



GANG PREVENTION

A Resource Guide on Youth & Gangs



NOVA SCOTIA
Justice



Department of Justice
Canada

Ministère de la Justice
Canada



“Halifax Regional Police has witnessed the emergence of youth/street gangs over the past several years. As a preventative measure, we are proud to partner with the Department of Justice to provide this booklet to educate both youth and those who can influence them so we all realize the negative impact gangs have on our community and encourage our children to make healthy lifestyle choices.”

- Chief Frank A. Beazley, Halifax Regional Police

Introduction

The potential growth of youth gangs is a concern both in Halifax and across Canada. By being aware of the signs of gang membership, we can all play a role in preventing the development and growth of gangs in our communities.

There is a lot of misunderstanding about what street gangs are, how they attract new recruits, how to deal with gangs at the community level and how gang members can escape the gang lifestyle.

From a community perspective, it is important to remember:

- Street Gang Violence is not usually targeted toward the general public - in most cases, violence is the result of attempts to settle scores between rival gangs.
- Street gang activity is not about religious or cultural differences - it is motivated by profit and power.
- Street Gang members can be from any racial, ethno-cultural or socio-economic group.
- The street gang lifestyle is not glamorous as depicted in movies and videos, and can be fatal.

A Resource Guide on Youth and Gangs is a collection of tips, techniques and background information designed to explain how to prevent gang development, how these groups operate and what signs parents, teachers, community partners and police should be looking for to determine if there are gangs in their community.

In addition to learning how to identify gang-type behaviour in youth, you'll also learn what you can do to prevent the development of gangs and gang activity in your neighbourhood.

By making an effort to educate yourself about what makes gangs tick, you've already taken the first step in making sure your children and the youth in your community don't get pulled into the dangerous gang lifestyle.

“This guide will help inform young Nova Scotians, parents and people who work with youth about the harm done by gangs and gang activity. By working together we can prevent and address gang activity in Nova Scotia, while creating positive and healthy environments for young people in our province.”

– The Honourable Murray Scott, M.B., Minister of Justice



Definition of a Gang

What elements determine that a group is a gang versus just friends or acquaintances? For a group to be called a “gang” in Canada, certain elements have to exist. Bill C-24 came into effect on February 1, 2002 and gives police agencies clear definition of what constitutes a gang. This information is also useful for parents, teachers, police and community partners as youth may deny gang involvement and insist their fellow gang members are just ‘friends.’

Bill C-24 - Criminal Organization Definition

A Criminal Organization means:

1. A group, however organized, that is composed of three or more persons and;
2. That has as one of its main purposes or main activities the facilitation or commission of one or more serious offences;
3. That, if committed, would likely result in the direct or indirect receipt of a material benefit, including a financial benefit, by the group or by any one of the persons who constitute the group.

It does not include a group of persons that form randomly for the immediate commission of a single offence.

In determining whether an individual participates in or actively contributes to any activity of a Criminal Organization, the court may look at the following:

- If they use a name, word, symbol or other representation that identifies, or is associated with, that Criminal Organization.
- If they frequently associate with any of the persons who constitute the Criminal Organization;
- If they receive any benefit from the Criminal Organization.
- If they repeatedly engage in activities at the instruction of any of the persons who constitute the Criminal Organization.

The Gang Mentality

It is important to realize that media coverage and acknowledgement of gang members in the community and schools is positive reinforcement for their actions. Being feared by others is, for them, a badge of honour.

The central theme in any gang-involved individual's life is to be respected by his or her group, rivals and non-members. A willingness to do anything for the gang is the basis for developing your reputation. This may prompt new members to commit acts they feel would impress the older members.

Disrespect for rivals is shown by making derogatory comments or graffiti, or defacing rival graffiti, showing up and causing problems in the other gang's hangouts, rival gang websites, drug "rip offs or selling drugs on the rival's 'turf' and even instilling fear in the rival's family.

No act of disrespect, no matter how small, goes without some response. Insults or acts of disrespect, if not responded to immediately, will build up, fuel animosity and eventually require some response. This response may vary from committing acts of mischief or vandalism to very violent acts against the individual or group responsible. Weapons are often involved and innocent bystanders can be affected.

Once these three elements of gang mentality are set in motion, the cycle of rival violence becomes a primary reason why they are of such concern to police and the community.

