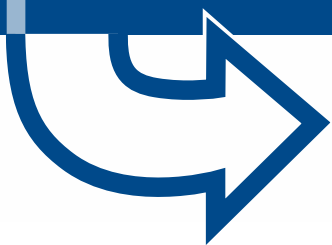




STEERING KIDS AWAY FROM gangs



What parents
need to know

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Steering Kids Away From Gangs is based on the Edmonton Police Service's resource booklet, "Who are Your Children Hangin' with?" and was adapted to reflect the needs of parents and caregivers living in the Lower Mainland.

The Vancouver School Board's Multicultural Liaison Workers and Settlement Workers in Schools facilitated focus group discussions with parents from various communities in Vancouver. As a result of these discussions, several versions of this booklet have been created. The booklet is also available in Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Punjabi and Spanish.

Additionally, members of the Vancouver Police Department and the BC Integrated Gang Task Force provided input and some of the content.

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IT IS FAR EASIER TO AVOID JOINING A GANG THAN IT IS TO LEAVE

INTRODUCTION

Engaging Parents for Safer Youth is a Vancouver School District initiated project aimed at providing information for parents about youth gangs, how children and youth may become involved in violence, and what parents can do to support their children/teens to resist involvement.

This booklet was created with the input of parents in Vancouver as well as consultation with many professionals working with youth in schools and in the community. Gangs and gang violence is a concern to all of us, and each of us has a role to play in addressing the issue.

YOUTH GANGS IN GREATER VANCOUVER AREA

Many people are often surprised to learn that there are gangs in BC. Some of the contributing factors may be that the Greater Vancouver area is a major gateway with a large port, an international airport, close proximity to the United States and significant rail /highway infrastructure thus supporting significant drug trafficking. This issue is not unique to this region of the province; gangs and or their associates will go to any community that affords an opportunity to make money through the sale of drugs or other criminal acts.

Research indicates that¹:

- In Canada for every 100,000 youth 26 are involved in gang activity.
- The average age when youth begin to associate with gangs is 13 years old.



Gangs often target youth who are young and impressionable and who lack positive connections with adults

- Almost all gang members are male.
- 12% of the BC gang population is female.
- Gang members are from any racial, cultural, or socioeconomic group.

DEFINITION OF A GANG

Under Section 467.1 of the Canadian Criminal Code, a Criminal Organization (or gang) is defined as:

- An organized group of three or more persons,
- With the main purpose or activity of facilitating or committing one or more serious offences,
- And if committed, would result in direct or indirect material benefit by a group or member of a group.

In determining whether a person participates in or actively contributes to any activity of a criminal organization, the Courts may look at the following:

- If they use a name, word, symbol or any other representation that identifies, or is associated with that Criminal Organization;

¹Totten, Mark. "Promising Practices for Addressing Youth Involvement in Gangs", Report prepared for the Ministry of Public Safety & Solicitor General of British Columbia in support of the Preventing Youth Gang Violence in BC: A Comprehensive and Coordinated Provincial Action Plan, 2008.





THE MEDIA MAKES THE GANG LIFESTYLE LOOK EXCITING TO SELL PRODUCTS

- If they frequently associate with any other persons who are a part of that Criminal Organization;
- If they receive any benefit from the Criminal Organization;
- If they repeatedly engage in activities at the instruction of a person who is a part of that Criminal Organization.

GANG BEHAVIOUR & CULTURE


Gang activity can occur in many different forms from drug trafficking and fraud, to property crimes, such as thefts and break and enters.

Violence is an extension of gang activity. Where drugs are being sold, there will be guns, and where there are guns there is violence, which can erupt for any number of reasons.

Reputation One of the most important concerns to a gang and/or its members is their reputation. Reputation is generally based on violent acts meant to impress other gang members or to intimidate members of the public.

To members of a gang, reputation translates into power and control. The more power and control a gang has, the more money the gang will make.

The Internet is now a favourite tool of many gang members trying to build up their reputation. Police have located numerous photos and videos of known gang members on the Internet, openly admitting their membership in gangs, and the commission of crimes.

A large, stylized arrow graphic pointing to the right, with a thick outline and a white fill, positioned behind the text.

Communicate with your child about how the media glorifies gang life

Respect Everyone seeks respect from other people. Gang members aim to gain respect through violence, threats or intimidation. Violence is usually the reaction to anyone who does not show respect or disrespects anyone in the gang.

