



Gangs.

What Can Parents Do?

Gang activity is no longer confined to a few large inner cities. Gangs have been documented in every state in the U.S. and are active in rural and suburban communities, as well as urban areas.

What is a gang?

A gang is loosely defined as a group of youths who:

- call themselves by a common name;
- identify each other with signs, symbols, or colors, and;
- engage in criminal activity such as drug trafficking, armed robbery, or auto theft.

Most gang members are ages 12 to 25, although younger children are sometimes recruited. Ninety percent of all gang members in the U.S. are male. About 46 percent are Hispanic, 34 percent are African American, 12 percent are Caucasian, and 8 percent are Asian or of another ethnicity.

Parents and adult role models can play an important part in reducing gang activity and preventing crimes committed by gang youth.

How do I know if my child is in a gang?

Parents and other adults should be aware of the following warning signs that may indicate gang involvement:

- Shirts, hats, and other clothing in matching colors or with matching logos and symbols. Also check for insignia on jewelry, belts, shoelaces, or tattoos.
- Gang graffiti (sometimes called “tags” or “placas”) on notebooks, clothing, and other personal belongings. Watch for initials, numbers, and nicknames written in Old English-style letters or in handwriting that is hard to decipher.
- Newly acquired and unexplained money or expensive possessions that are displayed, worn, or shared with peers.
- Carrying or showing off a gun, knife, or other weapon.
- Admitted gang involvement, and your child knows all three of these: his or her alliance (People or Folk), set (Surenos, Crips, Latin Kings), and gang name (Locos, Westside Crips).

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Parents should also look for changes in the behavior and lifestyle of their children, such as:

- Poor or failing grades in school.
- A hostile or defiant attitude.
- Secrecy about activities or time away from home.
- Drug or alcohol use.
- Involvement in illegal activities or trouble with law enforcement.

What factors contribute to gang affiliation?

Specific social conditions can place young people at risk for gang involvement:

- Living in poverty, because gangs provide a source of income.
- Living in a community that lacks jobs and organized activities for youth, such as sports, YMCA, and Scouts.
- Having other family members in a gang.
- Living in a neighborhood where gangs are present.
- Low self-esteem, or feelings of isolation.
- Inconsistent or ineffective parenting, such as a lack of family rules and expectations, ineffective discipline, or limited or no monitoring of youth activities.

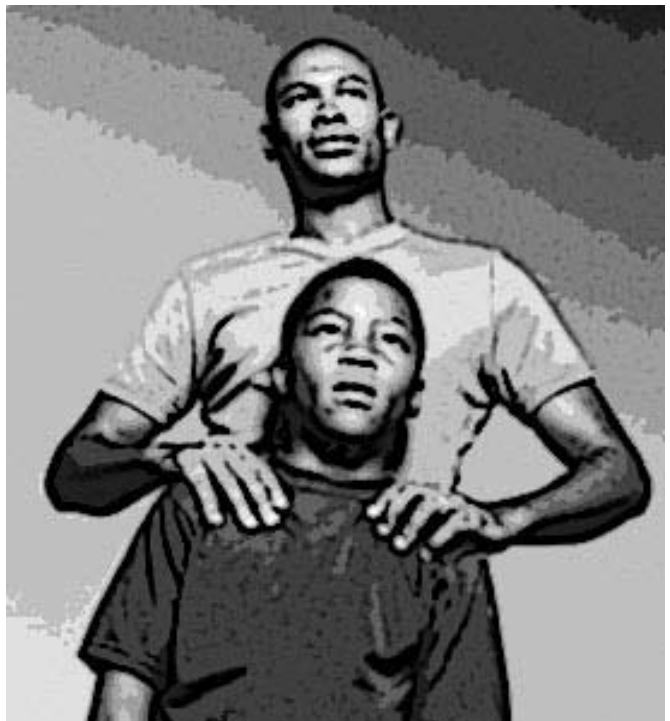
Young people in these situations often see gangs as a way out of poverty and into a community where they will be accepted and protected. They adopt negative behaviors that earn praise from the group, which perpetuates more negative behavior. Parents and other adults should learn appropriate prevention and intervention strategies to avoid or interrupt these negative cycles. Research shows that a majority of teens would quit gang life if they had other options.

What can I do to prevent my child from joining a gang?

Listen to your children. Don't simply provide your input. Many youth turn to gangs because they don't think they can trust and confide in anyone else. Begin by building your relationship.

Communicate positive messages. Let your children know you care about them, believe in them, and accept them. Help them identify and improve upon their strengths and talents. Direct your children toward healthy activities, and find ways for them to be successful at what they enjoy. Praise them for their accomplishments, and always make sure that they understand how important they are to your family.

Avoid scare tactics. Young people who are interested in or involved in gangs usually won't be frightened away from their loyalties. They may see only the positive, short-term consequences of their actions. Calmly discuss the long-term consequences and realities of gang life: prison, serious injury, and even death. Back up what you say with facts. Talk about how decisions today can affect their future.



Find ways to occupy your children's free time. Be aware of how your children spend their free time, and get them involved in after-school sports, recreation, dance, the arts, or other activities. Explore interests or hobbies that might be enjoyable and beneficial. Assign responsibilities at home, encourage working a part-time job, and monitor their progress in school.

Spend time with your child. Plan activities that the whole family can enjoy, and also spend time one-on-one with your children. Expose your youth to places beyond your neighborhood: parks, museums, the beach, campgrounds, or whatever is available and affordable in your area. Visit community centers, libraries, and other organizations that offer programs for families and for young people specifically.

Know your children's friends well. Encourage your children to invite friends over. Get to know them, and be a positive influence in their lives.

Set limits. Your children need to know at an early age what is acceptable and what is unacceptable behavior in your home. Do not allow your children to stay out late or spend a lot of unsupervised time out in the streets. You can't control everything they do, but you can be aware of where they are going, and whom they are going with.

Do not allow your children to hang out with gang members or to attend parties where gang members might be present. Do not allow



your child to write or practice writing gang names, symbols, or any other gang signs.

Do not buy or allow your children to dress in gang-style clothing. Young people like to express themselves through the clothes they wear. However, there is often a fine line between "normal" teen clothing and gang-style dress. You should become an expert on what gangs in your community wear and how they behave. This knowledge will help you set appropriate limits on what your children can wear.

Work within your community. Don't try to go it alone. Join other parents and community members to provide recreational opportunities, programs that are appealing to young people, and community activities that build confidence and self-respect.

If you are concerned that your child might be involved in a gang, you should first talk about the situation with a school counselor, law enforcement officer, or gang expert. To locate an expert, try calling United Way's new information line, 2-1-1, and ask for an expert on gang prevention in your community.

If a gang-related incident occurs, make sure you cooperate with authorities. Your help and support may prevent others from becoming victims of gang violence. Information concerning gang crimes, wanted suspects, or any violent gang activity should be reported to the police, even if you are intimately involved.

For additional information:

www.safeyouth.org/scripts/index.asp

www.ncpc.org/publications/brochures/

www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/familyworks/gangs-00.html

www.gangsor.us.com

www.iir.com/nygc

www.gripe4rkids.org

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