

## The Power of Diversity and Inclusion in The Dance Community

The power of dance gives people the power to express themselves with movement. Often people feel that dancers, especially ballet dancers, have to be perfect. But that is not true. Dance is for all including those with different abilities. Adaptive Dance classes are important to the Art and Dance community because they promote inclusivity and diversity of all people no matter their abilities. According to [Dancecouncil.com](http://Dancecouncil.com), the definition of adaptive dance is “Term for a dance/creative movement program that has been tailored for individuals with different abilities, focusing on creating an open environment in which all abilities can participate.” This program often involved music, games, and learning dances. Adaptive dance can be in a group, or individual setting, it also can help improve balance and motor skills.

In [SAGE](#) Open Medicine, an article was written by Citilai O., Tara E., and Deborah S. Talks about the benefits of having an adaptive dance class for kids with Cerebral Palsy. The writers did tests on the students before and after the class, there were significant improvements made within the time frame. The article also talks about the attitude of the kids who were in the class. It states, “The children perceived their participation in the program as fun and not therapy.” This shows that kids with a disability enjoyed going to dance classes and don’t see it as therapy. For some kids with disabilities, therapy can be looked at as something they have to do, often making it not enjoyable. Typical therapy sessions are normally one on one, focusing on a child's physical needs. By having adaptive dance classes, kids can interact with their peers and have fun while getting the same benefits that therapy offers.

The Joffrey Ballet Academy of Dance in Chicago, Illinois has adaptive dance programming. One of their programs is called “JAM”, which stands for Joffrey Abilities in Motion. This program helps kids with Autism explore the art form of dance. In addition to this, the Academy also has open adaptive dance classes for kids with disabilities. I spoke with the head of Joffrey Ballet Academy of Dance, Raymond Rodriguez, and Trish Strong the adaptive dance teacher. The academy has a program called “Joffrey for All” The founder of Joffrey Ballet (Robert Joffrey), believed that ballet should be for all to see. He would create ways to make ballet more accessible to the public. Mr. Raymond tells the story of how Robert Joffrey started the Joffrey ballet in 1956, by bringing dancers in a station wagon traveling all around the country. Mr. Raymond states, “He (Robert Joffrey) felt like everyone needed to be exposed to the art form.” These dancers would go everywhere to perform. Mr. Joffrey wanted to make everyone feel included even outside the opera house. Mr. Raymond explains this by saying, “Joffrey is for all”



Raymond Rodriguez - Director of Joffrey Academy of Dance  
Photo was taken by Tim Whalen



Photo of Trish Strong ( to the left) with Emma Loockath  
Photo taken by Pam Loockath

The teaching style at Joffrey is inclusion forward, things are not always by the book. It is more about looking at the child and addressing their needs. Ms. Trish is the adaptive dance teacher at Joffrey. When she is teaching her diverse mover's classes, a ballet move like a pod da polka (a forward galop) the steps are the same but how she teaches it to her students changes based on their needs. In a traditional class, teaching styles are different. If Ms. Trish is teaching someone with little strength in their legs, then she and the student will start on the floor building up strength. She states, "The ballet is the same, but teaching has been adaptive."

Ms. Trish sees the impact that the adaptive classes have on her students and their family. She sees her students being accepted, challenged, and rewarded. She believes that families can see their children like every other child. The parents don't have to worry about their child getting into something that they aren't supposed to get into. They can also forget about the day-to-day therapies and relax for a moment. She states, "They have a moment of relief and enjoyment." She also thinks that it's important for other people to see this powerful statement of inclusion and diversity. Having platforms like The Nutcracker allows both students and the audience to witness this statement. It gives the student a chance to say, "I might move differently, but I'm a dancer."

Mr. Raymond feels good to know Joffrey has an adaptive dance class, "It just warms my heart" he states with a passion. Reiterating what Ms. Trish said about dance being for all. He shares a story about when he was in a company with dancers who move differently. Some dancers were in wheelchairs, they were put into two groups, sit-down dancers and stand-up dancers. He performed a ballet with them, in this ballet he lifted a dancer out of her chair, danced with her, and wheeled her around the stage. "It was beautiful!" he said. In the beginning, he was a little nervous about injuring anyone but it open his eyes in the end. Mr. Raymond goes on to say the dance is for everyone and it has to be that way. Saying, "We have to be able to provide for everyone."

