

# *Gang Involvement*

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## **Characteristics of gangs**

Behavioral characteristics of gang members are varied and may include having poor general attitudes to clear-cut personality disorders. All gang members, however, cannot be placed into one behavioral category.

Gang members on their own "turf," in school or in the community, may be openly hostile. Outside the turf, the gang member may seem likable and friendly. But they usually have a "code" and sense of fairness all their own, and may suddenly become uncooperative or even violent when they believe that code has been violated.

Gang members often are con artists and attempt to manipulate their environment as it suits their needs. Appearances can be very deceiving. Gang members may display poor internalizing skills, be chronically angry and defensive, resentful of authority, and may be skilled liars.

More violent gang members may be calloused, remorseless, lack realistic long-term goals, be prone to boredom and have trouble controlling their impulses. To many mature, modern criminal street gangs today, violence is often a means to an end. Material profit, through drug trafficking and other criminal activities, often is a prime objective for gang involvement.

Studies indicate that violent gangs are not easily intimidated by authority and don't scare easily. They experience excitement at every stage of a crime, have little interest in responsible performance and often do not own up to their actions.

Many consider themselves basically decent human beings, and therefore justified in what they do. Gang members often want to be in charge, but usually have poor leadership skills.

## **Why young people get involved in gangs**

Young people from various ethnic and socio-economic groups are joining gangs. No ethnic group or geographical location is excluded.

The ages of gang members range from 13 to 21 years. Interview of gang members indicate that the reasons for joining gangs are seldom understood by the gang members

themselves, but can vary from the brotherhood therein to self-preservation, as listed below.

**Identity:** Gang members may not be able to identify with their environment, so they turn to the gang culture. They often visualize themselves as warriors against the outside world, protecting their neighborhoods.

**Protection:** In a community with several existing gangs, joining one seems to offer protection from violence and attack from rival gangs.

**Fellowship:** Studies indicate that some gang members may not have tight family structures. Gang activity offers closeness and a sense of family sometimes lacking in the home.

**Intimidation:** Threats, violent beatings, and dangerous initiations are often used to force people to join.

**Self Esteem:** Students with poor self-esteem may be trying to improve their self-image. These young people want recognition for their activities, whether criminal or not. Gangs may supply an extra pat-on-the-back that may not be given at home or at school. Many do not realize the hazards involved in gang activity.

**Other reasons:** There are a variety of personal reasons why young people join gangs. They include the excitement of gang activity, a need to belong, peer pressure, to get attention, for financial gain, and family tradition.

## **What can you do?**

**You need to be aware** of changes in your children, such as the way they dress, in their selection of friends, and/or in their behavior.

**Pay attention** to what is going on in your child's life. Truancy, violence and disregard for persons or property may be indications of possible gang involvement.

**Extra money.** If your child has purchased new and expensive items or has extra money that cannot be accounted for, it should raise flags that something is going on.

**Changes** in behavior and dress can be a normal part of adolescence or an indication that something is wrong. Know the difference by being an involved parent.

**Get Involved!** Become aware of what's going on in your neighborhood and community. When incidents such as vandalism, loitering, and suspected drug activity occur, report them to the police immediately. Through the Clifton Police Department 254-675-6620 be reported anonymously; you need not give your name.

**Graffiti** is a territorial marker for gang members. When you see graffiti on block walls, houses, and sidewalks, report it to the Clifton Police Department at 254-675-6620. The city will remove the graffiti on public property and, with permission from owners, on private property as well.

## Signs of possible gang involvement

### Physical signs:

- Changes in style of dressing
- Extreme or strange hair styles
- Tattoos
- Suddenly beginning to use or over use make-up

### Behavior signs:

- Poor school and/or work attendance
- Little or no participation in family activities
- Use of different, unfamiliar words
- Associating with known gang members or known criminals
- Staying out later than usual
- Wanting to be alone all the time
- Starting to drink alcohol or use drugs
- Having money or buying things without a source of income
- Unusual moods or patterns of behavior

### Non-verbal communication signs

- Highly stylized or strange writing
- Graffiti style writing on notebooks, books, or papers
- Using hand signals

**Don't jump to conclusions.** Even if your child exhibits some of the "signs," it doesn't necessarily mean that he or she is involved with a gang. Talk to them first, then talk to someone who can give you more information (see list of resources that follows).