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Three Societal Issues Impacting Gang Membership

Broken homes, low income and poor neighborhoods are a trio of interrelated social issues which have a great potential to lead to gang activity. The traditional family structure has broken down in our society and many homes are headed by an unmarried or divorced parent, usually the mother, with an income below the poverty level. As a result, these single parent families live in low income neighborhoods with other families in similar circumstances. Commonly the children are left home alone while the mother goes out to work to support the kids. Some might say, “What’s wrong with that? The kids are old enough to make their own sandwich.” However, while the mother is at work and there is no father in the home, the children lack parental guidance. And, in that absence of guidance, gang membership becomes attractive; perhaps the children may be bored, lonely, and angry or just want to be accepted. (Howell) Thus, broken homes in impoverished neighborhoods unintentionally contribute to youth becoming more vulnerable to joining gangs prevalent within these poor neighborhoods.

In the United States the traditional family has been made up of a married couple who provide and care for their minor children. Sadly, in recent years, “half of all American children will witness the breakup of a parent’s marriage.” (Billota) And, as the traditional family structure has broken down in divorce, statistics show that “90 percent of children whose parents divorced [have gone] into the custody of their mothers.” (Kirby). In addition, statistics demonstrate that among all children in the United States, “40 percent of children growing up in America today are being raised without their fathers.” (Billota) While experts debate whether single parent families are detrimental or a variation of family structure commonly seen in societies since ancient times (Felty), the fact remains that in the last 30 to 40 years there has been a change in our society and the once traditional American homes “have seen a dramatic growth in the proportion of families headed by women. Most of these families are poor and include

1 dependent children--causing the development of a large underprivileged class....” who live in
2 poverty. (Felty)

3 There are two main factors that trap single mom households in poverty. One cause is
4 teen pregnancy among unmarried young mothers. The United States Center for Disease Control
5 and Prevention (CDC) reports that in 2011 “329,797 babies were born to women aged 15–19
6 years.” (Hamilton) This is the age group that should be in high school preparing for employment,
7 college, and careers. Having a baby during this time frequently interrupts or stops their
8 education. These mothers often drop out of school and do not finish because the burden of
9 having young children was too much to carry alone. The CDC reports, “Pregnancy and birth are
10 significant contributors to high school dropout rates among girls. Only about 50% of teen
11 mothers receive a high school diploma by 22 years of age, versus approximately 90% of women
12 who had not given birth during adolescence.” (“About Teen Pregnancy”) Lacking an education,
13 the young mothers either cannot get a job or must work at very low paying jobs because they
14 have fewer employment skills and therefore cannot make nearly enough money to support their
15 children and meet their other financial needs.

16 Another factor trapping single mom households in poverty is that, for the most part, the
17 fathers are not involved or are stingy in providing and caring for their children. Teen mothers
18 are often unmarried and the teen fathers often abandon them to fend for themselves and their
19 babies. In addition, statistics among divorced families show that, “the custodial mothers’ and
20 children’s’ standard of living is reduced by 30 percent on average while the non-custodial
21 fathers’ increases by 15 percent.” (Felty) Although divorced fathers are usually court-ordered to
22 provide child support, “award levels have consistently accounted for less than half of the expense
23 of supporting a child, representing about 10 percent of the noncustodial father’s income.” (Felty)
24 A Census Bureau report states, “28.3 percent of all custodial parents had incomes below poverty

1 in 2009.... Furthermore, they were about twice as likely as the total population to be poor.”
2 (“Poverty Thresholds 2009”) It is stunning that while the poverty threshold, for example in 2009,
3 for a head of householder less than 65 years old with one minor child was approximately
4 \$14,731 (“Poverty Thresholds 2009”), while the “average amount of child support received by
5 custodial parents who were owed support payments in 2009 was \$3,630, or about \$300 per
6 month.” (“Custodial Parents...”)

7 Due to their low income, single mom households are driven by poverty to live in
8 impoverished neighborhoods. It is in these relatively more densely populated areas, usually
9 found in inner cities in which family disruption as well as limited education and low income are
10 more concentrated and are often the neighborhood norm. A U.S. Government Juvenile Justice
11 report on gang membership identifies that family risk factors leading to gang membership
12 include broken homes, low socioeconomic status and extreme economic deprivation (Howell) --
13 all of which are factors found in the poor neighborhoods. This report adds that parental
14 drug/alcohol abuse, troubled families, family members in gangs, lack of adult male role models,
15 family management problems, as well as parents with violent attitudes and sibling antisocial
16 behavior are also risk factors. (Howell) And, not only because “children who have a family
17 member involved in a gang are more likely to join a gang themselves, [but because] children are
18 greatly influenced by their parents actions and attitudes ... parents who model negative behavior
19 directly influence their children’s own attitudes towards crime and gangs.” (Maughen) It
20 follows, then, that in neighborhoods with many families sharing the same background of
21 disrupted families subjected to low income, gang membership would tend to be more acceptable.
22 It is in these poorer neighborhoods where statistical analysis has shown gang activity to be more
23 prevalent. (Li and Rainwater)

1 In conclusion, the trio of broken homes, poverty and poor neighborhoods contribute to
2 youth, who are trapped in these social difficulties, to become more vulnerable to gang
3 membership. However, there is some good news. Research suggests that by increasing a father's
4 interest and involvement in a child's daily life and education, the risks leading to gang
5 membership can be dramatically reduced. (Russell) A father's participation and assistance in
6 family life could provide a greater financial stability and contribute to improved living
7 conditions for all family members. In addition, a father could offer parental guidance and role
8 modeling to supplement and reinforce the mother's efforts. Then, too, with the father's
9 participation, the synergistic effect of both parents involved in the care and support of the
10 children in a traditional family structure would more adequately meet the basic needs children
11 have for activity, companionship, guidance, love, acceptance, and protection. While gangs might
12 fulfill some of these needs, membership does not look quite so attractive to the youth when their
13 families are together. Therefore, a return to the traditional family structure may be the best
14 approach to reduce gang membership.

