing attention to stereotyping and noting it as the final conclusion
about gangs is not meant to discredit the previous three conclusions or the invaluable contributions made by past gang researchers. However, it is intended to stress the dangers of relying on second hand information about gangs and to reinforce the rationale for a study which seeks the direct responses of gang members and at-risk youth.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In order to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of advertising, many communication scholars stress that researchers analyze messages in light of the specific situation and specific audience for whom they were intended (Dervin). In addition, scholars who study gangs urge that future studies actively involve gang members so that research on underclass groups is less likely to be "professionalized, quantified, and sterilized" (Hagehorn 165) in order to promote a particular political or social agenda (Monti 18) and more likely to elicit solutions to problems and produce reports which "do not speak to gangs and the underclass, but for them" (Hagehorn 170).

The methodology chosen for the present study was based on recommendations by both communication and gang experts and confirmed by the belief "that all but the most calloused and bruised young person will be willing to teach an adult many things about gangs, as long as the adult is willing to be taught" (Monti 20). The present study used the focus group, a traditional
but subject-oriented marketing tool with an untraditional population of adolescents aged twelve to seventeen who are in gangs or highly predisposed to gang activity. The focus group provided a setting in which participants could openly discuss various aspects of anti-gang advertising. Additionally, several anti-gang television advertisements were shown throughout the focus groups to simulate actual viewing and encourage spontaneous responses. All of the anti-gang ads shown were designed and produced by KVVU, the Fox network affiliate in Las Vegas.

Description of Study Participants

This study consisted of three separate focus groups. The members' participation was arranged by the staff at the Clark County Department of Family and Youth Services. All focus group members were enrolled in non-punitive, rehabilitative programs because they had committed felony offenses which put them at risk of being removed from their homes and placed in correctional institutions. The youth had been chosen for alternative programming based on factors which included whether they were gang-involved, whether they had younger siblings, and whether they and their parents appeared committed to the program.
All three focus groups lasted approximately one hour and fifteen minutes and took place at program sites in a comfortable atmosphere where program staff were not present and could not overhear the discussions. Each focus group was similarly conducted, except groups one and three were headed by two moderators and group two had a single moderator due to scheduling problems. All discussions were recorded on audio tape. Prior to the study dates, the research methods were approved by the UNLV Office of Research Administration and the youth in the county programs were informed of the research and procedures and given the option of participating to which they all agreed.

Members of the first focus group belonged to the Freedom Program, a county program in which juveniles are under constant staff supervision during the day and on house-arrest at night. This group consisted of males from central and north Las Vegas areas who, except for one white male, were of black, hispanic, or mixed ethnicity. Of the nine participants, seven reported to be gang or former gang members and all were familiar with a gang environment.

The second group consisted of one black male, five white males, and one white female. These youth also belonged to the Freedom Program, however, they attended the campus in Henderson, a Las Vegas suburb. One
participant reported to be a gang member and four others reported to associate
with gang members. However, the Henderson youth alluded to and later
confirmed that the gang environment where they lived was active but less
"hardcore" than that of Las Vegas or Los Angeles.

Members of the third and final group belonged to the Spring Mountain
Halfway House where, unlike the Freedom youth, they also lived. This group
included one black, one hispanic, two white, and two boys of mixed race. Four
of the participants reported to be gang members, one reported to associate
with gang members, and one reported to have little contact with a gang
environment. These youth were similar in description to the previous groups, yet
they were more reserved in their responses than the others. Their lack of
spontaneity could be attributable to their having spent a longer amount of time at
the program site. The amount of time that research participants spend in
institutional settings is commonly cited as a factor in gang-related studies.
The fact that participants of this study belonged to county youth programs
was one of several possible limitations taken into consideration prior to
designing research procedures, conducting the focus groups, and analyzing
the results.
Limitations of Methodology

The limitations of the methodology used in this study fall into three main areas. The first area relates to the youth's participation in the research. Perhaps, the most obvious problem in this area is the fact that the participants of this study were representative of youth who have been convicted of offenses and enrolled in county programs. Therefore, their responses may reflect their "altered status" (Moore, "Gangs" 30). Gaining accessibility to youth in a gang environment, however, is often unmanageable or dangerous (Hagehorn 28). As a result, many scholars have conducted research in controlled settings and found that comments from institutionalized youth are often consistent with comments from youth in gang settings (Monti 19). Particularly because this study did not focus on gangs in their natural environment, the status of the participants did not appear to impact the authenticity of their responses. Of more concern was the tendency for research participants in gang-related studies to use exaggerated "gang rhetoric" not to fool the researcher but "to fool the gang members using it" (in Monti 21). In this particular study, the research participants did appear to romanticize aspects of their gang life, and the implications of such phenomenon will be addressed in the results.

The second area of limitation relates to the role of the researcher.
Researchers who interact with gang youth are often criticized for demonstrating favorable bias toward those youth. The first established expert on gangs acknowledged that he did develop a "love-hate relationship" with his gang subjects (Thrasher). More recently, observers of gangs have acknowledged that they may be sympathetic to gangs but only in that they are "willing to challenge prevailing assumptions about gangs and policies intended to deal with problems" (Monti 19). The experiences of past gang researchers suggest that the key to avoiding bias in participant oriented studies is to remain aware of the relationship between the researcher and the subjects. By doing so, a researcher can more easily retain a sense of objectivity when interacting with gang members and maintain a distance between herself and her subjects which displays trust but not "uniformed sympathy" (Hagehorn 27; Monti 21). With such factors in mind, the author of this thesis, as chief moderator and interpreter of the focus groups, approached the present study.

Finally, the third area of limitation relevant to this study relates to a more general issue. Even with the most ideal subjects and researchers, both focus group and gang research are embedded with problems of generalizability. Focus groups, however, have proven to be effective exploratory methodology. In addition, gang research, even though it may be particular to a specific city or
typology, increases general knowledge about gangs (Hagehorn 169) and allows researchers to pinpoint "ideas, feelings, and recollections that consistently turn up" (Monti 20) in interviews with underprivileged youth. Therefore, despite its limitations, this study can provide useful information and serve as a starting point for research in the previously unexplored area of anti-gang messages.

