

# GANGS

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Taking Back Our Communities



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**HEALTH EDCO®**  
A DIVISION OF WRS GROUP, LTD.

# Gangs: Neighborhood Terrorists

They are on the nightly news, we read about them, and many of us fear them—gangs. These bands of violent young people terrorize neighborhoods and entire cities in their fights over territory or drugs, spreading fear wherever they go. One of the common elements among youth gangs is their involvement in criminal, often violent, activities.

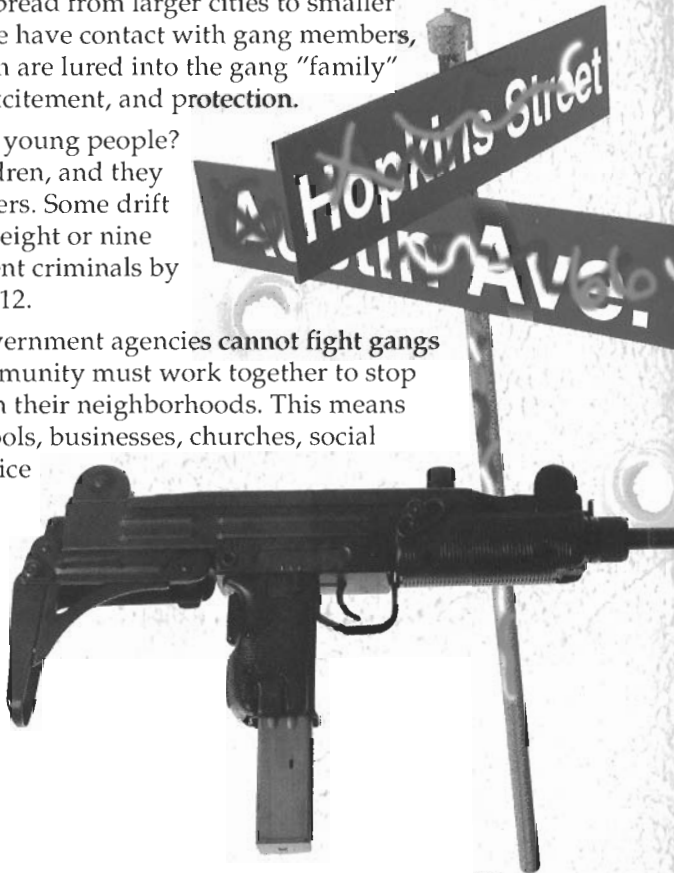
Why are gangs growing so fast? What is their attraction to young people? Is there anything we can do to slow down—even eliminate—this threat to our society?

Most people who live in suburbs or in smaller cities do not view gangs as a serious problem. But gangs are spreading. Everyone is at risk of being affected by a gang.

Records indicate that thousands of gangs exist in the United States, with hundreds of thousands of members. The numbers continue to grow. As gangs spread from larger cities to smaller ones, more people have contact with gang members, and more children are lured into the gang "family" for acceptance, excitement, and protection.

Who are these young people? They are *our* children, and they aren't just teenagers. Some drift into gangs at age eight or nine and become violent criminals by the time they are 12.

Police and government agencies **cannot fight gangs** alone. Every community must work together to stop gang formation in their neighborhoods. This means that parents, schools, businesses, churches, social agencies, and police must join forces to solve the problem.





## What is a Gang?

In today's society, a gang is generally defined as a group of three or more people who have a common identifying sign or symbol, identifiable leadership, and shared interests. They regularly or continuously commit crimes. They may or may not control a territory. Members are typically between the ages of 11 and 24, though children much younger may be involved, and older members may stay on as leaders or to give advice. Although many people believe that gangs develop in low-income areas, gangs can form in any community.

The two basic types of gangs are street gangs and drug gangs. Street gangs participate in many different criminal activities that may or may not include drugs. Drug gangs focus exclusively on dealing drugs and protecting drug territories. Drug gangs tend to be smaller, have a more defined hierarchy, and are more unified than street gangs. A drug gang may be a smaller part of a street gang.



## Graffiti

Tagging and gang markers are the two basic kinds of graffiti. Taggers may have a nickname or "tag" that they write on as many visible surfaces as possible. Sometimes

tagging is done to attract the attention of a gang that the person hopes to join. Tagging uses an individual's personal mark. Gang markers are gang symbols written on visible surfaces.

Gang members use graffiti to identify territory and to communicate among themselves, with rival gangs, and with their communities. Rival gangs may write another gang's symbol upside down to show disrespect.

## Turf

Gangs may work within a specific geographic location or control a drug-sales area, often called "turf." Anyone from a rival gang who crosses into that territory risks his or her life. Gangs fight over turf, usually in violent confrontations at territorial borders. But because cars are readily available, gangs are much more mobile than they have been in previous years. As a result, territory is of less importance now than in the past.