Ms. Trish believes that having an adaptive program makes everyone feel good. It also represents change, it doesn't always happen as quickly as we like. There are more dance companies

including people who are different. If people see inclusion and diversity more, then it becomes easier to accept.

Emma Loockath is one of the dancers that's a part of Joffrey's adaptive program. I talked with her and her dad Brian Loockath, to know what benefits they are seeing in having Emma participate in an adaptive dance class. Emma has Cerebral Palsy (CP), which affects her balance, coordination, and walking. For Emma, being a part of the adaptive dance program at Joffrey is like "A dream come true", her sister who doesn't have a disability also dances. Emma feels just like her sister, they can both share their love of dance. When Emma tells people that she dances with Joffrey they are amazed. She states, "I told my friend that I go to Joffrey, and she didn't believe it." She wants to represent the Joffrey Academy and the Company to the best of her ability.



The photo was taken by: Angela Johnson

Emma and Brian Loockath, a family that's a part of the adaptive dance program at Joffrey.

Emma has also been in the Joffrey Ballet Nutcracker for years, she loves being on stage and doesn't get nervous. She sits in a wheelchair while others push her around the stage. She smiles and watches other people dance, Emma describes it as, "I just like to smile while other people are doing ballet." Emma feels like "A ballet princess!" when she is dancing. Emma feels like she is a character in one ballet story. Emma's favorite ballets are The Nutcracker and Coppelia.

Mr. Brian sees the benefit of Emma being in an adaptive dance program because it offers great exercise for her, every Saturday. Mr. Brian describes it as, "It's a very big workout." Her family noticed that she is getting stronger from these classes. When Emma first started taking ballet classes, she wasn't able to jump off the floor but now she can jump off the floor. In between classes, Emma does a lot of practicing in her room at home. Mr. Brian states, "We don't always get to see it, because we're not allowed to watch... You can smell the workout." Emma also watches ballet videos and dances along.



- Photo Taken by: Angela Johnson
- Emma is at the ballet bar, waiting for instructions.

The adaptive dance program has a positive impact on the whole family. It helped Emma realize that dance is one of her happy places. It also helps with her behavior, which makes the family dynamic run smoothly and fluently. Emma uses ballet as an outlet for her emotion. In the beginning, ballet used to get Emma nervous. But now she realized it is a place of happiness. Emma describes this as "A ballet roller coaster." She is grateful for her parents and realized that she would be where she is, if not for them. She didn't realize the commitment it took to be in the Joffrey Ballet.

Mr. Brian believes that there should be more adaptive programs for kids with disabilities. Kids

should start early as possible. Mr. Brian said, “There are two things we need to do, get more programs and have more awareness.” He talks about how they found the Joffrey Ballet by accident. He states, “We didn’t think that Emma would be here, because it’s a big fancy program.” He now realized that Joffrey is an amazing outlet. He continued to say, “We are blessed to live in a city that has these outlets.” Mr. Brian hopes that more cities would have more adaptive dance programs for kids with a disability to be able to share their happiness.

Mr. Brian thinks that going to school, community places, and talking about adaptive dance can bring more awareness. He also thinks it’s important to reach a direct audience. By having internet ads, there can be more awareness about adaptive dance classes. There still needs to be more engagements as well. “Let everyone know the amazing experiences that the kids are having!”



- Photo taking by: Angela Johnson
- Emma is moving across the floor

Emma’s definition of inclusion and diversity is friendship. Emma has always felt included and confident within her group of friends. Mr. Brain adds that in life everyone is different and no two people are alike.

Dr. Citilali Lopez-Ortiz is a researcher, ballet teacher, and former professor with an interest in adaptive dance. One summer day Citilali was with her aunt who was a dancer. Her aunt started to show her the position of the feet in ballet, Citilali became very interested in how Ballet was organized and how it structure her body. She states, “It was organizing my body.” Citilali also liked how there were levels of difficulties that you could learn in ballet. Her aunt was also a Spanish dancer and showed Citilali her castanets, she thought it was hard and girly. From there she asked her mom to put her in a ballet class.