Description of Study Procedures

Each focus group began by having the youth introduce themselves. The moderators also introduced themselves, stressing that they were not counselors or social workers but "students like them" who "need their help." The importance of "their help" and participation was emphasized by further clarifying that "part of what we (the moderators) study is what different people think - we don't judge it or try to change it - just try to find out what they think." The moderators then went over a "few simple rules" by explaining that the focus group functioned like any other television or movie screening and that all comments would remain anonymous. The moderators reminded participants, however, that the most important rule was "to be honest." The participants were also told that the moderators did not make nor were they associated in any way with the advertisements being shown. The introductory portion of the focus groups were
concluded by having the participants respond to a word association. They were asked to write down the first four or five images that came into their minds upon hearing the word, "gang." The word association was included in the focus groups to provide the youth with an example of how they might respond upon seeing the advertisements that would be shown.

Most of the focus groups were spent discussing issues concerning anti-gang advertising. The youth were encouraged to respond spontaneously, but the moderators guided the discussion through six general topics. In most instances, each topic for discussion was initiated by showing a related anti-gang advertisement. If the participants did not respond to the advertisements, they were given prompts like "What is your first reaction to that ad?" or "What do you think the message was in that ad?" in order to illicit conversation. The six topics are listed below. Each topic is followed by the name of the advertisement(s) used to generate discussion (see Appendix 1 for ad transcriptions) and a brief description of the issues addressed as part of that topic.

1. **Spokesperson** - "Juan" - best types of spokespersons for anti-gang ads.

2. **Deterrence** - "Joseph", "Julian", "Rick" - using threat of death or jail to discourage gang membership.
3. **Unintended Effects** - "Jean Prison", "Gregory" - potential of ads to unintentionally glamorize or reinforce gang membership.

4. **Alternative Gang** - "Hawkins" - potential of associating the "gang" label with conventional activities to discourage membership in deviant groups.

5. **Suggestions** - (no ad) - ideas for better anti-gang advertisements.

6. **General Effectiveness** - (no ad) - general potential of anti-gang ads to affect youth, especially in comparison to other types of reform efforts.

Each of the focus groups was concluded by having the youth answer several demographic questions about themselves and their involvement with gangs.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

As mentioned previously in this study, many gang researchers have found young people "willing to teach an adult many things about gangs, as long as the adult is willing to be taught" (Monti 20). The young people who participated in this study demonstrated a willingness to share their opinions about anti-gang advertising. In particular, members of the first group were the most vocal and passionate in their comments. Despite any differences in groups, however, similar and often identical responses were expressed in all of the focus groups. Those comments which were most representative of all the participants' responses will be given the most emphasis in the following account of the group discussions. Particular attention will be given to the way in which members of all three groups played out distinct roles as respondents of anti-gang advertisements, critics of anti-gang advertisements, and creators of anti-gang advertisements.
Spokesperson

The first advertisement shown to the participants was "Juan." In this ad, a black inmate of Jean Prison simply said that he would not join a gang again because joining a gang was "demoralizing yourself." The first responses to this ad by the youth were negative. They quickly came up with several reasons why the inmate may have said what he did -- "Somebody paid him," "Because he was in prison," "So, he could get the hell out." However, as the discussions progressed, the respondents explained that they did believe the inmate had been a gang member, using comments like "He does know what he's talking about though." They also believed that part of what he was saying was true. "Well, about the fact that gangs get into trouble, I don't think he's lying about that." The respondents' only real objection to the ad was the inmate's claim that he would not join a gang again because, according to them, "nine times out of ten, he's gonna go right back to it."

As the youth took on the role of critics rather than simply responding to the ad, they became even more accepting of the inmate's message. "If you really listen to him, he makes sense." In fact, several of the teenagers suggested that the inmate actually believed that he would leave gang life even though it is most likely that he would return to it once he is released from prison.
One boy, in particular, explained this possibility by relating it to his own experience.

You never know, he could be telling the truth though because all the time he's been in he could be sitting back thinking of things he's done and don't want to go back to the same problem of things that he had done.... I've thought about it for three months in juvi every night - why I got to take my homey's wrap. I'd do it all over again though. Wouldn't let my homeys go up like that.

Regardless of the inmate's intentions at the time the ad was made, the respondents seemed to agree that his decision to rejoin a gang was not a matter of "whether he's going to do it or not, it's whether he has to or not." For a spokesperson to suggest that leaving gang life is as easy as simply saying so, explained one teenager, "doesn't give reality."

Later in the focus groups, the respondents were shown the advertisement "Rick." This ad was similar to the first except the spokesperson was white and his message was that gang banging inevitably leads to the penitentiary or death. In this instance, the youth's initial reactions were strikingly more negative, making comments like "I resent him being on TV just trying to get his time slacked off" and "he don't know a damn thing about it." Many of the focus group members became extremely defensive. Their initial reaction was to dispute what the inmate had said with statements like "You can be a gang member and not
bang...you can be a gang member and don't go to jail."

Once again, as the respondents took on the role of critics, they began to reconsider the inmate's message. They still believed that he was in prison for "tax evasion or fraud" and not as a result of being in a gang. "He wasn't in no gang, but what he was saying, it's kinda true. When you join a gang you either gonna get out or die or go to the pen." One teenager even said that of all the spokespersons, "he was the deepest." After consideration, the youth basically concluded that the message was true, yet someone would have to put "a different face on the message" for the ad to be effective.

If you were to hear it on the radio wouldn't you all be like, dam, he gots a point there. But if you were to see that dude on TV flipping through the channels after a movie and see a white guy talking about gangs, you gonna start making fun of him and cracking up. He don't know what he's talking about. You gonna just keep flipping and not listen to what he's got to say.

Throughout the focus groups, the youth were adamant that effective anti-gang messages must come from people who have "been through it," "someone who's on the streets." The respondents viewed gang members as the most credible sources of anti-gang messages, and several were adamant that outsiders should not make judgments about gang life without having experienced it. The following dialogue between three respondents demonstrates this point. Two boys were gang members, and the other was not.
Youth 1: So you have to go through it to understand it?
Youth 2: Ya.
Youth 1: I can understand it and I never been through it.
Youth 3: You don't understand it totally.
Youth 2: You ain't know what it feels like when a carload of dudes try to run you over and they're screaming Blood this and Blood that and you're screaming Cuz this and Cuz that. You're not sure if they gonna hit you or not, and you're gonna die for your set right then and there. You never felt that.
Youth 1: I ain't never said I felt it.
Youth 2: To understand it totally you have to feel it.