## Gangs and Drugs

Street gangs participate in a variety of criminal activities, which may or may not be for the purpose of getting money. These crimes may include burglary, robbery, extortion, and carjacking. The loose structure of a street gang is not favorable to carrying out organized drug business, although gang members may use drugs, and drug use is often encouraged.



Drug gangs may operate independently or within a street gang. The smaller structure, more centralized leadership, and more limited age range is well suited to the drug-selling business. Though these gangs are fewer in number than street gangs, their numbers are increasing.

# Signs of Allegiance



Gang members show affiliation in many different ways, including specific hand signs and body language, graffiti, colors, and choice of either the right or left side of the body (see list below). Colors are the banner of a gang, and simply wearing the wrong color in the wrong

place is dangerous. Opposing gang members are often killed for wearing their gang's colors in another gang's territory.

Other signs may help to identify gang members, especially if a group of young people display them together. These identifiers may include:

- Haircuts displaying gang insignias, colored beads or barrettes, colored streaks on the left or right side of the head
- Belt buckles worn to the left or right
- Glove worn on the left or right hand
- Pant leg rolled up on the left or right side
- Pant pocket worn inside out or dyed with gang color
- Buttons displaying gang name or insignia
- Hats tilted in a particular direction
- Jewelry displaying a gang insignia, which may be worn on the left or right side
- Nails painted with gang colors on the left or right hand
- Tattoos
- Handkerchief in gang color worn on the left or right side

Gangs may adopt the colors of or clothing representing a particular sports team. Some clothing styles, such as wearing pants that sag low on the hips or waist, originated with gangs. Because these styles have been adopted by non-gang members as well, these alone do not identify a person as a gang member. Also, many gang members dress much like "regular" people. They may choose not to wear items that identify them as gang members, or only to wear those items when they are participating in gang activities.

# Why Do Youths Join Gangs?

Young people join gangs for many reasons. Some of these may include:

1. *Social advancement.* Being a gang member can give prestige or status among friends and provide opportunities to be with them.
2. *Excitement and power.* Being in a gang and participating in illegal activities can make life seem more interesting and may give a sense of power over others.
3. *Identity and social skills.* Gangs provide a sense of identity for their members. The gang may also offer a way to resolve social adjustment difficulties from adolescence.
4. *Companionship.* Young people who have gang members or delinquents as friends often join gangs. As groups, gangs promote common interests.
5. *Economic gain.* Gangs provide many ways for their members to make money.
6. *Sense of belonging.* Young people from troubled homes may seek strong, new ties.
7. *Protection.* In some communities, gangs may make prospective members feel as if they have no choice. A few young people are "born" into gangs because of strong, traditional gang activity in their communities or because of a parent's or sibling's continuing involvement in a gang. Being a gang member also means that other gang members will protect you.

## The Gang as Family

Because gangs provide a strong sense of belonging, young people who do not have strong ties to their families, communities, schools, or churches may turn to gangs. When these young people join gangs, they are accepted by other members and are given a sense of identity. This acceptance may substitute for ties to family, community, school, or church.

# Risk Factors for Gang Membership



- Troubled family life: physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; neglect; limited attachment to family members
- Lack of parental and/or adult male role models
- A partner's or sibling's gang affiliation and permissive parental attitude
- Lack of economic opportunities
- Poor academic performance and poor school attendance
- Low educational aspirations
- Learning disability
- Low self-esteem
- Poor communication skills
- Poor decision-making skills

## Types of Gang Members

**Hard Core**—These members are the central leadership of the gang. They are willing to give up their lives for the gang.

**Regular**—These individuals spend time with the gang daily. They are familiar with and are aware of most gang activities.

**"Wanna-be"**—These people want a gang identity. They may "tag" to get attention from gang members. "Wanna-bes" are likely to be approached for gang membership and may risk being identified by rival gangs as gang members. "Wanna-bes" are easily influenced and seek attention. Communities have the best chance of saving a child from gang membership at or before this stage.

**"Junior"**—Like "wanna-bes," these young people want to be gang members, but they are too young to be fully accepted into a gang.



## Female Gangs

Females join gangs for the same reasons as males—they come from troubled families or are looking for acceptance, excitement, power, and companionship. Like males, these females may have experienced physical,

emotional, or sexual abuse at home. They may also seek the economic gain that a gang can provide.

In the past, females who were associated with a gang were either girlfriends of members or sex objects, and stereotypes lead us to believe that gang members are predominantly male. But females also form gangs. Like their male counterparts, female gang members participate in criminal activities—robberies, carjackings, burglaries, and shootings. Female-dominated gangs can be as violent and dangerous as male-dominated gangs.

