Contemporary Gang Theory
Considering Definitional Issues, Cultural Components, and Impact of Trauma When Working With Vulnerable Youth Susceptible to Gang-Involvement

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Presentation Overview

- Activity
- Stereotypes of Gang Members
- Definition of a Gang and Cultural Framing
- Ethno-Historic Considerations
- System-Induced Traumatization
- Social Control Agents and Street Socialization
- Traumatic Experiences For Marginalized Communities
- Multi-Systemic Socio-Ecological Approach
- Community-Based Two Prong Intervention Model
- Implications for Practice
- Healing Circle Facilitation

Hopson's Racial Attitude Assessment Procedure

⦿ Much of our thoughts and feelings about race and what racial differences mean are developed within our families and system interactions.

⦿ We seldom have time to analyze these feelings, yet they influence the way we interact with people around us.

(Hopson, 1990)

Possible Inaccurate Assumptions

⦿ Society as a whole, along with law enforcement may place assumptions on adolescent's ethnic identity.

⦿ Popular media portrayal of gangs.

⦿ Popular thinking has it that all gangs are violent.

⦿ Misperceptions that youth are gang-involved and violent based on family or friend affiliations with a gang.

(Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2004)

So What Is A Gang?

Definitional Problem

- "There is no single, universally accepted definition of a gang or a gang member" (Howell, 2012, pg. 53).

- Criminologists, sociologists, and other gang researchers have struggled with a definition for years.

- U.S. Department of Justice held a series of meeting between researchers, policy makers, community activists, police, and others, but to no avail.

(Curry & Decker, 1998)

Definitional Problem Consequences

- National figures from surveys tend to over-or-under-estimate the number of gangs and gang members.
  - *LA TIMES ARTICLE*

  - Gang crime stats may be inaccurately reported.

- Comparative cross-cultural research becomes problematic without a consistent definition.

- A "gang" then is just a label, and the conventional discourse perpetuates stereotypes of inner-city youth as violent criminals to give an identity to this label.

(Rios, 2017; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Sheldon, Tracy, & Brown, 2013)

Eurogang Definition

- A gang is "**any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity.**"

Eurogang Definition

- **Durable** means the group has been around for several months or more despite turnover of participants.

- **Street-oriented** means spending a lot of group time outside home, work and school—often on streets, in malls, parks, cars, and so on.

Eurogang Definition

- **Youth** refers to average ages in the teens or early twenties.

- **Illegal activities** generally means delinquent or criminal behavior, not just bothersome activity.

- **Identity** refers to the group, not individual self-image.

What's Missing from the Definition?

Definition of Culture

- Culture is the distinctive set of values, beliefs, customs, and morals that have been learned and transmitted through generations and are shared by a small or large group of people with common language and geographical proximity.

(Betancourt & Lopez, 1993)

- **Culture is an organized response to human needs. Food, safety, security, love, belonging, esteem, identity, and self-actualization are shaped by culture.**

(Cross, 2003)

Culture

- Is not static.

- Evolves from dynamic multi-leveled social interactions between individuals and their ecological environment.

- Acts as the lens which allows individuals and groups to ascribe meaning and interpretation to life experiences.

(Phinney, 1996)

Reactive Emergence of Subcultures & Contracultures

◉ Develop when cultural norms are challenged by:

- Individuals or groups (e.g., racial tensions)

- Environmental, social, political and/or historical differences (e.g., westernized school context, civil war refugees)

◉ Adaptations occur and give rise to **subcultures** or **contracultures**.

Subcultures & Contracultures

- A **subculture or contraculture** is a group of people with a distinct normative system of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behavioral habits that conflict with that of a larger dominant culture.

(Schaeffer, 2001; Yinger, 1960)

Emergence of "Gang" Cultural Framing

- Adolescent alienation results when family, schools, and other institutions fail to meet youth needs (Clark, 1992).

- Youth navigating "white spaces" are often punitively punished by schools, law enforcement, and others.
  - Human targets of the **"youth control complex."** (Rios, 2011)

- Identification with the "gang" cultural framing provides:
  - Sense of belonging to a family type system.
  - Sense of being fully accepted and validated.
  - Sense of competency and mastery.
  - An accepted means of managing psychological distress.
  - Sense of personal cultural identity and freedom.

