

Introduction to Youth Gangs

What is a Gang?

A gang is a distinctive group of associated adolescents or young adults, who, due to involvement in extensive illegal activities develop a negative identity with law enforcement and/ or neighborhood residents.

Gangs are not a new phenomenon. From poor, white youth gangs in 17th century London who wore distinct "colors" to identify themselves, to the Triads and Yakuza of China and Japan, gangs have arisen whenever or wherever they find a social or economic vacuum.

Today's youth gangs differ from their predecessors in four critical ways:

1. They are larger.
2. They are more organizationally sophisticated.
3. They have full access to powerful weaponry.
4. They recruit children as young as seven and eight years old.

The combination of these four factors makes today's youth gangs a significant threat to society at large.

Why Do Youth Join Gangs?

Gang members generally come from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds where there is a breakdown in family and community cohesiveness. Youth see the gang as a way to fill the psychological, social, physical and economic needs that the family and community at large have failed to fill. Gangs provide friendship, security, a sense of purpose and identity, along with an opportunity to gain wealth.

WHAT HAPPENS INSIDE THE GANG?

The key to understanding gang behavior lies in properly identifying the gang's primary objectives and leadership structure. Generally, most youth gangs fall into one of three distinct categories: *corporate*, *territorial* and *scavenger*.

■ **CORPORATE GANGS** focus their attention on making money, and have a clearly defined division of labor. The activities that gang members engage in are almost exclusively for profit. Corporate gangs tend to have a well-entrenched vertical hierarchy, and are likely to participate in a group rather than individual violence. Since these gangs tend to focus on making money, violence is usually administered in carefully prescribed situations. The vertical hierarchy tends to limit the visibility of these gangs to law enforcement, and it also makes it exceedingly difficult to leave the gang if one wishes to leave. These gangs also care less about turf than they do profit, and are highly mobile. Of all the active U.S. gangs, Chinese gangs tend to be the most hierarchical (B.J.A., 1998).

■ **TERRITORIAL GANGS** tend to focus on the possession of turf, and gang members are very quick to use violence to secure and protect what they see as theirs. There is some level of organization in territorial gangs, but it is much less developed than in corporate gangs. These gangs have a flatter hierarchy, which results in less control over individual members and a higher rate of gratuitous violence. Since they are tied to their turf, territorial gangs are much easier to keep track of, contain, and leave if a member so desires to do so. Hispanic gangs tend to be the most territorial (B.J.A., 1998).

■ **SCAVENGER GANGS** have very little organizational structure, and gang membership is motivated more by a need to belong to a group than anything else. The crimes that they commit are usually impulsive and often senseless. There are no objectives and goals for the gang, and leadership is very fluid (often depending on who is the most violent that day). The gang members tend to be low achievers who are prone to violence and erratic behavior (B.J.A., 1998).

How Do Youth Leave Gangs?

There may come a time when a gang-affiliated youth wishes to leave the gang. Depending on the type of gang that he/she belongs to, this will be anywhere from a slightly difficult to an almost impossible task. Many gangs view membership as a lifetime commitment; the only way to get out is to die. If the gang's hierarchy is fairly fluid (as is the case with many territorial and scavenger gangs), chances are that youth will experience only a moderate amount of difficulty in splintering off. Yet, if the gang has an extremely structured and rigid hierarchy (as do most corporate gangs), leaving may be highly dangerous. In these rigid and hierarchical gangs, values are more entrenched and the network to enforce those values more extensive. Members may be killed as a reminder to everyone else that one cannot just "wish" to be out of the gang.

General Guidelines

For Working with Gang-Affiliated Youth

"The most important thing to remember is that trust must be earned. Without this nothing else will occur."

Minister Robert E. Lee

Most youth who join gangs have experienced few trusting relationships outside of their gang family. Traditional role models such as parents, grandparents, teachers and clergy are often absent or have let youth down numerous times through broken promises and scanty support.

This does not mean that gang-affiliated youth cannot develop a solid and trusting relationship with a mentor or other individual outside of the gang. But how does a mentor begin to earn the trust of a mentee who is hostile to authority? The answer to this question is patience, as well as willingness on the part of the mentor to pursue the relationship. If the process of building this relationship is hurried, or the mentor comes off as something other than 'real' to the gang member, than the relationship will founder.

Being 'real' is nothing more than relating a genuine concern for the gang member, and the ability to act on this concern without it sounding contrived, preachy, or presented in a culturally inappropriate manner. Being 'real' means the mentor does not condemn their mentee for their actions, or launch into a diatribe about their immorality. To be "real" is to listen, understand and help (if help is asked for).

The following tips are some general rules of thumb to help mentors gain and keep the trust of their gang-affiliated mentees. The guidelines are simple, but must be applied consistently and wholeheartedly.

