

Gang Information for Parents

What Is A Gang?

Gangs can generally be identified by their formal organizational structure; identifiable leadership (but not always); territoriality; recurrent interaction; and, most consistently, involvement in serious, criminal and/or violent behavior. Gangs can be distinguished from Groups primarily by their:

- Exclusivity - members cut themselves off from non members;
- Criminal and antisocial behavior;
- Violent rivalries with other gangs; and
- Loyalty that overrides ethics or common sense — the gang comes first.

Gangs around the U.S.

A 1995 survey found over 23,000 gangs and almost 665,000 gang members throughout the U.S. Many primarily consist of members of one race, but others are becoming multi-ethnic. By the 1970's about 80% of gang members were either African American or Hispanic. Asian gangs have become more prominent since then, and girls are joining too. The greatest constant has been ethnic composition (recently migrated), and lower class social standing.

The gang problem appears to be increasing, notably in the schools, with the majority of members in the age 12 - 25 bracket. The peak age is around 17. Cities with new gang problems report up to 90% are minors; cities such as Chicago, with long standing gang problems, report up to 74% adult membership. Street gang patterns reflect not only chronic social problems associated with race, social class and immigration, but economic conditions, weapons availability, drug markets and turf issues as well.

Why Do Kids Join Gangs?

Commonly cited reasons: surrogate family (perception that affection, affirmation, understanding as well as physical and emotional support can be found in gangs, and is absent at home); failure in mainstream society's challenges (i.e., school, sports, peer relationships); identity, recognition and respect (confusing fear with respect, substituting gang membership for individual identity); protection; intimidation or peer pressure; money; glamour/role models; excitement and rebellion; and/or a family history of gang membership.

Gangs vs. Groups: Knowing the Difference

Four primary differences:

- **Exclusivity.** Gangs tend to be exclusive: members have little interest in associating with non-members. Gang involved young people cut themselves off from the influence of non-involved friends and family members.

- **Crime.** Activity and attitudes are frequently criminal and antisocial in nature. Gang crime originates for several reasons including profit, rivalries, building reputation, and “Jumping In” rituals for new members.
- **Rivalries.** Important points to understand about gang rivalries include the following:

Anyone associated with a gang may be in danger from either known or unknown rivals.

Rivalries are traditional and are rarely questioned or evaluated.

They tend to be impersonal: Random retaliatory acts against a convenient victim or “set” are at least as common as acts which accurately identify and target the particular individual who committed the precipitating insult or offense.

Families and friends of members are seriously at risk of harm, as rivals do not consider their well being.

Rivals don’t necessarily cease to represent a serious danger just because an individual quits the gang.

Individual members have no control over the perceptions or actions of rivals. Nor do they have control over - or often have an awareness of - events that may lead to violence where they may be the victim.

- **Loyalty**

Expectations of continued participation once an individual is “Jumped In,” involvement in the activities which the gang as a whole feels are desirable, regardless of the individual member’s personal feeling about such activities.

As a means of establishing loyalty and demonstrating their willingness to suffer or risk physical or legal consequences, new members generally must submit to “Jumping In,” and initiatory activity determined by the “set” which is usually violent, dangerous and/or illegal. In many “sets,” members risk serious consequences, including death, if they attempt to leave.

Gang Mentality

The term “Gang Mentality” is commonly used when discussing gangs, but very little time has been spent describing exactly what that mentality consists of so that non-members can develop an understanding of its significance.

Here, the mentality has been broken into components. Understand, however, that in the real world the mentality is seamless. Each component feeds into, and is reinforced, by the others, and becomes the basis for how gang involved individuals interpret and respond to the events in their lives.

Also understand that it is not necessary to be a fully recognized member to be significantly influenced by the elements of this mentality: Non-members who associate with gang involved individuals — friends, siblings, even parents — begin to embrace this mentality and incorporate it into their response to life situations.