You don't have to be a gang member to be influenced by this mentality. Non-members, including families and friends who associate with gangs, often begin to embrace the mentality and incorporate it into their responses to life's situations.

The 3 R's of Gang Life

Reputation

- Reputation is of critical concern to all gang members, referred to as 'rep' by these individuals. It determines the member's status within the gang.
- The more violent and anti-social the reputation, the better.
- During the past few years, the public's perception of gang members has automatically resulted in a negative reputation for them. Just hearing the word 'gang' conjures up feelings of fear in most people.
- Gang members relish this reputation and constantly strive to make themselves as ruthless and notorious as possible.

Respect

- Gang members demand 'respect' from other members within their own gang and from others outside their gang.
- They typically become aggressive and violent if they don't receive the respect they feel they deserve.
- Respect is viewed by gang members as critically important for both individual members and for the gang as a whole.

Retaliation

- Within the gang culture, challenges do not go unanswered.
- Gang members who feel they have been disrespected will retaliate.
- This retaliation can range from vandalizing property to arson and murder.

Gang members work at building a REPUTATION that will hold them in high regard with their peers. They demand the RESPECT they feel deserve as gang members. If they don't get that respect, they RETALIATE.

Common Traits of Gang Members

- ***Looking for a surrogate family.*** Young people join gangs to receive the attention, affirmation and protection they may feel they lack at home and school.
- ***Breakdown of traditional family units.*** Many young people do not have positive adult role models. Many see domestic violence, alcohol, drugs and even prostitution in their family life as the norm.
- ***Identity or recognition problems.*** Because of low self-worth and self-esteem, some youth join gangs seeking the status they lack due to unemployment or low achievement at school. If young people do not see themselves as intelligent, leaders, athletes or talented, they join other groups where they feel they can excel.
- ***Criminal Family History.*** Many street gang members are carrying on a family tradition established by grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, parents and siblings whom they see as role models.
- ***Need for money.*** The monetary allure of gang membership is difficult to counteract. Gang members share profits from drug trafficking, robberies, theft rings and other illegal activities. Money translates into social status which is an added pressure on teens. Too often, however, new gang members ignore the price of gang membership until they are deeply involved - only then do they see that it is the 'established' gang members who profit the most.
- ***Poverty.*** Socio-economic issues and unemployment are a reality for many teens. Becoming a gang member can provide youth with an opportunity to make money quickly because many gangs are involved in the illegal sale of drugs, stolen goods and firearms.
- ***Use of intimidation and violence.*** To coerce others to join their gang, members may recruit through scare tactics. People are often forced into membership to protect themselves or their families from the local gang or the local gang's rivals.
- ***Need for survival.*** Gang membership could also be viewed as a safe haven to a young person living in a very dysfunctional family.

General Risk Factors

Family Indicators

- Stressful home life
- Parental non-involvement
- Low parental education level
- Low parental expectations
- Abuse/neglect
- Ineffective parenting
- Permissive truancy attitudes
- Criminal behaviour by other family members

Personal Indicators

- Low motivation
- Low educational and occupational aspirations
- Low self-esteem
- Behavioural/discipline problems
- Alcohol or drug use
- Poor peer relations
- Negative police involvement
- Poor internalization skills

Community Indicators

- Lack of community support services
- Lack of community support for schools
- High incidence of criminal activity
- Lack of school/community linkages
- Lack of recreational facilities
- High transient population
- Lack of youth employment opportunities
- Community norms are inattentive to alcohol/drug abuse
- Youth are not seen as assets to the community

School indicators

- Low teacher expectations
- Poor academic background
- Conflict between home/school cultures
- Lack of educational options
- Negative school environment
- Lack of student responsibility
- Lack of effective attendance system
- Lack of effective discipline system
- Gang style clothing

Gang Behaviour

As a form of identification, gangs may select a dress code. The dress code may be either the universal dress code for their type of gang or as individual as the gang members themselves.

The dress code is very important to the gang. It is a statement of loyalty. If an opposing gang member were to wear an opponent's fashion trends in a disrespectful way or act negatively toward it (i.e. burning a bandana in a rival gang's colour), it could result in confrontation between the two gangs.

Innocent bystanders may also be at the mercy of gang fashion. If a gang sees someone wearing a clothing item or dressed in the style of a rival gang, they may be mistaken for a member of that group and confronted.

