



Demonizing children does not improve public safety

By Deseret News

May 2, 2014

John Mejia, For the Deseret News

Link: <https://www.deseret.com/2014/5/2/20540542/demonizing-children-does-not-improve-public-safety>

Recently, the Deseret News blared this headline: “Gangs still prevalent in Utah with members as young as 5, police say,” (April 24). The related article quoted a police detective who, speaking at the recent Utah Gang Conference, reported seeing “documented gang members” among our kindergarteners. I found this statement distressing — but not for the reasons you might think.

As an ACLU attorney, a near-lifelong Utahn and a Latino father of two young children, I was distressed that responsible public servants would ever label and stigmatize a child in this way.

What do we know about this child, beyond the sensationalized charge of “gang membership?” We don’t know why — or even whether — this child was engaged in the activity ascribed to him. We don’t know if the graffiti was gang-specific in any meaningful way, or merely a child’s poor facsimile of something seen around the neighborhood.

Putting destructive labels on a child accomplishes nothing positive for the child, his family or our communities. This is irresponsible behavior by law enforcement, and it is irresponsible for a local news outlet to repeat the unsubstantiated charge. It is neither productive nor fair.

By law enforcement’s own definition, the first step to an individual being classified as a “gang member” is if she or he “self-identifies” as being in a gang. Did this kindergartner express to a teacher or police officer that he was in a gang? If a 5-year-old boy told you he was in a gang, how would you choose to understand that assertion?

You might visit his home and speak with his guardians to assess whether the child was being exposed to criminal activity. You might request permission to enroll him in a mentoring program. You might interact with his older siblings, to assess whether they require assistance or intervention.

Or you could show up at his school, pull the child out of class, question him, photograph him, and put his name in a database so that throughout his youth, he can be feared and stigmatized by educators, police officers and the public. We know that police use these practices on many children like this 5-year-old, and it would be unsurprising if police did just that here.

The Gang Conference revealed a disturbing lack of professional curiosity about the efficacy of these tactics. In the “Gangs 101” workshop, law enforcement officers showed photos of young children wearing red or blue, announcing to workshop attendees that “they” start very young. Attendees were encouraged to pay attention to colors, signs and tattoos — not behaviors, intentions, risks and needs.

I question whether it is in the best interest of public safety to teach educators and community partners to fear (primarily black and brown) children as violent “thugs” engaged in criminal behavior. Are police officers aware of the long-term impacts of documenting a 5-year-old child as a gang member? Where is the evidence that shows that labeling a child in this way somehow helps our State ameliorate true threats to public safety? What do these tactics accomplish, beyond exacerbating tension and distrust between law enforcement and the people they’ve sworn to protect?

The Utah Department of Corrections now accepts that prisoners must be categorized accurately according to risk — because subjecting low or moderate-risk offenders to high-risk supervision and programming actually makes those offenders more dangerous. Our educators are beginning to accept the destructiveness of “zero tolerance” policies, particularly to students of color, because they push kids out of school rather than facilitate appropriate intervention.

I hope Utah’s law enforcement leaders will follow suit. Categorizing children as gang members doesn’t divert them from getting into trouble. It condemns them to a lifetime of profiling and stigmatization.

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