



Street Gangs are a community problem requiring a community wide prevention and intervention effort. Although most street gang members are adults, most members begin their involvement as children. Risk of gang involvement can begin as young as seven years of age. By far, most young people don't join gangs, but any gang involvement can have serious, far reaching and long lasting consequences for all concerned. As such, families, schools, law enforcement, government agencies, business and community resources must work together to provide young people with the support, and positive alternative options they need to achieve a rewarding future.

Knowledge of street gangs such as what gangs do, who is likely to join and why, is a key to recognizing signs of gang presence and taking effective steps to reduce their negative impact, and help keep our communities and our young people safe.

## ***DEFINITION OF A STREET GANG***

A Gang is a group of individuals who consort together to engage in unlawful activity.

## ***TYPES OF GANGS***

### ***Organized Crime***

- Definite Structure
- Older, more criminally experienced members.
- Engaged in crime for economic benefit.
- Sophisticated weapons.
- International connections.

### ***Criminal or Delinquent***

- Hard Core **street gangs** which evolved as a result of socio-economic conditions.
- Has a structure, rules, name, symbol, colour, and a primary group.
- Primarily organized to carry out illegal acts. Serious crimes are involved.
- May claim a neighbourhood as its territory but is also quite mobile.
- Members may see their options in life as limited.
- Weapons range from hand made to firearms.

### ***Mall or Transitional***

- Members are influenced by entertainment media and have a “glamorized” view of gangs.
- Members have other options in life and are less committed to the gang or its culture.
- Gang existence is of shorter duration.
- Found in suburbs and at neighbourhood malls.
- Crimes include shoplifting, vandalism and intimidation.

A “gang” could also simply be a group of three or more persons who drift together, commit unlawful acts, and drift apart.



## ***LEVELS OF INVOLVEMENT***

Levels as represented here are used to indicate a progression of involvement and commitment.

- ***Fantasizing*** about gang activity. May not have knowledge about ‘real street gangs’ but may admire what they perceive the gang lifestyle to be.
- ***Potential or Wanna-be*** members. Usually the youngest of those associated with a gang. Find gang lifestyle acceptable and gives serious consideration to joining.
- ***Strikers, Affiliate or Associate*** members. Not fully initiated. Hangs out with the gang, receives some gang benefits. Participates in gang crimes and activities.
- ***Made member***. Completed initiation. Full membership in the gang owing full loyalty to the gang. Privy to gang language, signals colours and traditions. Active with the gang and associates with gang members to the exclusion of family and former friends.
- ***Hardcore***. Full time gang member whose daily activity is furthering interests of the gang. Totally committed to gang lifestyle. Comprises approximately 5-10% of the gang. Has significant influence in the gang. Frequently incarcerated for criminal activity.
- ***Leader***. Typically adults, not teens. Control gang policy and activity; hand out rewards and punishments. Usually have extensive criminal backgrounds. Surrounds self with trusted members to form an inner circle.

## ***RISK FACTORS LEADING TO GANG INVOLVEMENT***

Gang involvement is not inevitable, however, the risk of gang involvement increases as the number of factors increases.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Low Self-esteem.</li><li>• Peer pressure.</li><li>• Parental neglect.</li><li>• Poverty.</li><li>• Rundown physical environment.</li><li>• Substance abuse by the youth or parents.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Low academic achievement.</li><li>• School dropout or truant.</li><li>• Unemployed with poor or non-existent job prospects.</li><li>• Friends or family members involved in gangs.</li><li>• Antisocial, hostile, aggressive.</li><li>• Frequent run-ins with the law.</li><li>• From a divorced or single parent home.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Needs that have been unfulfilled or neglected.</li><li>• Social deprivation or isolation.</li><li>• Need for protection.</li><li>• Perceived lack of opportunity.</li><li>• Lack of positive role models.</li><li>• Not knowing consequences of gang involvement.</li></ul> |
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## ***REASONS FOR JOINING***

The following are common reasons young people join gangs. However, what they find after joining is not what they anticipated. There is nothing good to be gained, and usually a serious price to pay.