Tattoos as a form of identification

Gangs may incorporate their 'sign' within tattoos, however, tattoos have become an increasingly normal form of art and expression within society; in this regard, tattoos themselves are not viewed as indicators of gang insignia or participation.

These expressions of body art can be telling just the same. It may be useful to ask why a youth, or your child, has selected a particular design or logo. By posing this question, you may receive an answer that will indicate an unusual degree of loyalty to a particular group.

Gang Fashion

The items listed here apply to both male and female gang members but are NOT limited to gangs - many are simply reflections of current trends and styles.

- Hats and baseball caps (certain team names and initials that are the same as the gang; some worn backwards or on a tilt; some embroidered with gang initials or signs)
- Jewellery (reflecting gang colours, initials or symbols)
- Professional sports team jackets (same initials or colour as the gang)
- Bandanas (reflecting gang colours or worn a specific way)
- Baggy clothing that may be designed to hide weapons or contraband
- Concealing clothing (hoodies worn with hood up concealing identity of the wearer)
- Custom t-shirts embroidered with gang names, symbols, logos or messages

REMEMBER- A current dress trend may be adopted by gangs.

YOUNG PEOPLE DRESSING THIS WAY DOES NOT NECESSARILY INDICATE THEY ARE MEMBERS OF A GANG.

A Guide to Gang Prevention

Awareness is the first step to preventing a gang problem from developing in your community. Whether you realize it or not, all children can be at risk to join gangs. As a parent, you have a lot more power than you think to prevent gangs from establishing and to stop your children from joining a gang.

Good Social Skills

Children and teens that have good social skills are less likely to join gangs or to be involved in negative behaviour. To build self-confidence and respect for others in their children, parents need to teach:

- ***Honest Communication.*** Children need to learn to express feelings such as anger, joy, love and fear. They must believe it is okay for them to express these feelings without being teased or punished.
- ***Cooperation.*** Children must learn to cooperate, negotiate and put themselves in another person's shoes. Praise your children for cooperating, especially when they are able to work out a compromise.
- ***Personal Responsibility.*** Teach your children to be responsible for their actions. Let them know that even if they don't get something right at first, what counts is that they are trying hard and learning from the experience.
- ***Ability to make decisions.*** Instead of solving problems for your children, give them the chance to think of possible solutions.
- ***Ability to give and receive unconditional love.*** Love your children for who they are, regardless of how well they do in school, sports or other activities. Even if you are angry with them, let them know you still love and respect them.
- ***Community involvement.*** Recent studies have found that youth often do not feel valued in their community. Encourage and provide opportunities for youth to volunteer and be a part of community organizations.

A Balance Between Love and Discipline

Children may join a gang to gain a sense of belonging. To show your children they are loved and valued:

- ***Spend time alone with each child.*** It doesn't matter what you do, as long as you get to know each other better.

- ***Plan Family Time.*** Make time for your family to play, eat meals together, take trips, keep family traditions, and have family meetings to talk about plans, feelings and complaints.
- ***Listen to your children and ask their opinions.*** Help your children talk with you without fear of punishment. Do not talk down to your children - even though adults are older, children's thoughts and feelings deserve respect.
- ***Talk to your children about ways to deal with pressure from friends.*** Help your children make up some simple ways to respond to peer pressure. For example, if your child is challenged by a peer who says "If you are my friend, you would...", your child can respond, "If you were my friend you wouldn't ask." Then he/she should walk away.
- ***Set limits with your children and teens.*** Children and teenagers need to know clearly what is expected of them and the consequences for acting otherwise. Do not rescue children from the consequences of their decisions.
- ***Build Assets.*** Give youth meaningful opportunities to be involved in decision making, planning and implementation of family, school and community projects.

Explain the Danger of Gangs

Learn about the risk of gangs establishing and potential gang activity in your area. Talk to your children about the negative things that gangs do, and how they can affect your child, their friends, your neighbourhood and your family.