- Be reliable.**
Most gang-affiliated youth have been let down numerous times.
- Always look for the positive in the youth.**
- Find out what youth like and build on this.**
Their interests are your foundation for building a solid relationship.
- Be real.**
Do not be somebody you're not.
- Absolutely do not make any promises that you cannot keep.**
- Never talk about the youth behind his/her back.**
- If there is a problem, deal with it immediately and privately.**
- Be a good role model.**
Practice what you preach.
- Avoid stereotyping.**
All youth are not the same.
- Be accepting of the youth's description and perception of their life experience.**
- Be aware that every person has different experiences than you.**
- Recognize your communication style and be comfortable with it**
(e.g., laid back, animated, stern).
- Listen to the youth.**
And he or she will listen to you.
- Be very aware of your body language.**
Remember, gangs do a lot of posturing and may feel threatened by sudden hand movements.
- Strive to understand your mentee's language.**
Do not be afraid to ask, "What does that word mean?"
- Make your mentee feel valued, significant, appreciated and accepted.**
- Let them know when you feel uncomfortable.**
- Avoid taking things personally.**
- Remember, you cannot help those who do not wish to be helped.**
Do not force a situation. Do not push too much. If the individual is not responding in a positive manner to your entreaties, back-off.

Approaching and Engaging Gang-Involved Youth

"There was one person that I'll never forget. It was a school teacher who had a lot of interest in kids. She took me under her wing. She taught me how to read and write. She was probably the most important person in my life."

A former gang member

The manner in which you approach and communicate with gang-involved youth will determine how much they are able to trust you, and hence, how productive your relationship with them will become. It is important to understand the social rules of your mentee's gang and to meet him/her on their own terms. This is especially true during the first few months of your relationship.

Following are some general suggestions to increase the trust and reduce the discomfort between yourself and your mentee.

- First contact with a gang member should be informal, brief and conducted when gang members are together.**

It has been found that most successful communication is done in an informal setting (e.g., when hanging out in their claimed territory).

- Learn their names.**

Most youth, both gang members and non-gang members, feel a sense of importance when an adult calls them by their name.

- Maintain the distinction of the adult position, and demand the respect that this position accords.**

Members do not need another buddy; they have each other. What they need is somebody to assist them in becoming a person who is accepted by society at large.

- ❑ **If a private conversation with an individual member is desired, a formal setting, such as an office, or inside someone's house may be suitable.**

Asking a mentee about such things as school progress, home situations, or social activities only when alone and away from other gang members will help him/her avoid causing embarrassment and "loss of face."

- ❑ **When a strong relationship develops between the member and the adult, discussions can focus on more serious issues.**

At this point, it may be possible to begin discussing alternatives to gang activity and where the gang member sees himself in the future.

Gangs and Identity

A gang is nothing more than another community, and like all communities the gang provides rules and norms to those within it. As a gang member, one is instructed on how to walk, talk, dress, whom to speak to and in what manner.

Inside the gang, a youth discovers the missing elements he/she needs to cement their emerging identity. Through the gang culture, the youth learns where they stand, what their role is, what their social and economic opportunities is, and whom they can lean on for support.

Like mainstream cultures, gangs have highly codified rites of passage and initiation. Through the practice of these rituals, youth gain a sense of tradition and pride. The rites of initiation also enhance individual and group self-esteem. The initiate knows that he/she has passed a test that others before them have taken and failed. As with any other select group, the camaraderie and sense of pride between gang members come from the knowledge that not everyone can make it into their inner circle.

Helping Mentees Construct an Alternative Identity

STEP 1: *Challenging youth's belief structure.*

Many gang-affiliated youth hold a deep belief that they cannot make it in the world without the support of their gang. The origins of this belief may come from an experience of academic failure, the sense that racism is too prevalent, or that there is a general conspiracy to keep him/her, and those like him/her, beaten down. This fear-based belief is the primary reason why youth turn to gang life for support and protection. The gang is their salvation, their key to a better life.

To help youth disengage from a gang lifestyle, mentors must focus on changing their belief structure. This is not an easy process. The glamour and promise of gang life holds great sway with youth who've seen few other examples of "success" within their communities.

Mentors must carefully and patiently work with their mentees to strip away the glamour and expose the harsh realities of gang membership. At the same time, mentors must be able to provide examples of attractive options to the gang lifestyle that mentees

will leave behind.

Some mentors will attempt to expose the harsh realities of gang membership by asking their mentees a simple set of questions designed to start them thinking about the fates of their “homies” or colleagues. For example:

1. *When you were in elementary school, can you remember the Big G (“Original Gangster”) in the hood (i.e., who was the successful drug dealer/ the preeminent gang member in your neighborhood)?*
2. *Now that you are in high school, where is that person now?*

The point of these questions is to start your mentee thinking about gang-membership and its consequences. Here, the youth is compelled to compare themselves to the Original Gangster, who by now is dead, in jail or on drugs. Does the mentee really want to travel down this path?

