



## **Inquiry Response**

### **Principals' Partnership**

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## **Resource Brief: Gangs**

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After a period of decline, gang membership and gang activity are on the increase in the United States. Recent Department of Justice figures indicate that there are currently over 26,000 gangs involving over 800,000 members active in virtually every community in the nation. No longer territorial, gang activity extends from the most impoverished and blighted communities to the most affluent suburbs and isolated rural areas.

Beyond engagement in illegal activity, and the economic rewards that brings, gangs provide a sense of power, belonging and recognition for their members. The fastest growth in gang membership is among middle level youngsters, a group that has changed its status from gang "wannabees" to "gonnabees."

The Principals' Partnership is pleased to bring you this resource unit on gangs and gang activity in school. This resource unit will provide you with information, tools and links on these topics:

- The extent and nature of gang activity in communities and schools.
- Strategies for dealing with gangs in schools and communities.
- Strategies for discouraging gang membership.
- Ways to curtail gangs and gang activity in and around the school community.
- How schools, parents, the police and juvenile justice officials can form partnerships to control gang membership and activity in your community.

Gangs and gang membership are complex topics and a large number of private foundations, government agencies, schools and law enforcement agencies are working on the problem. This resource brief provides useful information and links to many of these groups. It is organized so you can move quickly to the information you need in your own school or community situation.

If you want a **quick overview** of the topic, check out the "Most Frequently Questions Regarding Gangs" provided by the National Youth Gang Consortium (<http://www.iir.com/nygc/faq.htm>). See also the "Ten Most Frequently Asked Questions about Gangs" from the Hillsborough County (FL) Sheriff's Department at the end of this Resource Brief.

Be sure to check out all of these topics for information and strategies that may be useful in your setting.

- Gangs: is there a problem?
- Is there a problem in our community?
- What are gangs and how do they operate?
- How can we prevent or respond to gang activity?



- What other resources are available?

## **Gangs: Is There a Problem?**

According to U.S. Justice Department Statistics, there are over 26,000 gangs active in American communities. No community is immune from either the presence or the effects of gang activity in its area.

More important than their presence, though, the cost of gang violence is high both in economic and human terms. Policing costs are higher in areas with gang activity, largely because more felonies are committed in these communities.

The intimidation of rival gang members and non-members in schools disrupts the educational process and undermines effective school discipline and safety.

Tragically, gang violence has also resulted in dramatic increases in injuries and deaths among teenagers and young adults, many of whom are innocent victims of gang violence in their neighborhoods.

Check out these resources for vivid and comprehensive descriptions of the high cost of gang activity and gang violence.

National Youth Gang Survey <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/ojjdp/fs200020.pdf>

This link takes you to a succinct, non-technical synopsis of the most recent comprehensive study from the National Criminal Justice Research Service. This report provides the baseline data for most federal, state and local programs and policies regarding gangs. It provides data by state, region and nation.

## **Is There a Problem in Our Community?**

While no community is immune from gangs, obviously, there are vast differences across communities in the level of gang activity, violence and crime. Most gang experts agree on a number of indicators of gang violence and activity.

### **Warning Signs for Youth in Trouble**

Recognizing early warning signs for youth in trouble help students resist serious involvement in undesirable activity, including joining gangs. Look for early warning signs of kids in difficulty:

Rumors or reliable information that a youth has not been home for several nights.

Evidence of increased substance abuse.

Abrupt changes in personality and behavior.

Newly acquired and unexplained "wealth" often showered on or shared with peers (anything from sharing bags of candy with young children to a flurry of extravagant spending by older youth).



Requests to borrow money.

Young people "hanging around" an adult as if interested in conversation, but being unable to discuss the problem.

Evidence of mental or physical abuse.

A change in dress style, especially one which applies to a few (i.e., wearing of a color, style or item of clothing, a particular hair style or some curious symbols of identification).

## **Warning Signs for Gang Involvement**

The Ventura County (California) Sheriff's Department has 15 criteria for identifying gang membership or participation. These include:

Wearing gang tattoos.

Wearing gang garb that could include color or type of clothing, specific head coverings, or methods of grooming or adornment.

Displaying gang markings or slogans on personal property or clothing.

Possessing literature that indicates gang membership.

