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Youth gangs are spreading their violent lifestyle and drug trafficking from inner cities to suburban and rural areas.

# School Safety

## UPDATE

### Gang membership crosses cultural, geographic bounds

Although youth gangs have been a part of American life since the early 18th century, today's gangs pose a greater threat to public safety and order than at any time in recent history. Youth gangs, which at one time had primarily a social basis for their organization and existence, now are motivated by violence, extortion, intimidation, and the illegal trafficking of drugs and weapons. Today's gangs are better organized, remain active for longer periods of time, have access to sophisticated weaponry, and are much more mobile.

Recent estimates reveal that New York has about 50 gangs and 5,000 members; Chicago has 125 gangs with 12,500 members; Dallas has 225 gangs; and Los Angeles has more than 900 gangs with about 100,000 members.

Miami reports a 1,000 percent increase in gangs and gang membership during the past five years. In Los Angeles alone, nearly 700 gang-related killings occurred in 1990, and preliminary figures for 1991 indicate a continuing increase.

Youth gangs are not simply a big-city or inner-city problem, nor are they a problem of a particular race or culture. Gang membership crosses all eth-

nic and racial boundaries. Gangs also are spreading rapidly to a host of midsize and smaller cities. Suburban and rural communities provide attractive alternatives for recruiting members, marketing drugs and offering safety from rival gangs.

Although various regions of the country may have differing definitions for gang membership, a good working descriptor for a gang is: A group of three or more individuals with a unique name, identifiable marks or symbols who claim a territory or turf, who associate on a regular basis, and who engage in criminal or antisocial behavior.

Schools become involved with youth gangs for several reasons. Since younger gang members and most potential gang members attend school, it has become a prime recruiting ground. Gang members who go to school often stake out specific areas as their turf, which can lead to violence on the campus. In one Los Angeles high school, a local gang claimed a specific public telephone booth as its turf. When a non-gang member used it, the ensuing argument was settled by a gun, resulting in a student's death. Following this incident, 35 students withdrew from the school because of fear.

Gang members involved with selling drugs can find a natural market outlet at schools for their wares. One gang member even said, "The reason I go to school is to sell drugs." Another student was asked: "Do you have a drug problem in your school?" She replied, "No, I can get all the drugs I want."

Fees also are extorted by gang members from other students for the opportunity to use certain school facilities, to walk to and from school, or for the privilege of protection. One Asian gang in San Francisco was charging a certain restaurant owner \$1,000 per month simply for protection. Several



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gangs are well-organized in this regard and have established clear guidelines for their protection racket.

Schools can do a number of things to reduce the level of gang activity on campus. A vibrant extracurricular program can give bored students other things to do with their time rather than joining gangs. Most importantly, administrators should establish clear behavior guidelines that specifically prohibit gang activity and encourage responsible citizenship. Several school districts forbid wearing gang paraphernalia or apparel that identifies a student as a gang member. Sometimes just wearing the wrong colors can place a youngster in jeopardy, as in Indianapolis, where a 13-year-old student was shot while riding the school bus.

Model discipline and dress policies are crucial. More and more school districts are implementing model dress codes that clarify and define acceptable appearance standards. Great care must be taken in creating such guidelines to maintain the delicate balance between an individual's First Amendment right to free expression and the school's responsibility to provide a safe and secure educational environment.

The Inglewood (California) Unified School District's dress code prohibits "any apparel, jewelry, accessory, notebook or manner of grooming which, by virtue of its color, arrangement, trademark or any other attribute, denotes membership in such a group that advocates drug use or exhibits behaviors that interfere with the normal and order'y operation of a school."

While the language of this policy is instructive, it is only offered as one possible approach. All policies and procedures should be reviewed by the district's legal counsel to insure propriety, fairness and consistency with other laws. Adopting another district's policy, as opposed to adapting it to local needs, can cause serious problems.

Students, parents, law enforcement, the courts and local community leaders must be involved in the process of developing a unique gang prevention and intervention plan unique to their locale. Timing also is a critical factor. Imagine the public relations impact of a school administration that announces in September — right after mom and dad have purchased their child's new wardrobe — that certain colors or dress styles will not be tolerated.

Graffiti removal is another critical component. The San Diego Unified School District has a graffiti-removal team that works 24 hours a day to remove immediately any gang symbols or vandalism which may affect the school's positive climate. "Read, record and remove" are the 3 R's

of graffiti eradication. Always photograph and record any graffiti that you find on campus. It could be an important factor in resolving other school crimes or tracking criminal trends on campus.

More than a form of vandalism, graffiti serves as a message board that often will tip off educators, law enforcers and rival gangs about things "going down" in the community. A log book, as well as a glossary of gang terms and definitions, should be maintained in each community.

The San Diego Unified School District also has designed a special parent letter that has been translated into Spanish, Vietnamese, Hmong and several other languages so that parents can be accurately informed in their native language about their child's activities. Parents should be suspicious if their children come home wearing new types of clothing, or if they insist on wearing the same style or color of clothing each day. New, unexplained amounts of money also should raise questions from parents.