(Belitz & Valdez, 1997)

Statistics Support
Cultural Reasons for "Gang" Involvement

PEERS CITED AS TOP REASON FOR BEGINNING GANG INVOLVEMENT

Friends are members/associates	65%
Gives sense of belonging	37%
Family are members/associates	37%
Drug dealing/making money	12%
Provides protection	11%
Provides status	11%
Forced/coerced	4%
Other	9%
TOTAL	**133**

NOTES: Percentages based on multiple responses. Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2012

The "Gang" Culture

- ◉ Rejection of dominate culture values is evident in the:
  - Unique style of dress.
  - Slang language and hand signs.
  - Tattoos and graffiti symbols.
  - Antisocial behaviors (criminal activity and drug use).

- ◉ The gang contraculture secures prestige, financial success, and status for alienated, marginalized youth.

(Belitz & Valdez, 1997; Moore & Vigil, 1989)

The Gang Culture

- Gang values include power, respect, loyalty, attachment, commitment, protection, security, unity, and acceptance.

- These can be found in the dominant culture but gangs maintain a "surviving" frame by utilizing street-life skills to persist in a world with few resources:
  - Power is gained by amount and type of trouble one experiences.
  - Respect is earned by displaying toughness through physical strength and fighting ability.
  - Loyalty may be determined by the willingness of a member to commit a drive-by shooting.

(Hasan, 1998)

Ethno-Historical Considerations

Historical Youth Group Formation

- Youth have formed groups since onset of time, usually of their own age group.

  - 1880's gangs consisted of German, Polish, Irish, and Italian youth.

- Some of these groups committed what can be considered harmful acts and crimes.

  - Response was that these "maladjusted" deviant youth just needed proper guidance to lead healthy and successful lives.

(Sheldon, 2004)

California Penal Code 186.22

- A widely accepted legal definition of gangs was developed by the California state legislature 1988.

- A criminal street gang is:
  - Any on-going organization, association or group of three or more persons, whether formal or informal, having as one of it's primary activities the commission of crime, having a common name or common identifying sign or symbol, whose members individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal activity.

(California Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act, 1988)

Criminal Street Gang Label and Criminalization of Youth of Color
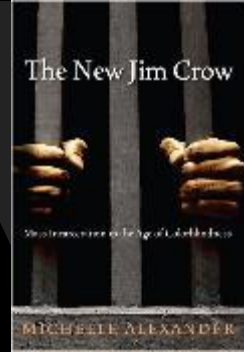
- Vague legal categorization of a gang is used to target, over-police, and prosecute communities of color.

- This criminogenic reaction grew from a **"moral panic"** motivated by racial and ethnic stereotypes, resulting in discriminatory policies, negative perceptions, and mass incarceration of youth of color.

- Media hyper-focus and labeling of gangs **demonizes** youth of color and distracts researchers from uncovering the underlying root causes of youth violence.
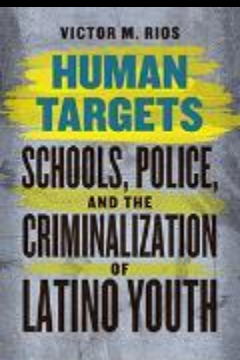
(Alexander, 2012; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Sullivan, 2005)

