

STUDENT ASSISTANCE CENTER

at
PREVENTION FIRST
Building community capacity to prevent substance abuse



Gang Assist... A Guide for Schools

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Preface

Today's youth face many risks: drug abuse, internet relationships, sex and violence. Each of these risk-related concerns together or singularly could mean that gangs are infiltrating a community. Gangs inherently bring with them the burden of the mainstays of their organization.

For schools, responding before the risks “take hold” can be a real challenge. Gangs present the potential for serious consequences in students' homes, schools, and neighborhoods. The developmental paths for children and adolescents are made difficult to traverse when youth abuse substances, participate in illegal activities, experience the trauma of violence, and live in fear of gang reprisals.

Special skills and ways of thinking about gangs are important for all school staff and school leaders. Open discussion about gangs and strategic communication about approaches for dealing with gang-involved youth can help prevent and intervene in problematic behaviors.

This guide is designed to help our school partners think, plan, select, and deliver effective responses to youth who choose gang involvement or have gang interests. This guide is also a tool for helping school leaders understand how Student Assistance Programs are a great asset when dealing with gang related issues.

Prevention First encourages school teams and school leaders who feel that their school is impacted by gangs to address these issues with local police, parents, and important community partners. Transparency regarding

school concerns will only help to assuage the academic and behavioral challenges and barriers to success that gangs create with even the quietest presence. The lowest level of gang proliferation in a school can have a disproportionate effect on the school.

Dealing with gangs should be a shared responsibility: teachers, school counselors, Student Assistance Professionals, parents, community partners, and of course, the students themselves. Sharing relevant information will support the provision of prevention and early intervention, promoting a reduction in negative life choices and an improvement in positive life skills.

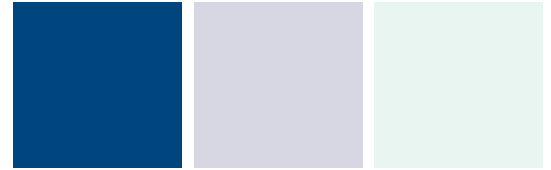
Introduction

Most young people will not join gangs. When they do, however, there are almost always significant repercussions.

School leaders strive to protect students in many ways. They establish success in learning. They create a culture of desired personal advancement. They assist youth in interpersonal relationship development. Without question they make it their personal duty to make schools safe havens for all youth.

Chapter 1

The Definition of Trouble: Defining Gangs



Making a clear determination of just who should be called a “gang” is not an easy task.

Membership into sworn allegiances, desire for aberrant behavioral standards, and criminal underpinnings create a profile that certainly discourage a school’s potential for a hope-filled outlook for a student engaged in such an organization. Utilizing a Student Assistance framework from years past, the co-author of this guidebook has defined gang membership within three community regions: Urban, Suburban, and Rural.

At a young age, urban members start gaining experience and expertise from older siblings or visible community members with obvious gang

ties. They advance to a marginal, but still unspecified membership, through a show of loyalty which can include directed misbehavior in school (via dress code, gang signs and symbols, and clear affiliation acknowledgement) gang personalized graffiti, verbal, social media, and physical attacks against an identified enemy. That loyalty often includes a willingness to use, abuse, and distribute illegal substances and guns.

As the leadership of a gang structure recognizes its clear hold on a youth, hardcore ritualization into the organization is offered and rarely not taken by the inductee. The pathology and sociopathy of the directorship of that gang affiliate will determine the rituals required for lifetime entry. No two gang organizations, not even within the same gang, will conduct the same entry rituals.

Whether it is self-injury (tattooing, branding, or body disfigurement), robbery, rape or murder, the damage to the psyche of the inductee cements them to an unhealthy way of life. While this new hardcore member risks his life and family for the gang, the directorship can relax knowing that its subordinates will die for them and the gang and provide protection to the members and the ideology, without self-regard.