- Photo taking by Larke J.
- Ciltalai Lopez-Ortiz researcher, ballet teacher, and former professor.

She became interested in working with kids who had disabilities through her dance teacher in Mexico. Her teacher had a class with kids who had disabilities, the teacher asked her to help and she agreed. Ciltalai remembers feeling lost and not knowing how to help. She states, "I felt a little lost because I didn't know how to help." There were a lot of kids with different needs and she didn't know what they needed. Like Raymond she didn't want to hurt them, "I was confused." Ciltalai stated.

Twenty years later, after going to school, studying movement, Kinesiology, and motor control she began doing research at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago( now the Shirley Ryan Ability Lab). The head of research recommended she work in the children's department. During this time, there wasn't a lot of attention on kids with CP.

She went to see the physical therapist who was working with a baby. The physical therapies were moving the baby in a way that looked like a dance to Ciltalai. The therapist and the baby were moving in together. Ciltalai wanted to explore this a little further, so she asked the director of Pediatric Rehabilitation Dr. Deborah Gaebler-Spria. Dr. Gaebler loved the idea and helped form a ballet class for kids with CP. She also helps with creating research studies that show the benefits of adaptive dance classes.

Ciltalai believes that there are many benefits to having adaptive dance classes. One of the benefits is that kids with disabilities can coordinate their bodies better. If kids are tested before and after

taking ballet classes, you can see the improvements that the classes have. These improvements aren't usually shown in Physical Therapy. She states, "If you do a test on how much their movement changes before and after the classes. You get the incredible improvement that usually doesn't see with regular Physical Therapy." Adaptive dance classes allow kids to participate in an activity that many kids enjoy, especially little girls. By having these classes kids with disabilities can feel empowered and be themselves. There are also mental benefits to adaptive dance, it improves executive function, and the ability to make the right choice at the right time. Self-regulation also improves allowing students to have the ability to know how to control their bodies in real-world situations. She states, "It helps in many ways."

Citilai's definition of diversity and inclusion is, that diversity means having a variety of people and their ways of being. Inclusion means having the ability to participate in the everyday experience with others in any activity, a person should feel included or seen. As of right now, Citilai is taking a break from her research, to focus on creating more programs for kids with disabilities. "Research is very necessary, but it doesn't reach everyone in the community. I want to start reaching out.

Citilai believes that the awareness about adaptive is growing. There are different ways of teaching adaptive dance. There are some classes where a combination of people with disabilities and people without. Other classes just have people with disabilities. Some classes involved hip hop and others have ballet."There is more work that needs to be done." Citilai believes there needs to be more training for dance teachers. As of right now, there is not that much training. For Citilai it took a Doctorate and a post-Doctorate before being able to combine her knowledge of dance and movement to create adaptive dance classes for people with disabilities to be part of.

Citilai believes that both adaptive dance classes and Physical Therapy (PT) are important. The training of a PT is very effective in helping a child with a disability. Adaptive dance classes provide other benefits that PT doesn't have. "One doesn't substitute the other. They are both important." Because Adaptive dance is a social activity it helps with the integration of society. Sometimes people with disabilities stop going to PT as a kid, over time they start having pain as they get older. If they are dancing it can help, but PT is recommended because it also helps them with the aging process.

Accessibility plays a role in how people learn about adaptive dance classes. Citilai finds that kids with disabilities want to be in a dance class, and the parents will find a nearby dance studio to take them to. They will ask the teacher if they could work with the child, depending on the teacher's comfort they will either say yes or no. Citilai said it's good if the teacher said yes because the child can take a ballet class. But the class isn't designed for the child and their needs. She describes it as "an afterthought" For the teacher. It's likely, that the teacher isn't properly trained in working with kids who have a disability, and for them to get certified the training process can take a while.

There is also a need for funding adaptive dance classes, it can be hard for a dance teacher like Citilai to find the proper dance space for her classes. The Chicago Park District has community rooms, but they don't have the popper floors for dance. They also don't have a ballet bar, and if they have mirrors they are too small for a dancer. It would be helpful if The Park District could

build spaces for the dance studio. The government could also help with funding the training programs for teachers and the adaptive dance programs. The National Institutes of Health could help with the funding, they have an organization called “The National Center for Integrative Health.” that could help with creating careers that involved adaptive dance.

