

Teenagers, Clothes, and Gang Violence

By bringing the school into the community and vice versa, we may be able to offer young people a positive alternative to membership in gangs to provide the security they lack at home.

JIM BURKE

Students cannot learn if they do not feel safe. No matter how you define safety—emotional or physical—it is a necessity in both the school and the classroom. While this seems obvious, perhaps even unnecessary to point out, the fact is that the school is becoming an arena of increasingly serious and constant violence.

And this violence no longer limits itself to the inner city. Witness the fiasco at San Leandro High School in the fall of 1990, where 3 to 20 students (depending on whom you talk to) were injured in a riot stemming from racial tensions that had erupted on that particular day. At a Bay Area high school near San Francisco, a locker search follow-

ing some trouble yielded 62 guns, more than 40 of which turned up in girls' lockers. Recently, two students from my own school, a suburban school in the East Bay, entered the parking lot of a nearby convenience store to buy their lunch; one of them left in an ambulance, unconscious. He had been savagely beaten by 10 to 15 students while reportedly out cold—all this over a girl one of the gangsters went out with. One of my own students currently hides from a gang from a neighboring town because he is dating a girl whose ex-boyfriend is in a gang. Last week a freshman in another of my classes told me her boyfriend had been robbed of his Raiders jacket while the thief held a gun to his head. She herself reports having been shot at several weeks ago



for wearing black and red—colors associated with a gang not welcome where she was.

Gang Members and Clothes

To become better informed as we attempt to manage these new and difficult problems, my school recently invited Joe Angeles to speak with our faculty on the topic of gangs. Angeles works with the Alameda County schools as a sort of gang guru, having a background in law enforcement, counseling, and education. At our meeting, he focused on the clothes these youths wear. At our school, and the surrounding area, Raiders jackets can mark one as a member of an exclusive club, which the kids may or may not define as a gang. I find many of these students in my English classes. Curious, I asked Angeles what distinguished the actual gang member from the kid who liked to wear Raiders regalia. He said that the gang member wears the prescribed clothes intentionally, hoping by means of his dress to communicate publicly his membership with a group to those around him; the gang member will frequently alter or individualize his clothes—having his nickname embroidered on, or writing his gang's name under, the bill of his hat. Such a "uniform" will, if the individual shows up in the wrong place, put him in danger should he come into contact with a rival gang. Related to this, I would add, is the degree to which such students are willing to go to protect their comrades who wear similar "membership only" items of clothing.

The role of females in these groups is especially troubling. Why would such nice young women as fill two of my classes spend their time with boys who, as Angeles said, see them only as "objects, possessions, holders of illicit goods"? In an era when the role and esteem of women in our society should be on the rise, why do these girls seek such subservience, such emotional, if not physical, degradation? Perhaps it is because they, too, want protection. Or they are afraid to say, "No, I won't

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hold your drugs or keep your gun in my locker."

Kids Need Security at Home

A recent report by the National Center for Health Statistics attempts to lay full blame for many of these children's troubles on their parents—specifically, single parents. An article from the *Chicago Tribune*, discussing the findings of this report, summed it up well: "Emotional and behavioral problems were two to three times higher among children in single-parent homes or in families with one step-parent." This tells me these parents may be absent both physically and emotionally from their children's lives, that they may pay little or no attention to the kids their child hangs out with or what they wear.

When these parents go shopping for Christmas or birthday presents to compensate for their absence, will they buy the requested Raiders, or Kings, or other sports team jacket? Most of these kids do not purchase these items with their own money. Parents must be aware of what their children wear, especially if an item of clothing seems to indicate some connection to other kids they see around. What kids wear can put them in danger today.

Security is a feeling that should begin

at home; it begins with children knowing their parent or parents are watching out for them. If they feel no security from home, they will seek it elsewhere.

Kids Create Their Own "Families"

Every other week, for 10 minutes at the end of the day, I supervise the area at our school where cars come to pick up students. It is here that the students who belong to The Great Disconnected—who signify their membership by wearing their large black Raiders jackets and black and red clothes—"hang" with each other. Week after week, I see these kids trying to create their own families. They do this because so many of them have no family at home that provides them with affection, with a sense of belonging. They feel that no one at home cares about them so much that they would smash someone who insulted them, as their Raiders-jacketed friends would do.

I think of the things I've read earlier in the day in the journals of some of these same students. What they spelled out for me was that they do not feel safe alone in our society. So they resort to the purchased security of a certain jacket and run with others who feel similarly ostracized from school, friends who lead friends far from the security that a good education might provide. They hope that if they wear a Raiders jacket, some lunatic who has a gun in his or her locker will leave them alone. What they fail to understand is that the Raiders jacket or the Ben Davis work shirt or the red bandanna—or whatever it is—is often a signal that sends fear or anger into the other kid, who runs for his gun, his bat, his friends, so that he, too, can feel safe in a school where they all feel too scared or distracted to learn or participate in the larger community of the school.

Bridges from the School to the Community

We cannot create some national curriculum that will magically solve the need

for safety, for membership in the community. Nor can we, in most cases, involve the family in such a way as would improve the "curriculum" of the home. We can, however, develop a curriculum that incorporates the school into the community and gets the community into the schools. We can make positive rites of passage available to students through various programs at school that, we hope, will draw them away from the hazardous rites of passage they now seek out. These connections would provide students with a sense of belonging to the society; they would also, significantly, impress upon the community the realization that these kids are not villains, but their kids, *our* kids.

We must also look to the thousands of teachers who daily perform acts of personal kindness and work to bring such teens into the fold. It is teachers, more than anyone, who are in a position to erect these bridges to the community. And, if built, such bridges will bring students like Richard—one of my freshmen who recently returned from jail for a gang-related assault—into the community, where they can see, as he did recently, his picture in the newspaper, the community recognizing him, along with other students, for his work with a group of retired older adults. It is only by providing a positive, humane, and safe "gang" of youths who participate in the community and are recognized by the community that we will get them away from the other gangs that spread the fear we all feel. □

R. Kotulak, (December 9, 1990), "Survey Links Youth Problems to One-Parent Families," *San Francisco Examiner*, p. A-5 (This article originally appeared in the Chicago Tribune).

Editor's note: A version of this article appeared under the title "The Great Disconnect: Try to Create Family," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 14, 1991.

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