The respondents stressed that, unlike Michael Jordan or another famous person, only experienced gang members can "tell other people, 'don't join a gang or you'll be going through what I'm going through, getting shot and stabbed' and all that." In response to the idea of an anti-gang message coming from the government or a politician, the youth just laughed, "Then nobody would listen."

"All this going on down here, and they way up there in the powerful world."

**Deterrence**

**Death** In response to the advertisement "Joseph" in which an inmate uses the threat of death to discourage gang activity, the members of all three focus groups reacted negatively. They did not feel death was a deterrent because they seemed to live comfortably with the possibility of dying. The first group explained that "if you ain't never been in a gang before, you gonna be
scared to die for a gang. But if you had to grow up with one, you ain't never
gonna worry about it." Not only did these boys maintain that they were not afraid
of death, they became very passionate in explaining to the moderators the value
of death in their gang life.

Youth 1: If you watched this, would you want to be in a gang?
Moderator: No, it scares me.
Youth 1: You think it's ridiculous to die for a gang, right?
Moderator: No, I don't think it's ridiculous because I can kind of
understand it, but I'd be scared. You guys don't seem scared.
Youth 1: It's like dying for something you believe in.
Youth 2: It's like a pride thing.
Youth 3: It's like an ego. Like you have a male ego. We have a gang
ego.
Youth 4: It's like saving face.

One of the teenagers further explained, "you don't give a damn what's going to
happen to you. You can get shot dead in the street. You're gonna die with that,
just like you die with your mother's love, you die with your homey's love, die with
your sets love....My hood gonna be there when I die."

The second group also did not claim to be fearful of dying, however, they
did not depict death as having as valuable a role in gang life as the first group.
One boy whose cousin died as a result of gang violence simply said, "Shit, I was
taught I was born to die." Another teen with a similar "you gotta go, you gotta
go" mentality towards death explained that one day his "homeys" had sat him
down and told him "if God wants you ain't nothing you can do about it. If there's
a bullet with your name on it, it's going to go through you."

Like the other groups, the third group also described the possibility of dying as an accepted reality and, therefore, deemed it an ineffective deterrent to gang activity. "Whenever it's time for me to die, it's time for me to die. Getting shot is possible." The comments from members of this group, however, did not suggest that gang membership increased the honor or value of dying. In fact, one teen said, "Death don't scare me, but I don't want to die." A second teenager admitted, "It gets me scared every time I go out. I'd like to say forget it, but I do what I got to do." Still another agreed, "you might be scared of them, but you gonna fight back. You just ain't gonna sit there and stop and think about it."

**Jail** The "Julian" ad featured an inmate reminding viewers that gang members often end up spending years in prison, "reacting to buzzers instead of voices." Based on their responses to "Julian," the youth appeared to be more threatened by the possibility of going to jail than dying. The initial responses to the ad were comments like "I don't want to be locked up," "You gonna be somebody's girlfriend," and "It don't glorify it (jail). You wake up to the buzz!"

Later in the discussion, a member of group one explained, "He's trying to say they don't treat you like an individual. They treat you like a number. You ain't nobody, you just a piece of meat." The vision of prison from this teenager who
strongly identified with a gang and the particulars of that gang was described as a fate, perhaps, worse than death. Several boys suggested similar notions about being incarcerated. "That's like taking away, saying you got to be in prison instead of being out there with your friends." "I'd be kinda scared to go because that's just wasting your life - sitting there doing nothing."

Despite the fact that all of the youth had strong reactions to "Julian", the threat of jail was still judged to be a poor deterrent to gang activity, one "that's not going to talk you out of trouble." The youth explained that knowing the consequences does not prevent young people from committing crimes and used their own experiences in the juvenile court system to prove the point. "Before we got in here, we knew some of things we gonna do gonna get you locked up, but you still do them."

The possibility of jail or death certainly did not scare the focus group members, and, therefore, they concluded that messages which remind youngsters of the consequences of gang membership made ineffective ads. Although the teenagers thought "Joseph" and "Julian" were poor ads, they liked them because they could "relate" to their messages. "Well, what he said was true so that's why I think that it's all right." After viewing the "Rick" advertisement, for example, the following dialogue occurred.
Youth 1: He's just saying you gonna die or go to the pen.
Youth 2: Those are the most likely things that's gonna happen. You can't say that's not true. You can't say it's not most likely. Every gang member been through juvenile - almost, I'm not saying all - been through the juvenile system.
Youth 1: I'll give you most of them.
Youth 3: If you in a gang you going down the street there's going to be somebody that don't like you and you don't like them and they gonna try to kill you or you gonna kill them first.

All of the youth were aware of the consequences of gang life mentioned in the advertisements and suggested that other young people "can't really learn nothing (from them) because they already know that's what happens."

Unfortunately, these youth could not specifically express why knowing the adverse effects of gang life did not discourage membership. However, the answer appeared to be tied to the youth's fatalistic view of life in general. Even if you were not in a gang, they explained, you could get AIDS, be hit by a car, or "die walking down the street with a gold chain somebody else want." In fact, when questioned, one group insinuated that the future will likely unfold similarly whether you are in a gang or not.

Moderator: Is it an issue of gangs?
Youth 1: No, God's got all our lives planned out already.
Youth 2: You can not be in a gang and still go to the penitentiary.
Youth 3: You can not be in a gang and still die.
Unintended Effects

Glamorization Although the advertisement "Jean Prison" ended with a shot of prison gates, it began by showing gang members wearing their colors and carousing to loud music. Therefore, the ad was shown to see whether it might glamorize gang life, however, the youth found it so unrealistic that it offered little insight into whether such ads might be unintentionally alluring. In response to "Jean Prison", one teen uttered, "That's like a play." In fact, most of the youth were so disgruntled by the ad's falsehoods, they could not wait to give their opinions. "Okay, for one thing, they wouldn't let you wear a gold tooth in there, or an earring, or jewelry. They wouldn't let you wear rags or street clothes or let you have a big radio...and you don't have fun." The boys were particularly critical of how the ad portrayed members of different gangs together. "That bunk. Somebody just got out of the pen, they say we shank a Blood every other day. We don't get along."