The academy has plans to grow its adaptive programming, Ms. Trish is wanting to create a mobile JAM to bring to places like schools. She understands that it can be hard for students who have Autism to adjust to a new place and by bringing it to them they can already feel comfortable. She also wants to have more teachers who can help with diverse movers’ classes. Mr. Raymond wants to create educational classes and training for teachers to take so that Ms. Trish doesn’t do it all by herself.

The art of dance is filled with beauty. It is also made for sharing with the world, everyone should be able to be part of it. Adaptive dance gives people with disabilities a chance to be a part of the wonderful dance community. “No matter the color of your skin, the shape of your body, size, or age, it is for all. We make dance for all.” The Mr. Raymond States.

Phillip D.

### The Significance of Preparing For the SAT

You would think that when it comes to a test that has a high influence towards your future career, preparing to do your best on it would be normal but really it is not. Ogden International High School offers help to prepare for the SAT. Whether it is teachers, tutors, or the SAT Club, these are methods that the students have access to at Ogden.

Sitting with students in the lunchroom and after a game I was able to get students to open up about the SAT. Between the clatter of trays or the sound of laughter, students were able to tell me their sincere feelings without being embarrassed or influenced. I learned and was able to understand what students felt towards the SAT and how that would affect their performance or perception of this test.

When it comes to things around work there is always something you need to prepare for. For example, when cooking someone must preheat the oven for food, get the seasonings together or for a project, getting all the necessary materials to conduct it, preparation is a key process in achieving satisfactory results.

All juniors are required to take the SAT, juniors know that the SAT is really important for college. Their parents, teachers, or just the daily adults around them know from experience the importance of college. Many students are aware that getting into college and completing college is major for their career and livelihood. According to [Study Abroad College Dekho](#), "SAT scores help students apply for undergraduate programs at 800+ universities worldwide. Also, the minimum SAT score requirement is defined by respective institutions for a specific course. SAT is one of the most convenient exams that allow students from different countries to get admission to the desired college." SAT is used worldwide for admissions and also takes part in determining what course you are eligible for. This is a test that affects what options you have to explore during college.

When asked why the SAT mattered, all students acknowledged how important the SAT was when it came to colleges. One interviewed junior in particular, David V. stated, “I want to get into a good college, I really want to finish my career, and I want to get into a college that would provide me with that education.” But in response even though he had a goal for himself he stated to the question of preparing for the SAT that “ I did not prep very much, I pretty much just went with luck and for the most part I just was hoping for the best.” David also expressed how nervous he was before taking the SAT and even more when taking it.

Another student, Junior Brian A. didn't feel prepared for the math section, but did feel he was ready for the reading part. He also stated how he took a PSAT test and also had work given from the teacher to help students including himself out.

Some juniors were less willing to speak about the SAT publicly. Off the record they expressed how when the previous practice tests were given, they did not take them seriously. These students only began prepping for the SAT days before the Official SAT, and after taking it they were not confident in their scores.



*David V, a junior at Ogden International High School, Photo By David V.*

Junior David V. from Ogden International High School discusses his experience with the SAT. Click [here](#) to listen to his entire interview.

*Alexander A., a junior at Ogden International High School.*

Junior Alexander A. from Ogden International High School discusses his experience with the SAT. Click [here](#) to listen to his entire interview.

Alexander is a student that has been consistently taking practice tests for years. In freshman year he had a score of 1110 during the PSAT in January 2020. Then during October 13, 2021 he had a score 1130 which was an increase even including the issues during remote learning because of Covid-19. Lastly his recent score in March 2022 was 1170. The increase may not seem too great compared to others' expectations, however it is still an increase over a process of repetition and preparation. I have watched Alexander first hand for many months and have found him to be hardworking. He is a full Diploma Program student that completes his assignment with high quality and correctness. He's always working or studying even on breaks or lunch. When interviewing Alexander it was not new to me on his confidence when and after taking the SAT because I watched him practice and study, finding some way to be in his best condition for the test. Him with his goal to get accepted into a selective college made things that were worth it. Alexander joining the SAT Club was just another form to get the grasp on the SAT. Strategies, grammar, trick questions, and time management were some of the many things that

SAT Club taught him. Alexander's goal might be the thing pushing him but at the end of the day he is human too. Other Students with whatever goal they have in mind can achieve the same results with effort as well.