Example: City of Los Angeles
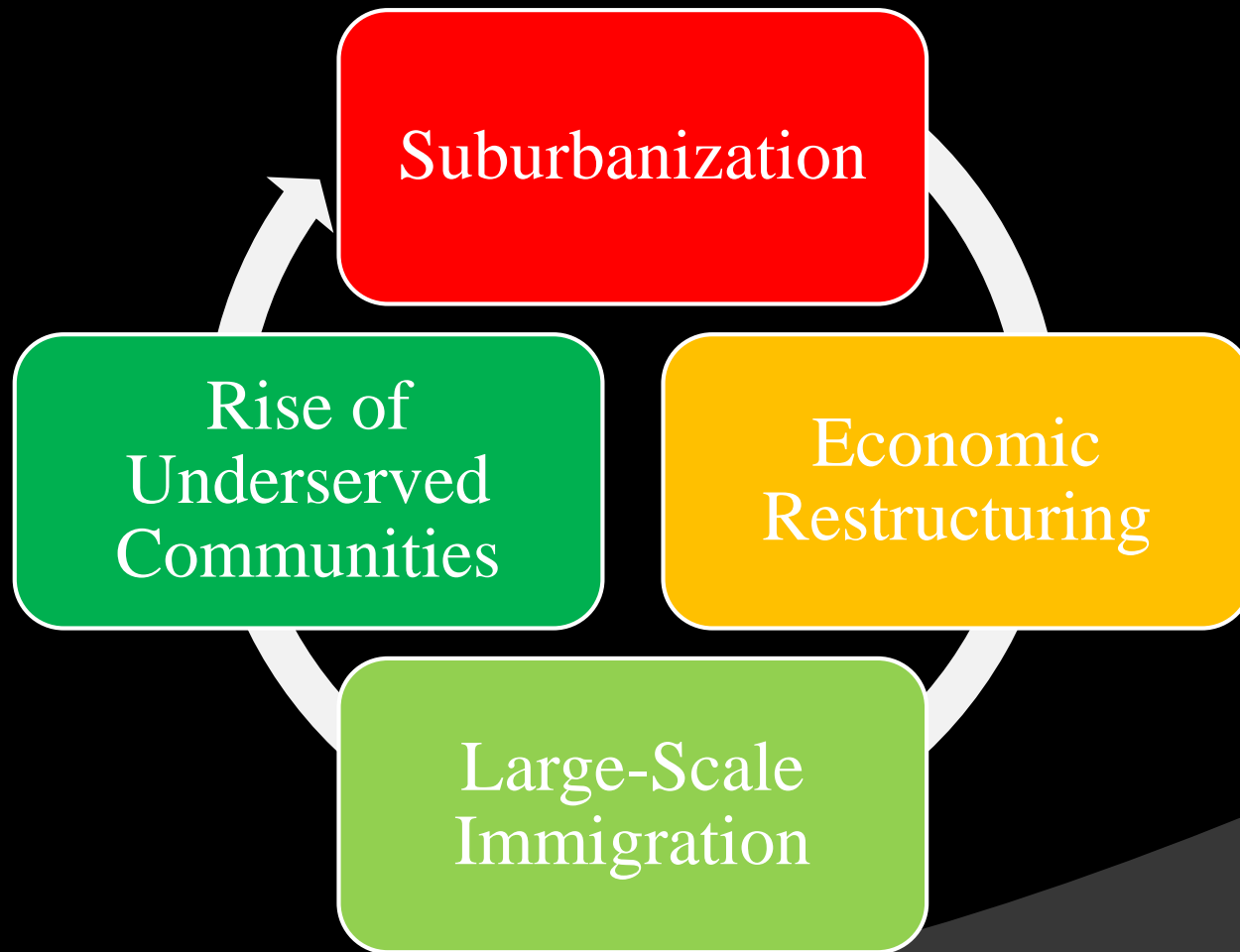
Fragmented Social Control Agents