- ***Do not allow your children to dress in gang style clothing.*** Explain to your children that these items of clothing can put them in danger and that you will not purchase them or allow them to be worn.
- ***Point out violent messages on television and in movies.*** Talk to your children about ways they can solve their problems without fighting or violence, and demonstrate the strategies in your own life.
- ***Get to know your child's friends and their parents.*** When children start to feel pressure to use drugs or join gangs, it usually comes from their friends.
- ***Start educating your children at an early age.*** While a five-year-old may not understand the effects of joining a gang, they can learn to say "no" to negative behaviour.

'Adapted from the National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations'

Gang Threat to Community

Level 1 - No Gangs

'No Gangs' means the community has neither the signs nor the existence of gangs.

Possible Responses

- Maintain and implement prevention and parenting programs in schools and community.
- Reinforce positive attitudes regarding family, home, community and laws.
- Maintain strong business/civic interaction with schools.
- Teach multi-cultural sensitivity, awareness, tolerance and respect.
- Enforce a reasonable dress code.
- Reinforce codes of conduct.

Level 2 - Early Gangs

'Early Gangs' means the community actually has active gangs, though they may not be publicly recognized or considered a major problem.

Possible Responses

- Involve law enforcement and/or the community to share gang intelligence and program information.
- Establish school and community prevention/education programs.
- Increased sports and other community activities.
- Deter vandalism and graffiti.
- Launch anti-gang public information campaigns.

Level 3 - Active Gangs

'Active Gangs' refers to communities in which there are visible signs of gangs, where residents acknowledge the problem and consider it serious, and where gangs are increasingly active over time.

Possible Responses

- Develop and implement target-area strategies.
- Develop and implement strategies to suppress gangs.
- Mobilize the community.
- Establish parent education/accountability programs.
- Help students find jobs.
- Develop an inter-agency strategy to share information.

Level 4 - Dominated By Gangs

'Dominated by Gangs' describes a community in which the gangs have sufficient enough control that most youth expect to join a gang or experience threats and intimidation to join. In this type of community, residents fear for their safety if they speak out or act against the gangs.

Possible Responses

- Continue major community mobilization efforts.
- Establish collaboration between community groups and anti-gang professionals/law enforcement.
- Campaign to 'reclaim the school, parks and kids.'

Rules for Working with Gangs

People who work to prevent gangs from developing and who work with gang activity in the community should be prepared for a negative, confrontational attitude in the beginning. You must find ways to develop mutually respectful relationships if you hope to have any effect on gang activity.

- Be decisive, firm and fair. Lenient treatment of gang members is viewed as a weakness and they will take full advantage of you.
- Intimidation of gang members usually escalates into a confrontation and seldom creates respect.
- Remember, lectures used to merely scare a gang member usually won't work.
- If media attention is needed, always emphasize the negative side of gang involvement (arrest, conviction, death, etc.), so as to not glorify gang involvement.
- When graffiti is discovered, read it, record it, remove it and report it.
- View each gang member or suspected member as an individual. They may be a 'poser' or a 'wannabe' and your actions could push them into full gang involvement.
- Prevent conflict whenever possible. Previous experience has proven that an incident - no matter how minor today - can cause many more gang-related or motivated acts of vengeance or reprisal.
- It is important to understand that gang or youth crime involvement often has as much to do with one's attitude as it does behaviour.
- A negative attitude towards anyone or anything that represents authority is typical of students involved in gangs. Be prepared to approach gang members at a personal and individual level.
- No matter what your level of response, don't leave the gang member feeling you are harbouring a personal grudge against him or her.

Working with Families

If you work with families or young people in the community you can help support parents and youth and prevent the development of gangs.

- ***Listen.*** Ask how they feel and consider body language as well as words and voice tones. Listen to the interactions among family members for clues to underlying relationships.
- ***Don't blame.*** Sometimes, family members will try to enlist you on 'their side.' Sometimes, it is tempting to buy in to the 'if only...' thinking. Your goal should be to enlist, encourage and empower people, not load them with guilt.
- ***Be Available.*** In a busy world with many urgent priorities, this can be the hardest job of all, but being in places where family members can reach you in person and by phone, and being open to their concerns, makes the overall job much easier.
- ***Have the facts.*** Dealing in rumours, opinions and innuendos hurts your own credibility. Factual answers can also defuse tensions.
- ***Be an ally.*** Helping people to do things themselves may at first seem more difficult than doing it on your own. But keeping in mind the ally/helper role makes it easier to enjoy the enormous benefits of empowering the families you are working with.
- ***Be a resource.*** As a person with specialized training, knowledge, experience and contacts, you know many ways to help people.
- ***Be sensitive to family culture.*** Regional differences, cultural differences and differences in heritage can influence how family members go about working together with you.