My research shows that there are useful methods for preparing for the SAT that can affect how students test. Consistently, students who did not prepare, or didn't prepare enough were nervous, full of uncertainty, anxious, and were lost. But those who did prepare had confidence when taking the test, they were in the correct mindset without any hindrance and able to think with clarity.

Waiting to prepare will most likely not leave you with satisfactory results. For those reading this who have yet to take the SAT or those who might retake the SAT, think things through for your own future. College may or may not be for you or your future, however college is by no means negative towards you or your future opportunities. To add, there are many colleges that don't use the SAT for admissions, at [Fair Test](#), a website you can find a [list](#) of many colleges that are "Test Free" as of 2022. So the SAT is not the end for you. However you should consider the possible consequences of not taking the SAT or not taking it seriously.

Ms. Croston, a counselor at Ogden stated " You definitely still want to take your SAT testing seriously because it is still a data point that can lead to you getting scholarship dollars." Education costs money, but scholarships can lighten the load. So considering whether the SAT and its benefits is a need towards your future is critical. But no matter what, to do well and have a good foundation, preparation is vital towards increasing your chances at reaching your best score on the SAT.

## Ogden Diploma Program: What good does it do?

**Makenna Y.**  
**April, 2022**

I've heard of the term IB for as long as I've been at Ogden, which is my 2nd grade year (2011). Until recently, I didn't know what IB meant. Ogden is a proud IB school, yet most don't know what IB *is*. I've asked around students if they know what IB is and most give me the standard answer of "International Baccalaureate " and nothing much else. I asked Mr.Karlins, a teacher here at Ogden, what IB is and he responded with "that's a very long answer." According to the [International Baccalaureate Organization](#), IB is specifically a program that engages students in learning that is the same as those all around the world, students in IB schools around the world are learning the same curriculum and creates more globally aware peers. At least that's the mission of IB. There are 3 main programs that fit under the IB name: the Primary Year Program(PYP), Middle Year Program(MYP), and Diploma Program (DP).

There are 5,400 schools in 159 countries. Three scrolls down on the International Baccalaureate Organization 's website, there is an [interactive map](#) that shows every IB school in the entire world.

Ogden is one of the few schools that are what is called a full continuum school, meaning we have all three programs at our school. Sophomores at the high school have the opportunity to apply to the DP program. By being in DP classes, students can get college credit if they pass the IB exams in the spring of their Senior year. That's pretty much the extent of what students know about IB and DP here at Ogden.



Ogden International School DP coordinator Mr. McGinnis. Picture provided by Mr. McGinnis himself.

I first sat down with Ogdens DP coordinator Mr. McGinnis to get a better understanding of what IB is to Ogden. It was the middle of the day and he had just finished teaching a senior seminar

class. We went into the library located in the dead center of the school on the first floor. It was empty and quiet but you could hear the loud bustle of the hallways outside as students scramble to get to where they're supposed to be. Mr. McGinnis has been involved with Ogdens DP program since its start here in 2012, he was first a Psychology teacher for six years. He says now "I don't get to meet with students as much as I would like anymore, now that I only teach one period instead of having five full classes." He mostly works with the teachers and administrators, making sure the school upholds its title to the International Baccalaureate Organization and helps teachers better their teaching craft. He does teach advisory, so he works with the juniors who are full DP candidates.

I wanted to know what made Ogden's IB program different from other schools, he told me that "in regards to our program versus others in the city, we're just about the only program that allows students to apply as sophomores, most students are recruited to the IB program in 7th grade based on their NWEA scores, so we believe in giving students the chance at Ogden to prove themselves in the first two years of high school to show us what kind of student they are and then to apply to the program then."

