
Gangs: Who & What They Are

Today, over half a dozen gangs claim territory in Will County, with gang membership estimated at well over 3500. What was once considered only an urban problem has now become suburbia's problem.

Results from *Street Gangs in American Cities: A Final Report to the Chiefs* (1992), a survey of more than 300 police departments, revealed the gang problem is exploding across America. Of the 170 cities surveyed with a population of 100,000 or more, 84% reported a gang problem. Of the other 130 cities surveyed, 86% reported gang problems.

Given the increasing current numbers and the continuing decline of inner city life, there's plenty of room for the problem to increase. We need to be talking to each other.

What is a Gang?

According to the Illinois Street Gang Terrorism Omnibus Prevention Act, a gang is defined as "any combination,

confederation, alliance, network, conspiracy, understanding, or other similar conjoining, in law or in fact, of three (3) or more persons with an established hierarchy that, through its membership or through the agency of any member engages in a course or pattern of criminal activity."

Gang Crimes

There are two types of gang-related crime: **gang motivated** crime and **gang involved** crime.

Gang Motivated Crime

Any offense which has as its motive, intent, purpose or method of accomplishment, some relationship to the furtherance or status of a particular street gang, or one in which two or more organized members conspire or assist each other in a crime for whatever purpose.

Gang Involved Crime

Any offense committed by an individual

known to be a gang member or gang associate.

Reasons Youths Join Gangs

Involvement in a gang is only a manifestation of many social ills plaguing our youth today. Research and interviews with gang members and service providers have developed the following list of reasons for gang affiliation (not listed in priority order).

- ▶ Need to belong, avoidance of rejection, peer pressure, recognition
- ▶ No hope
- ▶ Protection from intimidation
- ▶ Lack of productive culturally-oriented activities
- ▶ Too much unstructured, non-supervised time
- ▶ Lure of financial profit from illegal drug trade
- ▶ Artificial strength in numbers while perpetrating a crime
- ▶ Family tradition of gang membership
- ▶ Lack of positive social activity
- ▶ Not wanting to feel different
- ▶ Trying to emulate older kids
- ▶ Not enough attention at home, lack of parental interest and support
- ▶ Lack of religious/value training in the home
- ▶ Low economic conditions, lack of a work ethic demonstrated in the home

- ▶ Inability to achieve success in other areas (i.e. sports, academics, work)

All of these reasons are a product of low, or no self-esteem.

In many cases, young people are not actively discouraged from gang involvement by their parents. Many parents do not realize their children are engaged in gang activity. Street gangs will fulfill the socialization needs of its members and is often referred to as the “family” by its members.

Suburban Gang Development

Gangs and the subsequent gang violence that have often been associated with larger cities, such as Chicago, have in recent years become a major source of concern of many suburbs, and even some rural communities.

The development of gangs in suburban, or affluent, communities seem to defy the usual socioeconomic explanations for the growth of gangs in inner cities. The reason that suburban youth may join groups range from: a perceived increase in status, identity needs, comfort and a sense of control. If they do not get these at home, in the community or at school, they seek them in gangs. Lack of success, a perceived or real need for protection, and negative peer pressure are all factors in joining a gang.

The mystique or excitement of a gang is also a factor. Low self esteem, lack of confidence, lack of a proper role model or a need to belong to a group or

take part in an activity can also be reasons for joining a gang.

Once a youth becomes involved in a gang, he or she may find that financial benefit from drugs or criminal activities is an incentive for continued and deeper involvement.

Gangs that had been predominately based on racial or ethnic backgrounds, such as the Latin Kings and Black Disciples, now employ members regardless of their background. Their main concern is to increase their numbers and their illegal profits.

Gangs with identical names, but from different communities become established from a variety of different means. The most common method of gang establishment in a suburban community occurs when an individual with gang experience or knowledge moves into the community and associates himself with a specific gang. Other youths in the community may join him to enhance their sense of belonging and form a local gang.