Admitting gang membership.

Being arrested with known gang members.

Attending functions sponsored by gangs or known gang members.

Obtaining information from a reliable informant.

Getting statements from relatives about gang membership.

Receiving information from other law enforcement agencies that a youth is a gang member.

Exhibiting behavior fitting police profiles of gang-related drug dealing.

Being stopped by police in company of known gang member.

Loitering, riding or meeting with a gang member.

Selling or distributing drugs for a known gang member.

Helping a known gang member commit a crime.

One of these characteristics will lead authorities to consider a youth a gang wannabe or hanger-on. Two of these will result in the youth being labeled an associate gang member; displaying five or more will cause police to label youth as a hard-core gang member.

## **Are there gangs in your neighborhood or school?**

The National School Safety Council has identified indicators of gang-style activity. This tool helps communities overcome denial and focus on gang activity in the vicinity of their schools. Each "yes" answer scores the number of points listed next to the question.



Do you have graffiti on or near your campus? (5)

Do you have crossed-out (but not painted out) graffiti on or near campus? (10)

Do your students wear colors, jewelry, clothing, flash hand signals or display other behavior that may be gang related? (10)

Are drugs available near your school? (5)

Has there been a significant increase in the number of physical confrontations/stare-downs within the past twelve months in and around your school? (5)

Is there an increasing presence of weapons in your community? (10)

Are beepers, pagers and cellular phones used by your students? (10)

Has there been a drive-by shooting or other gang-style violence at or around your school? (15)

Have you had a "show by" display of weapons at or around your school? (10)

Is the truancy rate in your school increasing? (5)

Are there increasing numbers of racial incidents in your community or school? (5)

Is there a history of gangs in your community? (10)

Is there an increasing number of informal "social groups" with unusual names, like the "Woodland Heights Posse," "Rip Off and Rule," "Females Simply Chillin" or "Kappa Phi Nasty.?" (15)

The School Safety Council suggest that point values should be totaled and used as a gross estimate of the likelihood of gang activity in the area. The following scores indicate a need for a school security review: 0-15, no significant gang problem (unless you have one 15 point score); 20-40, an emerging gang problem; 45-60 points, a significant gang problem for which a gang prevention and intervention program should be developed; 65 point or higher, an acute gang problem that merits a total gang prevention, intervention and suppression program.

For more information about these characteristics and how to recognize them in your community, check out these helpful sites.

This site offers an introduction to the signs and symbols displayed by gangs either on their clothing, personal possessions or public places. There is quite a bit of variation across regions and ethnic groups, but these basic symbols will help you identify similar signs in your own community.

**Gang Hand Signs** [http://www.knowgangs.com/gang\\_resources/handsigns/menu\\_001.htm](http://www.knowgangs.com/gang_resources/handsigns/menu_001.htm)

Gang members used highly ritualized gestures and signs to identify and communicate with each other. Some of these hand signs are exhibited in this website.

**Graffiti Interpretation by Steve Nawojczyk** (<http://www.gangwar.com/dynamics.htm>)

According to this leading authority on gangs, graffiti is one of the first signs that gang activity is present in a neighborhood. This helpful website provide a useful guide that introduces you to gang graffiti.



**Gangs or Us** (<http://www.gangsorus.com/symbols.html>)

Robert Walker, gang specialist and expert witness, maintains this very informative site on gang symbols and culture.

**Additional help in interpreting Gang Symbols and Signs** can be found at the following websites:

<http://www.velocity.net/~acekc/gangsymbols.htm>

<http://www.polksheriff.org/library/gangs/identifying.html>

## **What are Gangs and How Do They Operate?**

Gangs mystify many educators because they seem to be such a negative force in the lives children and communities. Also, our perceptions of gangs and what they do may be shaped by unbalanced media reports, films and fiction, and outdated research from an earlier time.

Gangs are much more complicated than they may appear at first glance. They are not simply collections of violent thugs who prey on innocent communities on those occasions when they rouse themselves from a drugged stupor. Neither are they gallant advocates for impoverished communities in the tradition of Robin Hood. They are often very efficient criminal organizations who use advanced technology to manage criminal enterprises ranging from drugs to prostitution to protection rackets. Although random violence occurs, in many cases it is part of "doing business," either to protect another criminal activity from interference by a rival gang, or as a source of revenue, as in the case of robbery, to finance other operations. Despite this orientation, gangs remain dangerous and disruptive.

