

Youth Gangs: Going Beyond the Myths to Address a Critical Problem

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Day 1

The Lure of Gangs and the Consequences for Youth



Fueled by movies and media portrayals, a series of myths about gangs have emerged that obscure the deeper meaning and threats that gangs pose to young people. Below are some misperceptions about gangs that you may hear or have heard from school and community members in your role as a National Coordinator.

According to James C. (Buddy) Howell, Ph.D., a long-time gang researcher and former director of research and program development at the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, it is important to debunk the myths about gangs and focus on real problems that gangs pose, especially for schools.

Howell said "Communities overreact and attack the problem in the wrong way, there is an emphasis on trying to sweep them out of the area [through law enforcement]. When their roots are in the area, that's not likely to be effective. Instead, communities must analyze the problem and address the origins with prevention and early intervention. It's a harmful myth to just think you can drive gangs out of an area and that will be the end of it. It's not. They regenerate themselves."

Common Myths About Gangs

- ***Gangs are most exclusively composed of Latino or Blacks.*** In fact, many gangs are now hybrid with many ethnicities, and white gang members were the fastest growing segment of gangs in new gang problem localities in the mid-1990s. Gang members reflect the ethnic composition of their communities. If a gang develops in a rural, white community, its members most likely will be white.
- ***Gangs are mostly made of boys and young men, and girls are only part of the gang as hangers on or to service the young men.*** Many gangs have females with key roles. In some localities, girls represent between one-fourth and one-third of the current gang members.
- ***You can recognize gang members by the colors they wear or their***

tattoos. Unlike the gang members in “Colors,” who wore red-and-blue bandanas to signal their membership in their gang, many gang members today are much more circumspect about displaying their membership to outsiders, in part because many states have passed laws increasing the severity of penalties for offenses committed by gang members. It is not in their interest to advertise their gang affiliation.

- **All gangs are violent and deal drugs.** Some are, but others commit more low-level crimes or crimes that hurt primarily themselves, such as using illegal drugs.
- **Gangs are highly organized.** Again, some are but they are the exception. Many are about as organized as most teenagers and young adults are. “Look at the way most teenagers plan for the weekend,” Howell said. “They often don’t know what they’re going to do until they do it. How are they going to organize and manage a drug-dealing operation?”
- **Once in a gang, always in a gang.** Most youth who join gangs stay in for about a year. About 20 percent stay in for three years.
- **Youth are pressured by their peers into joining gangs.** In reality it is not as hard for adolescents to resist joining a gang as many people believe.
- **It is life-threatening for a gang member to leave a gang.** In most cases, a gang member can leave without being harmed.
- **Most gangs are exports from big cities like Los Angeles and Chicago and are part of a national spread from groups like the Bloods and the Crips.** Gangs are local and spring out of conditions in their communities.

Before moving on to the variety of ways in which schools and communities can prevent and address youth gang problems, it is first important to develop a shared understanding of this complicated subject -- particularly in light of the many myths that exist about youth gangs. In today’s materials, we will review answers to the following frequently asked questions:



- ◆ [What Are Youth Gangs?](#)
- ◆ [What Is the Status of Youth Gangs Today?](#)
- ◆ [How Many Youth Are Involved in Gangs?](#)
- ◆ [Why Do Youth Join Gangs?](#)
- ◆ [What Are Some Consequences of Gang Membership?](#)

What Are Youth Gangs?

Researchers and others have not been able to agree on a common definition of youth gangs, in part because each views a gang through a particular lens. Law enforcement tends to define gangs by more serious criminal behavior, while community workers and adolescents tend to adopt a broader definition of youth gangs. However, researchers generally agree that youth gangs have the following elements:

- ◆ A group of three or more members, usually between the ages of 12 and 24
- ◆ A gang name and some sense of identity, usually indicated by such symbols as a style of clothing, graffiti, and hand signs
- ◆ Some degree of permanence and organization
- ◆ Involvement in delinquent or criminal activity

Other researchers define gangs by the type of activity they engage in. According to Carl Taylor in *Addressing Community Gang Problems: A Practical Guide* (1994), gang characteristics can be grouped into three categories: corporate, territorial, and scavengers.