YOUTH

Street socialization

School

Family

Community
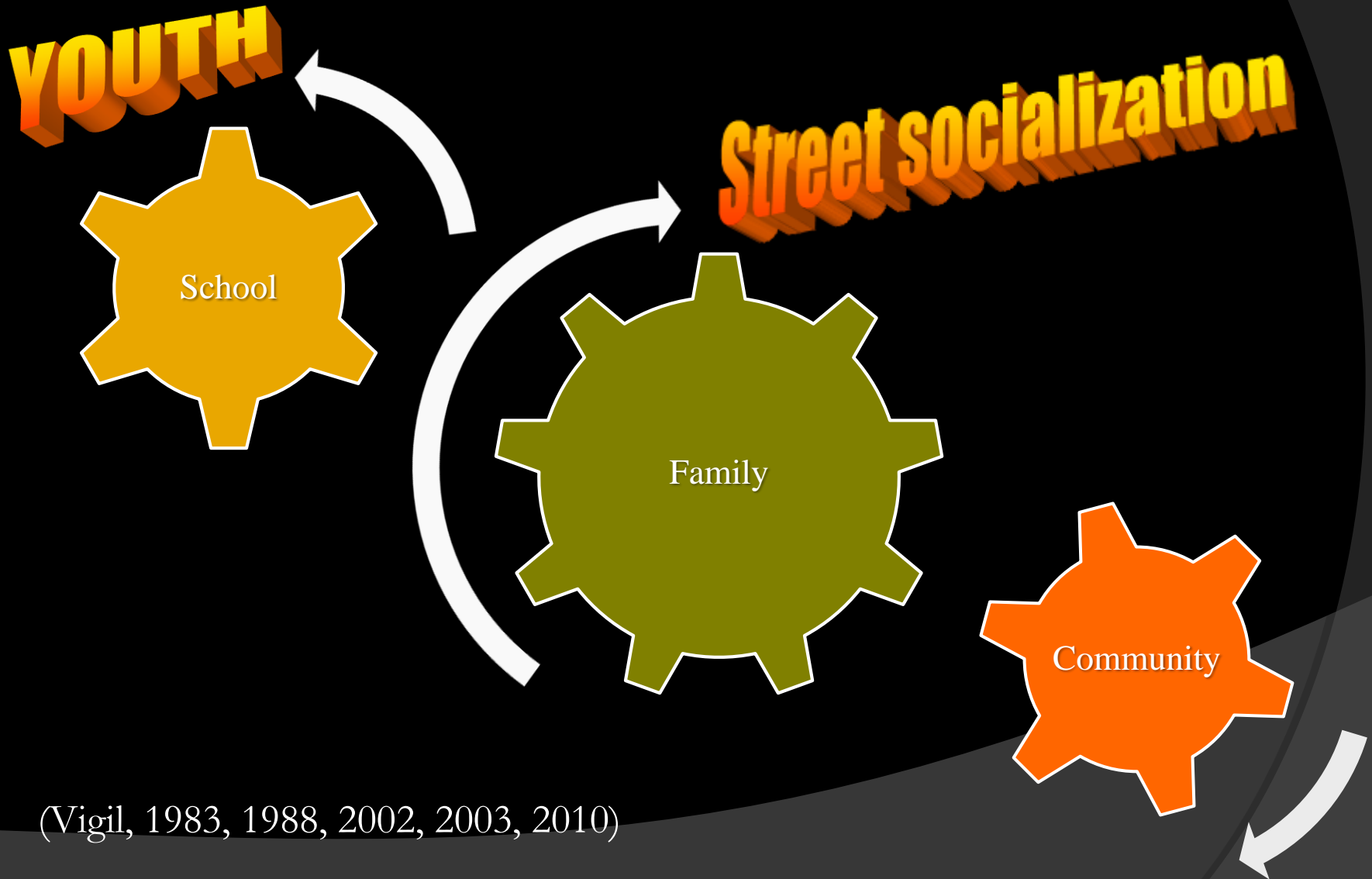