- ***Protection***. Assault, harassment and extortion are common means to coerce membership. Joining just increases the need for protection. Joining a gang means joining a group of criminals who accept violence as a means of achieving their aims. New members also gain instant enemies in the form of all other rival gang members.
- ***Material gain***. Drug trafficking, robberies, extortions, burglaries, theft are the common illegal means of obtaining ‘fast cash’. Fast cash doesn’t last. The criminal record does last and the consequences of any violence involved can be permanent. Laws enable courts to seize proceeds of crime and offenders can receive up to fourteen additional years in prison for participating in a criminal organization offence.
- ***Excitement***. The entertainment industry glamorizes gang lifestyles. ‘Cheap thrills’ only last for a few moments, and they aren’t cheap. The reality of losing life or limb, of going to prison, of having family members targeted can be sudden, sobering and permanent.

- **Gang as a 'family'**. Gang lifestyle involves crime, drugs, violence and weapons. Gangs exist for greed and the aims of gang leaders. Gang rules are not for the benefit of gang members. While some gang members may support each other, they do so in an atmosphere of danger and fear. Sooner or later the time comes when it's everyone for themselves.
- **Acceptance – Belonging**. More than belonging, new gang members may become stuck with their new gang 'friends'. Be prepared to give up family, school, friends who aren't in the gang, and other wholesome activities. Belonging to a gang means one's first loyalty goes to the gang, even before family. The gang restricts who you hang out with and they will be watching to make sure you stay in line.
- **Identity or Recognition**. Young people who aren't doing well in school or sports or who don't have confidence in themselves may join a gang for status and recognition. However, doing wrong or harmful things, or just "going along" does not build feelings of self worth. The identity one gains in a gang is a criminal record, a prison number or sometimes a toe-tag.

## ***GANG INITIATIONS***

Joining a gang means having to 'prove' one's self to a group of criminals. Initiations can include;

- Being beaten or 'jumped' in. Beatings often result in broken limbs and other serious injury.
- Girls may be 'sexed in', also known as 'giving train'.
- Having to commit serious crimes such as robberies and drive-bys.

Trying to leave a gang can mean being 'beaten on sight' or worse.

## ***WARNING SIGNS OF GANG INVOLVEMENT***

The following signs may indicate a youth involved with gangs:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Habitually staying out late.</li> <li>• Unexplained injuries.</li> <li>• Declining grades and school attendance.</li> <li>• Withdrawal from family.</li> <li>• Withdrawal from former friends.</li> <li>• Secretive about new 'friends'.</li> <li>• Increasingly confrontational.</li> <li>• Abrupt change in personality.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unexplained possessions or money.</li> <li>• Borrows money repeatedly.</li> <li>• Alcohol or drug use/abuse.</li> <li>• Preference for certain colour or item of clothing or refusal to wear a certain colour.</li> <li>• Unusual handwriting or graffiti on personal items such as notebooks, papers or bedroom walls. Possession</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>of permanent markers or cans of spray paint.</li> <li>• Marking gang symbols on themselves may precede tattoos of those symbols.</li> <li>• Use of gang slang.</li> <li>• Practice or use of hand signs.</li> <li>• Use of nicknames.</li> <li>• Frequent run-ins with the law.</li> </ul> |
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## ***SIGNS OF GANG PRESENCE IN A COMMUNITY***

- Increase in crime such as street and commercial robberies, assaults, vandalism, graffiti, stolen autos.
- Increase in drug trafficking and drug use.
- Senseless crimes of violence.
- Youths commonly seen hanging out in groups, particularly at night.
- Gang colours and dress worn on the streets and in schools.
- Rumours of gang activity.

## ***IMPACT OF GANG PRESENCE ON A COMMUNITY***

- Increase of fear in community residents.
- Property vandalized and marked with gang graffiti.
- Drop of property values.
- Businesses close and families move away.

## ***GANG GRAFFITI***

Gang graffiti differs from 'tagging'. "Tag" comes from "Turf Art Graffiti". "**Taggers**" are freelance graffiti artists who dare each other to accomplish feats of vandalism. They adopt nicknames and sign their graffiti which often has an artistic appearance.

Tagging is a subculture without ties to street gangs. They vandalize property, may commit crimes to obtain paint supplies and may resort to violence to prevent their work from being destroyed.

- **Gang graffiti** is often one of the first indications of gang activity in an area. It is comprised of symbols and slogans and is used to communicate gang presence, indicate territorial dominance, warn intruders, intimidate even when gang members are not present, boast of crimes committed, convey threats and challenge or disrespect rival gangs. Misuse of a rival gang's symbols such as crossing it out, inverting it, or writing it backward is considered a serious insult to that gang - sign of disrespect of rival gangs.