- **Being Respected.** The central theme in any gang involved individual's life is being "respected" by his or her Homies, rivals, and non-members. Being "respected" is essentially being feared, and is based upon one's reputation for being volatile and dangerous. A willingness to "do or die for the set" may also serve to develop this reputation. Many members, especially young, immature ones, will stop at nothing to establish or preserve their reputation.
- **Disrespect for Rivals.** One way in which respect is gained is through demonstrating disrespect, disdain, and lack of fear of rivals. Making derogatory graffiti or defacing that of rivals, throwing hand signs at them, "Maddogging" (hard stare), cruising their neighborhood, assaulting them, talking poorly about them, etc., are all ways of showing disrespect. The more an individual demonstrates this attitude, the more recognized he or she will be within their own "set."
- **No Insult Goes Unanswered.** No act of disrespect, no matter how small, goes without a response. The response, if not immediate, will stack up, fuel animosity, and eventually lead to an antagonistic or violent act toward an individual or "set" as a whole.

The combination of these first three elements of gang mentality serve to set in motion the cycle of rival violence that accompanies gang presence within a community.

- **Consequences as a Rite of Passage.** Seasoned gang members understand that gang life involves grief and suffering. As a result, young members, while taken as part of the "set" and cared for, are often not fully recognized and given status as mature gangsters until they have suffered the contingencies of gang life, e.g., physical harm, jail or prison, loss of loved ones through violence, etc.

The impact of this is significant: Newly initiated members or peripheral associates desiring fuller recognition may be inclined to engage in activities, understanding in advance the potential for painful consequences, as a way of attaining greater acceptance and increased status within the gang.

- **Problems Handled from Within.** Disputes, or "Beefs," are generally handled without requesting, or even accepting, input or involvement from police or the legal system. Rivals will often refuse to testify against each other, for participation in the legal system at any level is seen as undesirable.
- **Disregard for the Rights of Non-Members.** This may seem self-evident; however, the important point is to understand that to show empathy for non-members or victims is ruinous to an individual member's reputation. In private this may be different, but in public, expressions of empathy are considered weak and not tolerated.

Gang Culture: Continuum of Mentality and Activity

The following continuum provides some rough guidelines to assist in determining the level of gang involvement and seriousness of the activities of an individual or "set." Remember, however, there is nothing rigid or airtight about this, it is only a tool for general assessment.

- **Level One**

Emulating, experimenting with gang image.
 Focus on socialization: belonging, identity.
 Infrequent, opportunistic property crime, tagging.
 Bullying.
 Free to cease activity without serious consequences.

No active rivalries (may, however, be victimized by other, more seriously involved gangs).

A word of caution: The typical response at this phase is to minimize the importance of these early gang-like behaviors and attitudes because “They’re only Wannabes. *Nothing could be more destructive and potentially dangerous!*”

If an individual is involved or a group has formed at this level, address it now and address it aggressively! It’s the only significant opportunity you will have to be able to meaningfully address the needs, attitudes,, and behaviors until much further down the road, by which time they will have caused themselves and others much distress and loss.

- **Level Two**

- Identity crystallizing around membership in the “set.”
- Greater frequency of drug/alcohol usage.
- More serious antisocial behavior: intimidation, vandalism, etc.
- Heightened criminal activity: extortion, theft, burglary.
- Increased disruption at home and school.
- Leaving may result in threats and/or consequences.
- Fledgling rivalries: Posturing, making/defacing graffiti, assaults.
- Young people at this phase may express concern about going out with backup from other members of the “set” because of potential problems with rivals.
- They may also express concern about severing ties with the “set” because of concerns about physical harm being done to them by fellow members.

- **Level Three**

- Exclusive relationships with set: membership is core identity.
- Drug use may be at center of socialization.
- Established criminal orientation: Person and/or property crimes.
- May begin turf claiming (controlling territory).
- Likely to be out of school: expelled, dropped out.
- Criminal history likely, possible incarceration.
- Leaving brings serious consequences, may not be an option.
- Established, violent rivalries involving weapons.

- **Level Four**

- Departure from non-gang society.
- Criminal identity: A “Gangster”
- Incarceration accepted as an aspect of gang lifestyle.
- May want to leave gang life.
- Leaving a gang is not generally an option; attempts may result in death.
- “At War” mentality with rivals and police; injury to innocents acceptable.

This is the phase that people in cities with recently emerging gangs associate with as a “gang problem.” The reality is, however, that each of these phases represents a “gang problem,” just of varying degree.