When sophomores apply for the program, they can either choose to be Full DP or Course DP. Full DP means all your classes are DP courses and if you pass the IB exams, you can graduate with an additional IB Diploma. Course students only take a few, up to four, DP courses and are only eligible to receive college credits for the courses. Mr. McGinnis does point out that "research shows that, and this is research from the International Baccalaureate Organization, that just being exposed to the courses and being in them whether you pass the test or not is helpful for learning in college." As I spoke with current and former DP students, I see that most students would agree with that statement.

Safiyah Simpkins was a student at Ogden from 2016 to 2020, now she is a sophomore at DePaul University studying Political Science. She told me how being in DP prepared her for the amount of work in college and got her used to it. She further explained that "in Mr. Torres's [one of Ogden's History teacher] class, he'd give a lot of readings and tell you to read them for next class; next class is in two days. In college it's pretty much always like that." She goes on to talk about how the time frame for IB classes was way tighter than in college. "I only take four classes a semester now, so I have more time to do my work. I found myself choosing my IB work over my regular work in high school."

Mr. Allmen, Ogden's DP Biology teacher of ten years would agree, saying "for the most part when a student is choosing to do a class, they're going to be more invested in it or are going to be willing to work to achieve results in that class that they might not necessarily bring the same level of attention, same level of motivation to another class."



Ileana Lopez-Martinez as a high school student at Ogden from 2013-2017, and a college graduate at UChicago in 2021. Pictures provided by Ileana herself.

I was also able to talk to Ileana Lopez-Martinez, another former Ogden student who has graduated from college at UChicago. She is now in graduate school at Emory University for her masters of Public Health as a freshman. I was connected to her through the suggestion of Ms. Worley, since Ileana was one of her former students. We exchanged a few emails and I was able to set up a Google Meets. Talking to her was such a pleasure, she was such a warm and welcoming person. I was kind of nervous to talk to a stranger, but she was so nice and the conversation was really calm and chill. She talked fondly of Ogden and how she truly enjoyed high school. "One thing that stood out about Ogden was that it was unique in what we had to read, most of my peers in college had read books like the Scarlet Letter or the classics, we got to read books that were outside of the box." This did prove to make college slightly difficult since a lot of people who came from boarding or private schools got more experience academically, but she told me that IB prepared her to be able to catch up to her peers by being able to use the critical thinking skills she developed through IB. She also adds that "the time management skills from IB helped college be more fun." She got more free time to enjoy college while other students around her struggled to balance life and work.

That being said, Ileana graduated from Ogden in 2017, three years before the Covid-19 pandemic hit and schools had to be sent into remote learning. This greatly affected those who were taking IB, especially the seniors of this year's 2022 graduating class. Their first foundation year of IB was completely remote. Kayla Cummings, a full DP candidate, says that "doing DP junior year online was horrible, being full DP online was really hard since you were at home with no motivation, plus no explanation, plus no human contact, not to mention a lot of distractions."

Luckily for her this year students were able to come back in person and she got to complete her senior year in an actual classroom. She talks about the transition from remote to in person, saying “honestly it was way better, I did do hybrid last year, and it wasn’t all that crazy. It definitely helped the focus levels go back up.”

But being back in person couldn’t come without its own problems. Jess Correa, another full DP senior, tells me of their experience with the transition: “the biggest adjustment was the adjustment from Mr. Menon to Mr. Johnson.” They’re referring to the fact that Mr. Menon, one of Ogden’s DP Mathematics teachers, left Ogden before the 2021-2022 school year began. In turn, Mr. Johnson took over Mr. Menon’s DP Math class, and Ms. Barclay took over Mr. Johnson’s junior Math class. Typically a teacher would track with their students, meaning they teach their students for both their junior and senior year. The change in teachers halfway through their DP course affected the students’ learning, since the teacher for their junior year was different than their senior year teacher. “I still love Mr. Johnson though, he’s a great teacher” Jess reassures.



DP Visual Art students Deliah (left), Karson (middle), and Vashon (right) experimenting with watercolor. Picture taken by me Makenna Y.

While some students can handle or want the challenge of IB, it’s not for everyone. It’s hard for everyone to come to terms with that when our school culture is built on everyone being highly encouraged to be a part of IB. We should maybe consider additional alternatives for other students. There are many other types of programs our school could invest in that could benefit students just as well as the IB program. It’s understandable that IB is the culture at Ogden since we are an IB school, but perhaps we can benefit from things such as more electives or other non core classes.