"**Corporate** gangs focus their attention on making money. There is a clearly defined division of labor, and the criminal activities [that] gang members engage in are committed almost exclusively for profit. **Territorial** gangs focus on possession of turf, and gang members are quick to use violence to secure or protect what belongs to the gang. While there is some level of organization in these gangs -- clearly defined leaders and particular objectives and goals of the gang -- it is less refined than in corporate gangs. Finally, **scavenger** gangs have very little organizational structure and gang members are motivated by a need to belong to a group. The crimes that gang members of this category perform are usually impulsive and often senseless. There are no objectives or goals for the gang, and the gang members tend to be low achievers who are prone to violent and erratic behavior."

Another way to look at gangs is according to their make-up or membership.

Click [here](#) for a description of gangs in California, some of which also exist in other parts of the country.



Gangs range from long-established ones in areas like Chicago and Los Angeles to newly emerging ones in cities like Seattle, Wash.; Rochester, N.Y.; and Denver, Colo. Researcher Joan Moore asserts that for a youth gang to be established, “conventional agencies of socialization -- families and schools -- must be ineffective and alienating, which means that conventional adult supervision is largely irrelevant.” Adolescents must also have a lot of free time to hang out and a place to do so, usually a neighborhood. There also “must be limited access to appealing conventional career lines -- also known as good adult jobs.”

The Continuum Perspective

Some researchers see membership in a gang as a trajectory in youth development that some adolescents follow. According to James C. Howell in *Preventing & Reducing Juvenile Delinquency: A Comprehensive Framework* (2003), “the most important point to keep in mind in any attempt to define youth gangs is that such groups are an integral feature of the experiences of young persons during adolescence. One way of viewing gangs is along an age-graded continuum of social and criminal groups that is anchored at one end by childhood play groups and at the other end by adult criminal organizations. The following groups (and more) are represented along this continuum:

- **Childhood play groups:** harmless groups of children that exist in every neighborhood
- **Troublesome youth groups:** youths who hang out together in shopping malls and other places and may be involved in minor forms of delinquency
- **Youth subculture groups:** groups with special interests such as “Goths,” “straight edgers,” and “anarchists” (Goths are not known for criminal involvement, but some members of other youth subcultures have histories of criminal activity; Arciaga, 2001)
- **Delinquent groups:** small clusters of friends who band together to commit delinquent acts such as burglaries
- **Taggers:** graffiti vandals (Taggers are often called gang members, but they typically do nothing more than engage in graffiti contests.)
- **School-based youth gangs:** groups of adolescents that may function as gangs only at school and may not be involved in delinquent activity, although most members are involved in such activity
- **Street-based youth gangs:** semi structured groups of adolescents and young adults who engage in delinquent and criminal behavior
- **Adult criminal organizations:** groups of adults that engage in criminal activity primarily for economic reasons"

What Is the Status of Youth Gangs Today?

The 1998 release of "Colors," mentioned in this event's homepage, coincided with an alarming rise in the number of youth gangs around the country. Between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, communities noted a startling increase in youth gangs. While Los Angeles and Chicago-based gangs generated the most media coverage, gangs reached from the inner cities to small towns and rural areas. The growth was particularly frightening because of the gangs' access to guns and cars, leading to the violent drive-by shootings widely portrayed in the media. According to James Howell, the growth in youth gangs during the 1980s and 1990s was typical of the ebb and flow of gangs in the past.

"The so-called spread of youth gangs has been attributed to the spread of Crips and Bloods from Los Angeles and other Chicago gangs across the country. That hardly ever happened," Howell said. "Instead the proliferation has mainly involved local imitation of the big city gangs. Gang investigators often see hybrid gangs with a mixture of racial, ethnic, and gender backgrounds. They are not as easy to classify and deal with."

