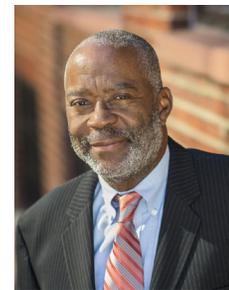




## College Is...: Focusing on the College Knowledge of Gang-Associated Latino Young Men

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There are more than 1 million self-reported youth who are embedded in some type of (in)formal gang, crew, or other group with a designated name and moniker that demonstrates a commitment to engaging in differentiated levels of criminal activity (Klein & Maxson, 2006; Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015). Youth choose gangs in response to the powerlessness and marginalization they may feel in their neighborhoods (Estrada et al., 2018; Vigil, 1988, 1999, 2019), which are often opportunity deserts, sites of long-term poverty, and underinvested by governments (Vigil, 2003). We know that gang-associated youth are 30% less likely to complete high school compared with their non-gang peers (Pyrooz, 2014), but we often miss the nuances of how and why gang youth make the decision to leave school or finally accept that educators prefer they leave. Missing from the conversations about gangs and gang problems are the role of schools and their capacity to promote gang desistance.

The aim of this qualitative study is to create a baseline understanding for sociologists, criminologists, and education scholars to understand what Latino young men who self-identify as gang-associated know about college knowledge and their aspirations for the future.

1. Do gang-associated Latino young men aspire to attend higher education?
2. What information do gang-associated Latino young men possess about attending college?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

We sometimes forget that youth need to feel cared for and appreciated in schools (Howard et al., 2019; Valenzuela, 1999). Boys and young men who are vulnerable may actively search for other opportunities to provide physical and emotional forms of validation, whether the support is from peers, family members, teachers, counselors, or gang members (Patton & Roth, 2016).

### Gangs, Neighborhoods, and Urban School Contexts

Students who attend the poorest urban public schools

are often in neighborhoods that are frequently home to gang activity and high crime rates, appallingly low achievement scores, underprepared teachers, inadequate and unsafe physical structures, and have been labeled as schools that “shock the conscience” (Oakes & Lipton, 2004). These structured environments create the necessary social conditions to welcome gang involvement and “are not confined to ghetto spaces” (Hagedorn, 2017, p. 191).

### Disproportionate Practices and Tracking

Taking curricular tracking, aggressive disciplinary policies, and disproportionality in special education diagnoses, Latino boys are experiencing multiple marginalizing forces in schools that are severely limiting their educational chances and trajectories. Collectively, it is not one force that causes educational and college aspiration derailment for gang-associated students, but a force of micro-decisions and structural actions that gradually compound to narrow hopes and dreams for a second chance at life.

### College Access Research

Previous literature suggests that Latino boys who are gang-associated are penalized by various systems, including schools and police departments, and by institutional agents, teachers, counselors, and law enforcement. The culmination of these moments limits opportunities for Latino boys to forge new positive relationships and access to information for social mobility. These forms of punishment are then further exacerbated when college knowledge is intentionally withheld by school counselors and other school personnel (Huerta, 2016). College information is a possible step needed to alternative pathways for “at-risk” youth (Huerta, 2018).

### MULTIPLE MARGINALITY

Multiple marginality explains the socio-environmental factors that contribute to why youth join and stay involved in gangs (Vigil, 1988, 1999, 2019). Multiple marginality can be understood through a person’s interactions in place/status, street socialization, street subculture, and street identity

(Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Vigil, 1988, 1999). For the purposes of this article, it is important to isolate how and why schools are important in shaping and reinforcing the marginalization process for gang youth in the educational system.

### METHOD

We used ethnographic qualitative methods to study Latino males’ college knowledge in an alternative school setting (Sunridge High School) including participant observations, individual interviews, and school documents (Merriam, 2009). In total, 19 Latino male students participated in the study, and during data collection, 13 of the students shared their personal connections to gangs and graffiti crews.

### FINDINGS

As highlighted in the student narratives, 12 of the 13 students hold aspirations to pursue some form of higher education degree or credential, and the other student feels that he must support his family economically and cannot afford to enroll in college.

### College Aspirations for a Better Life

Manuel, a 12th-grader who works full time for a restaurant and was previously expelled from a magnet school, held clear aspirations to attend some form of higher education as he sees the potential outcomes of a college degree are important for him. He struggled with the decision to attend the local community college over the four-year university because of the large difference in cost. Manuel acknowledges a tension between accomplishing his college goals and working to manage family responsibility. Although Manuel’s grades make him eligible for a special state-based merit scholarship, he has not received any information about that scholarship or how to access it.

Alonso, a student at Sunridge who aspires to be an auto mechanic, was not observed interacting with the college counselor or any administrative staff to inquire about local colleges and universities. On most observation opportunities, the college counselor

would not discuss college knowledge with students and instead focused on current events and television shows. We observed no counseling staff engaging students about the college-going process in the classrooms, hallways, or during lunch periods. There seemed to be a lack of concern from the counseling staff, and at this school the counseling load was 250 students to one counselor, which is much lower than the state average.

Jacob, a ninth grader and former gang member, is well liked in his high school. He has a positive relationship with the front office staff, especially the college counselor. Although he has a good relationship with the front office staff, it has not resulted in increased college knowledge or special advantages to meet with college recruiters.

Counselors are gatekeepers to valuable college information and although the counselor at Sunridge did not seem malicious, he was not proactive in sharing needed college knowledge with Jacob, Alonso, or other Latino male students in this study. Although students may hold high aspirations to pursue college, the necessary college knowledge is not readily available.

#### Lack of College Admissions Knowledge

Students in this study gained their knowledge of the college admission process from television commercials, a teacher who infrequently commented about the importance of college, and from peers and siblings who attended but did not

complete college. Most of the students believed their school discipline records and local juvenile court citations would play a major role in their future college applications. Students in this study hold only small pieces of valuable information about college admissions, and many possess the natural talents and skills to do well in school but are not afforded the opportunity to gain new knowledge about how to apply to college, and that information is unequally distributed, if at all, in Sunridge High School.

#### DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, this study contributes to our understanding of how gang-associated Latino young men see themselves within their own college ambitions and the mismatch between their ambitions and the information and support that is provided to them by school personnel.

We suggest school districts develop strong relationships with youth and community partners to implement a holistic evaluation of school and community resources, investments, and policing strategies to determine new ways of supporting youth located on the social margins within their own school settings.

#### School-Based Practices

School districts should offer educators and counselors professional development, through an asset-based perspective, on why youth join gangs, how to support youth to leave gangs, and best practices on how to

re-engage gang youth in schooling. According to Rios (2017), gang-associated youth will leave gangs, if they are provided jobs and other resources to promote positive behaviors and opportunities to earn a living wage. Schools cannot fix all out-of-school activities and challenges, but they must make strategic efforts to help youth stay clear of the school-to-prison-pipeline and not resort to further criminalization of students through increased contact between youth and local police or continued transfer to alternative or juvenile day schools, which are less likely to offer college prep classes and opportunities.

#### AUTHOR BIOS

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