Jamari S.  
Our World, Our Story  
Journalism  
Mar 21, 2022

### *The Front Page Kids.*

When I heard the ice cream truck approaching, I turned my head in the opposite direction. My cousin and I were sitting on his brick porch in Jackson, Mississippi's Colonial Heights area when I was just 5 years old. Because something internal was preventing me from doing so, I couldn't turn my head to face my 15-year-old cousin. But unlike usual, he never made an "Oh yeah!" like he always did when we saw the truck; I turned to find him face down on the stairs, blood pouring out of his skull, as a loud engine rushed by. Only a foot away from me, he'd been shot in the head.

Starting as early as 11, teenage boys make the decision to join a gang. Gangs can provide a multitude of benefits for boys so young. They offer discipline, acceptance, protection, and oftentimes allows for quick and easy money. These boys are chosen in innocence through a system of grooming.

Grace Robinson, a teaching assistant at Edge Hill University in London, who investigates gang activity in the London area wrote, In her feature article, [‘How gangs are exploiting children to do their dirty work’](#), “My continuing research with staff in youth offending services has found that victims of this new kind of grooming believe that their criminal activity is one of “choice”, and that by complying, gangs will respect them and give them a sense of belonging.”When these boys end up in the news, the outside world seems to forget that these boys were just regular kids. Kids who enjoyed drawing, playing sports, or even riding their bike, and their story of how it started often goes unnoticed.

Jahkari, a pledged gang member, pledged out of peer pressure as a way to become closer to his dad. I asked Jahkari what it feels like to be a part of a gang, to which he answered, “To be honest, It’s a board game I didn’t know the rules to. Everyday I wake up, I want out. I think it might kill me.”

According to [WSFA News](#), “Common characteristics of gangs include intimidation and extortion, vandalism, theft, assault, swarming, drug trafficking, stabbings, shooting, and sometimes murder.”

Jahkari explained that he only chose gang life out of peer pressure to be like his dad. He described his feelings very vividly as, “He always had money, a new car, I wanted that for myself. I thought he was top sh\_\_\_. I found a gun under the seat in his car. He told me to pass it to him. I closed my eyes and heard like 5 loud pops when he got out of the car.”

Jahkari further explained what his dad told him after he witnessed his father shoot someone, "He told me, 'This is the life you gotta live if you wanna be like me. Ain't no smiles out here in this motherf\_\_\_\_\_ lifestyle. Imma show you that life.'"

Peer pressure and affiliations may also play a role in a child's decision to join a gang. Peer pressure from a child's community can create a burden on a child's need for acceptance, comfort, and love. A gang provides a sense of belonging that often comes with a risky price; their life.



Jahkari details that in his free time, he sits and animates. He's been looking into different art colleges out of state as a way to escape gang life. This is a recent animation he drew, that represents two women WWE characters; a sport he used to watch with his Dad growing up.

Other than animating, some of these boys enjoy doing other things, like playing sports or even hanging out at their neighborhood park. Jahkari's best friend, Derrick is a pledged GD Member who lives in the deep South Side. A kid who enjoyed playing football with his older brother found way into a life of gang banging on accident, by stumbling into a gang initiation in his neighborhood park.

Kim Shinew, a professor of recreation, sports, and tourism at the University of Illinois, has spent her time researching perceptions and the use of park facilities for gang activity in Chicago's Little Village Neighborhood and East Side. In her 2009 article, ['Gang Presence in Urban Parks Complicates Lives of Residents'](#) Shinew states, "Parks are very conducive to gangs because it gives them a place to hang out...because parks are public spaces, gang members interaction there are less likely to be interrogated by authorities, making them ideal spots for criminal activity."



*Harold Washington Park, South Side of Chicago, Illinois: Taken by, [Foursquare.Com](#)*

On the contrary, Chicago Park Districts are not infamously known for their gang violence. Chicago Park District. "Over 30,000 people participate in

thousands of sports, recreational, cultural and environmental programs offered by the Chicago Park District,” As reported on the [Chicago Park District](#) Website

They also offer day camp, after school programs, compensated jobs for teens, arts and crafts, and even summer movie nights.

