

Preventing Youth Involvement in Gangs



Preventing Crime. Building Safe Communities.

Preventing Youth Involvement in Gangs

Victim Services and Crime Prevention of the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General is committed to developing and disseminating practical information to prevent and address the issue of gang violence and crime in B.C.

This booklet is designed to assist service providers, parents, teachers, and others who are working to help prevent youth from becoming involved in gangs or to help them leave gangs.

- 3 What is a gang?
- 5 Gangs in British Columbia
- 5 Who is involved in gangs?
- 7 Addressing youth involvement in gangs
- 9 Debunking the myths
- 9 Understanding risk factors
- 10 Enhancing protective factors
- 11 How you can help...
- 11 *As a service provider you can...*
- 13 *As a parent you can...*
- 14 *As a community member you can...*
- 15 What resources are available?
- 19 Sources

What is a gang?

A visible group of three or more persons that plans and carries out crime for profit, often using severe violence. Gang members may identify themselves through a common name, symbols, colours, signs, graffiti, clothing brands and tattoos. The majority of gang members are male and almost half of them are under the age of 18. Gang members are from any racial, cultural, or social-economic group.

Gang involvement exists on a continuum:



Organized crime groups

- Are highly structured and hierarchical – often modelled like a business.
- Have flourished over time, establishing a reputation and perceived “respect” through violent acts and intimidation.
- May have exclusive membership based on family, race, ethnicity, common criminal enterprises.
- Are complex organizations which may have rules, by-laws, constitutions.
- Have collaborative relationships with street gangs and mid-level gangs to make money through organized crime.

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Mid-level gangs

Mid-level gangs have characteristics of both street gangs and organized crime groups:

- Compared to organized crime groups, mid-level gangs are generally made up of unstructured smaller groups or cells.
- Like street gangs, relationships with other individuals and groups are fluid and opportunistic – often organized around lucrative criminal opportunities.
- Like organized crime groups, they are involved in serious crimes: extortion, kidnapping, drug dealing and smuggling, homicides, trafficking, and extreme violence.
- Violence is often initiated in response to perceived threats from other groups, mostly over drug trafficking or drug debts. It may also occur for any other reason.
- They are frequently sophisticated and disciplined.

Street gangs

- Street gangs are frequently involved in random acts of violence and crime – this differentiates gangs from non-criminal youth groups.
- Street gangs have some stability over a period of time.
- They may claim an area/turf to be their own for drug distribution and other criminal activities.
- Gaining membership is usually not difficult as youth often seek out gangs to fulfill their own self identity.

Compared to mid-level gangs and organized crime groups, street gangs:

- Have lower levels of sophistication
- Engage in less serious crimes
- Are much less structured



- Are relatively non-hierarchical
- Are younger in age
- Tend to operate in and around schools, reserves and neighbourhoods

The term “street gangs” is often used interchangeably with “youth gangs”. While great similarities exist, youth gangs can be distinguished from street gangs as follows:

- Are composed of youth under 19 years old
- Have lower levels of sophistication than street gangs
- Are involved in less serious crimes and on an opportunistic basis
- Readily welcome new members to build their profile and strength



Gangs in British Columbia

According to the 2009 Integrated Threat Assessment on Organized Crime, there are over 130 crime groups operating in B.C. In recent years there has been an evolution from homogeneous to more multi-ethnic gangs.

Ethnically/culturally homogenous gangs tend to be intergenerational, highly territorial, use identifiable means of communication, and rely on violent entry and exit rituals to protect the gang from outsiders.

Multi-ethnic/cultural (or hybrid) gangs tend to be single-generational, less territorial and do not emphasize traditional gang rights and rituals.

Who is involved in gangs?

- Many youth who join gangs have already been identified as youth who are using/dealing drugs and have been involved in serious and violent crime. The average age when youth begin to associate with gangs is 13 years old.

The reasons for joining a gang are varied. Some youth seek excitement; others are looking for power, prestige, protection, a chance to make money or a sense of belonging.