## Getting Into a Gang

Getting into a gang can be as dangerous as the gang involvement that follows. Initiation is designed to test a person's allegiance to the gang and to see if a person is tough and "courageous" enough to carry out the gang's work. Although initiation rituals vary among different gangs, they often involve gang members brutally beating a new member. The next step may require that the new member commit a serious, usually violent, crime—for example, armed robbery or murder. The initiation rites, whatever they may be, are dangerous to society and self-destructive for the new member.

In some communities, young people are coerced into joining gangs. They find themselves committing crimes—including murder—because they fear for their own lives and those of their families, or because they have family members who are involved in the gang.

# Getting Out of a Gang

Some young people realize that their membership in a gang is self-destructive, and they decide that they want out of their gang. But walking away is often impossible. A commitment to a gang can be permanent, and deserting has consequences.

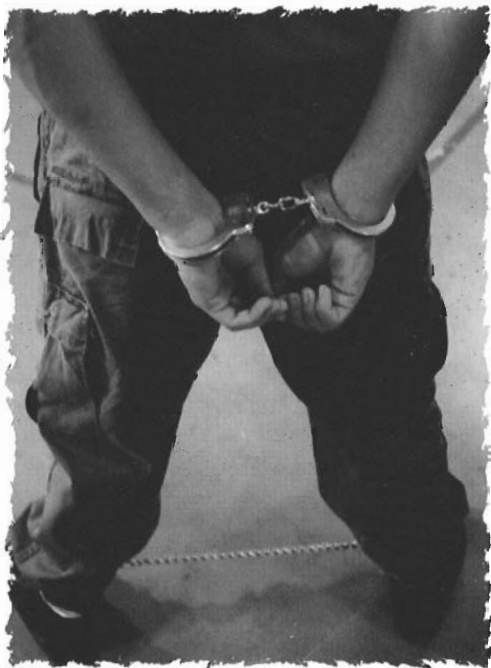
Those who simply leave often live in fear of being killed. Members who dare to quit formally may face a de-initiation ceremony that involves being beaten, perhaps fatally, by other members.

Another option is for the whole family to relocate to a community which does not have heavy gang activity. While this may seem impractical, it is one way to get a young person out of a gang safely. One other safe way to leave a gang is to "fade away"—to become less active in the gang gradually. This process is more realistic for older members who have paid their dues. Younger members rarely have this option.

## Consequences of Gang Membership

The best way to get out of a gang is never to join one. Gang membership has serious consequences. Gang members are almost always guaranteed a criminal record. Participation in gang activities means taking not only personal risks but also involves risking the safety of family members. Because younger people typically receive lighter penalties for

certain crimes, many gangs depend on their youngest members to commit the most serious crimes. Gangs discourage schooling and encourage alcohol and drug abuse. Limited education, alcohol and drug abuse problems, and a criminal record can make finding employment as well as interacting socially difficult later in life.



# Are Gangs Active in Your Community?

- Do young people consistently wear certain colors, jewelry, clothing, use hand signals, or display other behavior that is unusual and may be gang-related?
- Has there been an increase in violence?
- Is there an increasing presence of weapons in your community?
- Is truancy (skipping school) increasing?
- Are there more "social" groups with unusual names and/or interests?
- Is there graffiti in your neighborhood?
- Are race-related incidents and racially motivated crimes becoming more frequent?
- Has there been a drive-by shooting in your neighborhood?



## The Danger of Denial

Denying that a problem is developing or has already developed is the worst thing a community can do. Some communities acknowledge having problems with "groups of kids" but will not admit to a gang problem. Denial sends the message to gangs that they have **free reign** over the neighborhood.

# What You Can Do...

The problem of gangs cannot be solved by any single agency: by themselves, law enforcement operations, schools, and government-sponsored programs are not effective. Success requires a coordinated response from the whole community. This effort must involve parents, schools, businesses, police departments, churches, and communities.

## ...as a Parent

- ✓ Children are less likely to become involved in gangs when they feel strong ties to their families. As a parent, you are the most important role model that your children have.
- ✓ Develop good communication with your children, and spend time with them.
- ✓ Set limits for your children, and enforce them.
- ✓ Do not allow your children to dress in gang-style clothing, to practice gang signs, or to write gang graffiti on any surface, including their bodies.
- ✓ Know where your children are at all times, and schedule activities to occupy their free time.
- ✓ Get to know your children's friends and their parents.
- ✓ Get involved in your children's education, and encourage them to stay in school.
- ✓ Teach your children that being in a gang and/or taking drugs is dangerous and unacceptable behavior.



## ... as a School



Schools can help students avoid gang involvement. Students who receive positive reinforcement for their behavior in school develop self-esteem and will be more likely to seek acceptance at school than from gangs.