"Jean Prison" certainly did not appear to glamorize gang life in the eyes of the respondents, but it did have unintended effects. The majority of participants found it funny, but, perhaps more importantly, several youth reacted defensively. One said, "They always complaining about gangs and stuff and then they make a commercial like that." Another commented, "You think we gonna spend some
time together, cool, we gonna be down, whatever." In both cases, the "they" and "you" were undefined. Some of the youth did realize that the ad was intending to be sarcastic or, in their words, "trying to be funny." One even suggested that "It wasn't dumb if you get it or figure it out."

Regardless of how they reacted to the ad, all of the teenagers, taking on the role of critics, were concerned about negative effects the ad may have on younger children. "That message is all wrong. If little kids see that they be like - that's cool, homes be kickin it with my bachos in the joint. That's giving them the wrong message." In addition, they suggested that advertisers be especially careful when depicting prison life because "alot of people think that's cool" to test the authorities and even get sent prison. One boy even mentioned, "when I was like 10 or 11, I was like ah, man, I wish I was there."

**Reinforcement** When moderators played the "Gregory" ad, they were also looking for unintended effects from the respondents. This ad addressed the proposition that gangs form because "kids listen to kids" when their families often do not. As expected, the youth seemed to like this ad because they believed what the spokesperson was saying was true. "That's a good one. Like I said earlier, you look at your homey and he know what I'm talking about." In fact, without any encouragement from the moderators, most of the youth related
this ad to their own lives and openly discussed the issue being addressed.

Some of the teenagers suggested that their parents didn't take time to listen to them while others said their parents do listen but "sometimes we just argue."

Still, others agreed that they don't talk to their parents about gang life because "they got way too much love for them, way too much respect, so they go to their homeboys." However, regardless of their familial relationships, all the teenagers suggested that they turn to their friends first.

Because the youth could relate this advertisement to their personal life, it did appear to reinforce gang life by identifying the bonds that form between members. However, in their role as critics, several of the young people did realize that the ad was "talking about how the family needs to be, like, involved" and that its message was "mostly for the parents." But, when asked whether "Julian" was an effective advertisement, one boy, like many others, was not sure how to respond. "Well, it is - I don't know - well, maybe, not really, I don't think so." To elicit more specific answers, the teenagers were then asked whether the ad would encourage kids to talk to their family. The reply was negative saying, "we're not going to just because he's saying that's what we need to do." In fact, one boy said that kids might take the message and "probably use it as an excuse" for belonging to a gang.
Alternative Gang

"Hawkins", the final ad shown during the focus groups, featured a professional football player encouraging kids to stay out of trouble by joining the "right" kind of gang. The focus group members seemed to agree that the logic behind the message was "awesome" and that "sports and stuff" are good alternatives for young people "if they think about it." Unfortunately, they also felt a message like the one in "Hawkins" is "understandable, but hard to do." In fact, the teenagers expressed that the advertisement greatly oversimplifies a young person's ability to simply join the "right" gang. This oversimplification was made extremely clear when several youth discussed the differences between the "right" gangs and the gangs to which many of them belonged.

Youth 1: That's la-la, this is real!
Youth 2: That ain't no la-la.
Youth 3: Yes it is, yes it is la-la.
Youth 2: You act like nobody from the ghetto ever...
Youth 1: That's what I'm saying, this is la-la. You want to be in that la-la land, but only half of us going to make it.

According to the youth, the ability to join traditional, constructive groups becomes even more difficult once you are already in a gang. If you are already in a gang, "you sitting there, I got the right group. If I ever run down the street with him and homeboy's coming at me, he's gonna blast on them. I ain't gonna
worry about him suckering out."

Perhaps the most interesting discovery to come from the discussion about alternatives was that there was little consensus among the focus groups as to how to define a gang. Consequently, the youth had mixed views over whether it would be beneficial to apply a "gang" label to conventional youth groups in order to discourage participation in delinquent activities. The Henderson group, for example, believed there "ain't no right gang" and suggested that using a label like "right" gang or what they termed "get along - can't we all just get along" gang was dangerous. They also thought young people might "still hang out with a gang and play sports too," a phenomena that seemed quite common in neighborhoods like those in Henderson which have less intense gang activity. The group from the Halfway house felt that a gang is just a group, but distinctions can be made between "gangs that do positive things and gangs that do negative things." They felt, however, trying to use a gang label on both types "might mess you up" or cause you to "be stupid and get in the wrong one." The Las Vegas group seemed to define gangs by whether or not they exhibit behaviors that are "accepted by society." In fact, when one boy contended that football players who sell drugs are "in a gang that's breaking the law too," another replied, "But unfortunately, we're the majority." A third boy added,
"That's why we get picked on more." While this group of teens affixed a criminal connotation to gangs, they felt that applying a gang label to constructive groups was a good idea because "for little kids, that's a big thing to be in a gang."

Showing the "Hawkins" ad resulted in mix of ideas about how and when to use the term gang. Surprisingly, however, it evoked a similar discussion in all the groups about the future of gangs. All the youth believed that "everybody unfortunately wants to belong to a gang," most often out of necessity.

Youth 1: That's what it comes down to. You want to feel like you don't have to be scared wherever you go. You want to know that somebody's behind you that'll take care of you.
Moderator: So it's not necessarily that you want power, but you have to have it?
Youth 1: You have to have it now.
Youth 2: Even people that ain't gang members need it.
Youth 3: You have to have some, innocent people dieing now.

The intensity with which the teenagers explained the pervasive need to have "someone to run with" and "know someone has your back" clearly suggested that many of them had experienced the need first hand. "In today's society, you need that group so you don't get beat up everyday. So you don't get your shoes taken, your jacket, your necklace, money."

According to the youth, the gang provides a backup system that ensures "respect", but one that can also lead to a "big old competition." This competition is one that the youth take very seriously and discuss with equal intensity.
because "it's gonna get worse." Gangs are "not just a fad that's going to fade away" because "gangs are in demand" and "growing so fast out there." In fact, the youth in the focus groups became so passionate while discussing the future of gangs that their perceptions may easily have seemed completely exaggerated to the outsider. Most of the youth believed that "there's gangs everywhere you go" and "even if all the gangs and all their families united, you still gonna have all gangs against society and the police and the government." One youth in particular wagered, "I give you five more years and the whole world will be in gangs," and another responded, "Yep."