Why do kids join gangs? The rituals associated with gang membership are often ruthless, dangerous, or disfiguring. They include being "beaten into" the gang by a group of its members who administer a severe beating to the inductee. Sometimes, in the case of female gang members, the beating is replaced (or accompanied by) forced, often violent, sexual acts with gang leaders or designated members. Gang members often sport ritual scars from makeshift hot metal branding irons or knives that are designed to symbolize the permanence of their commitment. In all, gaining membership is usually a painful and brutal process.

Clearly, the inductees believe they get something from gang membership. Most gang experts agree that members develop a powerful sense of belonging and membership, a sense of power and protection, and enhanced self-esteem. Add to these powerful motivators the economic payoff of illegal activity, and it is understandable that young people, often convinced of their invulnerability under the best of circumstances, see gang membership as very desirable -- even necessary for survival.

Gang organization, activity and rituals make a fascinating and useful topic of study for educators who wish to understand how to reduce their presence and effects on schools. These sites provide an intriguing look into these mysterious organizations:



**Overview of Gangs by Steve Nowojczyk.** <http://www.gangwar.com/dynamics.htm>

This is a succinct and very readable summary of gangs and gang activity by one of the nation's leading experts on gangs and gang activity.

**East Orange (NJ) Police Department** (<http://www.eopd.com/gangs.htm>)

This helpful site provides a comprehensive but very readable resource on all aspects of gang membership and behavior.

**Gangs** <http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9216/gangs.htm>

This ERIC digest by Joan Gaustad.

**Youth Violence** (<http://www.library.umd.edu/TopicTracks/tt-youthviolence.html> - Selected electronic)

Selected electronic youth violence resources.

## **How Can We Prevent and Respond to Gang Activity?**

Gangs tend to appear in a community rather quickly, so prevention should be part of a general strategy of keeping youth productively engaged in activities that encourage healthy, law-abiding behaviors. Once gang activity has been detected, however, most experts advise quick and decisive action. Some strategies for prevention and intervention are given below.

**GRIPE (Gang Reduction through Intervention, Prevention, Education)**

<http://www.gripe4rkids.org/>

Designed for kids, this site offers great, easy to understand information and resources on gang prevention and intervention. It also has useful gang-education resources for kids.

**Gang Prevention and Intervention: A Study of Best Practices** <http://www.stedwards.edu/educ/eanes/ganghome.html>

As the name suggests, this is a compendium of best practices to fight gang activity in your community.

**Preventing Youth Violence in Schools: An Essay Collection**

<http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/youthdevelopment/DA7414.html>

From the Center for Urban Education, this helpful collection of essays focuses on gang intervention in all types of communities.

**Reducing and Preventing Youth Violence** <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/pedro12.html>

Pedro Noguera, a University of California professor, offers links to helpful and practical information on preventing youth violence. His references include descriptions of effective programs in California and elsewhere.



### **Gang Prevention Strategies: A Comparison**

<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/drugfree/v1takata.htm>

A comparative study of gang intervention strategies used in Wisconsin.

### **More Useful Resources**

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention <http://www.iir.com/nygc/> The US Department of Justice provides Federal leadership, through a comprehensive, coordinated approach, to prevent and control juvenile crime and improve the juvenile justice system. They offer the following helpful resources:

**National Youth Gang Center** <http://www.iir.com/nygc/>

A mother lode of resources, including funding opportunities for community based gang intervention programs.

**The Coroner's Report.** <http://www.gangwar.com/>

This grimly named site contains strategies and links to other helpful programs from Steve Nawojczyk, a consultant and one of the nation's leading authorities on gang culture and psychology.

**Suburban Gangs: The Affluent Rebels Update.** <http://www.ifpinc.com/Gangs/gangupdate.htm>

This abstract of a new book points out the growing phenomena of suburban gangs and suggests ways of intervening early to suppress gang activity at its outset.

### **What Follows:**

The *Ten Most Frequently Asked Questions about Gangs*,

Provided by the Hillsborough County (FL) Sheriff's Department,

Edited to include local information, may be a model for sharing information with your community.