For example, gang members think they can walk into a nightclub without having to wait in line. They pretend that it's because they are respected by the club owners but it is usually because the employees are fearful of them and don't want any trouble if they don't let them in.

Retaliation and Revenge Once a gang has established their reputation, they will use any means to protect it, even if it means committing violent crimes such as murder to send the message to others who dare to cross them.

"Losing face" or backing down is unthinkable to most gang members, particularly if he/she holds a higher status in a gang. Many violent, gang related confrontations stem from minor altercations which take place between two rival gangs.

Gang members have access to weapons and will use them when they think it is required. Many gang members will resort to weapons as a first choice, rather than attempting any kind of dialogue to resolve an issue.

Gang members aim to stop people from telling law enforcement officials about unlawful activities by intimidating people and creating fear of retaliation. In some communities, people are so fearful of reporting criminal activity that they won't even call the police when they themselves are victims, for fear of retaliation.





YOU MAY THINK THE GANG WILL OFFER YOU PROTECTION BUT THEY ARE NOT REAL FRIENDS

GANG RECRUITMENT

How do gangs recruit their members?

Gangs use a variety of techniques to recruit new members, and often target youth who are young and impressionable or those who are not involved in positive activities in their families, schools or community. Gangs will try to make the lifestyle look very glamorous and will make false promises. They may even shower the recruit with gifts such as money, clothing, drugs, alcohol, and even guns.

The most important thing to remember is it is far easier to avoid joining a gang than it is to leave once a youth has joined a gang.

WHY DO YOUTH JOIN GANGS?

Youth join gangs for the following reasons:

- **Identity/Status** Children and youth who join gangs may be seeking a certain type of “don’t mess with me” identity or status that they feel is lacking because of poverty, low achievement at school, or other reasons.
- **Protection** Many youth believe that joining a gang will protect them from violence or from other gangs. They think that “no one will mess with them” now that they have the protection of their gang. The reality is that once a youth joins a gang they will have made many more enemies in rival gang members.
- **Glorified Lifestyle** Gang recruiters promise youth money, sex, status, and reputation. They claim that everyone will like you



Watch for multiple signs of gang involvement

and respect you. The media is largely responsible for glorifying this lifestyle through video games, movies, and music videos.

- **Financial Gain** The lure of making lots of money is very hard to resist for a young person. Moneymaking schemes for gangs are usually illegal and likely involve drug trafficking, robberies, and thefts. The reality is that young gang members must take huge risks and make very little money, in comparison to older gang members.

- **Threats, Violence and Intimidation** Threats and violence may be used to force young people to feel they have no choice but to join a gang.

- **Promise of excitement** Gang life can provide a level of excitement to a young person. Unfortunately, the excitement is generally in the form of criminal activity, and usually comes at the expense of their education, job, and family.

- **Peer Pressure** Young people may be talked into joining a gang by their friends. They are sometimes convinced they should join because everyone else they know is in a gang. Peer pressure is often a difficult thing for a young person to avoid, particularly in a community where gangs are prevalent.

- **Obligation** After the recruit is accepted into the gang, they are expected to show their loyalty in return by doing anything the gang asks them. Sometimes, the gang will demand that recruits pay back gifts and/or money that were given to them, claiming the value was much more than what was actually given. The recruit is now obligated to “go to work” for the gang to pay off the debt, which can include anything from drug dealing to acts of violence.





OLDER GANG MEMBERS MAY TAKE ADVANTAGE OF YOU BY MAKING YOU TAKE ALL THE RISKS

A unique factor found here in British Columbia is that many of the youth and young adults involved in gangs also come from very stable and financially well-off families. Some gang involved youth have graduated high school and even attended post secondary school.

GANG FASHION AND SIGNS OF INVOLVEMENT

Sometimes gang members can be identified by how they dress, their tattoos, the way they communicate with each other and/or through the use of hand signals. Parents should look for multiple signs to indicate possible gang involvement as many of these indicators alone do not mean that a young person is involved in gangs.

Some indicators could be:

- Wearing distinct clothing styles
- Showing an unusual interest in one or two particular colours of clothing or a particular logo
- Using unusual hand signals to communicate with friends
- Having unusual sums of money or unexplained items, such as clothing or jewelry
- Having weapons
- Non-accidental physical injuries, such as being beaten or injuries to hands and knuckles from fighting
- Having specific drawings or gang symbols on school books, clothes, walls or tattoos



Research confirms that children are more influenced by their parents than their friends

Although some gang members may incorporate their personality within tattoos, some tattoos may just happen to be popular and are not always an indication of gang involvement. It may be useful to ask why a youth, or your child, has selected a particular design or logo.

