



Say No To Gangs

Highlights

[Initiation](#)

[Warning Signs of Gang
Involvement](#)

[Gang Names](#)

[What You Can Do](#)

[Gang Types](#)

[Ways to Use This Help Sheet as
a Resource With Youth](#)

[Why Young People Join Gangs](#)

[For Further Reading](#)

[Gang Identifiers](#)

Money, power and protection are all reasons why young people join gangs. Gangs have existed throughout history as people organized along ethnic lines to support one another and adjust to new environments.

Today, the term "gang" refers to a group that is involved in violence and criminal activities. Members are between the ages of 11 and 23. Gangs have recognizable leadership and purpose, as well as an unhealthy need for recognition and consistent use of violence.

Gangs aren't just a concern in the inner city, they are in the suburbs and even rural communities. Also, gangs are not just a concern for minority youth, they are a concern for all youth. Congregational youth ministry is one place to address the dangers of gang activity. After all, violence is the second leading cause of death among males between the ages of 14 to 21.

Initiation

Youth are initiated into a gang usually at the age of 14. Males are typically beaten into the gang by other members as part of an initiation ritual. They may also participate in violent crimes such as drive-by shootings. Females are initiated by being gang raped by male members of an affiliated gang. Some females who are considered stronger are beaten into a gang.

Gang Names

Midwest gang affiliations are called Nations. The People Nation includes the Vice Lords, Latin Kings and El Rukns; the Fold Nation includes the Black Gangster Disciples and Spanish Cobras. West Coast gang affiliations are called Sets, such as the Bloods or Crips. There are also outlaw motorcycle gangs, Asian gangs, and American Indian gangs.

Gang Types

Turf-oriented gangs operate in a specific location such as around a school or neighborhood.

Independent gangs are organized around a specific criminal behavior such as selling drugs or stealing.

Ideological gangs form around a specific belief system; they are typically racially motivated and encourage violence to specific populations.

"Many youth enjoy living on the edge and participating in dangerous activities. Often, what at first appears to be fun has serious consequences."

Why Young People Join Gangs

1. *Money.* Many youth join gangs to make fast money. Financially disadvantaged young people look for ways to buy expensive starter jackets, tennis shoes or electronic equipment. They'd rather participate in one drug deal and make enough money to buy something that would take a full month's earnings from a fast food restaurant.
2. *Power.* Gangs promise power to youth who feel powerless over their lives. Although the power is a false sense of security, they have no other healthy outlets for support.
3. *Identity.* Many youth are desperately searching for a place to belong. Gangs accept youth who don't feel loved or accepted by parents, adults or school. Gang identity also offers members guidelines on how to act and dress.
4. *Protection.* Many youth feel forced to join a gang for protection from other gangs, especially in the inner city. Once involved in illegal gang activity, the gang provides a false sense of protection from the law.
5. *Fun.* Gangs provide activities and a social life. Many youth enjoy living on the edge and participating in dangerous activities. Often, what at first appears to be fun has serious consequences.
6. *Intimidation.* Many youth join gangs because of fear, threats and intimidation from other gang members or bullies at school. Young people may want to join a gang to appear tough or more acceptable.
7. *Shock.* If young people aren't getting positive attention from parents, joining a gang certainly provides lots of negative attention. Youth who are angry at a parent may join a gang to shock or be defiant toward the parent.
8. *Romance.* Many young people don't know what gangs are really about and have a misguided sense of romance about gangs. They might think they can join the gang for fun and get out whenever they wish. They might also believe that joining a gang will not involve them in violence and criminal activities.
9. *Family Involvement.* Family members in gangs often recruit other family members. Young people who grow up with a parent involved in a gang are extremely at-risk for joining a gang. Gang involvement becomes a way of life for some families.
10. *Low Self-Esteem.* Youth who don't feel good about themselves are more vulnerable to joining a gang. They will seek out ways to feel accepted, and if healthy options aren't available, they may look to gangs for support.
11. *Academic Problems.* Young people who are not finding success at school may see no hope or future for themselves through the path of education. Many don't believe they could ever get a good job or go to college, so they look for other alternatives.

Gang Identifiers

Each gang has its own identifiers in the line of colors, clothing, language and symbols. It's common for gangs to change some of their identifiers to avoid getting caught by the police. Here is a partial list of gang identifiers:

1. *Caps or hats--* tilted to the right refers to the Folk Nation, tilted to the left the People Nation. A certain type of baseball cap may indicate a specific gang affiliation.
2. *Colors--* some gangs identify with specific colors such as red and black, or blue and black.
3. *Hand Signals--* signals such as a crown or falcon have been developed by many gangs to identify their gang affiliation.

