



Communities In Schools of North Carolina

Gang Awareness: A Guide For Parents & Community Members





What Is A Youth Gang?

Street gangs can be described as an organization, association, or group of three or more persons. The primary activities of this group are the commission of felony or violent misdemeanor offenses, or delinquent acts that would be felonies or violent misdemeanors if committed by an adult. They share a common

collective identity, often expressed through a gang name; typically adopt certain symbols and signs or claim control over a certain area (turf); and are deliberately involved in illegal or anti-social activities.

GANG IDENTIFICATION

Gang members use graffiti, hand signs, tattoos, and colors to signify their membership in a gang and to communicate their gang affiliation to others. Each street gang has its own unique signal, sign, colors, jewelry, and dress. These serve not only to identify gang members, but also to promote group solidarity.

Grffiti – One of the first indicators of gang activity is the appearance of graffiti in a neighborhood. To most community members, graffiti is just vandalism and childish pranks and means nothing more than that. However, to gang members and trained observers, it is a clear marking of territorial boundaries and serves as a warning sign or even a challenge to a rival gang. You can find graffiti on almost any available space, be it a building, bus bench, park wall, street sign, or even a private residence. The purpose of graffiti is to glorify the gang and make its existence well known.

Hand Signals – The art of non-verbal communication is critical for all gang members. The use of hand signs is multipurpose. It is a means of communicating gang affiliations to both rival and allied gang members. Hand signals are also used as a means of challenging rival gangs.

Tattoos – Tattoos can be used to identify the member's gang, set and moniker. The tattoo may appear any place of the member's body, such as the neck, arms, wrists, hands, chest, and legs.

Colors – Matching clothing such as shoes, shirts, caps, and bandannas are common group identifiers. Colors are of paramount importance to the gang. They serve not only to identify gang members, but also to promote group solidarity. Degrading of one gang's color and/or symbol is the ultimate disrespect. Interestingly enough, because of pressure from law enforcement, school officials, and parents, gangs have been forced to become more innovative in showing gang affiliation (i.e., usage of sports logos, numbered jerseys).

Levels Of Individual Gang Involvement

LEVEL I - FANTASY

- Knows about gangs primarily from the media (music, movies, and literature).
- May or may not know about "real" gangs.
- May or may not like, respect or admire a gang, gang member, or the gang lifestyle.

LEVEL II - AT-RISK

- Knows about gangs and gang members first hand.
- Occasionally casually associates with gang members.
- Lives in or near gang areas (turf).
- May like or admire gangs or gang members as individuals.
- May like and/or admire the gang lifestyle, but does not participate.

LEVEL III - WANNA-BE / ASSOCIATE

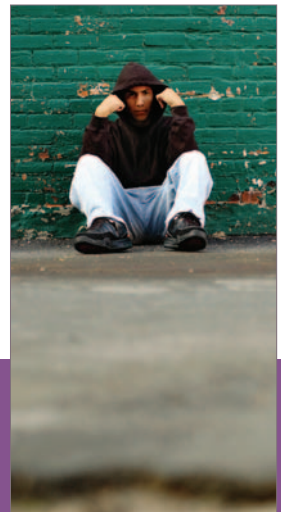
- Knows and likes gang members first hand.
- Regularly associates with gang members.
- Considers gangs and related activity as normal, acceptable, and admirable.
- Finds many things in common with gang members.
- Is seriously thinking about joining a gang.

LEVEL IV - GANG MEMBER

- Is officially a gang member.
- Associates almost exclusively with gang members to the exclusion of family and former friends.
- Participates in gang crimes and most other related activities.
- Is not considered hard core by fellow gang members or others.
- Has substantially rejected the authority or value system of family and society.

LEVEL V - HARD-CORE GANG MEMBER

- Totally committed to the gang and gang lifestyle.
- Totally rejects anyone or any value system other than the gang.
- Is considered hardcore by self, other gang members, and authorities.
- Will commit any act with the approval of a demand from the gang.
- Does not accept any authority other than the gang.





Why Do Youth Join Gangs

Youth join gangs for many different reasons. All youth are "at-risk" for gang involvement, but there are certainly factors that may cause some youth to be more susceptible to being lured by gangs. The domains of risk that ultimately impact the destructive decisions of youth include: individual, peers, family, and community. Some of the motivating factors for gang involvement include:

Identity or recognition – Being part of a gang allows youth gang members to achieve a level of status they feel is impossible outside of the gang. The individual desires attention, status, and needs affiliation.

Protection – Many members join because they live in the gang area and are, therefore, subject to violence by rival gangs. Joining guarantees support in case of attack and retaliation for transgressions.

Fellowship and brotherhood / sisterhood – To the majority of the youth gang members, the gang functions as an extension of the family and may provide companionship lacking in the youth's home environment. Family dysfunction and lack of school / community connections usually perpetuates the attractiveness of the gang culture.

