

GANGS & COMMUNITY RESPONSE

JUST WHAT IS A GANG? There are many different types of gangs. The kinds of gangs most commonly found in Texas are:

DELINQUENT YOUTH GANGS—Groups of young people (mostly juveniles) who “hang out” together. They have developed some identifying signs such as similar clothing style, colors, or hand signs. They have engaged in delinquent or undesirable behavior (truancy, minor vandalism, status offenses) often enough to attract negative attention from law enforcement officers, neighborhood residents, and school officials; but they have not yet committed serious crimes.

SIGNS OF GANG ACTIVITY:

- A rise in truancy
- An increasing number of social groups with unusual names
- Young people wearing tattoos, beads, and colors
- Graffiti—especially if crossed-out
- A rising incidence of confrontations, “staredowns,” and racial tensions
- “Show-by” displays of weapons and “drive-by” shootings

TRADITIONAL TURF-BASED GANGS—Groups of young people (juveniles and/or adults) with a name and a leader or leaders and identifying signs such as clothing style, colors, or hand signs. The group is associated with a territory, which it defends

against rival gangs. Offenses include vandalism (graffiti), assault, and sometimes even homicide. Turf and rivalries are key identifying characteristics of these groups.

GAIN-ORIENTED GANGS—Groups of young people (juveniles and adults) with a name and a leader or leaders, who repeatedly engage in criminal activities both as a group and individually for economic gain. Offenses may include robbery, theft, and the distribution and sale of controlled substances.

VIOLENT/HATE GANGS—Groups of young people (juveniles and adults) with a name and a leader or leaders, who collectively engage in acts of violence toward groups or individuals. Geographical turf and material gain appear to be of secondary importance, if present at all. Offenses may include serious assaults and homicide.

WHO ARE THE YOUNG PEOPLE IN GANGS? Gang members are typically between the ages of 10 and 21. Most have not performed well in school, and many have dropped out. Very often, they have family members who have been in gangs. Typically, the most deeply involved gang members have histories of being without adult supervision for extended periods of time, on a daily basis, from an early age on. These young people turn to gangs in search of acceptance, companionship, recognition, and a feeling of belonging. Note: not every child who experiments with gang styles is a gang member. Don’t jump to conclusions. If you suspect gang involvement, talk to the child—and above all, listen.



WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT GANGS?

ACKNOWLEDGE THE PROBLEM. In some communities, residents and officials are afraid to admit that there is a gang problem. They may be concerned about their community's image or about the negative effects of "labeling" young people as gang members. Some people are even afraid that by giving the problem any attention, they will be encouraging gangs by providing them the notoriety they seek. All of these concerns should be addressed. Denial is never beneficial. You cannot solve a problem until you admit that it exists.

ASSESS THE PROBLEM. Gangs are found in every locality—large, medium, and even small towns. Before you can begin to find solutions to your own situation, you must understand it. How many gangs and gang members are there? What kinds of gangs are present? Do you have an emerging or chronic gang problem? What sorts of local conditions are contributing to gang activity? To gather this information, you must establish cooperative relationships among schools, police, and community organizations.

ACT ON THE PROBLEM. Send a clear message to the gangs in your community that gang activity will not go unanswered. Call neighborhood meetings for citizens who are concerned about gangs. Involve the media. Clean up graffiti—and keep it cleaned up. Always photograph the marks for law enforcement documentation. Graffiti is the newsletter of the gangs: read it, then paint it over. Involve parents and neighbors. Graffiti removal is a crucial first step to reclaiming neighborhoods and reducing fear.

GRAFFITI ERADICATION. An individual convicted of a graffiti-related offense can be required to pay a \$5 fee for deposit in a county's Graffiti Eradication Fund, as provided by Art. 10.0171, Code of Criminal Procedure. The county commissioner's court is responsible for creating and administering this fund. This fund may be used to repair damage, provide education and intervention for graffiti abatement programs, and provide public rewards for identifying and aiding in the apprehension and prosecution of graffiti-related offenders.

WHAT KINDS OF PROGRAMS REDUCE GANG ACTIVITY?

Special police tactics may be needed where gangs are violent or where they are driving up local crime rates. But gangs are not primarily a law enforcement problem. Programs are needed to address some of the causes of gang behavior.

OPPORTUNITIES. Gang activity often occurs when young people do not have access to socially acceptable alternatives. Children who are poorly prepared for school and receive little support for their positive efforts may turn to gangs for a chance to "be somebody." Schools must recognize the potential and value of each child. Academic support and positive extra-curricular opportunities are essential for at-risk youth.

ALTERNATIVES. Gangs are the only form of recreation and companionship available to some young people. To compete successfully with gangs, recreational programs must offer excitement and close, supportive relationships. Mentoring programs may be combined with after-school and summer activities.

SUPERVISION. Too many children are left unsupervised for extended periods of time. "Latchkey" and after-school programs can help by providing safe places for children to learn and play when they would otherwise be left alone. These programs also can help by providing nutritious meals, tutoring, and mentoring.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT. Some children need help with interpersonal and decision-making skills. Young people can be taught to visualize the consequences of their actions and to understand that they can choose what to make of their lives.

Children and parents can benefit from learning new ways of communicating with each other and positive ways of resolving interpersonal conflicts.

RESOURCES FOR COMMUNITIES

OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

JUVENILE CRIME INTERVENTION

(512) 463-4024

www.oag.state.tx.us

jci@oag.state.tx.us

TEXAS YOUTH COMMISSION

OFFICE OF PREVENTION

(512) 424-6130

www.tyc.state.tx.us

GANG RESISTANCE EDUCATION AND TRAINING (G.R.E.A.T.)

(800) 726-7070

www.atf.treas.gov/great

TEXAS SCHOOL SAFETY CENTER

(512) 245-3696

www.txssc.swt.edu

JUVENILE JUSTICE CLEARINGHOUSE

1-800-638-8736

NATIONAL YOUTH GANG SUPPRESSION AND INTERVENTION PROGRAM

Technical assistance manuals (University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration). Available from the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse.

NATIONAL SCHOOL SAFETY CENTER

Gangs in Schools: Breaking Up is Hard to Do

(Pepperdine University, Malibu, Ca. 90263)

(805) 373-9977

www.nssc1.org