Characteristics of Gang Involvement

Parents and citizens need to be aware of the characteristics of gang membership. Prevention is the key to keeping our youth away from joining gangs. If the warning signs are identified early, then the youth can be directed away from gang activity.

(While each of the following indicators when viewed separately are not signs of gang involvement, when viewed together may indicate gang membership.)

- ▶ Associating with a new set of friends while ignoring old friends. The youth will not talk about the new friends, who they are, or what they do together.
- ▶ Change of hair and/or clothing, or associating with other youths with the same hair style and/or clothing. Usually some of the clothing, such as a hat or jacket, will have the gang's colors, emblems, symbols, initials and/or the youth's "street" name on it.
- ▶ An increase in the amount of money the youth has without explanation as to where it came from, or other possessions that the youth could not have brought himself/herself (i.e., stereos, jewelry).
- ▶ Indications of drug, alcohol or inhalant abuse. Signs of inhalant abuse could be paint or "white out" found on the youth's clothes, the smell of chemicals on their clothing or a change in the youth's health.
- ▶ Change in attitude about activities the youth previously enjoyed, such as sports, scouts or church.
- ▶ Youth becomes a discipline problem at school, in public or in the home.
- ▶ Youth no longer accepts parental authority and challenges it frequently.
- ▶ Writing or doodling in gang script and symbols. (Check child's personal letters and school notebooks.)
- ▶ Problems at school, such as failing classes, "skipping" school, causing

disruptions in class and being disrespectful to teachers.

- ▶ Youth shows fear or hatred of police.
- ▶ Signs that the youth has been in a fight, such as cuts, bruises or complaints of pain, which the youth will not explain.
- ▶ Graffiti is present on or around the youth's residence.
- ▶ Family members are threatened by rival gang members, or more tragically a family member is the victim of a drive by shooting.
- ▶ A change in their vocabulary -- the way they communicate or speak.
- ▶ An infatuation with becoming an artist.
- ▶ The presence of weapons, marijuana or other narcotic substances.
- ▶ Hidden tattoos on their body, including tattoos by burns, not ink.
- ▶ The need to wear jewelry, or pierce their ears.
- ▶ Wearing the same color clothing day in and day out.
- ▶ Alcohol or drug abuse.

If several of the above indicators are present, there is *a strong possibility* he or she may be involved in a gang.

As a parent or guardian, you have the right to ensure your family's safety and you may wish to search your child's room or vehicle for weapons or drugs. This is not a violation of your child's privacy. It is an act that may protect your child, as well as the rest of the

family.

Gang Membership

Gang membership involves very different levels of commitment and participation. The number of gang members in a given gang may vary from a few to hundreds. Gangs will actually recruit as many people as possible. The larger the gang, the stronger the influence the gang has and are more daring with rival gangs.

Leadership

Gives orders to younger members, including acts of violence and narcotics trafficking operations. Often times having risen to the top through committing ruthless acts of violence.

Hard-Core

Hard-core gang members are those youth who are extremely involved in the gang. The gang is their primary source of interest. They will often obtain tattoos of the gang's symbols to demonstrate loyalty to the gang. They literally live for the gang.

Associate

Associate members are active gang members who readily identify themselves as a member of the gang but are not generally involved with the heavy violence associated with the hard-core members. All associate gang members have the potential of evolving into hard-core gang members.

Peripheral (Fringe)

A peripheral member is generally a younger person who lives in the gang's neighborhood and hangs on the fringe of

the gang structure. He is not normally involved with the violent criminal activity, but is ripe for recruitment into the gang as an active member as he matures.

Pee Wees or Shortys

Pee Wees are usually youths under the age of fifteen who associate with hard-core gang members. The pee wees are often used as look-outs and drug runners for the older gang members. They are used to transport drugs because they will not receive penalties as severe as those given to older gang members

Wanna Be's

Wanna be's, or imitators, are those youth who are familiar with a specific gang's symbolism and imitate gang members through dress, etc. They may not be associated with any particular gang, however these individuals can put themselves into potentially dangerous situations if their "imitation" of a particular gang is observed by rival gang members.