Co-author of this guidebook, Charla Waxman, MBA Ed. D., identified in her dissertation (2001) that there are profiles that target certain youth for membership. Disadvantaged youth in impoverished neighborhoods are at high risk to make a choice for safety, and an organization whose sheer volume seems to lend itself to protection.

The dream of money for a home, for the basic needs of their families, and a way out can make



youth consider short term involvement for a long term pay-off. Unfortunately, when gang living becomes a lifestyle, many positive opportunities that one might receive in school, will be diminished as substance abuse, violence, and legal hassles become a way of life.

When youth have active family membership in a gang, their potential to remain gang-free becomes diminished. Even if a young person with a legacy to the gang somehow steers clear of membership, there will be a constant flow of retaliation for family connections to a gang by enemy gang rivals. The pressure is immense and will take its toll.

Young people whose lives have left them feeling unsafe and uncared for are a good target for gang membership. Concerns for safety may mean that carrying a gun establishes the a sense of power and control. Gang leadership is pleased to develop those who willfully risk their own lives for the ideology of their set.

Suburban gang leadership is a bit different than the rigidity of urban groupings. Some suburban groups are established by wannabees who do their best to mimic urban groupings but lack real knowledge for doing so. In contrast, some suburban gangs are established by urban groupings to broaden their scope for volume in numbers and money-making distribution of drugs and guns.

Youth who join suburban gangs may miss the initiations that are held so important to the urban gangs. A “blessing-in” may occur because of friendships and family connections, so physical beatings may not occur as an initiation rite. An expectation of violence and illegal activity is an assumption for involvement, not a rite of passage as in urban groups.

Some suburban youth have knowledge of gangs and express their interest in what Waxman (2005) calls a “Fantasy Member.” This young person, by feigning knowledge and membership through gang colors, signs and symbols, is a walking advertisement for selection. This child is an easy target for a gang recruiter looking to increase membership volumes.

Marginal and hardcore membership in suburban gang groupings offer benefits similar to the urban gangs. Marginal members gain school and community respect, power, and fear while showing gang leaders their value and potential for hardcore advancement. Hardcore members lead the way for suburban gangs to create notoriety for their boldness in violence, and turf development for distribution of their mainstays. Hardcore members can be suburban home-grown or displaced from urban territories, but either way, they create community chaos and a disenfranchised investment in education by younger members. Again the elite leadership takes a back seat to the everyday community activities but pay close attention to the financial benefits for all the street work completed by their constituents. Although not previously mentioned, that street work can include very sophisticated enterprises

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like prostitution and sex trafficking networks and legitimizing themselves in real business interactions (i.e. property purchases, and political involvement).

Our rural communities are not free of gang concerns, either. Many rural territories are areas rife for things like meth labs and marijuana farming. These rural areas are often just isolated enough, and unpoliced enough to make it easy to carry on illegal activities without scrutiny.

Rural “gang” involvement is often a smaller group of young people who feel disconnected from their community and somehow band together with a goal of striking out in a group demonstration of power against targeted peers or locations. Anti-social friendships like these create a definite feel of a gang, most often without the recognized city and suburban titles. All in all, a gang is a gang with or without the name if these elements are present:

- Leader: Established by all memberships as the person in power who directs activities, relationships, and management of personal time.
- Identified victim: Can be a person or place; like a school or business - someone to injure or some place to damage to prove organizational power and loyalty.
- Self-benefit: This can include a desire to belong or for protection, a reward for negative behaviors and interactions rather than punishment and what appear to be strong surrogate family and peer loyalties.
- Group-benefit: In any gang structure the group and its needs supersedes that of the individual.

- Pre-meditation for action: Gangs are hyper aware of their communities and those who choose to thwart their activities. They openly work against those forces which can include peers, schools, law enforcement, and of course other gangs.
- Criminal thinking and criminal acts: Gang membership and criminality cannot be separated. Drugs, prostitution, and guns as well as a host of illegal maneuverings make up a lifestyle for most members.