Many communities reported the existence of gangs for the first time. These newer gangs were more difficult to classify than those of the past. The growth of the youth gang problem has steadied since the mid-1990s. Since 1996, the National Youth Gang Center, funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, has conducted a survey of law enforcement agencies about youth gang activity in their jurisdictions. Every city with a population of 250,000 or more has reported youth gang problems since the survey began. In 2002, 87 percent of cities with a population between 100,000 and 249,999 reported youth gang problems.

The survey found a decline in reported gang problems in smaller cities and rural counties. The 2002 survey also revealed that 38 percent of suburban county agencies, 27 percent of smaller city agencies, and 12 percent of responding rural county agencies reported youth gang problems. Larger cities and suburban counties accounted for about 85 percent of the estimated number of gang members in 2002. Researchers estimated that approximately 731,500 gang members and 21,500 gangs were active in the United States in 2002.



How Many Youth Are Involved in Gangs?

The national survey of law enforcement officials about gangs, while useful, does not paint the whole picture of youth gangs. Law enforcement concentrates on the most violent offenders and may not count younger members who are not committing the most serious crimes, said Arlen Egley, Jr., a research associate at the National Youth Gang Center, which compiles the annual survey. Law enforcement *tends* to concentrate on the most violent offenders or offenses, but

levels of gang-related violence vary dramatically across jurisdictions (see this [Bulletin](#) for further discussion). This is likely associated with the variation in reported age composition of documented gang members across jurisdictions. For example, larger-populated jurisdictions typically report a large majority of documented gang members are adults, whereas smaller-populated jurisdictions report most gang members are, on average, juvenile-aged. Police tend to report on male gang members, although female gang members commit crimes as well.

Up until recently law enforcement officials have viewed females as simply appendages of their boyfriends in a gang rather than full members. While some of the earliest research certainly was biased toward male gang membership, serious scholarly attention to female gang membership has been carried out for at least 20 years (see this [Bulletin](#) for further discussion). By way of contrast, just a decade ago a nationwide survey found that many law enforcement agencies did not as a matter of policy identify females as gang members. While this appears to have changed over the past decade -- that is, law enforcement is more likely to report documenting female gang members -- there is still the issue of under-documentation as males continue to make up, on average, 90 percent or better of the reported gang members.

Respondents to the The National Youth Gang Survey “likely underreport gang members who attend schools or about gangs that students report in and out of schools,” Howell said. “A small portion continue their activity into street gangs. School-related gangs are younger and not nearly as involved in violence.”

According to Howell, the prevalence of youth gang membership depends on the location, with areas that have had long-standing gang problems reporting higher percentages of youth involved in gangs.

However, a series of surveys in the past decade paint a picture of many students who either report attending schools with gang problems or who have joined gangs themselves. A 2000 survey of middle and high school students found that 7.1 percent of males and 3.6 percent of females reported gang participation (Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 2001). Among samples of high-risk youth, gang membership is higher, ranging from 14 percent to 30 percent in Denver, Colo.; Seattle, Wash.; and Rochester, N.Y. According to Howell, the average age that adolescents join gangs is between 13 and 15.

Just as disturbing, a national survey of students age 12-19 conducted in 1995 by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice found that more than one-fourth (28 percent) reported that there were gangs at their schools. Analysis of the data also “suggested that gang presence is an important contributor to overall levels of student victimization at school,” according to the federal report by Chandler and others. The survey asked students whether they had been victimized at school, such as having someone take money from them by force, stealing something from them or physically attack them.

“When students said gangs were present, 54 percent of them reported some type of victimization, compared with 46 percent when gangs were not present,” Howell and Lynch reported.

Further analysis of the survey data in a report by Howell and James P. Lynch found that when more security measures are used in schools, gangs are significantly more prevalent (e.g., the presence of security measures at schools, such as security guards, metal detectors and locked doors during the day). The authors noted that the results were difficult to interpret because the data could indicate that more security measures are employed in response to gang presence. However, they also stated that many of the security measures that schools are using may not be used effectively.

