



NATIONAL
CRIME
PREVENTION
COUNCIL

Teens, Crime, and
the Community

Youth Gangs: Know the Facts

WHAT IS A GANG, ANYWAY?

A gang is a group of people who share a common purpose; engage in criminal activity like drug dealing, graffiti, and violence; and often have a common name, symbol, or color. Gang members frequently hang out together and claim a specific area or “turf.”

SO YOU WANT TO JOIN A GANG

Gang leaders use a variety of tactics to recruit new members. They often target and recruit children and teens who perform poorly in school, skip class, have few friends, have low self-esteem, need money, or have already gotten into trouble with the law. Gangs promise money, prestige, drugs and alcohol, sex, and a sense of belonging. This may sound tempting, but there is a stiff price to pay in order to get these things. New gang members usually must commit crimes and acts of violence.

Gang initiation ceremonies are different for men and women. When young men join gangs, they may have to fight several other gang members simultaneously. When young women join, they may be raped by other gang members or forced to fight other female gang members. All new gang members may be forced to hurt an innocent person by committing crimes, such as robbery or assault. In some cases, gang recruits have shot police officers or other innocent persons in order to become gang members.

“The gang life is an endless battle with no victories on either side.”

Former gang member.¹

Nothing positive comes from belonging to a gang, and there are many negative consequences to gang life.

The consequences of gang involvement and participating in a life of crime and violence are serious. You may be injured, imprisoned, or killed. Family members and others who care about you are often left to deal with the emotional and financial consequences.

“If knowing gang life was so surrounded by death, I don’t know how anyone could WANT to get into a gang.”

Miss Moni, former gang member.²

Few teens are actually forced to join gangs. If you are approached by a known gang member, be confident, refuse the person, and talk to an adult you respect about what happened. He or she can help you find alternatives to gangs.

“Gang violence ignores all boundaries. Geographic borders, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity mean nothing to these criminals. Our response, therefore, must be equally unbound...”

New Jersey Assemblyman Gary S. Schaer.³

GANG LIFE = SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES

Gang members often risk personal injury from rival gangs, injury to family members, and even death. To combat the growing number of gang-related offenses, new laws now support some of the stiffest penalties for gang-related crimes. These include larger fines and longer sentences—15 years or more for gun violations, drug trafficking, and violence.

WHAT CAN I DO IF I DON'T JOIN A GANG?

There are many alternatives to gangs. You can participate in sports, volunteer, join a club, hang out at your local Boys & Girls Club or community center, or get a part-time job. If you need help figuring out what to do, talk to an adult you trust—a parent, teacher, school counselor, coach, or grandparent.

You can also help prevent gang recruitment in your community. Encourage your friends to take part in positive activities, and be careful not to copy gang clothing and symbols. You don't want gangs to mistake you and your friends for gang members, which could make you a target for violence. You can also conduct a survey of other students to find out what people think about gangs. Is there a lot of fear and anxiety? Or do people believe, "It can't happen here"? Once you have the results, you can work with school administrators and police to educate others about gangs.

IN A GANG AND WANT TO GET OUT?

Many teens have left gangs safely and you can too. If you or a friend is involved in a gang, getting out might seem impossible, but there are things you can do and organizations that are ready to help you.

Many former gang members have found the courage to get out of gangs and start a new life.

“The way out is not by guns and violence. It is by using [your] minds. Educate yourself.”
EZ-T, former gang member.⁴

One of the first things you can do is talk to an adult you trust. This may be a teacher, school counselor, parent or other family member, local police officer, gang squad officer, or community religious leader. You can also call your local teen crisis hotline, or national crisis hotline for help. The National Center for Victims of Crime Helpline (800-FYI-CALL) is open for calls Monday through Friday, 8:30 AM to 8:30 PM EST. Hopeline (800-442-HOPE) is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Both crisis hotlines can speak with you about your situation, and help you find local resources to help you leave gangs.

1 Gangstyle; online at www.streetgangstyle.com/gangs_gangster_quotes.php (viewed 6/12/06).

2 Ibid.

3 New Jersey Assembly Democrats, News Release, May 22, 2006; online at www.assemblydems.com/press/0506/PRAntiGangViolencecc.htm (viewed 6/12/06).

4 Gangstyle.

LEARN MORE

The **National Crime Prevention Council** has resources to help you learn more about gangs and alternatives to gangs.

Community Works is a law-related education curriculum that addresses crime and violence prevention. The curriculum discusses gangs, alternatives to gangs, drug and alcohol prevention, property crimes, and many other topics.

Volunteering: Do What You Like To Do is a booklet that will help you follow your interests and use your talents in volunteer activities.

Visit www.ncpc.org for more information on NCPC resources.

You can also check out other programs to learn more about how to stay away from gangs. **The G.R.E.A.T Program**, www.great-online.org

National Youth Gang Center, www.iir.com/nygc

National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, www.safeyouth.org



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