Providing adequate support and protection for victims of gang-related crime is critical. If students or staff members do not feel safe in reporting gang crimes, then the situation will only worsen. In-service training and gang counseling services can offer a sense of support.

One teacher, after attending an in-service training session on gang prevention in a major urban center, said she was embarrassed to have unknowingly been supporting the gang mentality. She said

that she was going to change the name of the goldfish kept in her class, who was called "Homegirl," a common gang term for girls. Another teacher was unknowingly providing supervision, tools, instruction and materials in a wood shop class to assist a student in routing out his gang's name on a piece of lumber.

For gang-suppression strategies to work effectively, common myths about gangs need to be dispelled. Just as the two teachers mentioned above were oblivious that they were lending their support to gangs, all concerned need to be informed about the realities of gangs and of the gang mentality. The following list of gang myths was furnished by Lorne Krammer, chief of police in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

*Myth #1 — The majority of street gang members are juveniles.* Juveniles — those who are 18 years or younger — actually compose a minority of gang membership. In Los Angeles County, juveniles represent only about 20 percent of gang members. Across the nation, the tenure of gang membership is increasing from as early as 9 to 10 years up

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to more than 40 years. Money, drugs and lax juvenile laws each are key factors in this transition to attract kids to gangs at younger ages.

*Myth #2 — The majority of gang-related crimes involve gangs vs. gangs.* The reverse actually is true. In terms of gang-related homicides, more than half the time, innocent victims with no gang affiliation are killed or assaulted.

*Myth #3 — All street gangs are turf-oriented.* Some gangs may not claim any specific turf, while other gangs may operate in multiple locations or even in very unsuspecting small cities. One Asian gang that operated crime rings from Florida to California had its headquarters in a small Pennsylvania town of less than 4,500 residents.

*Myth #4 — Females are not allowed to join gangs.* Females are joining gangs in record numbers and often are extremely violent. In times past, females were thought of simply as mules — transporters of weapons or drugs — or as innocent bystanders. Females now make up about 5 percent of gang members and this is increasing.

*Myth #5 — Gang weapons usually consist of chains, knives and tire irons.* Perhaps brass knuckles, knives and chains were the key weapons in the gangs of yesteryear, but today uzis, AK-47s and semi-automatic firepower are the weapons of choice.

*Myth #6 — All gangs have one leader and are tightly structured.* Most gangs are loosely-knit groups and likely will have several leaders. If one member is killed, other potential gang leaders seem to be waiting in the wings.

*Myth #7 — Graffiti is merely an art form.* Graffiti is much more than an art form. It is a message that proclaims the presence of the gang and offers a challenge to rivals. Graffiti serves as a form of intimidation and control — an instrument of advertising.

*Myth #8 — One way to cure gang membership is by locking the gang member away.* Incarceration and rehabilitation of hard-core gang members has not proven effective. Changing criminal behavior patterns is difficult. Prisons often serve as command centers and institutions of higher learning for ongoing gang-related crime. Often prisoners are forced to take sides with one group or another simply for protection.

*Myth #9 — Gangs are a law enforcement problem.* Gangs are a problem for everyone. Communities need to develop systemwide programs to effectively address the gang problem in their areas.

Not merely a school problem either, gangs are a community problem and a national challenge. Responding to gangs requires a systematic, comprehensive and collaborative approach that incorporates prevention, intervention and suppression strategies. While each strategy has a spe-

cific vision and pressing mandate, the greatest hope is on the side of prevention, for only by keeping children from joining gangs in the first place will we be able to halt the rising tide of terror and violence that gangs represent.

### Police give tips for parents, educators to identify possible gang members

Parents and school administrators often do not want to admit that their children or their students are involved in gang activity because they believe it makes them look bad, or they simply may not want to admit gang participation. Police agencies in Ventura County, California, use 15 criteria for identifying youths as gang members. These guidelines also are useful for parents and educators. The criteria include:

- Having gang tattoos
- Wearing gang garb that could include the color of clothing, types of clothing, head covering or methods of grooming
- Displaying gang markings or slogans on personal property or clothing
- Possessing literature that indicates gang membership
- Admitting gang membership
- Being arrested with known gang members
- Attending functions sponsored by the gang or known gang members
- Obtaining information from a reliable informant
- Getting statements from relatives identifying the youth as a gang member
- Receiving indication from other law enforcement agencies that a youth is a gang member
- Exhibiting behavior fitting police profiles of gang-related drug dealing
- Being stopped by police with a known gang member
- Loitering, riding or meeting with a gang member
- Selling or distributing drugs for a known gang member
- Helping a known gang member commit a crime

It only takes exhibiting one of these characteristics for a youth to be considered a gang wanna-be or hanger-on. Two of these can result in a youth being labeled an associate gang member. Displaying five or more of these attributes can cause police to label someone as a hard-core gang member.