Do most people in your schools and communities view youth gangs as a major problem on par with substance abuse and violence among youth?

Yes

No

Current Results

Why Do Youth Join Gangs?

So what is the draw for some adolescents to join a gang? The answers vary but researchers offer some insights, both from talking with gang members and examining their lives. Terrence P. Thornberry, a professor at the school of criminal justice at the University at Albany, State University of New York, conducted a 16-year-long study of high-risk youth in living in Rochester. Thornberry and his colleagues followed the youth for several years, some of whom joined gangs and others who did not.

"It seems to me that there are two things that drive kids to gangs," Thornberry said. "It's where the fun and action is. They emphasize that their friends and cousins and siblings are in the gang. It's where the parties and the drugs are. A secondary reason is that the gangs offer protection from other gangs on the way to and from school. They see gangs as providing a variety of goodies to them - protection, fun, and excitement."



When Thornberry and others look at the backgrounds of gang members, they find that a variety of risk factors place adolescents at increased risk for joining a gang.

Those factors include the following:

- ◆ Early involvement in delinquency, especially with violence and drug use
- ◆ Troubled family relationships

- ❖ Low attachment to school and poor grades
- ❖ Association with youth involved with gangs, including older siblings
- ❖ Living in neighborhoods with gangs

Click [here](#) for some common signs of gang membership.

The more of these factors in a child's life, the greater the risk that he or she will join a gang. Hanging out with delinquent peers, school failure at the elementary level, and sexual activity at an early age in particular are among the stronger predictors of gang membership.

In *Gangs and Delinquency in Developmental Perspective*, Thornberry and his coauthors write, "Gang membership is clearly not produced by just a few risk factors. The accumulation of deficits appear to be far more important than individual risk factors in accounting for gang membership, however. Adolescents who experience deficits in none or only a few of the seven studied are not very likely to become gang members; adolescents who experience deficits in five or more domains are far more likely to be gang members. Indeed, 61 percent of the young boys and 40 percent of the young girls who have deficits in all seven domains were gang members."

Thornberry and his colleagues also note, "Youth are quite resilient -- at least in terms of the chances of joining a gang -- in light of low levels of risk. As risk accumulates, however, the likelihood of joining a gang increases substantially, a pattern observed for both males and females. It appears that youth can tolerate lower levels of risk or risk in a few domains and still avoid an increased likelihood of joining a gang."

What Are Some Consequences of Gang Membership?

"For it is not simply the case that gang members are somewhat more delinquent than nonmembers. They are, in fact, responsible for a huge proportion of the crime, especially the serious and violent crime that occurs."

- Terrence Thornberry, et al. in *Gangs and Delinquency in Developmental Perspective*

Adolescents who become involved in gangs are at great risk, not only during the time they are in the gang but for a downward course for their lives. According to J. David Hawkins (director of the Social Development Project at the University of Washington) and his colleagues, gang membership is one of the strongest indicators of individual violence in adolescence. Studies in several cities indicated that gang members are responsible for a large percentage of violent crime. In Rochester, N.Y., gang members reported committing 68 percent of all adolescent violent offenses; in Seattle, Wash., gang members reported committing 85 percent of adolescent robberies, and in Denver, Colo., gang members self-reported committing 79 percent

of all serious violent adolescent offenses. Gang members are far more likely than other delinquents to carry guns and use them. In a Rochester, N.Y., study, gang members were about 10 times as likely to carry guns as non-gang juvenile offenders.

According to James Howell, "The growth in youth gangs and the violence associated with them is the most overlooked factor in the increase in juvenile and young adult violence in the late 1980s and early 1990s."

Studies of gang members in Seattle, Rochester, and Denver show that youth commit many more serious and violent acts while they are gang members than after they leave the gang. But even after they stop being an active gang member, their crime rates remained high. Thornberry and his colleagues note that gang involvement tends to increase the "criminal embeddedness" of gang members.