The simple truth, based on history over the past twenty years in the United States, is that if a community waits until level three and four activity is present, there is virtually nothing they will be able to do to bring the problem under control. Dealing with the problem while it is observable at the earliest possible stage is the only way to respond.

Why Teens and Preteens Join Gangs

For many of today's youth, gangs represent the way in which adolescent frustration, searching, and rebellion are expressed. In a recent nationwide survey of gang involved youth, seventy percent acknowledged that they were active prior to the age of fourteen. Commonly cited reasons include:

- **Surrogate Family.** Perception that affection, affirmation, and/or understanding are lacking at home. Gangs provide structure and camaraderie, a tremendous sense of bonding and "family."
- **Support.** A place to turn in times of need and crisis.
- **Failing at life's challenges.** Able to experience success in the gang versus failure in other areas of life, e.g., school, peer relationships, sports, etc.
- **Identity, Recognition and Respect.** Compensate for social/personality deficits or lack of self-esteem; gain power.
- **Protection.** "Do or be done to" by other gangs/individuals.
- **Intimidation or peer pressure.** Pressured by friends to join.
- **Money.** Bleak employment prospects, lack of legal alternatives.
- **Glamour.** Media images have made gang lifestyle appealing.
- **Family History.** Siblings, parents, grandparents are/were in gangs.
- **Role Models.** Who's got the reputation, money, etc. Who are the youth's media role models?
- **Excitement.** More interesting and exciting than other options.

Risk Factors

Which young people are at risk of becoming involved with gangs? How can you identify those young people prior to early involvement and intervene before intrigue begins?

In another national survey of approximately 4,000 currently incarcerated juveniles, the following statistics which reveal risk factors for gang involvement were identified. The column on the left represents incarcerated youth who are involved with gangs, while the column on the right represents incarcerated youth who are *not* gang involved.

Risk Factors	Gang Involved	Non-Gang Involved
Approached about Joining	67.2%	18.5%
Friends in Gangs	94.1%	41.8%
Family in Gangs	57.6%	23.0%
Alcohol/Drug History	83.0%	35.0%
Criminal History	74.6%	25.5%
School Trouble	89.4%	39.6%

Clearly, those young people who had the opportunity to join or with the greatest degree of exposure to gangs were at most significant risk. Beyond that, history with drugs and alcohol, school trouble, or a previous criminal history were the most significant indicators.

At current address less than 12 months: 35.6% 14.5%

Age at Time of Involvement: <14 >14

Male 73.9% 26.1%

Female 68.0% 32.0%

Profile of a Gang Involved Youth

Single parent of unstable family structure provide one of the most reliable predictors of gang involvement. *Keep in mind, however, that while the majority of gang members are from single parent homes, very few young people from single parent homes actually end up involved with gangs.* Research indicates that it is the lack of structure and bonding with adult role models of the same sex in some single parent homes that underlies movement towards gangs, not single parent households themselves.

In addition, the following factors have been shown to be significant.

- Exposure to gangs through neighborhood, friends, or family; gangs are part of the social environment.
- Minimal or overly harsh structure and discipline.
- Stressful relationships with peers, siblings, parents.
- Poor communication skills.
- Inability to feel empathy.
- Socially isolated, unskilled (peers may be similar).
- Limited experience with success.
- No expression of emotion or vents frustration and anger onto weaker people/animals.
- History of physical/sexual abuse and/or substance abusing/criminally oriented adult role models.
- Easily bored; reliant on constant, external stimuli.
- May be of average/above average intelligence.
- May or may not do well in school.
- An additional factor, which may in fact be the most significant of all, is the perceived absence of an adult figure that is available in a time of crisis.

What to Watch for: Indicators of Gang Interest/Affiliation

With the exception of bona fide gang tattoos, there are few, if any, single indicators which can be taken as airtight guarantees that a particular young person is involved in gang activity. The following list can serve as a guide. However, if several of these become observable, they should serve as a red flag, and professional intervention should be sought.