- ✓ Carefully observe students and student behavior to determine if your school has a gang problem. Do not ignore the problem if it exists, and take steps to prevent it if it does not.
- ✓ Identify at-risk students and students who are already gang members. Signs include associating with a group that identifies itself by an unusual name, logo, or sign; wearing gang paraphernalia; poor attendance; low grades; and disciplinary problems.
- ✓ Do not allow anyone to wear gang paraphernalia.
- ✓ Photograph and remove all graffiti immediately. Use photos at parent, community, and staff presentations.
- ✓ Encourage high-risk students to participate in sports, drama, music, art, and other positive activities that will increase their confidence and sense of belonging. Students involved in extracurricular activities are less likely to seek acceptance from gangs.
- ✓ Identify students who might be interested in or fascinated by gangs. Intervention before or at the "wanna-be" stage is most effective.
- ✓ Work with parents, counselors, and school personnel to determine when intervention is necessary and what steps should be taken.
- ✓ Make gang and drug prevention part of the curricula, and present gang and drug awareness programs to parents.

## ... as a Business

Jobs play a significant role in combating gangs and drugs. When business and industry develop jobs, more people in the community have the chance to feel useful and productive.

- ✓ Employ local youth in your neighborhood stores so that they develop a sense of pride in and responsibility to their community.
- ✓ Work with schools to develop special training and apprenticeship programs that teach occupational skills.
- ✓ Support community programs with your time or money.
- ✓ Work with residents, agencies, and other business leaders to form action committees and develop alternative youth activities.
- ✓ Remove any graffiti immediately.



## ... as a Police Department

- ✓ Share information, and work with all agencies.
- ✓ Establish anti-gang programs in the community, including visits to homes where young people are flirting with gang membership, activity centers to keep children supervised and off the streets, and neighborhood awareness programs.
- ✓ Discourage gang activity and drug trafficking in problem neighborhoods by assigning more officers to that area, increasing police visibility, and making swift arrests.
- ✓ Teach residents how to identify and deal with gang members and ways to prevent children from joining gangs.
- ✓ Establish confidential hotlines to report gang or criminal activity to prevent retaliation against witnesses.

## ... as a Church

The church can provide a moral and spiritual foundation for the community by promoting family values, providing parental training, encouraging school attendance, and positively reinforcing moral and ethical behavior.

- ✓ Sponsor day care programs and after-school activities such as basketball, music, and drama. Make your facilities available for community organizations such as Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts.
- ✓ Support young people in the community by encouraging adults from the church to serve as mentors. These adults may go with them to counseling, court appearances, or parole-officer meetings. Adults can also help organize and supervise recreation center activities.
- ✓ Offer a weekly cooked meal and regularly scheduled positive activities.
- ✓ Offer regular support for parents. This may include parenting classes, in-home visits, or people who work as a liaisons between parents and local counselors.





## ... as a Community

A strong community support network can provide alternatives to gang involvement and can help children in troubled homes. Dedicated residents can mobilize the community to take a stand against gang activity and to eliminate the conditions that lead to gang activity.

- ✓ Establish a neighborhood graffiti task force to remove all graffiti in the neighborhood as soon as possible. This removes the signs of gang boundaries, deters rival gangs from reacting to it, and sends the message that the community will not tolerate gang behavior.
- ✓ Persuade newspapers and radio and television stations not to use the names of gangs when reporting gang-related incidents. Gangs like the attention they get when credited for criminal activities, and such attention spurs rival gangs into action.
- ✓ Establish neighborhood recreational centers where young people feel a sense of belonging and receive supportive counseling. Establish youth clubs in neighborhoods where none exist. Promote recreational and sports programs. Develop after-school and summer classes that offer positive activities.
- ✓ Take advantage of established institutions that lend themselves to social gatherings, such as churches, schools, and clubs. Promote and enhance existing programs.
- ✓ Establish a working relationship with neighborhood police officers. Work with probation and parole officers to maintain contact with juvenile offenders when they are in court, in jail, and back in the community. Help released offenders get jobs, attend school, and join neighborhood groups.
- ✓ Petition local elected officials to provide police departments with funding for gang control. Lobby for tougher prosecution and sentencing for gang-related crimes.
- ✓ Sponsor programs that teach parenting skills.

# Looking Ahead to a Positive Future

Many neighborhoods have been forced to defend against the dangers of gangs within them. However, other communities are recognizing that it is easier to discourage gangs through preventive action than to deal with them after they have gained a foothold.

As residents work on behalf of their children, positive attitudes are reinforced. The quality of their living environment improves, and the children respond to constructive social influences. Only the community working together as a whole can create the climate necessary for raising healthy, law-abiding children.



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