Suggestions

After watching several types of anti-gang advertisements, the focus group members unanimously concluded that future ads with spokespersons that "talk straight to you" would be most effective. Additional comments for improved ads began with suggestions like having "music at the beginning and then stop it" or having "somebody talk to you and when they say death, show something real quick, somebody getting blown away." With little encouragement from the moderators, the teenagers became even more enthusiastic as they assumed roles as ad creators.
Surprisingly, all the groups mentioned showing "someone getting beat up," "getting shot," or "getting blown away," noting that "it's violent but it "catches peoples' attention" and "sticks in your head." Several youth described a scenario in which an advertisement "shows a dead body on TV, like if he was a Blood or Crip, have a rag on his head or something, like the Crip shot the Blood. Then have the Crip in handcuffs going into the cop car and the Blood on the ground....One goes to jail for the rest of his life and the other dies, so they both lose." Other youth thought the victim should be an innocent person because gang members certainly "don't want to make that mistake." By innocent, the youth specifically meant children under seven because kids "ten and twelve are the ones pulling the trigger" and "a grown man, well, he lived his life. He probably done something wrong." They created a scenario for an ad that depicts "somebody doing a drive-by and somebody with a baby carriage, and the baby gets blown up and the mom's sitting there crying on her knees."

Critiquing their own ideas, however, the youth reminded one another how showing violence in an ad could be unintentionally dangerous. "If you see somebody die with a red rag, a little dude could say, 'yah, sly just got blown away. I'm going to do somebody like that.'" They also reminded one another that even if graphic ads do not glorify violence, they would not necessarily make
effective deterrents to gang activity. In fact, one boy remembered, "I got a whole bunch of friends that got shot. I got shot in my leg, but I still wanted to bang. It didn't change my mind."

Many youth said that the reason anti-gang ads, whether violent or nonviolent, are ineffective deterrents is because they are "just giving you wham, bam, thank you ma'am" and "they don't say enough." Because gangs are "a real serious issue, they should get more time" to fully and accurately present the realities of gang life. The majority of teenagers thought a movie ought to be made about gangs, but instead of portraying "Ice Cube and all these famous people" as gang members, the directors should "follow people down the street and see how they act" until, inevitably, "the camera gets shot and broke."

The most important advice that members of the focus groups could offer was that anti-gang messages, whether in ads or movies, come from someone who has not only experienced gang activity, but "that's in it." One boy even commented, "You hire accountants to do your books. Why not pull gangsters and criminals to do them." More specifically, every group member stressed that they would be much more influenced by "homeys" their own age than any of "those old guys" in the anti-gang ads that they were shown. When asked what kind of teen might do an ad, one youth explained that it could be "a rehabilitated
teen, even like a guy that's a hypocrite" because "he tells you why you shouldn't be in it and you're going to listen to him because he's in it. He knows what's happening, going on now, not when he was in it." When asked why a young gang member would advocate such a message, another boy replied, "because alot of people out there are getting killed for no reason, so...I think alot of people will be sincere."

After the youth finished giving suggestions for anti-gang advertisements directed at young people like themselves, they were asked what message they would convey if they could make an ad directed at the general public. Surprisingly, they found this task much more difficult. Basically, the teenagers seemed to want to convey their own frustrations with living in a gang environment. They explained, gang members "expect to get jumped, expect to get in trouble...expect getting stabbed, expect getting shot, expect getting a gun held to your head," and there is "nothing" anybody can do to stop it. One teen also made a passionate attempt to explain the frustration he had with the way news reporters and outsiders view gangs.

They're making it entirely wrong on us and that's putting more pressure on us, so society's coming at us. We're like, fuck you all, you all coming at us. Why are we gonna stop to think when we're gonna shoot when you already put us on the basis that we do it - that we do it everyday, that every time a gang gets together, they going out doing a job like every time
they're together - when gang bangers only do a shooting every once in a while, whenever they have to or whenever we get blasted on.

**General Effectiveness**

According to the youth in the focus groups, anti-gang advertisements can catch the attention of young people. In fact, many of the teenagers said that the phrase "it's time we talked about gangs" which opened several of the commercials which were shown to them gets "stuck in your head." However, the respondents agreed that even if young people listen to and agree with anti-gang messages, the ads are basically "just a waste of time, money, and airtime" when it comes to trying to change behavior. The youth were confident that "no commercial gonna change your life," but they were unable to delineate why they and other teens are so "hard-headed" that they would "just blow off" a good message to "go take care of business."

When focus group members were asked why they become involved in gang activity despite having heard anti-gang messages from their television sets, parents, schools, and probations officers, the responses were similar to those of three boys.

Youth 1: There is no answer. You just do it.
Youth 2: Because your hard-headed.
Youth 3: You just do it.
Comments throughout the discussions, however, insinuated that young people are often curious and just "want to experience it for yourself before you take someone else's word for it." According to the respondents, "You just have to go through it." In addition, many respondents felt that sometimes a teenager who knows the adverse effects of gang involvement still believes "that ain't gonna happen to me." Even for teenagers that do contemplate violence and jail, they simply can do very little to avoid conflict when "somebody wants your jacket," "when everywhere you go somebody's starting trouble," or when you end up in unexpected situation.

Youth 1: I can hardly think of one time my homey called me up to say let's go put in work. We usually already out together, that don't give you time to think.
Youth 2: You're there, it's like a split second.
Youth 3: We don't say we're gonna come get you....No, you kick it on the set then it happens and you ain't got time to think. You either blast or get blasted.

To the surprise of the moderators, the focus group members were adamant that regardless of why they became involved in deviant or gang activity, they were each responsible for their own behaviors. They also suggested that regardless of the amount of pressure from peers or the unavailability of jobs, a young person "has a choice" whether or not to join a gang. Consequently, if a young person wants to abandon deviant or gang behavior, "nothing is gonna
make him change except for himself." Counseling or anti-gang messages are ineffective because young people have "really got to help themselves."