“I used to hang out over in Washington Park like almost everyday, kicking around a football with my younger brother. I lived about a block away, so it was like a second home for me. We was playing all day and I realized I left it there. When I went back at dark, there was a gang initiation going on. I wasn’t really successful in school, so I just stayed to see what was going on. I wish I just went back home,” Derrick describes in a phone interview from his home; where he is currently on house arrest after being released from prison after an attempted armed robbery charge.

Failure in elementary school is a major risk factor for gang involvement later in life. Lack of engagement and positive encouragement in schools, allows children to be left with no close connection for discipline. Which gives them the chance to involve themselves in delinquent activities. In a study on gang activity by [kidsdata.org](#), “In 2019, 9% of U.S. students ages 12-18 reported a gang presence at their school. When youth are exposed to violence or feel unsafe at school, it can negatively affect their health, mental health, and academic performance (3, 4). Because the majority of youth who join gangs do so between the ages of 11 and 15, early prevention is critical, along with cross-sector efforts that reach at-risk children and strengthen families, schools, and communities.”

As best friends, both Jahkari and Derrick admit, their heavy involvement in gang activity has given them both immense depression. “I just wanna be a kid again, you know? I used to dream of being a football player. But you know? Here I am,” Derrick further explains.

There are not only adolescents who suffer the consequences of gang life. Commitment to a gang life isn’t easy to drop for some. Sometimes these consequences live on after gang membership ends. Negative effects of joining a gang last long after gang membership ends’. An article published by [UW News](#) states, “University of Washington researchers have found that joining a gang in adolescence has significant consequences in adulthood beyond criminal behavior, even after a person leaves the gang.”

For former GD Leader, Robert Shelton (no relation to author), the consequences he faced were bigger than any drug use. “I have an 18 year old son. I never met him. At the time he was

born, I was arrested on a 2nd degree murder charge. Once I got out, I had wanted to reach out to him. He would've been 15. The same age I was when I joined this lifestyle. Crazy right? But I knew meeting him would cause me more pain than being shot or stabbed. I didn't want him to see this lifestyle. So I made the choice...let him live his life without me. It's better for everyone."

### A wide range of restrictions following criminal convictions

People in the US who have been convicted of felonies and misdemeanors face more than 40,000 restrictions, most of which are imposed by states. The most common ones limit job opportunities.

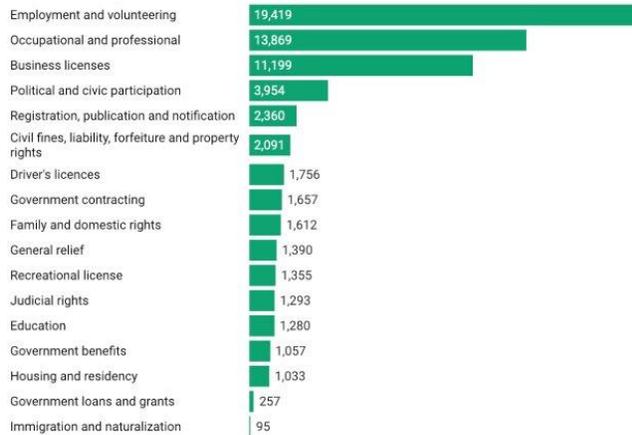


Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND · Source: National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction · Get the data

Those released from prison will fight a hard struggle to reconnect with the outside world and regain access to benefits.

For over the thousands of people incarcerated, their life will never return to normal. From the chart (pictured to the left; from a Quartz.com life article titled "[The Lifelong Consequences of being convicted of a crime](#)") Convictions can result in mandatory or discretionary punishments. The consequences can be short-term or long-term.

"... a gang member who becomes involved in illegal activity, is in and out of jail, has difficulty obtaining and/or holding a job, and subjects the family to unnecessary financial and emotional burdens, should they become permanently disabled as a result of gang violence," says an article written by [Olathe, Kansas Police Department](#), 'Impact of gang activity on Family Members'.

Even as adults, these once innocent children have become a group shunned by society. With no assistance in locating homes or finding work, all they can do is sit and listen to rejection as a result of their wrongdoing. Even if it was not what they had wished for, it is what the world has bestowed upon them.