

WHAT PARENTS
SHOULD KNOW ABOUT GANGS

STREET GANG AWARENESS

GANG-- a structured group of 3 or more individuals bonded together on a continuing basis for the purpose of committing antisocial or criminal acts.

Most gang members are bonded together by race, culture, sex, or location. Not all youths who are members of a group should be classified as gang members. Within the category of these groups are those who have formed an alliance, but are not criminally motivated. Officials should be aware of other groups referred to with terms such as *posses, turf groups and fraternities*.

Certain street gangs are more sophisticated than others and are known on a national level, while others are merely groups of youths who have formed for many varied reasons, including social alliance. Each precinct, and almost every town in Nassau County has some form of anti-social, youth group activity. These members are generally not organized, nor are they the more serious criminal offenders. Their actions are usually limited to harassing other youths, criminal mischief and other incidents influenced by underage drinking.

Many of the street gangs in urban areas of the United States are formed for ethnic, monetary, geographic or protective reasons. They are usually comprised of a single ethnic group thereby allowing for an ethnic solidarity to form among the members. This solidarity permits the gang members to remain apart from other youths in the community. It also affords them the feeling that they are above parental supervision. Very often the gangs will use aspects of their native culture as initiation rituals or as codes in the affairs of the gang.

Although self-preservation is a major reason for joining a gang, very often the focal point of a gang's formation is financial gain. Narcotic sales, extortion, protection rackets, and robberies are used as a means to finance the gang's daily activities.

Gangs are also territorial and are usually comprised of members who reside in a specific area. This allows for the formation of areas known as "turf", in which members can operate without being preyed upon by rival members. It also allows for the members to insulate themselves from rival gangs and grants freedom from the domination of elders in the neighborhood. The gang with the best "rep" (reputation for violence) is often the gang that is most feared and therefore believed to be the safest to join.

REASONS FOR JOINING A GANG

Gangs are able to provide their members with a host of services. Many of these services relate to needs that are not met via legitimately sanctioned organizations and activities. The list of those needs, which gang members feel are being met, comprise the gangster mentality:

- Sense of family
- Protection
- Identity/recognition
- Respect
- Acceptance
- Financial gain

Family is first, foremost and an integral component in all relationships. Youth experience a sense of alienation and powerlessness because of a lack of traditional support structures, such as family and school. This void can lead to feelings of frustration and anger thus creating the desire to obtain support outside of traditional institutions.

The sense of belonging becomes a major source of identity for gang members. Everyone has a desire to be a part of something or attached to someone. In turn, gang membership affords our youth a sense of power and control with gang activities becoming an outlet for their anger.

Control of their turf is essential to the well being of the gang, as they (gangs) will use force to control both their territory and members.

Finally, the recruitment of new members and the expansion of territory are essential if a gang is to maintain its strength and power. Both "willing" and "unwilling" members are drawn into gangs to fill the need for greater resources and more members.

Taken together these four factors interact to produce gangs that become more powerful and ruthless as they work to maintain and expand their control over territory and youth.

GANG IDENTIFIERS

The following is a list of warning signs depicting an emerging gang presence. It should be understood that more than one identifier need be observed in order to confirm the presence of gang activity.

GRAFFITI

In the beginning the graffiti covers a small geographical area that grows larger as the street gang becomes bolder and gains confidence. Their graffiti marks their turf, thus informing other gangs of their presence. Rival gangs will often cross out opposing graffiti. Officials should take note that cross outs are territorial -insults and often lead to retribution. Graffiti is usually signed by the author (moniker or tag) and may also contain the names of other members. Murals or memorials contain the names of deceased members.

COLORS

All gangs have designated colors. Their colors may be worn in any number of different ways, eg.: beads, bandannas, clothing (including sports attire) hats, shoelaces, key chains, back packs, national flags, etc.

HAND SIGNS

Most street gangs utilize some form of hand sign(s). It's their means of greeting, identifying and communicating with each other. While its helpful to be able to distinguish between the various hand signs, thus allowing you to identify the specific gang, it is not imperative that you be able to read all the signs. Merely realizing the use of some type of hand sign will provide beneficial assistance to the individual in his/her identification of the subject gang affiliation.

Officials confronting possible gang members should note that hand signs are utilized to forewarn and prepare other members of a possible impending attack upon an unsuspecting official.

TATTOOS

Gang members will often tattoo their head, hands, arms, chest, and back with gang markings. The tattoos play a significant role in identifying specific gangs, as most members will have multiple tattoos. Generally, one of those tattoos will clearly identify their gang.

ADMISSIONS AND ASSOCIATIONS

Gang members are proud. As such, given the right circumstances they will not hesitate to identify with the gang and readily admit their association. Once an official has identified an individual as a gang member, he/she can then more easily identify others. Note that mere association with a known gang member does not confirm an individual's membership. Officials should look for additional identifying factors prior to making a decision regarding membership. As an interviewer you can extract vital information from these individuals. Further, if you are aware that gang members focus heavily on respect, when afforded it most members will become exceptionally co-operative.

HANGOUTS

Gang members meet on a routine basis. They do so to conduct business, including everything from the collection of dues to the administration of punishments. Many of their meetings take place in public. (eg. park, school yard, etc.)