## ***FOUR R'S OF GRAFFITI***

- **Read.** Don't ignore its presence. Read for type of graffiti, danger signals, and to identify which gang or tagger is active in the area.
- **Record.** Photograph and keep a record of markings. This is important for purposes of identification and evidence.
- **Report.** Report graffiti to police for tracking purposes. Report graffiti to school authorities if it occurs on school property.
- **Remove.** Remove the marking to reduce the chances of further vandalism or violence.

## ***CONSEQUENCES OF GANG INVOLVEMENT***

The gang member becomes a victim of his or her own choices.

- Criminal record and prison time. Gang members are 3 to 7 times more likely to commit serious or violent crimes.
- Being a suspect in any crime the gang commits.
- Gang life in prison where there is no 'going home' when one has had enough.
- Risk of serious or disabling physical injury or death.
- Becoming a target of rival gangs.
- Being a target of one's own gang if one fails to conform or attempts to quit the gang.
- Lost opportunities for education and employment.
- The look (tattoos), walk and talk of being a gangster hinder getting a job and rejoining mainstream society.
- Risk of AIDS from drug use or tattoos.
- Being involved in a gang means one's home and family become targets for vandalism, harassment, extortion and violence.
- Gang members who are unemployed, facing court charges, and are in and out of jail may become a financial as well as an emotional burden on their family.

## ***PARENTS***

Prevention of gang involvement begins at home. Children need their parents and guardians to be involved in their growth and development. To help prevent gang involvement parents should:

- Spend time with, and give attention to their children. Children need to know they are loved.
- Plan family activities and expose children to a variety of learning experiences.
- Be a role model. Set the example.
- Know what their children are doing in and out of school. Know who their friends are, where they go and what they do.
- Give children responsibility at home. Set limits, establish and consistently maintain acceptable rules and expectations for your children's behaviour.
- Communicate with their children. Good communication is open, frequent and positive. Encourage children to know they can approach you to discuss any topic or problem without fear of condemnation. Listen.
- Be an informed parent. Learn about gang and drug activity in your community.
- Talk to your children about alcohol, drugs and gangs. Don't tolerate cigarette, alcohol or drug use by your children or their friends.
- Be involved in your child's education. Attend school meetings, meet with teachers and help your child develop sound study habits.
- Teach your child how to deal with peer pressure, to think for themselves and to act responsibly.
- Help your child participate in wholesome after school and recreational activities. Sports, community clubs, church groups, music, boys and girls clubs, scouting and cadets are examples. Learn what is available in your community.
- Report gang, drug and suspicious activity to police.
- Contact parent support groups, school officials and police if your child becomes involved with gangs.

## ***COMMUNITY RESPONSE***

- Recognize and acknowledge gang activity.
- Community resources such as schools, parents, government agencies, youth, church groups, media, law enforcement need to work together to provide positive alternatives to gangs in the form of gang awareness, education, job training, recreational and employment opportunities. Perceived lack of opportunities is a major factor in young people joining and remaining in gangs.

## ***WINNIPEG POLICE SERVICE RESPONSE***

The Winnipeg Police Service has launched a multi-faceted response to street gang activities.

- Public education through the Community Relations Unit with presentations available for both youth and adults audiences.
- Pro-active enforcement through the Street Gang Unit.
- Street level contact with the community.

## ***ADDITIONAL TIPS***

- Reputation, respect and retaliation are core elements of gang culture. A 'rep' is built on anti-social behaviour. If a member or a gang feels they have been disrespected, violence usually results. Gangs retaliate for what they perceive as disrespect, however trivial.
- Avoid gang members wherever possible.
- Where school rules apply, they should be applied firmly, fairly and consistently to everyone, gang member or not.

### ***ADDITIONAL TIPS (continued)***

- There is safety in numbers. It is safer to be with someone than to be alone.
- Don't talk about gangs where someone can overhear you. A gang member may think you "know something" and make you a target.
- Don't make remarks about gang members that might anger them.
- Avoid going out at night in a gang-infested area. Do your shopping and visiting during the day.
- Avoid corners, streets or parks where drug dealers hang out.
- If you know gang colours, avoid wearing them so you won't be mistaken for a gang member.
- You are safer in a vehicle than on foot. You will be exposed less and if trouble happens, can get away quicker.
- Don't use illegal drugs. Not only are such drugs a serious health problem but drug use will draw gang attention to you.  
Drug use encourages gang presence and gang rivalry.

### ***OTHER INFORMATION***

If you wish more information or have any questions, please contact the Winnipeg Police Community Relations Unit at 986-6322.