STEP 2: *Helping youth develop tools to succeed without a gang.*

Mentors need real-life proof that they can succeed in the world without their gang. They need to see viable and attainable options for satisfying their financial, social and other needs. One way in which mentors can highlight these options is to guide their mentee toward areas where they have shown some aptitude or interest. This may mean looking closely at mentees current or previous gang activities. For example:

- What tasks/functions does your mentee perform within their gang?** How is this activity analogous to a career in the outside world (e.g., a gang leader in charge of identifying gang interests and communicating gang priorities may possess the raw skills of a program administrator or recruiter for human resources).
- Demonstrate a good fit.** Show the youth that what he/she is doing in the gang can be switched over to the outside world for a greater amount of money, prestige and safety.
- Help your mentee realize that he or she most probably will thrive in the outside world.** Anyone who can survive and thrive in a gang, can survive—and most probably thrive—in the outside world.
- Provide opportunities for your mentee to develop his or her own “appropriate” interests and hobbies whenever possible.** Relate these hobbies back to a career or alternative life path.

STEP 3: Reinforce the change with positive and consistent messages.

Most gang-affiliated youth have spent the first 13-18 years of the life weighed down by the belief that crime and violence are their only options. For this reason it is extremely important that mentors reinforce positive perspectives and philosophies whenever possible. Minister Robert E. Lee has successfully used the following lessons with his gang-affiliated mentees to help keep them on a healthy course.

- ❑ **Instill in your mentee that he/she is born to win, and conditioned to lose.** This means that his/her limitations are mental and self-imposed. They can be changed by a change in perspectives. Recognizing these limiting attitudes (conditioning) is the first step toward realizing that real change can be achieved.
- ❑ **Remind your mentee that growth out of the gang will not be easy.** This transition may be the most difficult thing he/she has ever done or will ever do in their life. It is within their reach but they have to be willing to work for it. Remind your mentee that anything that is worth doing is worth doing poorly for a while. With practice comes ease and confidence in the task.
- ❑ **Point out that Michael Jordan, Martin Luther King, and Albert Einstein were not born great, but made themselves great.** They worked harder than anybody else in their respective fields, spending hours a day practicing a preparing for what they wished to accomplish. Eventually they all became the best — the greatest basketball player, the best orator, the most significant scientist. All of them experienced difficulties, yet worked to overcome them. Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team as a sophomore, Einstein was considered slow and stupid by his teachers, and Martin Luther king had to overcome the institutional racism of America. *Each of these leaders could have given up and no one would have criticized them for it. But they chose to persevere.*
- ❑ **Tell your mentee that everyone has a great deal of potential—the question is, “Will it be unleashed?”** Talent, knowledge, and potential are not enough to determine success. Some have tremendous potential yet they choose to dwell on, *“some day I’ll ...,”* and it never goes further than that. How do you use what you have?
- ❑ **Do not say “CAN’T.”** This is the ugliest 4-letter word, and is totally self-defeating. Eliminate this word from the youth’s vocabulary, as well as from yours.

STEP 4: *Creating physical separation from the gang.*

Not only must youth be mentally and philosophically separated from the gang, he/she must be physically separated as well. Youth need positive alternative activities to engage in that build their self-esteem. To identify these, mentors should pay attention to what interests the youth; what he/she hopes for and dreams about. Below are some suggestions for getting started.

- Get the youth involved in activities that are not gang-related** (e.g., sports, church/youth group, job, community volunteering, apprenticeship school clubs).
- If a job is one of the activities, be sure that the youth sees both the short-term and long-term positives of the job.** Will it lead to a better job? Does the job have room to grow? People do not want to flip burgers for the rest of their lives; they want a job with a decent future.

Through these activities the youth will come into contact with other people, see other possibilities that life holds besides the ones the gang offers. A new idea may begin to emerge with this contact. As a mentor, the most important thing for you to remember at this point is patience. This is a difficult process for your mentee and may take a significant amount of time.

Recognizing Drug Abuse

A mentor should become aware of the signs and symptoms of drug use. A mentee who is currently abusing drugs or alcohol will be less able to move away from gang life. Following are some common signs of possible drug use:

- Possession of drug-related paraphernalia such as pipes, rolling paper, small decongestant bottles, or small butane torches
- Odor of drugs, smell of incense or other "cover-up" scents is noticeable
- Memory lapses occur on a regular basis
- Short attention span and the inability to concentrate
- Poor physical coordination
- Slurred and incoherent speech
- Unhealthy appearance, indifference to hygiene and grooming
- Bloodshot eyes and dilated pupils
- A distinct downward turn in the student's grades occurs
- Increased absenteeism and truancy from school
- Chronic dishonesty (lying, stealing, cheating), and trouble with the police
- Changes in friends, and evasiveness in talking about new ones
- Increasing and inappropriate anger, hostility, irritability, secretiveness, paranoia
- Reduced motivation, energy, self-discipline and self-esteem
- Diminished interest in extracurricular activities and hobbies

None of these indicators should be taken by themselves as a sign of drug use (except for the first two). Instead, look for a pattern of drastic mental and behavioral changes. Most teenagers will have one or two of these signs, and they are merely being typical teenagers. But if a pattern does present itself, such as slurred speech and memory lapses with bloodshot eyes, there is reason for concern.

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