Title I, Part D funds can be used for school-based gang reduction and prevention programs that target students who are at a higher risk of joining a gang. Such programs, experts say, produce better outcomes for at-risk students.

“The problems associated with gangs are something we all need to address,” said Dennis Mondoro, strategic community development officer with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and schools and communities should be part of the plan to comprehensively address these problems.

Mondoro and several other panelists discussed the issue during an April 21 webinar, Gang Prevention From Multiple Perspectives: Federal, Research, and Practice, sponsored by the National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk.

Stephanie Rapp, an OJJDP program manager, reported that in 2008, there were roughly 774,000 active gang members across the U.S. affiliated with some 27,000 gangs.

“These youth account for a disproportionate amount of juvenile delinquency, so this is an important [issue],” Rapp said.

**Risk factors**

Specific risk factors exist for children and youth who are at risk of joining a gang, explained Finn Esbensen, the E. Desmond Lee Professor of Youth Crime and Violence in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

At the community level, for instance, he said most neighborhoods and communities receive inconsistent or inconclusive support in a variety of areas, including the school environment, family poverty or mental health.

At the individual level, a young person may be experiencing negative life events, problem behaviors, or have delinquent beliefs.

There may also be a lack of parental supervision in the home, poor academics at school, or negative influences from peers, Esbensen said.

And when a youth experiences multiple risk factors in multiple domains, Esbensen said his risk of joining a gang is higher.

Given the harmful effects of cumulative risk, programs should be broad-based so they can address numerous risk factors across multiple domains “with a focus on the education setting,” Esbensen said.

**National, state, local resources**

At the national level, OJJDP supports states and communities in their efforts to develop and implement effective and coordinated prevention and intervention programs and provides myriad resources through the National Gang Center, Rapp said.

The center, for instance, provides a *Parents’ Guide to Gangs* that schools can request and distribute, and the OJJDP Strategic Planning Tool, a resource that encompasses four interrelated components to assist in addressing a community’s gang problem. The components, Rapp explained, link information about risk factors, best practices, strategies, and research-based programs, and communities can catalogue existing local resources by creating a Community Resource Inventory account accessed on the Web site.

There are also two successful programs that can be implemented statewide and locally in schools.

The first is the Gang Resistance Education And Training (GREAT) program, a life-skills competency and violence-prevention program taught in elementary and middle schools, which is officer-instructed and includes a school-based curriculum.

The program is a cooperative effort between law enforcement, educators, parents, and local community leaders, explained Tim Cowan, a school resource officer with the Garland (Texas) Police Department and long-time GREAT instructor.
“The bottom line is that this is a combined effort designed to let kids know that gangs can ruin their lives,” Cowan said.

Another program is GRIP, or Gang Resistance Is Paramount, which provides anti-gang lessons to pre-teens. The program promotes affordable and positive community activities as an alternative to gang involvement, he said.

“The strategy is to lower youth gang activity in the community by cultivating peer pressure against it, teaching kids how to resist peer pressure to become gang involved, and by impacting the culture of gang acceptance,” Ostos said. “Nobody is born a gang member; it’s learned behavior.”

For information on GREAT, go to www.great-online.org.