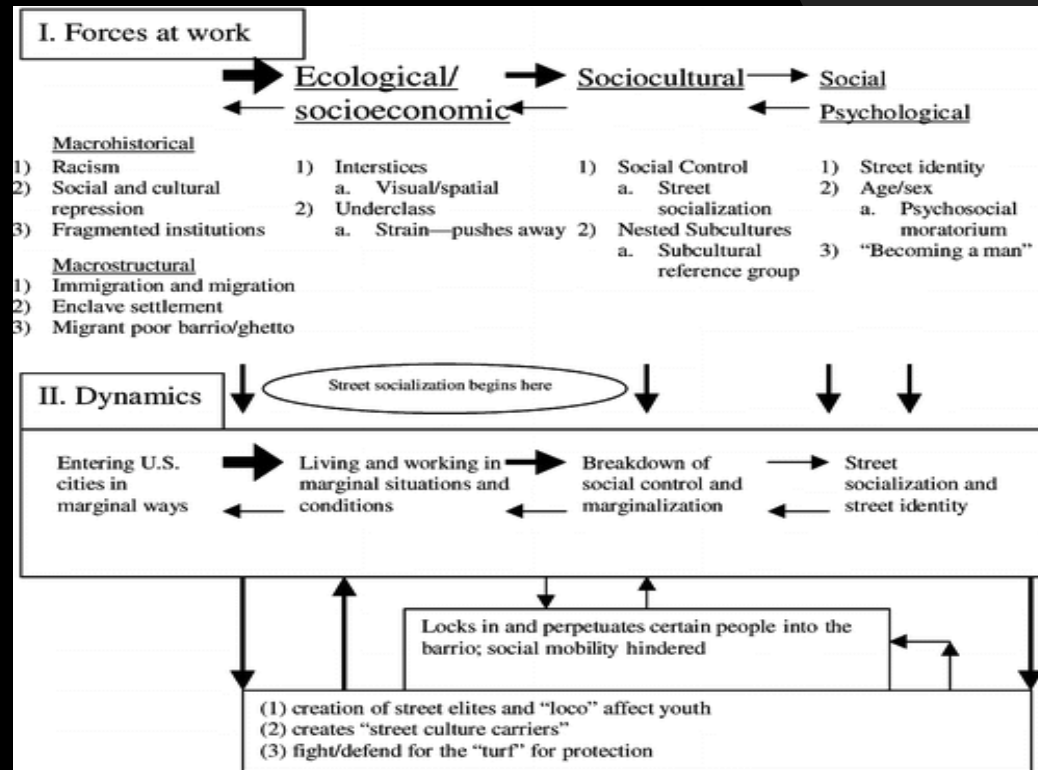
(Vigil, 1983, 1988, 2002, 2003, 2010)