Community Responses

- Street gang prevention/intervention cannot be assigned as the sole responsibility of any one service agency.
- Gangs are not just a police problem, a school problem or a family problem.
- Cooperation between parents, police, the community and government officials is proving to be the most effective way to deal with gangs.
- Collaborative prevention/intervention efforts are likely to be more effective if they are initiated when the signs of gang activity first appear.
- Remember that prevention is the key to controlling gang activity.
- Everyone and every community can work on solutions to gang activity.
- Effective anti-gang efforts begin with partnerships among parents, schools, law enforcement, religious institutions, community organizations, businesses and youth.

Community Organization/ Mobilization

- Involvement of local citizens, including former gang members, and community groups and agencies is essential.
- Coordination of programs and functions of staff within and across agencies makes a difference.
- Uniting organizational and citizen energies (including perceptions, definitions, communications and actions in reference to particular gang concerns) makes managing big problems manageable.
- Inter-agency coordination is very important.

Social Opportunities

- Develop a variety of specific educational, training and employment programs targeted to gang-involved individuals.

Social Intervention

- Youth-serving agencies, schools, grassroots groups, churches, police and criminal justice organizations must ‘reach out’ and act as the link between street gangs, their families and the conventional world.
- The aim is to develop meaningful social relationships from these individual relationships that emphasize, in an integrated way:
 - Positive communication;
 - Social development;
 - Social control.

Suppression

- Formal and informal social control measures, including close supervision or monitoring of gang members by agencies of the criminal justice system, are essential. Suppression through community-based agencies, schools and grassroots groups within the community is also important.
- The target population of this vigorous law enforcement is all potential and active gang members.

Organizational Change and Development

- For each of the strategies to work, the community must commit to keeping an open mind and developing new ideas and methods for dealing with the continuing threat of gang activity.
- The solution to safe communities, now and for years to come, lies in long-range planning, which takes innovation, dedication and perseverance.

Getting Out of a Gang

When a gang member learns that he/she can meet his/her needs in other ways, he/she may decide to leave the gang. When a child decides he/she wants to leave, here are a few simple steps that can help with the transition:

- ***Believe in your power to change.*** Gangs are a dead-end street. No matter who you are, what you have done or where you live, you deserve better.
- ***Begin spending your time doing other things.*** Instead of hanging out with your gang friends, find something else to do during that time. There are possibilities everywhere: sports, recreation centres, arts programs, drama, school activities, even spending time with your family.
- ***Try to stop looking like a gangster.*** As you begin to believe in yourself, you will find you do not need to make other people feel afraid of you to feel good about yourself.
- ***Find alternatives to your former habits.*** Stop hanging out with gang members and emulating their behaviour.
- ***Get good at making excuses.*** Stop taking calls from gang members and decline invitations to hang out with them.
- ***Find people who support and believe in you.*** Find people who expect more of you and make yourself accountable to those people. Community Police Officers, School Response Officers, teachers, coaches, parents and recreation staff members are just a few examples of who to turn to for support and encouragement.

Acknowledgements

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- Mike Knox, The Gang Guy
- National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations
- Multi-System Approach to Street Gangs (Manitoba)
- Salt Lake Area Gang Project - Salt Lake City, Utah
- Search Institute - Asset Building in Youth

Website Resources

- Nova Scotia Department of Justice:
www.gov.ns.ca/just/
- Halifax Regional Police:
www.halifax.ca/police/
- Edmonton Police Service:
www.police.edmonton.ab.ca
- Canadian Organized Crime Information:
www.cisc.gc.ca
- Study of Violence/Youth:
www.killology.com
- National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations:
www.nagia.org
- Search Institute-Developmental Assets:
www.search-institute.org

These sites provide publications on gang activity:

- Ontario Partnership:
www.notogangs.org
- National Youth & Gang Centre:
www.iir.com/nygc
- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention:
www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org
- Online resource page for gang information:
www.ganginformation.com

For more information on gangs in Halifax Regional Municipality, contact the Halifax Regional Police Quick Response Unit at:

(902) 490-GANG (4264)