(CAUTION: Many youth eventually become what they "wanna be". This term describes a stage in the progression of an individual gang member and in no way should be used to minimize the problem.)

Many persons are called fringe or associates and may be reluctant to declare their affiliation with a gang. They will often state that their friends are members, but they are not; or that they only "hang around" with them. However, rival gangs, shooting from on foot or a speeding car, do not make a distinction between a gang member, his

associates or innocent bystanders.

Females in Gangs

Wherever there is an active male gang, a female counterpart can usually be found. Most gangs have traditionally had female counterparts, usually the girlfriends of gang members. However, in recent years girls have become more directly involved in gang activities.

A common infiltration strategy used by all gangs is to target young girls with low or no self-esteem, regardless of their socio-economic background.

National statistics indicate that the female gang membership is 10-15% of the active gang population. Female gang members become active at a young age and by the time they reach adolescence they can be involved in activities ranging from truancy to first degree murder.

People and Folk Factions

The gang population has been broken down into two distinct and opposing factions known as the People and Folks. As a general rule, all gangs belonging to People are allied with each other and opposed to all gangs belonging to Folks.

Both alliances developed in the penitentiary system in the 1970's by incarcerated gang members seeking protection by forming coalitions. The alliances are not aligned along traditional racial boundaries and both contain black, white and hispanic street gangs. Both alliances are active on Will County streets and in most cases are bitter rivals.

Gang Recognition

Street gangs communicate primarily through their actions. They need and seek recognition not only from their community, but also from rival gangs. The gang's image and reputation depend on this recognition and it is important to its members because visibility enhances reputations of gang members.

Regardless of the method of communication, the gang member is telling the world that the gang is number one, the best. He/she is also expressing commitment to the gang.

How Gang Members are Identified

Most gang members are proud of their gang and admit it freely to peers and sometimes to police. Open display of tattoos, specific manner of dress associated with the gang, personal belongings depicting gang markings or graffiti, and hand gestures associated with the gang, are common. Many members are given or adopt street nicknames which become their new

"identity".

Representing - People and Folk

Representing is the means by which gangs communicate by their manner of dress. It is similar to hand signs in that it is used to indicate loyalty or antagonism to another group.

Representing is based on an imaginary line being drawn vertically through the center of the human body. Anything to the left of the line or showing left, represents an affiliation with the PEOPLE gangs; whereas, anything to the right of the line or showing right, indicates an alliance or association with FOLK gangs.

The PEOPLE gangs all wear their identifiers to the left side. An earring in the left ear, a left pant leg rolled up, the strap of a pair of overalls dangling to the left side, a cap tilted to the left; all may indicate gang affiliation to this alliance. The gang hand sign is thrown toward the left shoulder. Their members fold their arms in a manner that will point to their left side. The FOLK gangs, on the other

hand, all wear or indicate their identifiers to the right side.

PEOPLE and FOLK are the two warring sides of gang alliances. This system had its genesis in the Illinois Department of Corrections and was designed to balance the power between warring gangs so that an individual gang would not be overwhelmed by a larger gang or group of gangs. This alliance system is also evident outside the penitentiary system but has begun to break down in recent years.

Colors

The colors worn by youths can also indicate possible gang affiliation. Specific colors or color combinations will be worn as a means of identification. Any article of clothing worn alone or with another color can be used to signify membership in a gang. Some gangs color combinations are:

Vice Lords: red and black (also black and yellow)

Latin Kings: black and gold

Insane Deuces: black and green

Latin Counts: black and red

Black P-Stone: black and red

Gangster Disciples: black and blue

Maniac Latin Disciples: black and blue

Simon City Royals: black, red and blue

Two Six (2-6) Nation: black and beige/tan

Two Two (2-2) Boys: black and baby blue

Satan Disciples: black and canary yellow

Sports Clothing

The most popular way of displaying colors is through the use of sports clothing. The popularity of specific sports clothing is on a sharp increase because of gang usage. However, not every person who puts on sports clothing is a gang member.