Multiple Marginality

- ◉ Social Control Agents
  - Family
  - School
  - Law Enforcement
  - Key Factors
    - Primary agents
    - Uniquely adaptive and responsive to concerns of society.
    - Joint actions or (inactions) that exacerbate street socialization.

I. Forces at work

Ecological/ → Sociocultural → Social
socioeconomic ← ← Psychological

Macrohistorical
1) Racism
2) Social and cultural repression
3) Fragmented institutions

1) Interstices
   a. Visual/spatial
2) Underclass
   a. Strain—pushes away

1) Social Control
   a. Street socialization
2) Nested Subcultures
   a. Subcultural reference group

1) Street identity
2) Age/sex
   a. Psychosocial moratorium
3) "Becoming a man"

Macrostructural
1) Immigration and migration
2) Enclave settlement
3) Migrant poor barrio/ghetto

II. Dynamics — Street socialization begins here

Entering U.S. cities in marginal ways → Living and working in marginal situations and conditions → Breakdown of social control and marginalization → Street socialization and street identity

Locks in and perpetuates certain people into the barrio; social mobility hindered

(1) creation of street elites and "loco" affect youth
(2) creates "street culture carriers"
(3) fight/defend for the "turf" for protection

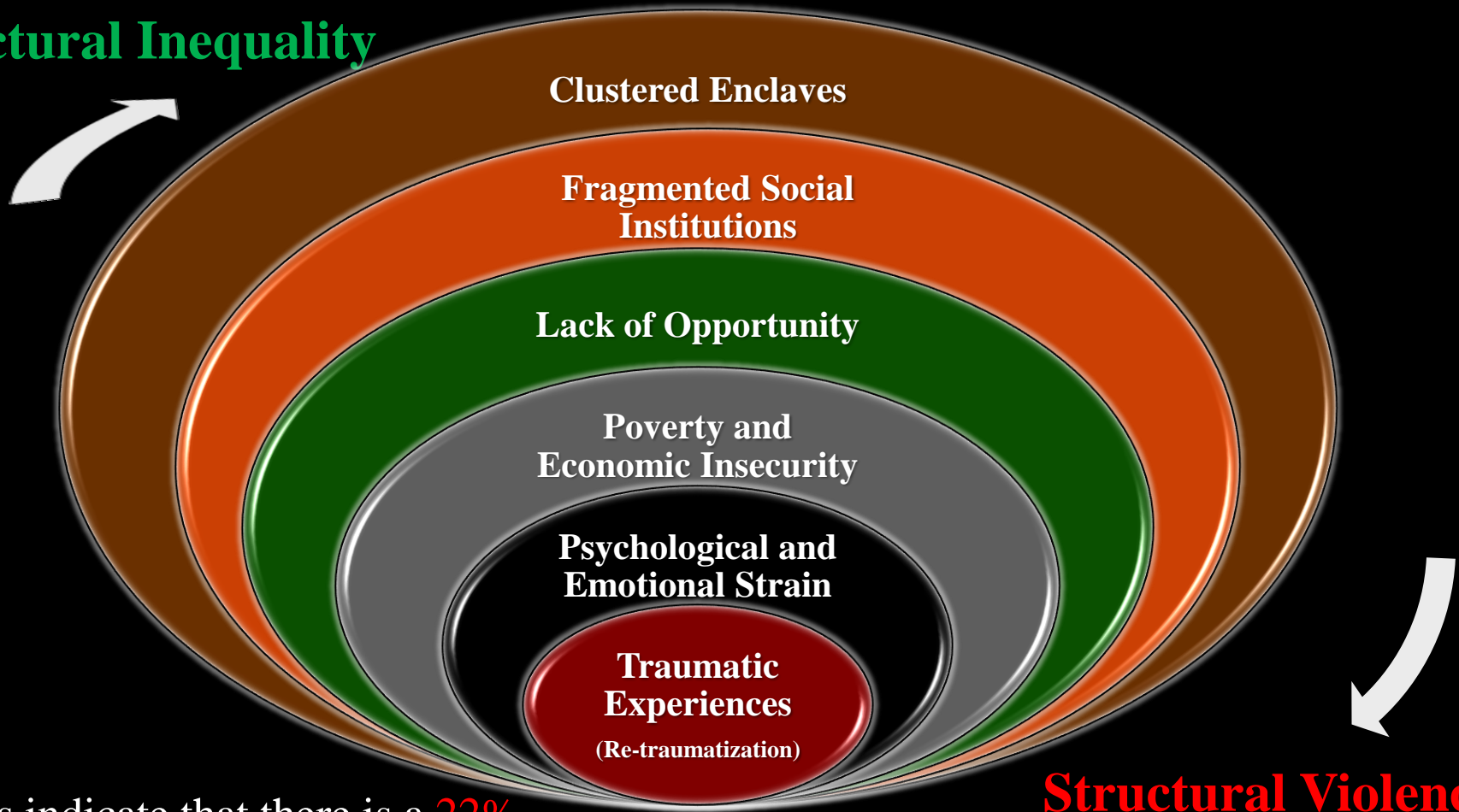(Vigil, 2003)