Unfortunately, this does not happen often.

Throughout the group discussions, the teens who were in gangs often spoke as though "it's too late" for them to make changes in their lives. One boy commented, "you already know what you could have did before you joined a gang" as if those aspirations where no longer possible for him. Several conversations between the teenagers suggested that once you become a member the ties to gang friends, the "adrenalin rush" of gang activity, and the development of gang enemies just perpetuate a young person's commitment to gang life.

Youth 1: If you ever know how it feels to get shot, that's when you feel revenge.
Youth 2: It hurts.
Youth 1: I know it hurts. I've experienced it myself.
Youth 2: It hurts more when you sit there and watch your homey die.
Youth 1: When you been there, you think about it.

Because the focus group members who were in gangs and even those who were not realize the difficulty of leaving gang life, they all felt that anti-gang messages have the most potential to influence young people who "kinda already" know about gangs but are not in one. In fact, when asked if they would want their younger siblings to see anti-gang ads, the focus group members unanimously
agreed with comments like, "Ya, if it was gonna help." However, they noted that
the prevention process for kids must start early on.

   Youth 1: You got to have them way back when.
   Youth 2: You got to start looking after them right when they start, right
when they start hanging around with friends.
   Youth 3: You can't wait until they start hanging around with them and
then tell them, "Wait, I don't want you to be in a gang."

According to the youth, the prevention process, even for very young kids, can
not rely on anti-gang advertisements mainly because "today there's so much
bullshit on TV" that every viewer is a skeptic. Despite television's reputation,
however, nearly all the teenagers agreed that the best messages come from face
to face contact and not from "studio gangsters." "The best way" to help young
people is "just to talk to them." In fact, one boy even commented to the
moderators, "if you all was telling us the same thing they (the ads) saying, we'd
take it in more than watching it on TV." Members of the same focus group later
recalled that a group of teens had joined together to talk about sex and AIDS
and proposed using a similar idea for gang prevention, especially since they
viewed "AIDS as killing at almost the same rate as gangs." The group rather
excitedly explained, "they should have a whole group of kids our age going
around to schools, juveniles, places where people are having problems, like us."
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

The account of the focus group discussions presented in the results of this thesis offers insight into how the participants responded to specific types of anti-gang messages. A broader analysis of the participants' responses, however, will reveal that although the focus groups covered a wide range of topics related to anti-gang advertising, two main themes prevailed throughout the dialogue. Identification of these key themes provided the basis for concluding that anti-gang advertising can make two unique contributions to gang reform.

Prevailing Themes

The most striking and pervasive theme throughout all three of the focus groups relates to the irony found between the comments made by the focus group members and the characters they portray. Nearly all of the study participants were either gang members or involved with gang activity, yet not
once during the discussions did any of the teenagers refute the principle behind the anti-gang message or the need to prevent others from joining gangs. At times, the participants mentioned the protection and friendship that gangs provide, but they never promoted gang membership. The youth also had objections to the presentation of the ads they were shown and doubted their effectiveness, but they did not disapprove of the anti-gang message in general.

For the most part, the focus group members appeared to be genuine advocates of anti-gang messages, yet their alleged lifestyles and affiliations did not correspond to what they said. At the same time, many of the teenagers professed gang membership and then agreed with the commercial spokesperson who vowed that gang membership "ain't worth it." The participants know the negative consequences of gang involvement and want to avoid them, but it seems they do very little to ensure that they will not end up dead or in jail. Most ironically, the youth cannot fathom leaving gang life themselves, but they don't want their younger siblings or other children joining gangs and will even enthusiastically participate in a discussion to create better prevention messages.

The incongruity between the commitment to but disapproval of gang life seen in many youth appears senseless. If the youth had boasted of the rewards of gang life or showed bitter disregard towards the criminal and violent behaviors
that often accompany membership, it would provide an explanation for their involvement in gangs. Or, if the youth had awakened to the detriments of gang life as a result of their being convicted of offenses and entering a rehabilitation program, it would explain contradictions between their past behaviors and current beliefs. But neither appeared to be the case. They admitted "everybody already knows" the flaws and the consequences of gang membership prior to getting involved in gangs or getting in trouble. Even despite their derogatory comments about gang life, most admitted they would "kick it back to a gang" upon being released from the county programs.

The present study alone can only suggest that "there is no answer" or at least no simple answer to explain the disparity between the announced convictions and actions of many young people. However, the fact that the focus group members verbally discern right from wrong and express genuine concern over the seriousness of gang activity and the futures of younger children, supports past conclusions made by gang researchers. Fortunately, there is not something inherently criminal in many of America's young people, but there are complex factors in the environments where they live which perpetuate gang membership and lead to criminal and violent acts. After listening to teenagers from gang neighborhoods describe their environment, an outsider may begin to
realize that a young person taking part in gang activity, in many ways, is no
different from a weight conscious adult taking a second donut. They both know
better but "just do it."

Perhaps, even more ironic than the apparent contradiction between the
beliefs and behaviors of many young people is the fact that they could use their
environment to justify some of their actions, but they do not. As past research
suggested, many members of the focus groups were more than willing to share
their life experiences with the moderators, but they were equally willing to
recognize that each individual "has a choice." The youth certainly appeared
much more open to criticism of their own actions than Sister Soljah or the
Consolidated Committee of Concerned Black Men who strongly objected to the
Evanston advertising campaign because it made shocking statements about the
severity of black-on-black homicide without addressing the "system failures"
which may have contributed to it. Young people may give a detailed explanation
of a situation or refute an outsider who claims to "understand" gang life, but often
they will acknowledge "the truth" about the worlds in which they live.

The notion of truth in the gang environment relates to a second theme
that recurred throughout the focus groups. The participants continually referred
to "reality", saying that the ads "don't give reality" or that the spokespersons
need to be "more real." One boy explained, "there are people who are going to stay there and face reality and here are people who gonna turn around and...do the right thing." For him and others, reality is the wrong thing. Reality is the perception that the "average person has committed a crime" or at least "done something wrong in their life." Reality is the perception that any one of them could easily end up in jail or dead. And, unlike what many outsiders think, this reality does not exist because of gangs and does not even necessarily have anything to do with gangs. "It's got to do with life."