Gang involvement can also wreak havoc in an adolescent's life even after he or she leaves a gang. According to Thornberry, gang involvement disrupts the developmental course of youth's lives, forcing them to take on roles that they are not yet ready for with devastating consequences, such as teen parenthood, dropping out of school, and unstable employment. They also have a much higher likelihood of violent victimization than other adolescents in other peer groups.

Youth who participate in gangs also have much lower educational expectations than do other students and are much more likely to be threatened or victimized at school, according to Gary and Denise Gottfredson (educational researchers based in Ellicott City, Md.). While 91 percent of students who are not involved in gangs report that they expect to complete high school, only 75 percent of gang-involved youth expect to finish high school.

Their 2001 study found that 28 percent of gang-involved boys reported that they had been threatened with a knife or gun in the current year in school while only 5 percent of other boys reported similar threats. Similarly, 18 percent of gang-involved girls reported being threatened while only 2 percent of other girls reported threats. Ironically, while some boys and girls say they join gangs for protection, they are much more likely to be afraid of being hurt than are other students.

"Gang members are more fearful than are other youths -- more often afraid they will be hurt or bothered at school, less often feeling safe, and more likely to avoid certain locations," according to Gary and Denise Gottfredson. "Gang members are more likely to have had to fight to protect themselves than are other youths, and they have observed more violence in their environments."

Looking Ahead

Frightened by the upsurge in gang activity, communities around the country have been

implementing a variety of approaches to stop or at least slow down this alarming problem. In recent years, often supported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, communities have begun to implement comprehensive programs that include prevention, intervention, and police suppression efforts. All of these efforts require close collaboration among police, public officials, community agencies, schools, businesses, and others. In Day 2, we will take a look at some of these efforts and the research behind them, as well as spotlight some innovative programs that might be applicable to your area.



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in PDF format.*



Discussion Questions

Please think about the questions below and share your responses, comments, and/or any questions about today's material in the [Discussion Area](#).

- ◆ What is the status of youth gangs in your school and community?
- ◆ What role(s) can you as a Coordinator play in the prevention and reduction of youth involvement in gangs at your school and in your community?
- ◆ What are the biggest obstacles to addressing youth gang problems in your school and/or community? What measures can you take or have you taken to overcome these obstacles?

This completes today's work.

Please visit the [Discussion Area](#) to share your responses to the discussion questions!

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An Overview of Different Gang Types

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In *Gangs: A Community Response*, the California Attorney General's Office lists several types of gangs that are active in the state, some of which are similar to gangs in other parts of the country. The following quotes from this guide are intended to provide an overview of these different gangs:

African-American Gangs

“African-American gangs first appeared in southern California in the 1920's. They were not like the Bloods and Crips that are well-known today. It is believed that the first Crip gang was formed in late 1969. During this time in Los Angeles there were many African-American gangs, and they were all rivals with each other.

“The Crips outnumbered the rest of the African-American gangs. Because of this and the fact that the Crips had become the common rival between the remainder of the gangs, the first Blood gang was formed. The Blood gang was an alliance formed by all the other gangs who did not want to be part of the Crips. As the Crip and Blood rivalry increased, gang assaults became increasingly more violent. Crip and Blood gangs also got involved in the distribution and sale of drugs. The illegal trafficking of drugs became a major factor that intensified the rivalry between the two gangs.”

Asian Gangs

“California is home to the majority of Asians who live in the United States. Types of Asian gangs include Korean, Chinese, Japanese, South Pacific Islander, and Indo-Chinese. Some Asian gangs mimic western gangs in dress style, the use of tattoos, graffiti, and criminal behavior. Other Asian gangs develop expertise in particular crimes, such as home invasion robberies, credit card and check fraud, and computer chip thefts.

“The Indo-Chinese gangs have members from the Vietnamese, Cambodian, Minh, and Hmong who immigrated to the United States after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Refugee and immigrant families experienced a similar culture shock as Mexican immigrants did in the 1900s [some of whom formed gangs]. As a result, some Asian youth established and joined a gang. The first Indo-Chinese Asian gangs appeared in southern California between 1978 and 1980. Culture and language barriers have made it difficult to monitor, investigate, and prosecute Asian gang members.”