Whether they go by the street names selected by our most known Chicagoland groupings does not matter. If the bulleted points above are set in motion, they constitute the very essence of a gang (Waxman, 2001).

Chapter 2

Risk and Protective Factors and Resiliency Building



In several works Klein and Maxson, (2006), WHO (2010), Beelmann and Losel (2006, 2009), it is discussed that all levels of school: elementary, middle, and high school must address risk and protective factors in youth in order to safeguard them from the risk of negative life influences, among those certainly, is gangs. The domains of family, peer, school, and community must be considered.

Families and family structures that create risk for our youth are universal to all age groups. Families who already have direct gang linkages put their children at risk for gang interests, a level of comfort with those choices, and a disregard for school and community rules that address such involvement. Families that have few supports and controls in place to monitor behavior and school achievement may also struggle with their child's choices. Parents and important family members who have a pro-substance stance and behaviors create difficult choices and may make gang involvement a natural path to peer selection.

Youth who struggle with peer relationships and those who are bullied are often easy to sway toward gang membership. Youth who seem to gravitate toward impulsiveness or aggression find that the gang rewards and reveres both of these behaviors. Academic failure combined with low parental investment in education is a definite sign of risk for gang interest. Substance use and association with those who use, make gang affiliation an easy course of study. Overall, peers are important.

Schools that lack behavioral intervention programs (anger management, conflict resolution, basic life skills and so on) may not be giving their students the foundation for steering clear of gang acceptance. Schools that do not have policies reflecting a clear stance

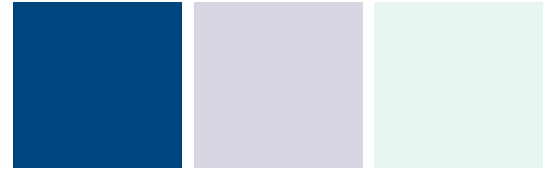
on gangs and gang membership often struggle with students who have gang ties. Another school risk factor is neighborhood proximity to a defined gang territory. This makes gang infiltration into the school day an easy process.

Community risk factors include lack of collaboration between key school partners, i.e. police, local businesses, and service clubs. Siloes of operation mean that key community concerns like break-ins, robberies, drug arrests, and vandalism go under-discussed and connections for resolution do not occur. Communities that do not have mentor programs and lack consideration of the need for mentoring of young people may miss the value of these relationships. Community coalitions should exist to enhance protective factors and reduce or reverse risk factors.

Resiliency theory indicates that problem solving, a sense of future, a sense of humor, social competence and mentoring are the building blocks that create bounce-back kids. Communities and the schools within, who along with parents, institute these protective factors of development give youth a real chance at saying no to gangs. These youths will be able to respond in healthy ways to difficulties that confront them every day.