Not only do the youth perceive their reality in a negative light, they perceive it as one that is getting worse -- getting worse so quickly that it seems to outdate spokespersons as quickly as they can make commercials. The youth often stressed the present saying that "in today's society you can't avoid a fight" because "nowadays people don't quit." In doing so, they suggested that the gang environment was worse now than yesterday but was likely to get even more intense tomorrow. Consequently, the teenagers discussed the gang issue with bitter seriousness and observed that gangs are "everywhere - anywhere you go" so you need someone to "have your back" because at any moment you may "blast or get blasted." Not surprisingly, such an environment leaves not a moment to spend thinking about "la-la land."
The reality of gang life is described as so distinctive and so absorbing that it appears messages must be true to that reality if they are to be accepted. Consequently, if ads are to be effective, spokespersons must be "real" and the gang experiences and situations they recount must meticulously conform to the reality of gang life. These youth do not want to listen to heroes telling them stories. Even advertisements like the "right" gang ad which propose that positive alternatives are part of the reality of the gang environment are likely to be criticized for oversimplification. Common sense and communication theory suggest that people must be able to identify with messages in order to find them credible and eventually be moved by them. However, this principle seems to be taken to the extreme in the gang environment, especially among twelve, thirteen, or fourteen year olds who might normally be expected to relate to a "superhuman" teen idol or a somewhat inflated vision of the future. The job of the anti-gang advertisers targeting young gang members and at-risk youth would seem nearly futile. They must create messages that are unmistakably real but that also appeal to young people and encourage them to envision a better future for themselves.

The focus group members continually spoke as though they were consumed with and always reacting to their current environment, but on
occasion this theme was subtly interrupted. Without even realizing it, the participants' dialogue sometimes contradicted the starkness of the reality they described and suggested a desire to reach beyond their immediate world. At times, the youth even displayed a surprisingly positive enthusiasm when talking about gangs as well as when talking about how to prevent them.

As previous gang research has suggested, gang members often exaggerate aspects of their gang life or create their own value systems within their gang environment in order to escape some of the harsh realities outside of it. Several of the youth in the focus groups expressed similar tendencies. For example, their mindful descriptions of death, respect, and the trust and reliance among fellow gang members suggest those are aspects of gang life that the youth, both as individuals and as a group, actively seek out in order to create a vision about that life. In addition, the youth protect the values in their gang worlds by creating useful but abstract barriers between themselves and others. They can often only describe the outsiders as "you," "they," or "society," but the vision of these outsiders is what seems to cause a young person to feel as if "the only thing in your corner is your gang."

The fact that the focus group members briefly interrupted their stark explanation of reality with romantic notions of values and barriers associated
with gang life was not particularly uncommon. Surprisingly, however, the focus groups themselves appeared to create a unique setting in which the youth also demonstrated, perhaps unknowingly, a desire to reach beyond their immediate realities. At times, when the teenagers slipped into the roles of critics and creators, they actively struggled to find answers to why the anti-gang messages would not affect them. At times, they listened to one another, explained their opinions, and as a group channeled out ideas about how to keep younger children out of gangs.

The realization that the youth do have that ability to create a vision is promising, but it does not erase the more prevalent fact that their lives and futures are highly subject to their environment. Therefore, there must be changes to that environment before the youth can successfully live out any type of vision or act on their own convictions. It was not the goal of this study to discover precisely what obstacles these youth face or what opportunities are actually available to them. Such conclusions would result from a very different type of study in which researchers observed the gang environment and make suggestions for concrete changes in their surroundings. While the bulk of gang research and gang reform should focus on the physical environment in underprivileged neighborhoods, this study has been successful in drawing
attention to the youth's perceptions of gangs and the gang environment. The benefits of anti-gang advertising lie in these particular perceptions.

**Contributions to Gang Reform**

The unique way in which young people in and around gangs view the world can provide a basis for creating advertising campaigns that contribute to gang reform, despite the fact that they are unlikely to change young people's behaviors and certainly cannot change their physical environment. As past research has suggested, an aspiring designer is likely to make effective anti-gang ads not by simply looking at past campaigns or communication theory but also by capitalizing on the uniqueness of the gang issue and target audience and focusing on how the campaign relates to the total reform effort. In particular, two unique ways in which anti-gang advertising can contribute to gang reform can be drawn from the discussions with youth in the Clark County juvenile programs.

One contribution that anti-gang advertising campaigns can make is to aid in breaking down barriers that gang members build between themselves and outsiders. Young people view gangs as a serious issue, and anti-gang advertising campaigns can show them that the undefined "you" and "they" which
they so often refer to are genuinely concerned about it as well. Even anti-gang advertisements that do not effectively promote behavior change can at least show young people in the gang environment that they exist outside of their immediate reality and in fact, belong to the same world as ad executives, community leaders, TV sponsors, and CEOs.

The suggestion that anti-gang campaigns can be used to dissolve barriers is not meant to infer that the mere presentation of anti-gang ads will ensure such end results. On the contrary, using ads with the intention of dissolving barriers is risky business. As the focus groups demonstrated, the youth are extremely judgmental of the appearance of spokespersons and situations depicted in anti-gang advertisements. As one boy in the focus groups concluded about spokespersons of anti-gang messages, "If he makes it sound dumb, you gonna be like he's full of shit." Therefore, practitioners must create ads which reflect the truth about gang life or run the risk of putting young people on the defensive and unintentionally reinforcing the perception that they are disassociated from people and opportunities outside of their gang life. "Dumb" ads build barriers, as might ads that generate fear in the general public. The Frankel & Anderson ad, for example, proposed that after spray paint, "the next thing they (gangs) spray is bullets." Obviously, the ad was not directed at young people and can be
complemented for suggesting that the public become concerned with the issue of
gangs. The ad, however, connotes fear. And, while a fear of gang violence and
crime may certainly be justified, it perpetuates barriers between gang members
and outsiders and causes young people to see themselves as criminals before
they ever commit their first offense. These mental barriers between gang
members and the general public must come down, especially as tangible
improvements are made to fuse the two worlds together.