Not all gang members are obvious in their dress and manner and cannot always be recognized by their attire. Parents should look for multiple signs to indicate possible gang involvement, because some of these indicators alone, such as clothes or musical preferences, are also common among youth not involved in gangs.

Behaviour changes

Youths who are becoming gang involved or are already involved may exhibit the following negative changes in behaviour:

- Withdrawing from the family
- Declining school attendance, performance, behaviour
- Exhibiting signs of drug use
- Consistently breaking rules
- Defying authority
- Speaking in gang style slang
- Staying out late without reason
- Running in and out of the house for a short period of time
- Hiding items in their homes
- Displaying an unusual desire for secrecy and protectiveness in guarding their rooms





IF YOU ARE IN A GANG, YOU ARE AT A GREATER RISK OF BEING HURT, KILLED, OR JAILED

RISK FACTORS

What is a risk factor?


A risk factor is something that is likely to increase the chances that a particular event will occur. Risk factors may be individual characteristics or could be life events or experiences that are associated with an increase in problem behaviours, such as drug use or gang activities.

Long-term studies of adolescents in Canadian and American cities suggest that the most important risk factors for gang involvement include²:

- Negative influences in the youth's life
- Limited attachment to the community
- Over-reliance on anti-social peers
- Poor parental supervision
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Poor educational or employment potential
- A need for recognition and belonging

There is significant on-going research into why youth and young adults join gangs. While some of the traits are quite evident in gang-involved individuals here in BC, there are some unique factors rarely seen in other communities.

² National Crime Prevention Centre. "Youth Gang Involvement: What Are the Risk Factors?" Public Safety Canada, 2007



Encourage your child/teen to participate in positive after-school activities with adult supervision

• **Low self-esteem** Low self-worth and little or no self-esteem can be related to unemployment, poor school achievement, or negative to non-existent positive peer associations. If youth do not see themselves as having a purpose, or as intelligent, or as leaders being accepted by their peers or star athletes, they can form associations to groups where they feel they can excel and gain acceptance for who they are.

• **Looking for a surrogate family** Youth join gangs or become involved in the gang culture as a means of receiving the attention, love, acceptance, and the positive recognition that they feel may be lacking at home.

• **Breakdown of traditional family units** Many youth come from families where alcohol, drug abuse, and domestic violence occur, thereby depriving them of positive adult role models and a healthy productive environment.

• **Family Violence** Evidence shows that early exposure to violence and child maltreatment are risk factors for violent behaviour in youth.

• **Absentee parents** The fiscal reality that we face in BC may require both parents to work long hours, leaving little or no time for healthy and positive family oriented activities.

• **Poverty / Need for money** The predominant activity of gangs in BC is the importation / exportation and trafficking of drugs. Substantial amounts of cash changes hands and is spent daily by those involved in the drug trade. The money is a strong lure to young people who see the cars, “bling” (jewelry, accessories) and





YOU WILL BE LOOKING OVER YOUR SHOULDER FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE IF YOU ARE IN A GANG

other material goods that gang members have, and see it as a way of making money, fast.


- **Family History** Many gang members are carrying on a family tradition established by family members, who they see as role models.
- **Use of Intimidation and violence** A young person fearing for their own safety, or the safety of their family, may agree to join a gang and commit criminal acts. A gang may look like a safe haven from abuse, in both the home and by peers.

PREVENTION

As a parent, you have the power to help your children. Studies reveal that parents have more influence on their children than their friends do.

a) Parenting tips

- Let your child/teen know that you love and care for them.
- Increase the amount of quality time spent with your child/teen.
- Volunteer or participate at your child's/teen's school. You'll show your child/teen that you care as well as gain some insight into the way that your child/teen interacts with their peers.
- Show an interest in your child's/teen's life. Listen to them; keep communicating. This can have a profound effect on his/her future.
- Know your child's/teen's friends and their families. Studies have shown adult supervision is a protective factor against involvement in harmful activities.



Let your kids know that status and a good life can be achieved through legal means

- Encourage your child/teen to participate in positive after-school activities with adult supervision (recreation centres, organized sports, youth groups).
- Trust is something that is earned so provide opportunities for them to make their own choices, within appropriate limits. Provide a safe space for them to grow as people.
- Recognize your child/teen for the positive things they do. Remember that self-esteem is a key to building resilient children and youth who are not interested in gangs and drugs. Positive recognition will make your children feel accepted.
- Teach your child/teen responsibilities.
- Respect them as you would like to be respected.

