

## Experts: Gangs a growing problem in D.C. area

### Latino gangs becoming more common

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Published: Sunday, May 22, 2005 10:19 PM EDT

Some adolescents join gangs in search of respect from their peers. Many come from broken homes and are lured by promises of acceptance and protection on the streets. For others, it's simply the thrill of a life of crime.

Whatever the reason, gangs are a growing problem in the Washington region and new types of gangs are flourishing in local jurisdictions, according to a panel of experts who spoke Friday at the District of Columbia's annual Judicial Conference.

In the District, young black men have made up the majority of gangs in the recent past, said Washington's U.S. Attorney Kenneth Wainstein. Those criminal gangs, often called crews or posses, still are the most prevalent, but Latino gangs are becoming more common and "it's just a matter of time," before they, too, have a substantial presence, Wainstein said.

Across the river in Northern Virginia, violent Latino gangs like Mara Salvatrucha and South Side Locos are on the rise and becoming more brazen.

Mary Ann Urquilla, director of a gang intervention unit based in Columbia Heights, works with police and city leaders to halt the increase in gang activity among the District's Latino community.

Washington's predominately black crews and posses involve drugs and gun violence, but the lure of Latino gangs often differs.

Some young Latino immigrants view gangs as a fast way to find acceptance in new surroundings and as a means to get back at their parents, who in many cases left them behind initially to start a new life in America, Urquilla said.

For black males growing up in crime-ridden neighborhoods, joining a gang sometimes is more of a natural progression than a decision, Wainstein said.

"It goes from playing basketball with these guys to shooting guns with these guys," he said.

Glenn Ivey, state's attorney for Prince George's County, agreed, noting that although

Latino crime circles are increasing in suburban Maryland, the majority of gang-related homicides still are "young black males killing young black males."

Another growing gang trend in the Washington region is a recent spike in female gangs, according to Bridget Miller, a gang expert who supervises the youth gang task force for D.C. Public Schools.

Gangs like "Most Wanted Honeyz," "The Knockout Honies" and "Berry Farm Babes" are becoming increasingly violent, requiring prospective members to "jump" an elderly person to join.

The key solution to curtailing this epidemic, regardless of gang type, is better parenting, Miller added.

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