

Facts for Teens: Youth Gangs

Overview

Although once thought to be an inner-city problem, gang violence has spread to communities throughout the United States. At last count, there were more than 24,500 different youth gangs around the country, and more than 772,500 teens and young adults were members of gangs.¹ Youth gangs are responsible for much of the serious violence in the United States. In schools and neighborhoods where they are active, they create a climate of fear and increase the amount of violence and criminal behavior.

What is a gang?

A gang is a group of teens and young adults that hang out together and are involved in joint violent, illegal, or criminal activity. They generally give themselves a common name or symbol, and they often choose to wear a certain type of clothing or to display some other identifying item.

Gang members are responsible for much of the serious violence in the United States.

Teens that are gang members are much more likely than other teens to commit serious and violent crimes. For example, a survey in Denver found that while only 14% of teens were gang members, they were responsible for committing 89% of the serious violent crimes.²

Joining a gang is dangerous. Violent conflict between gangs is common, and gang members are at least 60 times more likely to be killed than the rest of the population.³

Gang violence has become increasingly deadly over the last few decades.

Some people have blamed this change on gangs' growing participation in the drug trade and "drug wars". That does not appear to be the primary reason for the dramatic increase in gang violence and homicides, however. Instead, researchers believe that gang violence has become more dangerous because of the increasing availability of more lethal weapons and the growing use of cars in drive-by attacks on other gangs.⁴

Is gang membership on the rise?

There has been a dramatic increase in gang activity in the United States since the 1970's. In the 1970's, gangs were active in less than half the states, but now every state reports youth gang activity.⁵ And, while many people think of gangs as just an inner-city problem, that is clearly no longer the case. In the past few decades we have seen a dramatic increase in the growth of gang problems in smaller cities, towns, and rural areas.⁶

Since 1996, the overall number of gangs and gang members in the United States has decreased. However, in cities with a population over 25,000, gang involvement still remains near peak levels.⁷

stop youth violence before it starts

How old are most gang members?

Although some gang members are as young as 12, the average age is about 17 to 18 years. Not many people realize that around half of youth gang members are 18 or older. These older members are much more likely to be involved in serious and violent crimes than younger members. Only about 1 in 4 gang members are ages 15 to 17.⁸

For most teens, gang membership is a brief phase. One-half to two-thirds of teen gang members leave the gang by the end of their first year.^{9,10,11}

Do many girls join gangs?

Male teens are much more likely to join gangs than female teens. Police reports indicate that only about 6% of gang members are female and that 39% of gangs have some female members.¹² These estimates are probably low, however. One 11-city survey of eighth-graders found that 38% of gang members were female.¹³

Female gang members are less likely to be involved in criminal behavior than males, but they are still an important concern.¹⁴ In one survey, 78% of female gang members reported being involved in gang fights, 65% reported carrying a weapon for protection, and 39% reported attacking someone with a weapon.¹⁵

Why do teens join gangs?

Teens join gangs for a variety of reasons. Some are seeking excitement; others are looking for prestige, protection, a chance to make money, or a sense of belonging.¹⁶ Few teens are forced to join gangs; in most cases, teens can refuse to join without fear of retaliation.¹⁷

What You Can Do

Find positive ways to spend your time and energy.

Many teens join gangs because they are bored, lacking in purpose, or looking for a way to belong. But there are other options. Sports, recreational, and after-school programs give you a great chance to meet new people, explore new interests, develop new talents and skills, and to connect with people that really care about you and your well-being. See the After-School Programs fact sheet to learn how to find after-school programs in your community or to discover how to get programs started if few exist.

Stay away from gangs and gang members.

Be aware of clothing, colors, and symbols used by gangs in your area, and avoid them. If you *look* like a gang member or are *seen* with a gang member, other gangs may mistake you for a *real* gang member. You have a very good chance of being the innocent target of violent gang behavior.

Do not carry a gun or other weapons. Carrying a gun is not likely to make you safer.

Guns often escalate conflicts and increase the chances that you will be seriously harmed. If someone is threatening you and you feel that you are in serious danger, do not take matters into your own hands. Find an adult you can trust and discuss your fears, or contact school administrators or the

police. Take precautions for your safety, such as avoiding being alone and staying with a group of friends if possible.

Find out about gang activity in your community.

Find out about gangs, gang recruitment, activities, signs, and colors. Then share the information, publishing an article in a school or local newspaper, or talking to community groups, parents, or groups of students.

Join an existing group that is working to get rid of gangs in your school or community, or launch your own effort.

Develop positive activities for teens, report suspicious activity to the police, set up a Neighborhood Watch or a community patrol; let the police know about gang graffiti; or start or join a program to remove gang graffiti.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's National Youth Network (www.usdoj.gov/kidspage/getinvolved) web site can connect you with national organizations and provide you with information and resources to take action in your community. Learn about effective programs and what other teens are doing around the nation. Find out how to plan and start a program, run a meeting, develop publications, and work with the news media.

Helpful Links

Get Rid of Gangs

www.usdoj.gov/kidspage/getinvolved/3_2.htm

Department of Justice

This web site offers tips for teens to help them to avoid gangs, provides information about effective gang prevention programs, and includes links to gang prevention resources.

A Teenager's Guide to...Fitting in, Getting involved, Finding yourself

www.ncfy.com/expreng.pdf

Family and Youth Services Bureau, Department of Health and Human Services

When times get tough, it's important to know there are people you can count on. The ideas in this booklet can help you learn to deal with tough times and enjoy the good times by finding the people and places that are right for you. You might find these ideas useful in your everyday life. Or read them to see if they might be helpful to a friend.

Youth Gangs: An Overview

www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles/167249.pdf

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Department of Justice.

This 20-page review provides an extremely useful summary of available knowledge on youth gangs.

Highlights of the 2001 National Youth Gang Survey

www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/ojjdp/fs200301.pdf

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Department of Justice.

This fact sheet presents the most recent results of a national survey of police and sheriff's departments around the United States, assessing the levels of gang activity in different parts of the United States.

The Growth of Youth Gang Problems in the United States: 1970–98, with Appendices

www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/ojjdp/181868-1.pdf, www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/ojjdp/181868-2.pdf

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Department of Justice.

This report provides information about changes in gang involvement in the United States over the last few decades, and explores various explanations for these changes.

National Youth Gang Center

www.iir.com/nygc/default.htm

Funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Department of Justice

The purpose of the NYGC is to expand and maintain the body of critical knowledge about youth gangs and effective responses to them. This is a good place to find out about publications on gangs.

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