If advertisements are to help remove barriers, their actual messages are,
perhaps, less important that what those messages imply. Because there is such
a fine line between including and offending teenagers in the gang environment,
anti-gang ads can not be haphazardly produced and mediated. Advertisers must
be especially careful with anti-gang messages. They must create anti-gang
messages with the assumption that young people will simply react to them and
not analyze them as they were encouraged to do in this study. In addition,
advertisers must thoroughly pretest anti-gang messages with appropriate
audiences and allow audiences to participate in their creation. An essential
starting point, however, for creating anti-gang campaigns may be with a genuine
concern and an informed understanding of the targeted audience, especially
because young people seem to be astutely attuned to the motive behind such
efforts.

The behaviors of young people, whether in a gang atmosphere or not, are often spontaneous, but there are times when they do not simply react. Because of this fact, advertising campaigns can contribute to gang reform in a second way. Although they cannot affect behavior, anti-gang messages can force young gang members and at-risk youth into the role of critic. Therefore, ads should not be made with the intention of directly deterring gang membership but indirectly encouraging teenagers to think about their behaviors and their environment. Because the participants of this study were in a rehabilitation program and were given the opportunity to discuss their views with receptive moderators, they, perhaps, were exceptionally aware of the contradiction between their convictions and their actions. However, their discussions also revealed that young people associated with gangs do not need "society" telling them "we don't want you in gangs no more" because they must be their own critics and be ultimately responsible for changing their own lives and lifestyles. According to focus groups members, most young people already know that gang crimes are wrong and that gang membership is fraught with negative consequences. Therefore, they must continually be reminded to react based on that knowledge and to channel frustrations with their environments in the right
Although it was not the intention, this study actually provided a positive outlet for the frustrations of three groups of gang members and at-risk youth. After being questioned about anti-gang messages, several youth responded, "let us make the commercial." After discussing alternative means of gang prevention for younger children, one gang member very thoughtfully said, "You know, I would enjoy going to - if we could do that I would enjoy that, going to a school and tell them what's really going on." Unfortunately, however, these youth were not likely to continue to think about how they can take positive steps in their own lives or encourage others to do so once they left the focus group and especially once they return to the gang environment. When you see "your homeboys every night," the "wad of money from selling (drugs)," or "got thirty people and their friends ready to jump you" -- when reality does not facilitate thinking is when young people simply react. However, as there are actual changes to that reality which reduce those things that trigger deviant behavior and gang membership, young people in and around gangs are likelier to be consistent in their thoughts and actions. At such a time is when anti-gang advertisements intended to encourage the receiver to be his or her own critic can best contribute to gang reform. On their own such advertisements can not compete with the
environment, but they can reinforce similar, but stronger messages that come from community or church leaders, family members, or other concerned groups. Or, if there are positive, solid alternatives readily available, the advertisements may provide just enough incentive for some young people to take advantage of them.

**Implications and Future Research**

While this study focused specifically on anti-gang advertising, the implications reach beyond the realm of mediated appeals. The conclusions of this study suggest general guidelines for communicating with gang members and at-risk youth. Regardless of whether messages come from advertisers, police officers, social workers, or parents, communication with young people in a gang environment is likely to be most effective when communicators take into consideration the youth's perceptions of reality and create an atmosphere that allows them to reflect on what was said.

Those people willing to contribute to gang reform must also be willing to listen to gang members and learn from them. This study has already stressed the importance of further understanding gang youth in relation to their natural environment. However, this research suggests that future studies also focus on
the often restrictive perceptions that gang members and at-risk youth have about
the world around them. In this study, the discussion of anti-gang ads in a focus
group setting led the participants to indirectly, but effectively express many of
their views about their lives and futures. Similar and innovative methods may
also be effective in producing research that can help outsiders better understand
gangs and help gang members better understand themselves.
APPENDIX I

TRANSCRIPTIONS OF ANTI-GANG ADVERTISEMENTS

"Juan"
(ANNOUNCER) It's time we talked about gangs.
(VO) Knowing what you know now, after all you've been through, would you join a gang again?
No I wouldn't join a gang.
(VO) Why not?
Because to go join a gang is to go join trouble. To go join a gang to me is demoralizing yourself, and it's making you smaller than what you can be. And, I want to be all that I can be.

"Joseph"
(ANNOUNCER) It's time we talked about gangs.
I think any involvement in a gang is going to inevitably lead to violence whether it's just a simple physical confrontation or whether it's just a simple fist fight because it can turn into ... it can turn from a fist fight one day and the next day somebody end up dead.

"Julian"
(ANNOUNCER) It's time we talked about gangs.
I'd tell them to weigh up a bunch of situations. Man, just imagine for eight or nine, ten years out of your life your reacting to buzzers instead of voices because that's what you're up against when you come here. When you get in a gang, have violence, and go to jail, this is what you're up against. It's not worth it. To be honest, it ain't worth it.
"Rick"
(ANNOUNCER) It's time we talked about gangs.
The way I look at it right now, you got gang members if there're starting off gang banging that's just their first step to the penitentiary or death, one of the two. They got probably two choices. That's the only two choices they're going to make. They're either going to come to the penitentiary or they're going to die. That's all there is. They have no other road to go. You can't be a 55 year old gang banger. You just don't see them.

"Jean Prison"
(Montage of men wearing bandannas, playing cards, smoking, etc.. Shot widens to reveal prison gates.)
(ANNOUNCER) If you join a gang, plan on spending some time together.
(PRISON ANNOUNCER) This is on the yard, lock down, lock down.

"Gregory"
(ANNOUNCER) It's time we talked about gangs.
It's very important if you take the time out to listen to your kid, I think. You know, and alot of people take it as kids don't have much to say, but other kids listen to kids. That's why there are gangs because other kids will take the time out - like, you know, "what's up with that", "what's happening!", "you got a problem?". They'll talk, and that makes the bond between them stronger and alot of people don't understand that so it's got to be the same way with the family. They got to take the time to listen. Try to understand the kid.

"Hawkins"
I'm Frank Hawkins, and I was a gang member for more than seven years. What a gang it was. This was a gang of rock'em sock'em guys called the Los Angeles Raiders. They were smart, tough, dedicated to winning, and knew that success and respect was something you earned. It's a gang I was proud to be a part of. How about you? Are you proud of the guys you hang out with? If not, find a new gang, just make sure it's the right kind.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