There are numerous incidents in which children have been assaulted, robbed and sometimes even shot for the sports apparel being worn. Many times, the innocent victim is a child in the wrong place at the wrong time, wearing the wrong clothes. The child is not a legitimate gang member, however is mistaken for one due to the clothing. Thus, parents need to consider if giving their child sports clothing is worth putting the child's safety in jeopardy.

Parents must determine what their child's intention is for the desired sports clothing. Some questions that can be asked :

- ▶ Is your child a sports fan?
- ▶ Does your child have a legitimate interest in the team that he/she desires to wear?
- ▶ Can your child name numerous team members without hesitation? If he or she can't name players then it may be the colors the youth is interested in.
- ▶ Does your children's friends have a similar interest in the same team? Are they all wearing the same team clothing on a regular basis?

The following is a list of the area gangs and some sports teams/colors the gangs associate:

Latin Kings

While black and gold or yellow are the traditional colors, in the last two years, the trend has changed to black and grey due to the increased use of the *Los Angeles Kings* hockey team clothing which switched colors from purple/gold to black/silver. This allows the Latin King to wear clothing with "L" and "K" displayed. They also may wear the *Pittsburgh Pirates* baseball hat.

Gangster Disciples

Because these are two very popular colors, numerous teams are represented including the *Detroit Lions*, *Detroit Tigers*, *Georgetown Hoyas*, *Colorado Rockies*, *Orlando Magic*, and *Duke University*. They have also been known to wear sports attire in black/silver including the *Los Angeles Raiders* and *Chicago White Sox*.

Vice Lords

This gang overwhelming uses the *Chicago Bulls*. They tend to wear the jackets with "BULLS" lettering on the back, as compared to the jackets with the bull's head. They also have adopted the *University of Texas* and the *University of Nevada - Las Vegas, UNLV*, basketball team clothing.

Graffiti

One of the first indicators of the presence or development of gangs in an area is graffiti (wall writings). It is often used to mark territory, claim responsibility for violent acts, disrespect or challenge rival gangs and show allegiance to specific gang by its members. Members of the general public often mistake graffiti for

thoughtless vandalism or childish pranks. Quite the contrary is true.

Gang graffiti proclaims to the world the status of the gang and offers a challenge to rival gangs. It reduces property values and places a stigma on the victimized communities. Allowing these markings to remain on property only exacerbates the problem, resulting in a proliferation of this form of representation. It is imperative to report all graffiti to your local law enforcement agency prior to quick removal.

Certain basic elements are found in gang graffiti. The main body of the writing will usually contain the gang's name or logo. Also included will be the nickname, or street name, of the writer of the graffiti. Frequently, assertions of the gang's strength or power will be included.

In most instances, the "People" alliance utilizes the five pointed star in their gang graffiti. The term "high five, six must die" is in reference to their five pointed star versus the six pointed star of the "Folks" alliance. Commonly used by the "People" alliance are drawings of pitchforks pointing down which show disrespect to the rival "Folks" alliance.

The six pointed Star of David, a Jewish religious symbol, is used by the "Folks" alliance in its graffiti and hand signs. Variations of the symbol with and without pitchforks running through it in an upward fashion represents the "Folks" alliance.

Arm/Hand Signs

Arm and hand signs are another means by which gangs communicate with each other, either to show allegiance or opposition to another

Black Gangster Disciple Nation (Disciples)

Nation: Folk

Gang Colors: Black and Blue

Local Associates: 2-6RS (Two-Sixers)

Symbols and Insignias (Graffiti and Tattoos):

Star of David (6-point)

“B.G.D.N.” (Black Gangster Disciple Nation)

“B.G.D.” (Black Gangster Disciple)

“G.D.” (Gangster Disciple)

“D” (Disciples)

“K.H.” (King Hoover, leader)

Pitch forks (sometimes crossed)

K.D. (King David, founder)

“74”

“Folks”

Heart with wings

Crown, flames, horns, devils tails

“D LOVE”

Clothing:

Accented to the right (Folks)

Hats/caps tilted to the right

Right pant leg pulled up

Gang colored shoes/shoelaces (black and blue)

Gang colored inside pocket (black and blue)

Glove on right hand only

Blue Civil War hat

Gang colored clothing (black and blue)

Jewelry:

6-point star pendants, necklaces, rings, belt buckle, bracelet, earrings, etc.