Financial Benefits – Some youth are lured into gang involvement simply because of the possibility of financial gain. Many gangs make money through drug sales, prostitution, extortion, thefts, robberies, and trafficking of illegal bootlegs (music / movies).

Intimidation – Some members are forced into joining by their peer group. Intimidation techniques range from extorting lunch money to physical beatings. If a particular violent gang is in the recruitment process, the tactics used by the gang can be extremely violent, even to the point of murdering a non-member to coerce others into joining the gang.



Signs of Youth Gang Involvement

Early identification of gang-related behavior is critical. Specific patterns of anti-social and counterproductive behavior can signal a willingness to associate with known street gangs. Concerned and responsible adults in the community who care about the safety and future of young adults can impact youth in a positive way by recognizing these negative gang behaviors and redirecting individual youth towards a safer and wiser lifestyle choice.

Some typical signs of gang involvement include:

- Skips school or misses work often
- Exhibits significant drop in school achievements
- Shows a strong disrespect for authority
- Displays significant change in attitude
- Spends time with negative peer group
- Desires a lot of privacy and time away from the family
- Refuses to take part in family activities
- Stays out later than usual
- Comes home with unexplained injuries, cuts, and bruises
- Drinks alcohol and/or uses other drugs
- Has more money than normal – along with other possessions





We Can All Be Part Of The Solution

In order to make a difference, it is important for the community to mobilize and support efforts and intervene in the lives of youth who may be negatively impacted by the gang culture. Youth who are involved or at-risk of involvement are still impressionable youth, but with redeeming qualities. With the correct intervention, youth can be steered back on to the right track.

What Can Parents Do?

Be a good role model.

Emphasize strong family values, including respect and responsibility.

Be consistent about discipline. Establish clear limits and rules.

Be aware of changes in your child's behavior, declining grades, dress / appearance, or truancy.

Get to know your child's friends and know how they spend their free time.

Communicate with the parents of friends.

Support your child in the schoolwork and special interests.

Provide the tools and equipment for quality learning and positive recreation.

Praise your child's good work and stress education.

Talk with children early and regularly about gangs, alcohol / drugs, violence, and other at-risk behavior. Set rules that are non-negotiable.

Establish clear guidelines and limits for your children's behavior and activities.

Be aware of and do not permit gang identifiers.

Eliminate youth access to weapons.

Demand accountability for money and clothes.



What Can Schools / Community Do?

Identify schools as neutral ground and adopt a zero tolerance policy for gang activity or behavior such as sagging, headgear, bandannas, hand signs and graffiti.

Utilize Street Gang Outreach workers as a liaison to the community and gang involved youth.

Establish programs that build social competencies (i.e., mentoring, conflict management).

Train school personnel in gang identification.

Establish policies and procedures that distinguish between misbehavior and criminal acts.

Establish policies and procedures that reflect firm, fair and consistent treatment for all students.

Create a mechanism for mediation of youth conflicts.

Get involved in programs that are designed to help our youth.

Establish cooperative relationships with law enforcement and social service personnel.

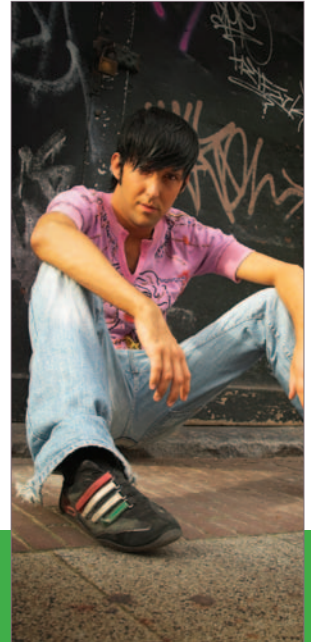
Communicate suspected gang involvement and activity to administration and / or law enforcement agencies.

Remove graffiti as soon as possible after taking pictures and notifying law enforcement.

Incorporate gang issues into classroom discussion and lessons - include decision-making, rights and responsibilities, consequences, and problem-solving skills.

Call on law enforcement to speak to your neighborhood associations, businesses, and other civic groups about what you can do to help.

Once warning signs become evident, use immediate intervention and counseling to prevent further participation.





For More Information:

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www.cisnc.org

Additional Resources

Helping America's Youth

www.helpingamericayouth.gov

National Criminal Justice Reference Service

www.ncjrs.gov

Addressing Community Gang Problems:

A Model for Problem Solving

Bureau of Justice Assistance

www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA

A Comprehensive Response to America's Youth Gang Problem

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

www.ojjdp.org

National Institute of Justice

www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij

National Gang Crime Research Center

www.ngcrc.com