WANNA BE

There is no such thing as a "Wanna Be." Any individual, who wants to be a member of the gang, is, in the opinion of our investigators, a "gang member." The *wanna be* has a greater potential to commit criminal acts, particularly violent acts, than his/her established veteran counterpart. This *wanna be* member has something to prove, thus he/she can easily confirm their allegiance by committing frequent and more serious criminal acts. Simply stated, the *wanna be* is the J.V. member who hopes to make the "Varsity."

INDICATORS OF POSSIBLE STREET GANG INVOLVEMENT

The following signs may be used to identify potential gang affiliation. Be careful not to assume that displaying any of the followings signs assures gang involvement. To insure proper identification consult with your local law enforcement agency.

- Sudden poor school grades coupled with a disinterest in school.
- Withdrawal from family activities.
- Use of unknown vocabulary (gangs utilize their own terminology and codes)
- A sudden change in friends.
- Any evidence of drug abuse.
- Utilization of hand signs.
- The desire for excessive privacy.
- Acquiring a new nickname.
- Displaying a poor attitude toward family, school and authorities.
- The purchase or desire to buy clothing of all one color or style.
- Changing physical appearance with special haircuts, shaved eyebrows, and specific tattoos.
- Drawing gang graffiti on personal belongings, such as backpacks, notebooks, posters, furniture, etc.
- Staying out much later than usual with no legitimate reasoning.

WHAT PARENTS, FAMILY OR FRIENDS CAN DO

- Avoid Denial.
- Become Informed.
- Become Involved and Stay Involved.
- Get To Know Your Children's Friends.
- Create And Maintain Good Communication With Your Child.
- Create Quality Time with Your Child; Soliciting Their Input In Social Activities.
- Teach Good Values While Instilling Responsibility.
- Monitor Media Usage.
- Encourage Healthy Activities.
- Speak With Your Child In A Positive Way, Avoiding Negative Or Demeaning Criticism.
- Don't Be Embarrassed To Tell Your Child How Much You Love Them While Emphasizing The Significance Of Their Being Your Child.
- Don't Be Afraid To Say No While Remaining Firm, Yet Fair.
- Refuse To Give In To Peer Pressure.
- Above All, Be A True Role Model.

PARENTS & GANGS

Gang involvement does not occur overnight. Young people in trouble cry out in different ways. Crises do not just occur they develop gradually. We must recognize the warning signs. Prevention begins with being concerned. It may sound simplistic, however it's the first and most important step. Unfortunately, caring alone will not suffice. Each parent, teacher, law enforcement agent and community member must be familiar with the tell-tale signs of an emerging gang presence and the potential for their child/student to become a gang member.

Our youth become gang members for various reasons. The primary reason is their need to belong. Everyone needs to feel connected. Family fulfills that need and provides a strong sense of personal importance and identity. The key is healthy, constructive communication combined with an ability to provide your child with a high sense of self-esteem. Bonding with your child is essential. The following are family bonding strategies:

IDENTITY

Give them a sense of who they are in the family, what values your family represents and a sense of self-esteem.

PROTECTION

A good environment offer food, shelter, clothing and a feeling that the family is a refuge from outside negative forces. A place where they can receive love and understanding; when hurt occurs, a place where "wounds get licked.

SENSE OF BELONGING

Acceptance is probably one of the strongest emotionally drawing forces. Families do not need to condone negative behavior, yet it is important to still be loved and be an important part of the family -- even when we make mistakes.

BOUNDARIES AND LIMITS

Children claim that they want freedom and they do need freedom. However, freedom with no boundaries or constraints places inordinate pressure on young minds. Our youth have often not reached the appropriate level of maturity to make such decisions. We can reduce this pressure. Unfortunately, parents are also sometimes reluctant to set boundaries for fear of hurting their child or fear of rejection. Ironically, children do not feel loved or protected if there are no limits or boundaries. Boundaries should be set with thought and reason for the purpose of teaching the child to make good choices.

**GANGS HAVE NO PROBLEM SETTING LIMITS
"YOU CROSS THE LINE AND YOU'RE DEAD"**

SET GOOD EXAMPLES

SUPERVISE (age appropriate) **YOUR CHILD'S ACTIVITIES.**

MONITOR WHAT THEY SEE AND WHAT THEY HEAR
music, reading materials, television and movies.

BE ACTIVE IN THE P.T.A.

COOPERATION (cooperate and assist schools in rules, planning, student activities and student attendance).

SPEND TIME WITH YOUR CHILD AND LISTEN TO HIM/HER.

These warning signs will help to identify a child's gang involvement:

Does your Child have gang tattoos?

Has your child been arrested with gang members?

Does your child wear gang colors/gang garb?

Does your child display gang markings or slogans?

Parents must realize that nothing can guarantee that a child will not be lured into gangs, yet there are steps that can be taken to minimize the likelihood of their child joining a gang.

Remember gangs thrive on angry youths who lack parental respect and have loose or no family ties. They feed on children without an identity and whose value system is faulty or compromised. They can give your child good feelings by providing drugs and promote self-esteem by sharing lots of money. But in the end, it will be the child who loses as drugs and money are given to attract. Once the gang has cultivated the relationship, the next step is an allegiance into a world of violent crime.