- Extreme loyalty/exclusivity to core group of friends.
- Secretiveness/defensiveness about activities with friends.
- Disengagement from family.
- Loss of interest in normal activities and interests.
- Delinquency issues: problems with school, police, etc.
- Out of control behavior: curfew, runaway, defiant.
- Use of new, unfamiliar slang.
- Dress: Sagging (baggy pants), colors (generally red or blue), team jackets.
- Tattoos/Drawing on self or clothing.
- Graffiti on clothing/notebooks/baseball caps/bedroom walls and furniture.
- Sudden appearance of unexplained money/possessions.
- Flashing hand signs (hand gestures) to friends (or even when alone).
- Use of new nickname, referring to friends by nickname.
- New interest in “Gangsta” rap music (not soft Rap).

- Initial onset of drug and alcohol use, or increased usage, is often seen in conjunction with gang involvement.

How Do Gangs Develop?

Gangs evolve through three stages:

- **Stage 1 — pre-involvement.** Intrigued by gang culture, based on incomplete or fantasy information; trying on the image. The focus is socialization, establishing a sense of belonging or identity. Common actions include infrequent, opportunistic property crime, tagging and bullying. As involvement progresses, level two characteristics are evident: identity crystallizing around set membership; increased drug/alcohol use; increased criminal activity; increased disruptive behavior and fledgling rivalries reflected in posturing, making/defacing graffiti and assaults.
- **Stage 2 — active involvement.** Youth formally join a “set,” commonly by being “jumped in,” which means submitting to a ritual beating. Behavioral traits reach level two by now; it is difficult to quit the gang. They progress to level three traits: exclusive relationship with the set, and set as core identity; significant drug use; criminal orientation; claiming turf; expelled or dropped out of school; established, violent rivalries, criminal history or incarceration. Leaving at this point probably involves physical harm. At level four they have abandoned non-gang society; see themselves as gangsters, and accept incarceration as part of the lifestyle.
- **Stage 3 — looking for a way out.** Members recognize the gang lifestyle as a mean-spirited dead-end. Obstacles to escape include: risk of violence as part of leaving (*jumping out* may involve serious injury or death); gang rivals; criminal records; lack of a non-gang support system; poor relationship/communication skills; drug dependence; lack of job skills prospects, or education.

What Can Communities Do To Combat Gangs?

Recognize the presence of gangs, and the reality that gangs can move from a minor problem to a full scale crisis in less than five years; mobilize and coordinate prevention, intervention and suppression resources; clarify definitions, targets and strategies; mobilize the community (rated most effective in emerging gang problem cities); promote social and economic opportunities, (identified by some researchers as the most effective strategy) including special school, training and job programs (especially critical for older gangsters who want to leave gangs); social intervention (outreach geared toward mainstreaming fringe youth); gang suppression (formal and informal social control; only rated effective when combined with other strategies); and organizational change and development (as the risk escalates, responses should keep pace).

A community has the greatest success in combating gangs when preventive measures are aggressively instituted before youth move beyond stage one. Stage two requires creative intervention measures. However, in no community where gangs have established firm roots have gangs ever been eradicated.

How to Discourage Your Children from Joining Gangs

- Discourage your children from hanging around with gang members. Meet your children’s friends. Find out whom they are, what influence they have over your children, and how they and your children spend their free time. If your children choose friends that are

mostly from gangs, then your children are probably involved or will become involved in one also.

- Occupy your children's free time. Give them responsibilities at home. Get them involved in after school sports, city recreation, or church activities.
- Participate in the community. Know your neighbors. Organize or join Neighborhood Watch groups. Discourage gangs from hanging around your neighborhood. Remove graffiti from around your home. Attend community functions. Teach your children civic pride.
- Be a good example. Become an active, not passive, parent.
- Learn alternatives to gang membership; but, most importantly, talk to your kids.

Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.)

G.R.E.A.T. stands for Gang Resistance Education and Training. It is a program taught to youth during school class periods. The program teaches students the dangers of youth gangs and methods of avoiding them.

G.R.E.A.T. began in 1991 by police departments in the Phoenix area of Arizona. The program is supported by the A.T.F. and Federal Law Enforcement Training Center and has gained national attention. Hundreds of law enforcement agencies throughout the nation have implemented this program. It is estimated that 1½ million students have received the G.R.E.A.T. Program, to date.