Chapter 3

Warning Signs for Gang Involvement

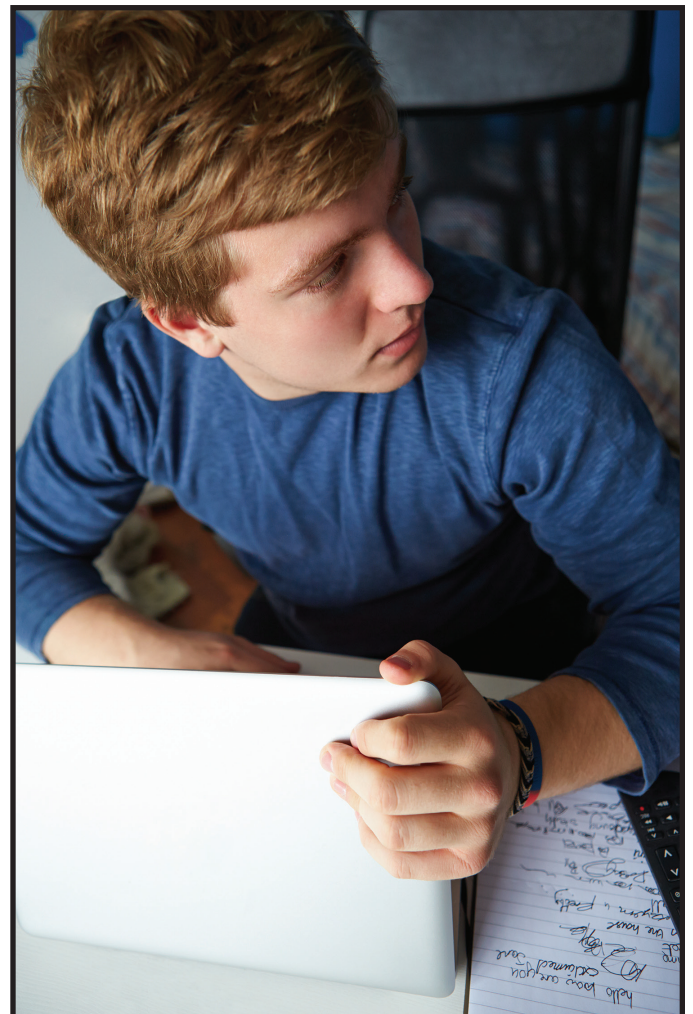


Although it is impossible to create a list that is all-encompassing, consider the following when trying to identify gang involvement. Look for multiple signs rather than singular indicators. Consider partnering with local law enforcement departments. If graffiti is an issue, take pictures to share with police and to create a timeline and pictorial history of which groups are in and or around your school grounds.

The following are signs that a young person may have some gang ties:

- Admits to or hangs out with known members
- Confrontational or insubordinate behaviors have increased
- Shows an interest in certain colors that appear in notebooks or schoolwork
- Has police involvement already in his/her history; may have an extremely negative view of police
- Displays a fascination with gangs in social media and music
- Has carried a weapon or rumors of such
- Is tattooed or has specific drawings related to current gang groupings
- Carries cash or has an unexplained increase in expensive clothes or jewelry
- Fights at school or has unexplained injuries that look like fighting injuries
- Exhibits decreased school performance: attendance, grades, positive peer relationships and extracurricular activities
- Displays signs of substance use
- Breaks rules often

In addition, there must be some outlets for those youth who have dropped out. These are not youth with the same needs as those attending school. Strategies that appeal to these young people and meet their needs are equally important. Some schools have instituted evening or off-hours programming for youth who do not seem to fit in with usual school related programming and studies.



Chapter 4

Strategies for Prevention



Ways to prevent gang membership are often a puzzle. Prevention seems hard to do and even harder to measure. All in all, finding a well-constructed plan that incorporates the points below will be helpful in making movement toward thwarting gangs in a school.

- a) Identifying and talking openly about the problems in schools, students' homes and the community
- b) Building on existing resources
- c) Developing goals for prevention and a means for dealing with involved youth
- d) Establishing a core team or Student Assistance Program to sustain efforts
- e) Providing ongoing assessments of the student body and discussions on any recent gang related incidents
- f) Regular trainings to keep abreast of new gang and drug trends and behavioral interventions

The above will go a long way in keeping communication open about risk and students needing special support. As mentioned previously in this guide, Student Assistance Programs are often able to support school leaders in dealing with the most at-risk students. Some ways Student Assistance Professionals can do this are:

- Design seminars to educate teachers, parents, and students in gang awareness
- Develop supportive groups to reduce bullying
- Communicate internally about students needing increased support

- Help with policies related to gangs through focus groups with key community, parent, and school personnel
- Promote pro-social skill development through groups and student workshops
- Identify gang prevention programs for piloting at each grade segment; elementary, middle and high school
- Work with at-risk students to participate in school activities
- Create and facilitate school committees on gangs and drugs
- Link community resources to schools for job shadowing by students, mentorship opportunities, and in-kind support
- Design brochures which provide gang prevention resources and approved outside resources that deal with gang intervention
- Enlist mentor opportunities for at-risk students internal to the school and external as well

Best practice programs for all students' needs; conflict, anger, gangs and life skills are important. Evidence based activities support a better opportunity for impact.