Systemic Institutional Breakdown

When families, schools, churches, and communities do not meet the needs of "OUR" youth, street models can become more attractive leading to social issues of delinquency, gangs, drugs, teen pregnancy, prostitution, street life, homelessness and despair.

System-Induced Traumatization
Historical and Structural Institutional Failures

Structural Inequality

Clustered Enclaves

Fragmented Social Institutions

Lack of Opportunity

Poverty and Economic Insecurity

Psychological and Emotional Strain

Traumatic Experiences

(Re-traumatization)

Structural Violence

Studies indicate that there is a 22% increase of trauma exposure related to various types of structural violence within underserved communities

(Estrada, Hernandez, & Kim, 2016; Vigil, 1983, 1988, 2002, 2010)

What Are Potential Traumatic Experiences For Marginalized Communities?

Types of Trauma

A single traumatic event that is limited in time.

The experience of multiple traumatic events.

Acute Trauma

Chronic Trauma

Vicarious Trauma

Complex Trauma

System Induced Trauma

Both exposure to chronic trauma, and the impact such exposure has on an individual.

The traumatic removal from home, admission to a detention or residential facility or multiple placements within a short time.

Training provided by San Diego Trauma-Informed Guide Team

Traumatic Cycle of Violence

Violent Trauma or Adverse Childhood Experience

Acute, Chronic, Complex Stress or PTSD

Jail

Death

Treated or Hospitalized

Discharged to the Streets

Youth shot, stabbed, or assaulted

Get weapon or self-medicate

Re-traumatization fear trigger
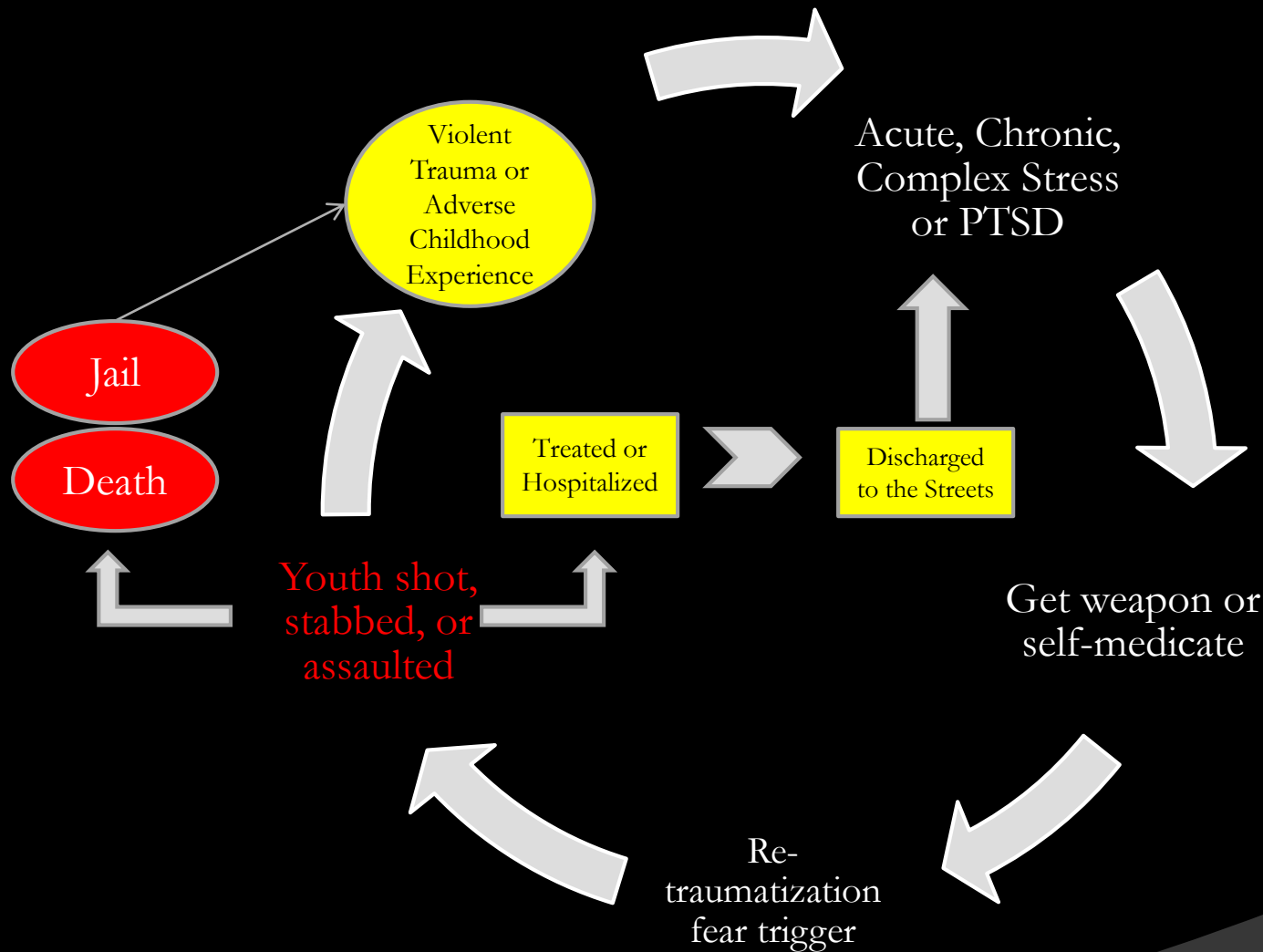
It Takes A Village To Break The Cycle!

Community Intervention Worker (CIW) "Community Mentors"

License To Operate
- Credibility
- Interface with violence
- Engage with the community at multiple levels

Referent Power
- Power of identity and lived experiences
- Cultural proficiency
- Gender specific/role models

RELATIONSHIPS (ACCESS)
- Trust & rapport (faster & stronger)
- Liaison for all levels of treatment
- Reduction in "us versus them" stigma

Community-Based Gang Intervention's Two-Prong Approach (Integrated Community)

PRONG 1
Hardcore, Specialized, Street And Detention/Prison-Based Services

- Street Mediation
- Developing Local and Regional Truces
- Peace Agreement Maintenance
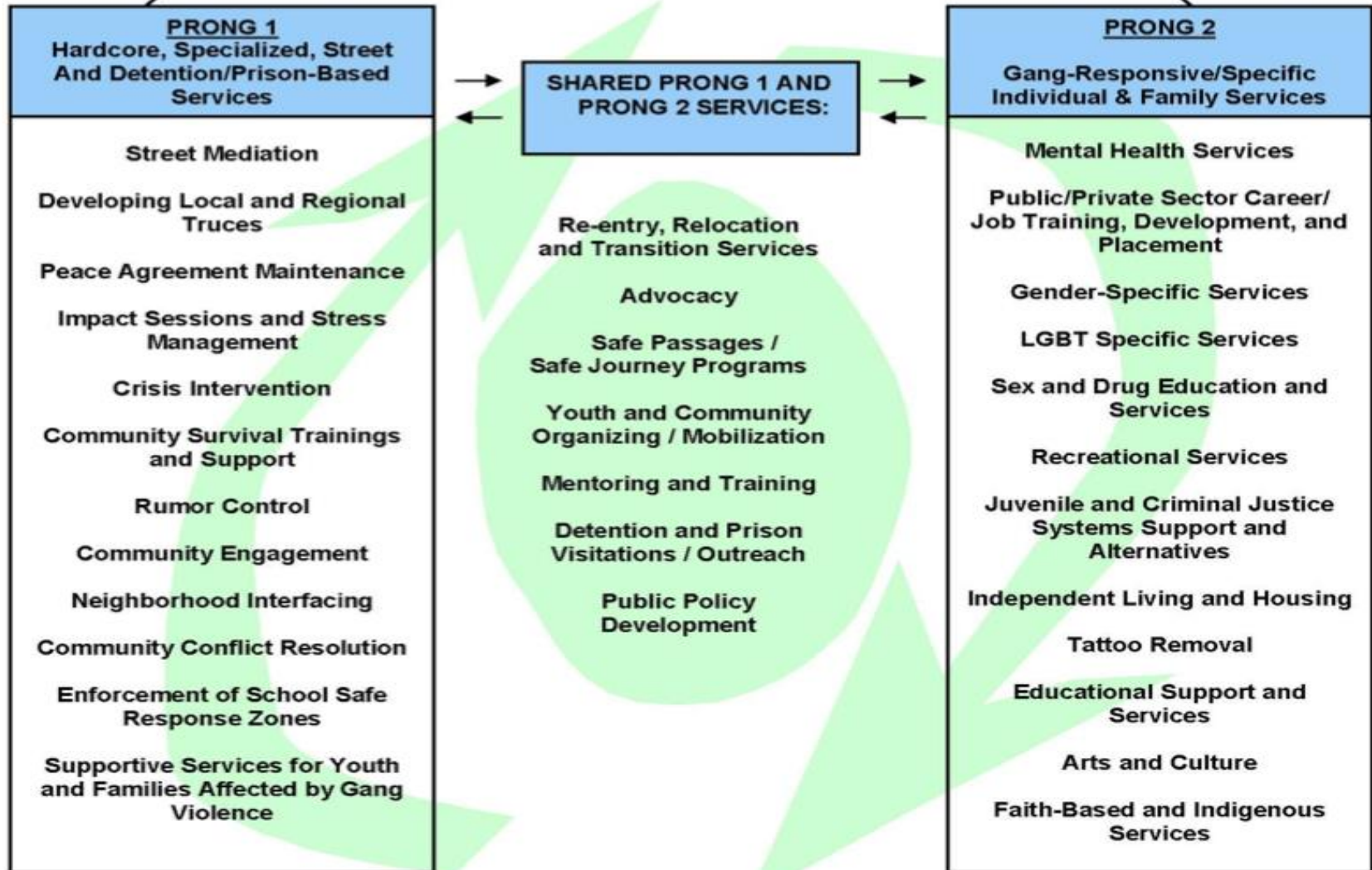- Impact Sessions and Stress Management
- Crisis Intervention
- Community Survival Trainings and Support
- Rumor Control
- Community Engagement
- Neighborhood Interfacing
- Community Conflict Resolution
- Enforcement of School Safe Response Zones
- Supportive Services for Youth and Families Affected by Gang Violence

SHARED PRONG 1 AND PRONG 2 SERVICES:

- Re-entry, Relocation and Transition Services
- Advocacy
- Safe Passages / Safe Journey Programs
- Youth and Community Organizing / Mobilization
- Mentoring and Training
- Detention and Prison Visitations / Outreach
- Public Policy Development

PRONG 2
Gang-Responsive/Specific Individual & Family Services

- Mental Health Services
- Public/Private Sector Career/ Job Training, Development, and Placement
- Gender-Specific Services
- LGBT Specific Services
- Sex and Drug Education and Services
- Recreational Services
- Juvenile and Criminal Justice Systems Support and Alternatives
- Independent Living and Housing
- Tattoo Removal
- Educational Support and Services
- Arts and Culture
- Faith-Based and Indigenous Services

Implications for Practice

- The most vital component is **developing strong rapport and creating a safe environment of compassion, kinship, and trust.**

- Be genuine, respectful, and strength-based.

- Start with an ecological perspective to get an understanding the historical, social, and ethnic identity dilemmas experienced by marginalized youth.

- Be culturally proficient and address root causes and needs not being fulfilled by fragmented social institutions.

- Focus on healing and learning about the person rather than controlling or modifying behaviors which will encounter resistance.

- Engage youth to become actively involved in their community with the help of Community Mentors.

Implications for Practice

- **"Positive progress will reveal itself through evidence of authentic moments of kinship and compassion. The previously demonized gang member becomes humanized, victims transform into survivors, and hopelessness finds avenues of hope in a life that was once drowned by marginalized inequalities and traumas."**

(Estrada, Hernandez, & Kim, 2016)

Dialogue & Questions?

Community Safety Conference 2020

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