- Knowledge is the shield to help youth make the right choices. As a parent you can attend forums, information sessions, and read books to educate yourself and how to keep your children safe.

At times, you may feel that your child or teen is living a different life as a young person than you did when you were their age. This is probably true as things are changing rapidly in society and the younger generation is more comfortable with technology. You may want to talk to your child/teen but they would rather chat on the internet, text someone or talk on their cell phone. You may feel they are speaking a different language or living in a different culture. Often, there is a disconnection between parents and their children.

It is important to find a balance between listening to your teen's point of view and being firm about what you expect. Teach them






GANGS MAKE YOU SACRIFICE YOUR FUTURE AND YOUR FREEDOM FOR THEM

not to be a “passive participant”. If they can think for themselves then they will be less likely to be receptive to having other young people making choices for them. With proper knowledge they can make the right choices.

b) What parents can do

Effective gang prevention efforts begin with a partnership among parents, schools, law enforcement, community organizations, and youth. Parents who are concerned that their child/teen may become gang involved should take steps to intervene. The following are some suggestions:

- Parents need to know that prevention is part of responsible parenting. Do not expect schools to parent for you. Be a knowledgeable role model, learn more, and regularly provide information to your child.
- Parents need to recognize that children are going through a transition as they become teenagers. Adolescence can be a time where youth are struggling to develop their identities, sexuality, and individuality. Open and honest communication can help with this transition.
- Provide children with options in the life choices that are available to them. Show them that status and a good life can be achieved through legitimate means: careers, trades, sports, and the arts.
- Teach your child/teen to be aware that the media may glorify representations of gang life through music, video games, and movies. This media, aimed at youth is designed to look exciting



**Know your child/teen’s
friends and where they are
spending their time**

to sell products. It is not an accurate representation of a gang lifestyle nor does it provide healthy role modeling.

- Tell your children the truth about the risks of joining a gang, including the short and long term effects of a gang lifestyle. Some points to cover with your children & youth include:
 - Although you may think the gang will offer you protection, **they are not your real friends.**
 - Older gang members are likely to **exploit** young members to their own advantage making young people take greater risks at their own expense.
 - You are at a greater risk of being **hurt, killed**, or caught by the police and sentenced to **jail** if you are in a gang.
 - You will be looking over your shoulder for the remainder of your life.
 - You may get a criminal record that will affect your future (ability to get a job or travel outside of Canada).



RESOURCES

Where to go for help

- Talk with school officials, counsellors, School Liaison Officers Police Officers, or Youth & Family Workers (YFW).
- Talk to other people or join support groups, such as the Boys and Girls Club—Parents Together.
- Crisis Line 604-872-3311
- Youth Crisis Line 1-800-448-4663
- The Youth Line (info, referral and support) 604-572-4060
- Call your local community based organization such as a community centre or a Neighbourhood House.
- Contact the Vancouver Police Department: (Tel) 604-717-3321.
- Youth Against Violence line: (Tel) 604-775-4264 or 1-800-680-4264
- Crime Stoppers: (Tel) 1-800-222-8477

For more information on gangs

There are many sources of information on gangs on the internet. Below are a list of web sites and articles on youth gangs as well as parenting tips and strategies:

- **National Crime Prevention Centre**
Youth Gang Prevention
http://www.safecanada.ca/gangs_e.asp
- **Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Vancouver**
Youth Gang Prevention
<http://www.bgc-gv.bc.ca/tips.asp>
- **The Community Solution to Gang Violence**
Prevention and Families
<http://www.csgv.ca/content.php?ID=94>
- **Centre for Addiction and Mental Health**
"What Parents Need to Know About Teens—Facts, Myths and Strategies"
http://www.camh.net/Care_Treatment/Resources_clients_families_friends/parents_need_know_teens/index.html



What can you do as a parent to keep your kids safe from gangs and gang related activities?

Engaging Parents for Safer Youth is a **Vancouver School Board of Education** initiated project aimed at providing parents and caregivers with information about youth gangs, how children and youth may become involved in violence and what you can do to steer them away from being involved.

Gangs and gang violence concern all of us. Being informed is the first step in understanding and addressing the issues.



VANCOUVER SCHOOL BOARD'S YES AND EPSY PROJECTS.

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