The ultimate goal of G.R.E.A.T. is to reduce gang involvement, thereby reducing violent behavior among the nation's youth. G.R.E.A.T. helps youth become responsible members of their communities by setting goals, resisting the pressure to join gangs, learning how to resolve conflict without violence and understanding the negative ramifications of gang involvement. To accomplish this, the program has four main components: a 7th and 8th grade curriculum, 5th and 6th grade session, 3rd and 4th grade session, and a summer recreation/education program.

G.R.E.A.T. has a National Policy Board comprised of law enforcement administrators and the directors of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center at Glynco, Georgia. Information about G.R.E.A.T. can be obtained from the Internet website at:

<http://www.atf.treas.gov/great/great.htm>

Information about G.R.E.A.T. can also be obtained by calling ATF at (800) 726-7070 or (202) 565-4560.

- **G.R.E.A.T. Curriculum**

- 3 **Middle School Curriculum**

- These nine lessons are designed to be taught in 45 minute blocks for 9 consecutive weeks at the 7th/8th grade level.**

- **Lesson 1: Introduction Lesson**

- G.R.E.A.T. students become acquainted with the program and the police officer.

- **Lesson 2: Crime/Victims and Your Rights**

- G.R.E.A.T. officers discuss the impact crime has on victims and neighborhoods.

- **Lesson 3: Cultural Sensitivity/Prejudice**

G.R.E.A.T. students examine their own cultural differences and how they impact the community. They also discuss the harmful behaviors resulting from prejudice.

– **Lesson 4A: Conflict Resolution (Discussion)**

G.R.E.A.T. students learn a six-step process enabling them to resolve conflicts without using violence.

– **Lesson 4B: Conflict Resolution (Practical Exercises)**

G.R.E.A.T. students apply the six-step conflict resolution model to real life situations.

– **Lesson 5: Meeting Basic Needs**

G.R.E.A.T. students are taught to become better equipped to meet their basic needs in a positive way.

– **Lesson 6: Drugs/Neighborhoods**

G.R.E.A.T. students discover how drugs and gangs interfere with the peaceful co-existence of a neighborhood.

– **Lesson 7: Responsibility**

G.R.E.A.T. students learn the diverse responsibilities of individuals within their community. Emphasis is on personal responsibility for one's behavior.

– **Lesson 8: Goal Setting**

Through role playing and discussion, G.R.E.A.T. officers show students the importance of setting goals in life and making appropriate choices.

3 **Fifth And Sixth Grade Curriculum**

These four lessons are designed to be taught in 45-minute blocks for 4 consecutive weeks.

– **Lesson 1A: Stop the Violence**

To familiarize students with the ramifications of violent behavior.

– **Lesson 1B: (Discussion)**

Group exercise concerning the results of violence.

– **Lesson 2A: Cultural Awareness (Discussion)**

To help students understand that cultural diversity is positive and leads to new opportunities of growth.

– **Lesson 2B: (Practical Exercises)**

Six group projects highlighting cultural awareness and respect for people's differences.

3 **Third and Fourth Grade Curriculum**

These four lessons are designed to be taught in 45-minute blocks for 4 consecutive weeks.

– **Lesson 1: What is a Gang?**

This lesson defines what a gang is and differentiates between a gang and a club.

– **Lesson 2: Families and Why They Are Special**

To help students understand that differences in families are what make people unique and special.

– **Lesson 3: My Future**

To help students understand the importance of setting goals.

– **Lesson 4: Do You Know Me?**

To help students develop good self esteem and gain an appreciation for the differences in their classmates.

3 **Summer Component**

An integral part of the G.R.E.A.T. Program is the follow-up summer project. The summer component is filled with classroom curriculum and extra-curricular activities which serve to reinforce the 9-week school program with cognitive, social, and self-esteem building opportunities.

The summer education and recreation program continues to build on the G.R.E.A.T. school-based program. Children enjoy recreational games, outings, and participation in community service projects. The goals for the G.R.E.A.T. summer component are:

- To provide opportunities for children to enhance both life and social skills
- To help make children aware of alternatives to gang involvement.
- To provide structure during the summer break.