Showing or "flashing" gang signals is a way of identifying one's gang.

4. *Graffiti*--emblems or insignia on buildings, street signs and bus stops mark gang territory. Gang members may have graffiti markers on their clothing or personal belongings. Graffiti written upside down or with a line drawn through it means one gang is disrespecting or "dissing" another gang.
5. *Clothing*-- Certain colors on starter jackets or baggy or sagging pants may represent gang involvement. Other clues are one pant leg rolled up, a certain colored bandana on one side of the body, a glove on one hand, one pocket out or one shoe lace untied.

Warning Signs of Gang Involvement

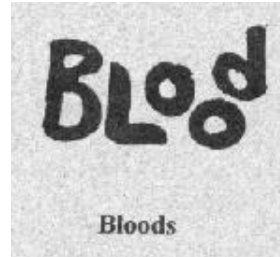
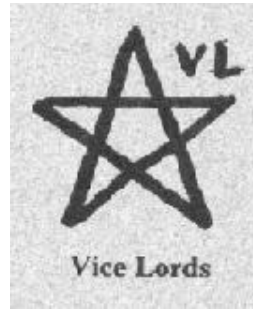
These activities are a warning sign of likely gang involvement or interest in joining a gang:

- Buying or warning to buy excessive amounts of clothing that are blue, red, or black.
- Wearing a bandana of one predominant color, sagging pants, wearing only certain types of colors of shoes or shoelaces.
- Wearing a lot of gold or silver jewelry, especially if not accountable for how it was obtained. Jewelry might include stars or other gang symbols.
- Hanging out with known gang members.
- Using hand signals with friends or showing off hand signals around others.
- Secretive behavior, skipping school, sneaking out of the house and not being accountable for activities or whereabouts. Having large amounts of money or property for which they cannot account.
- Arrested for gang-related activities that might include vandalism, theft, drugs or violence.
- Unexplained bruises or marks on the body.
- Writing or wearing gang symbols on personal property or on the body.
- Excessive listening only to gangsta rap music with themes of violence and glorifying gangster activities. This music includes groups such as Dr. Dre, Gangstarr, NWA, and Snoop Doggy Dog.

What You Can Do

- Prevention is the best response. Inform young people of the dangers involved with gangs.
- Learn about gangs operating in your area and learn to identify gang symbols and graffiti.
- Walk away from gang members or gang activities if you are approached. Avoid areas that are known to be hangouts for gang activity.
- Be cautious regarding clothing you wear; certain clothing and colors may be incorrectly interpreted as belonging to a specific gang. A rival gang may attack you if they believe you are part of another gang.
- Get involved in healthy groups such as your church youth group, sports, music, scouting or school activities.
- Report any gang activities to the proper authorities at school or in the community.
- Remove gang graffiti from buildings immediately. Not doing so opens the door for more gang involvement in your area.

Gang Graffiti and Symbols



Ways to Use This Help Sheet as a Resource with Youth

- Invite a former gang member or gang expert to speak to youth and parents.
- Contact local law enforcement officials to find out more about gang prevention programs in your area. Invite representatives from a prevention program to speak to your youth.
- Challenge young people and adult leaders to explore ways in which your church can be a place that teaches baptismal identity and a sense of belonging that dispels the attractiveness of gangs.
- Distribute this "information sheet" to congregation members, especially young people.
- Use as a tool in discussing gang activity with young people. Look for articles from the newspaper and gangsta rap music to use with this information. Challenge young people to see what they would lose (e.g., identity, freedom) if involved in gang activity.
- Brainstorm about ways your congregation can counter the ways of gangs.
- Remove gang graffiti as a youth service project.

For Further Reading

Youth in Destructive Groups: Cults, Occult/Satanism, Gangs, and Hate Groups
by Dr. Dan Feaster
3192 Breeze Drive
Sun Prairie, Wisconsin 53590
(\$20)

(Permission to reproduce)

Article by Dr. Dan Feaster, a pastoral counselor with Lutheran Social Services in Madison, Wisconsin. Dan works with individuals involved with gangs.

© 1997 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Division for Congregational Ministries--
Youth Ministries
1.800.638.3522
