

Youth Gangs:

Every large urban school district is affected by street gang activity; however, youth gangs are not simply a large city or inner city problem. Nor are they a problem of particular race or culture. Gang membership crosses all ethnic, racial and geographic boundaries.

Identification:

No single warning sign indicates that a child is behaving in a manner that potentially places the youth at risk of gang involvement.

What is a gang?

A youth/street gang should be defined as a closely (or loosely) structured group of individuals who may express their identification by adopting certain dress attire, adoption of symbolic behavior to include nicknames of individuals, tattoos, hand signs, and the claiming of territory in a neighborhood. The activities of this group include criminal acts of violence, threats, and anti-social behavior.

A youth/street gang may be small or large in membership, with subdivisions determined many times by location of the gang or ages of the members. (Sometimes smaller gangs will be called "sets", "cliques", "posse", or "crews".)

Gang recruitment of youth (students):

Recent research data has identified that the primary age for recruitment into street gangs is 11-15 years. It is in this age group that many gangs actively recruit new members at schools.

Youth gang involvement may begin as early as elementary school. Children as young as 7-8 years are extremely vulnerable and may start acting out, adopting the style and language of a gang, acquiring the status of a "wannabee". If there is no collaborative prevention and intervention effort by the school and parents, most likely the "wannabee" is certainly a "gonnabee".

Early involvement signs:

There are indicators of a child/student possible early involvement with youth gangs. Changes in behavior or activities are early warning signs and may include the following:

- Dropping, or poor, grades
- Being truant from school
- Affiliating more closely with peers than with family
- Changing friends (associating with gang members)
- Changing clothes, hair styles
- Using alcohol and/or drugs
- Developing attitude and behavior problems
- Glamorizing youth gang lifestyle

The following physical indicators may include:

- Graffiti – Youth gang members will advertise their gang affiliations by writing gang graffiti on their school books, school bathrooms, school desks, and other school property. They will also write gang graffiti on walls of neighborhood properties adjacent to schools. Additionally, gang members will write gang graffiti at their personal residences. Gang graffiti will most certainly be found in the bedroom area of a youth gang member.
- Youth gang clothing attire - Clothing continues to be a gang membership indicator; however, variations of gang clothing are in vogue and currently in style with many school age youth who are not involved in gang activities. Gang members associate extremely baggy clothing, clothes of particular colors, styles, and certain athletic teams (specifically baseball caps) as being affiliated, and important to gang membership. Clothing preferences change over time.
- Hand signs/signals – Many gang members communicate their affiliation through hand signs. Youth practicing hand signals is an early warning sign of gang affiliation.
- Gang style language – Most street gangs adopt the use of a form of gang slang and many forms of gang slang exist. Although students who are not gang members may use some gang forms, and excessive amount of gang slang is an indicator of possible gang involvement.

Signs of actual gang membership:

Once involved directly with a street gang, a youth/student's behavior may change gradually, or suddenly. Most likely, it will follow a pattern or process. At school the youth will promote his affiliation and new status with the gang. The student will most likely become more disrespectful towards teachers and behavior problems involving defiant issues may increase.

Indicators of actual gang membership are:

- Monikers – Gang members pride themselves in being given nicknames, or monikers, by the gang. The moniker may highlight a physical characteristic, or some personal trait.
- Attitude – One of the main activities of gang members is the intimidation of other youth and/ or adults. By promoting a defiant and arrogant attitude, gang members obtain a reputation for being tough and aggressive.
- Tattoos – The majority of youth gang members after initiation, or acceptance into the gang, are tattooed, indicating their allegiance and affiliation. These tattoos could be crude or elaborate. Most likely, the gang members' monikers and/or the gang's name will be involved in the tattoo.

Prevention:

Students who are at high risk and vulnerable to join a youth gang exist in many school environments. They will continue to be attracted to possible gang involvement if educators, parents, public safety officials, and other community members are not aware of causation factors leading to youth gang membership.

Some of the factors include:

- The need for belonging to something special: Gang membership will provide the recognition, the identity, the attention, the support, the acceptance, of their peers. Many gang youth will join the gang to satisfy the need of belonging.

- Family tradition: A youth may join a gang because a brother, sister, parent, or relative, has or had a gang affiliation.
- Excitement: Many youth find the gang lifestyle daring and dangerous. The potential for violence has a certain level of attraction for many young people.
- Protection: A youth may join a gang for physical protection from rival gang members. Some youth will feel they are targets for violence if they don't join a gang.

Many of today's gang youth do not believe in themselves outside of their gang structure. They do not see themselves being successful in school, or having employment opportunities in their communities.

Authored by:

Det. G. "Sandy" Sandoval (Retired)

Source: Los Angeles Police School Department

www.laspd.com/gangs.html