Prevention is for all students and can reduce or prevent gang participation. Gang intervention is separate and distinct requiring programs targeted toward youth who are already gang involved. It is important for a successful school-wide response to have both prevention and intervention strategies in place. This should be a point of discussion when deciding on best practice programs.

Chapter 5

School Leaders Make a Difference



School leaders can do much in helping teachers destigmatize students who have a gang label. Finding ways to make each student a valued member of the school community is important. Students feel safe when rules are meant for everyone and all are held accountable to positive standards of behavior. Some ways that school leaders can be effective in strategizing around gang concerns are:

1. Regularly distribute information to staff about new gang trends
2. Instill school pride and a sense of belonging by teachers and students
3. Foster a climate of respect for all
4. Support educational seminars on gang and drug topics for teachers, parents, and students
5. Support groups for students
6. Define gangs and develop policy for the issue
7. Include discussions of clothing, graffiti, and symbols in meetings
8. Remove any graffiti
9. Collaborate with police, businesses, and parents on gang-related concerns
10. Encourage mentor programs
11. Implement fair and consistent behavior procedures
12. Have clear expectations for academic achievement and social relationships
13. Always provide “strength-based” messages to students about behavior and academics

14. Be aware of how mental health and substance abuse connect to gang lifestyle choices
15. Be transparent about problems and successes

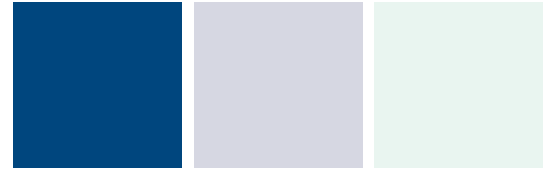
Above all, remember that student perception about personal safety is a powerful prediction of gang involvement.

School leaders who collaborate with their community can be more aware of what students are doing outside school hours; helping them to understand community incidents that can cause student stress and fear. This allows school leaders to be proactive rather than reactive to student behavior related to gang participation.

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Chapter 6

Parents Make a Difference

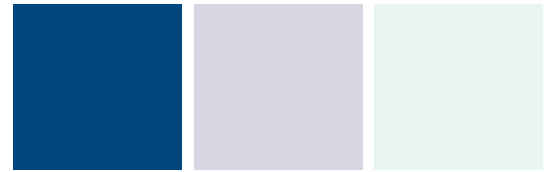


Student Assistance professionals and school counselors can help parents become better at what they do. A former School Assistance professional and District School and Safety Coordinator, Miriam Wade-Wicks (1999-2015) indicates that The Pride Survey whereby students were assessed for parental mentoring was cited as showing that parents were held in high esteem for being a positive influence in their child's behaviors. Parents can be provided with valuable reminders about the impact of their involvement in their child's lives. School personnel should help parents understand that these things are important:

- Spending quality time (meals, weekend outings, and family meetings) together - having this time together can keep communication open
 - Meeting their children's friends and talking to their parents
 - Talking about gangs and drugs is important even if there are no suspicions of such behaviors
 - Knowing the school and key staff and call on their support as needed
 - Instilling good study habits
 - Monitoring parties carefully and paying close attention to the details of party attendance outside the home
 - Looking for signs of stress or peer pressure
 - Watching for clues like signs, symbols, or colors that may relate to gangs
 - Being a good role model for conflict resolution and anger management
- Paying attention to neighborhood activities and reporting suspicious behavior to police
 - Encouraging involvement in school events
 - Helping develop hobbies outside of school
 - Setting rules and responsibilities within the home
 - Having curfews
 - Being pro-school and pro-success.



Conclusion



Schools should be a place where students feel safe and are motivated to achieve. Young people should grow from the positive relationships and mentorship that occurs there.

There should be continual assessment for potential gang or safety problems. Youth who are at the highest risk should be reached. School leaders that attend to that risk and examine and expand upon protective and resiliency factors are creating a promise of success.

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