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Work Sample Evaluation

Subject Area: Composition 1

Task Title: Affecting Change through Academic Discourse

Student Work Sample Title: Three Societal Issues Impacting Gang Membership

The document was scored using the *CCR Task Bank Rubric*. The final scores are indicated in the following chart.

Scoring Criteria	Insufficient Evidence	Developing	Progressing	Accomplished	Exceeds
Research and Investigation				X	
Ideas and Content				X	
Reading and Analysis				X	
Communication				X	
Organization				X	
Accuracy					X

Annotations: The following evidence from the work sample and the reviewer’s comments support the scores above. Page and line numbers refer to the original work sample.

Scoring Criteria	Page #	Line #	Commentary about the work sample
Research and Investigation: <i>Locating resources independently and/or identifying information within provided texts</i>	1	10-11	While the first source in the work sample is cited, it is unclear why it is included.
	1	15-16	Same as comment above—good integration of textual support, but since it is the first time this author is cited, credibility needs to be established by indicating where published and the title of the text being quoted.
	1	14-24	Several authors are cited throughout this paragraph, but none are introduced or given credibility.
	2	4,9	Quotes in this paragraph are credible because the student cites statistics from the CDC.
	2	19-21	Some statistics in the work sample are used without indicating why they are significant.
	3	17-23	The student uses a nice variety of sources. However, as mentioned above, sources aren’t introduced in a way that shows their credibility.
	5	All	Though the student does not provide the context throughout the essay itself, the Works Cited page is correct and provides the important information to establish credibility.
Ideas and Content: <i>Presenting a thesis and understanding concepts</i>	1	11-13	The work sample provides a sophisticated thesis that addresses the nuances of the issue and sets a context for the essay.
	1	14-15	The first topic sentence engages the audience in the conversation about the traditional family. In this section, the student establishes credibility for what they will go on to say.
	2	3	The student provides a brief topic sentence indicating the “main factors” that lead to poverty.
	2	16-17	The student continues the argument logically by citing another example for what leads to the gang membership.
	3	7-8	The student provides another focused topic sentence that moves the conversation along.
Reading and Analysis: <i>Evaluating sources and selecting evidence to support the central idea</i>	1	14-24	Though this paragraph does not follow an analytical structure, it does speak to the rhetorical situation and introduces a variety of evidence that contributes to the issue being discussed.
	1	14-24	This first body paragraph does discuss the various factors that contribute to the breakdown of the family, but it does not return to the focus for the paper, which is how that breakdown ultimately leads to the rise in gang violence and activity.
	2	6-9 12-15	While the student provides a discussion of the statistics that show what leads to single moms and poverty, this could be strengthened by providing a larger discussion about how the findings in the statistics play a part in the issue.

Scoring Criteria	Page #	Line #	Commentary about the work sample
Reading and Analysis (continued)	2	16+	Similar to the second paragraph in the paper, this sentence also provides data for a robust and clear argument. The main element lacking is the credibility of the sources, with the exception of the Census Bureau citation.
		All	The student does a good job of logically taking the reader through the factors that contribute to children living in poor neighborhoods and the factors that ultimately leads to gang involvement. The student's argument is logical and they use a variety of sources of evidence to support it.
	4	1-14	As the paper concludes, the student makes suggestions for solutions to the situation.
Communication: <i>Using subject-appropriate language and considering audience</i>	1	2-5	Clear opening sentences orient the reader quickly to the issue while using language that is interesting and engaging.
	1	17-18	The work sample uses the word "statistics" in a vague way, often neglecting to provide in-text citations for the sources of these data.
	2	19-21	The student consistently uses transitions to introduce new sections.
	3	7-10	Rich academic vocabulary is used throughout the essay, which further adds credibility to the writer's contribution to the rhetorical situation.
Organization: <i>Structuring main ideas and supporting information</i>	1	18	The student uses a variety of transitions to develop their ideas.
	2	3-15	There is effective structure in combining a topic sentence with evidence and commentary, even if the commentary could be further developed in its analysis.
	2	16+	The student has effectively developed focused ideas around the rhetorical situation. More specifically, the student provides a discussion on the lack of male representation in the examples of single mothers and their children.
	3	7-23	The student provides another effectively developed paragraph that starts with a clear topic sentence and uses evidence to move the conversation forward.
	4	1-14	The student concludes the discussion with a well-developed researched solution.
Accuracy: <i>Attending to detail, grammar, spelling, conventions, citations, and formatting</i>	1-4	All	The student uses sophisticated sentence structure throughout the paper, conveying ideas with a strong voice that establishes credibility.
	3	17	The student demonstrates an understanding of how to adjust citations to fit the grammatical structure of the sentence.