## **The Ten Most Asked Questions About Gangs**

**Hillsborough County, Florida**

**Sheriff's Office: Gang Suppression Unit**

The Hillsborough County Gang suppression Unit was formed in January 1993, to help combat gangs and the violence associated with gang activity. The unit gathers and monitors intelligence on gangs, investigates gang related crimes and makes arrests on gang members, The unit offers assistance to social agencies, schools, and parents who have questions regarding gang membership. The unit also



offers gang awareness programs to educate the public on the signs of gang membership.

Since the beginning of the unit, we have fielded many questions regarding gangs and gang membership. This brochure contains the ten most commonly asked questions about gangs along with the answers to these questions. Awareness is a key to the solution of the gang problem and we hope this brochure will help you better understand and recognize the gang phenomena which currently exists in Hillsborough County.

### **WHAT IS A GANG?**

- A group of persons working toward unlawful or antisocial ends.
- The group normally takes on a common name.
- Normally commit crimes that increase the profit or reputation of the gang.
- Gangs also commit crimes out of revenge or retaliation.

### **WHAT CRITERIA ESTABLISHES GANG MEMBERSHIP?**

Many states have established criteria for gang membership. The reason for strict criteria is to ensure that persons who are not gang members are not inadvertently entered into the gang files. Documentation that will stand up in court must exist in order to place a member's name in gang files. Some of the criteria for the State of Florida follow:

- Admits his or her gang membership in a known gang.
- Has tattoos, wears or possesses clothing and/or paraphernalia that is only associated with a specific gang.
- Associates with members of a street gang on several occasions.
- Commits a gang related crime with known gang members.

### **WHERE ARE THE AREAS OF HIGH GANG ACTIVITY LOCATED?**

Gangs today are extremely mobile and are not turf oriented as in the past. There is no neighborhood completely free of gang members or gang activity. Residents should be aware of the following signs that might indicate gang activity.

- Increase in graffiti in the neighborhood.
- Increase in crime, especially violent crime.
- Increase in the number of groups of unknown people loitering in the neighborhood, especially those who fit the description of gang membership in this report.
- Increase in suspected narcotics activity.

### **AS A PARENT, WHAT WARNING SIGNS OF GANG MEMBERSHIP SHOULD I BE AWARE OF?**

- Change in attitude to include violent reactions, disruptive behavior, dislike of and refusal to submit to authority (parents, school, and police).
- Increased or abnormal secretiveness regarding whereabouts and activities.
- Change in friends; does not bring friends home.



- School attendance becomes sporadic and grades begin to decline.
- Change in clothing selection such as style, color, or type. Friends or associates with similar dress. Clothing such as hats and t-shirts, may be altered with gang writings.
- Increase in gang type graffiti on school books, notebooks, or other papers. This may also be found on bedroom walls or other locations in the room. May mark this graffiti on themselves in the form of tattoos.
- Receives calls from people who refuse to identify themselves or who identify themselves with a nickname only. Caller may also refer to your son or daughter by a nickname.
- Uses gang related hand signs as a form of communication.

### **DO CERTAIN TYPES OF CLOTHING INDICATE GANG MEMBERSHIP?**

Clothing alone may not be an indicator of gang membership. Parents must look beyond the clothing and determine why it is being worn. Parents should be aware of the following attitudes:

- If athletic team clothing is being worn, is the subject a sports fan?
- Are all his/her friends wearing exactly the same style, type, or color of clothing?

Keeping in mind the attitudes listed above, the following clothing may be indicators of gang membership:

- Exclusively wearing red, blue, or black clothing.
- Wearing clothing that is altered by lettering or numbering indicating gang name, moniker, or other gang insignia.
- Wearing athletic clothing (keeping in mind the list of attitudes above). For instance, the wearing of a Raiders coat in itself may not be a sign of gang membership, but if it is being worn in the middle of the summer there may be a purpose other than warmth.
- Wearing hats that have been altered.