Hispanic Gangs

“Hispanic gangs are established throughout the state. Hispanic gangs use graffiti to mark the boundaries of their turf. These marks serve as a warning to rival gangs, a welcome greeting to peer gang members, and often a form of intimidation to the citizens who live within the boundaries of the turf. Hispanic gang members often consider themselves the ‘policemen’ of their neighborhoods. Thus, they are motivated to protect these areas.

“As makeshift guardians of their barrio, Hispanic gang members are expected to defend it

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Common Signs of Gang Membership

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The Kansas City Missouri Police Department Gang Squad lists the following as warning signs of gang membership for parents and other concerned adults:

- ◆ Changes in the child's behavior.
- ◆ Not associating with long-time friends and being secretive about new friends and activities.
- ◆ Changes in hair or dress style and/or having a group of friends who have the same hair or dress style.
- ◆ Changes in normal routines with new friends, such as not coming home after school or staying out late at night with no explanation.
- ◆ Suspected drug use, such as alcohol, inhalants, and narcotics.
- ◆ Unexplained material possessions such as expensive clothing, jewelry, money, etc.
- ◆ The presence of firearms, ammunition, or other deadly weapons.
- ◆ Change in attitude about school, church, or other normal activities.
- ◆ Discipline problems at school, church, or attended functions.
- ◆ Lower grades at school or skipping school.
- ◆ Change in behavior at home -- increases in confrontational behavior, such as talking back, verbal abuse, name calling, and a disrespect for parental authority.
- ◆ A new fear of police.
- ◆ Phone threats to the family from rival gangs (or unknown callers) directed against your child.
- ◆ Photographs of the child and others displaying gang handsigns, weapons, cash, drugs, or gang-type clothing.
- ◆ Graffiti on or around the residence, especially in a child's room such as on walls, furniture, clothing, notebooks, etc. Many also include drawings and "doodling" of gang-related figures, themes of violence, or gang symbolisms.

- ◆ Physical signs of being in a fight, such as bruises and cuts and secrecy on the child's part as to how they were received.
- ◆ A new found sense of bravery -- brags that he/she is too tough to be "messed" with.
- ◆ Use of new nickname.
- ◆ A new-found sympathy or defending of gang activity by the child.
- ◆ Tattoos or "branding" with gang-related symbols.

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against any type of intrusion. The mere presence of a rival gang, the crossing out of their gang graffiti, a derogatory look, an insult to a girlfriend -- all have been motivations for gang-related attacks. Many Hispanic gangs are generational. California has third- and fourth-generation Hispanic gang members.”

Tagging Crews

“In tagging crews, also known as ‘graffiti vandals’, the individual members are called ‘taggers.’ Many tagging crews initially formed for the sole purpose of placing their names or slogans in as many visible locations as possible. Sometimes individual crews would have a contest or ‘battle’ with each other. They would try and get their tag and crew name up as many times as possible within a specified geographical area and time. The winners could play for cans of spray paint, or the losing crew members would have to join the winning crew, or the losing crew might have to give up its current name. Initially tagging was conducted by individuals or crews who had no specific gang affiliation. However, fatal violence began to occur among tagging crews. Rivalries have intensified, and some tagging crews have begun to claim turf-life traditional gangs and regularly arm themselves with guns.”

Female Gang Members

“While female gang members account for less than 10 percent of California's total gang population, females, especially in the Asian and Hispanic gangs, have moved away from the traditional role of being merely girlfriends of gang members. There are no stereotypes for female gang members. Some female gang members are gainfully employed. Females have formed their own gangs and also have become members in traditionally all-male gangs. Caucasian and African-American females have also formed their own gangs. In some instances, female gang members have become co-leaders of a gang that has both male and female members. Female gang members have been known to carry weapons and drugs for their gang.”

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Source:

California Attorney General's Office (June 2003). *Gangs: A Community Response* Sacramento, CA: Author.