NATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION COUNCIL

Teens, Crime, and the Community

Straight Talk About Youth Gangs:

Facts for Educators

Defining a Gang

A gang is a group of people who share a common purpose; engage in criminal activity like drug dealing, graffiti, and violence; and often have a common name, symbol, or color. Young people of all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds participate in gangs. Although the majority of gang members are male, female gang involvement continues to increase. Gang members participate in delinquent and criminal activities such as graffiti, property crimes, gun violence, and drug trafficking.

Why Do Young People Join Gangs?

The factors that influence youth to join gangs can vary; however, there are identifiable risk factors and motivations that encourage youth gang involvement. These include individual factors such as peer pressure, family conditions, lack of school achievement, and community turmoil.

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS: Youth who are delinquent and involved in violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and promiscuous sexual activity have a higher incidence of gang membership. Youth who seek money, power, recognition, and excitement are also more likely to join gangs.

PEER PRESSURE: Youth who are associated with and intimidated by delinquent friends are at risk of gang involvement.

FAMILY CONDITIONS: Youth who lack protection, affirmation, and a stable family structure are inclined to join gangs. Moreover, youth who have gang-involved family members are likely to continue the gang tradition.

LACK OF SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT: Youth who are truant, lack scholastic achievement, and are viewed negatively by educators are likely to further their delinquency via gang involvement.

COMMUNITY TURMOIL: Youth who regularly see or experience poverty, drug abuse, and are frequently exposed to gang activity may glorify the gang lifestyle and feel compelled to join a gang. Youth who feel unprotected in their neighborhood may be promised safety by gang members.

Signs of Gang Involvement

The same factors that influence youth to join gangs can also be early warning signs that youth are involved in gang activity. Below is a list that can help you identify youth gang-related behaviors and activities.

- Changing friends
- Displaying gang symbols on books, lockers, clothing, or as a form of communication. These may include wearing or displaying a colored shirt, hat, or bandana, or even how an article of clothing is worn such as such as a hat tilted to the left or to the right; tattoos and graffiti; and hand signals, which are typically signs made by formation of the fingers on one or both hands to make some sort of symbol or letter.
- Losing interest in school and family
- Becoming truant
- Using drugs and alcohol
- Carrying weapons or large amounts of cash
- Getting arrested

Not all youth displaying these warning signs are gang members, therefore, it is important to review the facts presented. If you have questions about gang activity in your community, contact your local police department's gang unit.

Young People Can Leave Gangs

Although many young gang members often speak of the "positive" aspects of gang life, the negative consequences far outweigh any perceived benefits. Former gang members have shared a number of reasons for wanting to leave a gang, including fear of personal injury, imprisonment, or death; anticipation of sibling involvement; and the birth of a child. There are things you can do to assist a young person who wants to escape a gang and begin living a positive lifestyle.

These seven strategies integrate gang prevention education and the creation of positive alternatives to gangs.

- Educate young people about the costs and consequences of gang involvement. Gang members may risk personal injury from rival gangs, injury to family members, and even death. To combat the growing number of gang-related crimes and offenses, new laws now support some of the stiffest penalties for gang-related offenses. These include larger fines and longer sentences—15 years or more for gun violations, drug trafficking, and violence.

- Keep youth in school and enrolled in positive activities when the school day ends. Find ways to help at-risk youth by developing interesting schoolwide programs or taking part in the National Crime Prevention Council's *Community Works* curriculum. Help create and coordinate afterschool learning and recreational activities for latchkey youth, so that they do not participate in delinquency during these critical afternoon hours.

- Raise awareness among parents and students of the signs of gang activity. When students understand gang characteristics, they will know who and what to avoid. Advocate for a school dress code that prohibits any clothing or symbols that suggest gang membership.

- Provide students with opportunities to practice refusal skills. Create realistic scenarios and allow young people to role-play appropriate responses. Promote self-esteem and responsible decision-making; these developmental skills will bolster youth confidence and assertiveness.

- Make sure your school is a designated drug-free and gun-free site and that your students are aware of this status. Declaring your school a safe zone allows students to feel protected. Criminal violations within these zones are serious and carry stiff fines and penalties.

- Engage students in community service or service-learning projects. Allow students to select, plan, and execute a project that addresses a concern or issue in their school or community. Community service can increase positive attitudes toward others, the community, and the future.

- Many gang members have safely left gangs. Encourage youth who want to leave a gang to talk to an adult they trust and respect. You may need to direct these young people to appropriate social services, victim service providers, crisis hotlines, or other community support agencies. For help locating local victim service providers, go to the Office for Victims of Crime, Directory of Crime Victim Services website (http://ovc.ncjrs.org/findvictimservices). You can also refer youth to The National Center for Victims of Crime Helpline (800-FYI-CALL), which is open for calls Monday through Friday, 8:30 AM to 8:30 PM EST. Hopeline (800-442-HOPE) is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Both crisis hotlines will speak with youth and help them find local resources to help youth leave gangs. Community religious leaders can also provide counsel and assistance to youth in need.

Recognizing and Preventing

Learn More About Recognizing and Preventing Gangs

To learn more about recognizing gang activity and preventing youth from joining gangs, consult the following National Crime Prevention Council resources.

- Teens, Crime, and the Community (TCC) Initiative (*Community Works* curriculum and Youth Safety Corps). The *Community Works* law-related education curriculum combines education and action to reduce teen victimization. Youth Safety Corps is a program that gives youth the opportunity to engage in crime prevention, safety, and service in an afterschool or community-based club.

- *School Safety and Security Toolkit: A Guide for Parents, Schools, and Communities* (CD-ROM). This kit helps parents work with school personnel and policymakers to bolster school safety.

- *Parents and Their Children: Talking Together.* This new packet of nine reproducible tip sheets, available in either English or Spanish, includes "Talking to Your Teen About Gangs"—a valuable resource for parents of at-risk students.

- *Giving Youth a Voice.* This kit includes 20 reproducible brochures for teens on such topics as gangs, drugs and alcohol, and dating violence. Program papers for adults provide background information on a variety of crime prevention topics.

- *Taking a Stand Against Violence, Drugs, and Other Crime* (CD-ROM). NCPC's comprehensive crime prevention kit includes ten concise, informative reports and 43 reproducibles. "Gangs are a Community Problem" will be of special interest.

For more information or to order any of the materials listed above, visit www.ncpc.org.

Other agencies also provide resources focused on gang prevention.

- The G.R.E.A.T Program, www.great-online.org
- National Gang Center, www.nationalgangcenter.gov
- Gang units or squads at your local police department may also have pertinent information about gangs in your community. Call your station's non-emergency number, and ask for the officer who deals with gangs.

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