Capital letter “G” or “D” in jewelry items

Earrings worn in right ear only

Haircut:

6-point stars, “G”’s or “D”’s cut in hair

Hand Signs/Signals:

Arms crossed over chest, with left arm over right -- right arm closest to the chest

Two fingers over heart (rival gangs will show only one finger over heart)

Fingers displayed in an attempt to form a “D”, or bending the index, middle, and ring fingers of each hand to form a pitchfork

Vice Lord Nation (Vice Lords)

Nation: People

Gang Colors: Black and Red, also Black and Gold

Local Associates: Latin Kings, Spanish Vice Lord

Symbols and Insignias (Graffiti and Tattoos):

5-point star

Top hat, can, and gloves

Playboy bunny with straight ears

Martini glass

Pyramid with a top hat

360° circle surrounded by fire and two half crescent moons

Dollar sign (\$)

Dice with numbers 7 or 11

“Lords”

“V.L.N.”

Word “LORD” preceding a name

Words “Mom” and “Love”

Clothing:

Accented to the left

Hats/caps tilted to the left

Left pant leg rolled up

Gang colored shoes/shoelaces (Black and Gold or Black and Red)

Gang colored inside pocket (Black and Gold or Black and Red)

Glove on left hand only

Gray Civil War hat

Gang colored clothing (Black and Red or Black and Gold)

Pittsburgh Pirate baseball cap (Black with yellow lines)

Jewelry:

5-point star pendants, necklaces, rings, belt buckles, bracelets, earrings, etc.

Capital letter “V” or “VL” in jewelry items

Earrings in left ear

Playboy bunny with straight ears

Hand Signs/Signals:

Arms crossed (right arm over left) with left arm held closest to the chest/heart

One finger over the heart shows respect and loyalty, rivals use two fingers to their own gang

Thumb, index and middle finger extended to represent “V” and “L”

Almighty Latin King Nation (Latin Kings)

Nation: People

Gang Colors: Black and Gold

Local Associates: Vice Lords

Symbols and Insignias (Graffiti and Tattoos):

“Amor de Rey”

5-point crown with letters “L” and “K”
(Coronet)

3-point crown with letters “L” & “K”
(Imperial)

“L.K.”

“L.K.N.”

“People”

“King Love”

“A.L.K.N.” Almighty Latin King Nation

Jewelry:

5-point crown

3-point crown

Claddagh ring (ring with a crown)

Earring in left ear only

Hand Signs/Signals:

Thumb, index, and little finger extended

Two-Six Nation (2-6RS)

Nation: Folk

Gang Colors: Black and Tan

Local Associates: Black Gangster Disciples, Latin Locos, Chicano Cholos

Symbols and Insignias (Graffiti and Tattoos):

“2-6”

“T.S.N.”

Dice with “2” and “6” showing

“King Killers”

“...” (Three dots)

2 T 6

Rabbit head with bent ear and eye patch

6-point star

Clothing:

Accented to the right (Folks)

Hats/caps tilted to the right

Right pant leg pulled up

Gang colored shoes/shoelaces (Black and

Tan)

Gang colored inside pockets (Black and

Tan)

Black and yellow football jersey with
number “26” on it

Glove on right hand only

Gang colored clothing (Black and Tan)

Jewelry:

Earring in right ear

Playboy bunny with bent ear

6-point star pendants, necklaces, rings, belt buckles, bracelets, earrings, etc.

Hand Signs/Signals: