

Stopping Gang Violence in Texas

One Community's Effort

Closing the Gap, Men's Health • September/October 2001

The Corpus Christi Family Life Center, located at Texas A&M University's Corpus Christi branch, works primarily with young at-risk Hispanic men in Nueces County. For a community plagued with gang activity, and violence, this program primarily focuses on drug and violence prevention, and gang intervention strategies. Also core in the program's curriculum is a cultural component that provides the youth with positive images and information about their ethnicity and culture.

The program works with an at-risk population—characterized by low incomes, a high proportion of single parents, behavioral problems, truancy, and academic failure. Other services incorporated in the program include intensive case management that assists the youth's family with daily living needs and crisis intervention (e.g., food, school supplies, money to pay the bills), and a family-bonding program to encourage family support.

"We set up components to deal with any family issues they may have. We teach parents how to be involved in their children's lives. We send the family and the child to camps together, that we produce ourselves. We provide parenting and nutrition classes—like how to make a nutritious meal with little food," said Tony Elizondo, director, Texas A&M University's Corpus Christi Family Life Center.

Born out of a need for after-school programs to keep youth involved in positive activities—and not gangs—the Center's program also works to build self-esteem through activities that the kids would not normally partake in—like hunting and fishing. Because the Center is located near Padre Island, many of its activities focus on marine biology and the environment—instruction not normally taught in school. College students tutor the kids, and also serve as mentors.

"Gang activity and low economics are big factors. Kids don't have the resources to do positive things so they join gangs or steal to get what they need. With this program they don't need any money—it's free. They don't have to go out and steal to get what they need. We get them involved in hobbies and continue to support them so they won't need join gangs, or participate in illegal activities," said Elizondo.

The overall goal of the program is to develop young leaders in the community. The Center also collaborates with local businesses to do job shadowing and career exploration so that when the student leaves the program, he leaves with some job skills.

"We've also partnered with 15 different community organizations and businesses. They help us train our staff, supply us with incentives for the kids and their families, as well as donate food and door prizes," Elizondo added.

For more information, go to <http://www.fcup.org/flcs/TAMU-CC.htm> ❖