### **HOW DO I TELL IF GRAFFITI IS GANG RELATED, AND WHAT DO I DO IF I SPOT IT IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD?**

Much graffiti is not gang related, but is linked to a group referred to as "taggers". Normally, these are young teenagers who consider themselves street artists and take pride in putting their moniker (nickname) on a wall, sign, sidewalk, or other area as many times as they can until they are apprehended. Gang graffiti is normally easy to read, whereas tagger graffiti uses symbols and letters that are difficult to read. Gang graffiti is distinguished as follows:

- Normally done in block style letters,
- May be done in the gang color (blue or red).
- May contain a moniker list (nicknames of the members of the gang.)



- Done in areas where gang activity is prevalent.

If you suspect gang graffiti in your neighborhood or have any questions about graffiti, call the Hillsborough County Sheriffs Office Gang Suppression Unit at 247-8740. Questions regarding the removal of graffiti can be answered by the Gang Suppression Unit.

Home or business owners often ask if it is safe to remove graffiti from the walls of their homes or businesses. In most cases it is safe to remove this graffiti as long as it is not done selectively. Remove all the graffiti so that the gang members do not feel their particular gang is being "picked on".

#### **WHO IS CONSIDERED HIGH RISK FOR ENTRY INTO STREET GANGS?**

- Youth living in areas of high gang activity.
- Youth from dysfunctional, abusive, or drug-affected families.
- Youth from lower socio-economic settings.
- Youth from homes where they are left to fend for themselves most of the time. Youth whose parents who do not exercise parental control and responsibilities.
- Youth who are looking for a sense of belonging which they do not get at home or in school.
- Youth with low self-esteem. Youth are not given the proper praise for accomplishments at home or in school. It is guaranteed that members will receive praise and esteem from other gang members.

#### **WHAT SHOULD MY SON OR DAUGHTER DO IF CONFRONTED BY A STREET GANG MEMBER?**

In most instances, gang members will confront subjects because the gang member may feel the teenager is a member of a rival gang. The majority of the time gang members are looking for rival gang members. As long as your son or daughter is not portraying the gang image, the chances of confrontation are minimal. In the event of a confrontation, the teen should let the gang member know he or she is not involved in gangs and is not a member of any street gang. In most instances the gang member will then break off the confrontation. The following precautions should be taken:

- Do not dress or act in any manner that might suggest gang membership.
- Be aware of areas known for gang activity and avoid them as much as possible.
- Associate with friends who are not involved in gangs and do not portray the gang image.
- Do not be intimidated into claiming gang membership or acting the part of a gang member. For instance, if flashed a gang sign, don't be intimidated into flashing the sign back. It may be a play on the part of the gang member to get you to claim gang membership.



- If the purpose of the confrontation is purely for robbery or any other crime, comply with the member's demand, especially if he or she is armed. It is better to lose property than your life. Be sure to report the incident to the police as soon as possible.

### **WHAT ARE THE SOLUTIONS FOR THE CURRENT GANG SITUATION?**

- Police are not the solution, only a part of the solution.
- Intervention programs, education, prevention programs, along with the police department are all necessary elements of the solution.
- It is easier to prevent young people from entering a gang than it is to get them out of the gang once they are in.
- It often becomes necessary for law enforcement to get involved. Arresting and jailing gang members is not a permanent solution to the gang situation. It provides only a temporary relief by getting the gang member off the street.
- Parents and teachers must be involved in the lives of children.
- Parents and teachers must give their children a sense of belonging and build up their self-esteem by praising them for good accomplishments. Adults must be there for their children, especially in their times of need.
- Keep young people busy in activities such as school, community, and church. By keeping them busy in such activities, young people YAI not have time to be involved in gangs,

We hope this information will assist you in better understanding gangs and gang members. We have attempted to answer the ten most commonly asked questions regarding gangs, There is currently a great deal of attention given to the gang problem in our county and when a county has over 25 gangs and 500 gang members, it is a problem that needs constant attention. However, it is important to keep the gang situation in perspective. Only half of one percent of our county's population is involved in gang activities. (This figure would be higher among our youth; perhaps five percent.) We cannot forget about the 99 percent of our population who are not involved with gangs. It seems that our society today like to dwell on the negative and forget that there is a lot of good being accomplished. Let's keep a positive outlook and work together as a community to put a stop to the gangs and their violent activities.

By: Mike Muir, Maine Center for Meaningful Engaged Learning

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