- Gang membership exists on a continuum: wannabees, associates, recruits, regular members, and leaders. Most high level gangs require recruits to meet certain criteria and perform serious crimes of violence before they are allowed membership.
- Gang members come from any cultural and economic backgrounds in both rural and urban areas.
- While some gangs have members mainly from a single ethnic group, an increasing number have a multi-ethnic membership.
- There is a growing percentage of female gang membership in B.C. Female gangs are somewhat more likely to be found in small cities and rural areas than in large cities, and female gang members tend to be younger, on average, than male gang members.
- The reasons for joining a gang are varied. Some youth seek excitement; others are looking for power, prestige, protection, a chance to make money or a sense of belonging.

How are girls and young women involved?

Girls and young women can play a variety of roles in gangs:

- They may be involved with gangs as accomplices to male gang members in drug smuggling, money laundering, counterfeiting, credit card theft, fencing of stolen property, and other offences.
- They may be exploited by male gang members to participate in the sex trade or are shared as sexual objects within the gang.
- Females may form or join an all-female gang (either independently or as a sub-set of a male dominated gang) with a purpose to commit serious violence and crime.



Addressing youth involvement in gangs

The issues of gang violence and crime are complex. Addressing them requires working across sectors and disciplines, recognizing the importance of a long-lasting and effective continuum of prevention, intervention and enforcement strategies that target youth involvement in gangs. Police, community services, educators, cultural communities, families and youth themselves come together to confront gangs and organized crime in B.C.

Provincial Youth Gang Prevention Strategy

The Inter-ministry Committee on Youth Violence and Crime in partnership with the National Crime Prevention Centre is implementing a four-year provincial strategy to prevent youth gang violence and crime with education, law enforcement, government, youth and community partners. The strategy was developed in 2006 in response to incidents of gang violence witnessed by communities across B.C.

Participating communities have developed local Community Action and Assessment Networks (CAANs). These networks are creating community action plans to prevent youth involvement in gangs. Their experiences and best practices will be shared with other communities throughout B.C.



BC Integrated Gang Task Force (BCIGTF)

The BC Integrated Gang Task Force was created in October 2004 to address ongoing gang violence. The task force brings together resources from Vancouver Police, RCMP, Abbotsford Police, Delta Police, New Westminster Police, Port Moody Police and West Vancouver Police. The mandate of the task force is to target individuals or groups that pose a significant risk to public safety by arresting, prosecuting, disrupting and dismantling crime groups through unified enforcement.

Violence Suppression Team

In November 2007, the IGTF was expanded to include the Violence Suppression Team. The integrated team pools resources to:

- target the top suspects until they are arrested, convicted and safely placed in jail;
- form a highly visible pro-active anti gang squad that actively seeks out guns and gangsters; and
- increase the efforts of community intervention and awareness.

Additional resources

In February 2009, the province committed 168 additional police officers and 10 Crown prosecutors to curb gang violence.

The province has also appointed its first Public Security Commissioner in efforts to increase focused attention on the issue of gangs, illicit drugs and gun violence in B.C.



Debunking the myths

There are many myths in the media and the general public about youth gangs.

The vast majority of B.C. youth are healthy, contributing members of society; less than 0.5% belong to gangs. Groups of youth are not the same as youth gangs.

The key difference between a group of youths and a gang is the gang's high degree of organization for violent criminal activities. The large majority of youth who are mistakenly classified as "gang members" are instead involved in anti-social behaviours which, although serious, are not gang-related.

Youth gang prevention strategies strive to address all of these myths, particularly the ones that promote racist beliefs about the prevalence of gangs within certain ethno-racial groups.

Understanding risk factors

Youth who join gangs tend to have many risk factors which interact and influence their involvement and membership in gangs. The presence of one or two of risk factors alone is unlikely to result in gang involvement. These risk factors are present long before a youth joins a gang.

The most important risk factors for gang involvement include:

- Negative influences in the youth's life.
- Limited attachment to the community.
- Lack of connection to their cultural identity.
- Over-reliance on anti-social peers.
- Poor parental supervision and victimization by serious and prolonged child abuse.

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- Long-term and multiple placements in child welfare and youth justice facilities.
- History of family violence and crime.
- Alcohol and drug abuse.
- Cognitive impairments such as those resultant from Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.
- Poor educational or employment potential.
- Lack of friends, personal support and sense of belonging.

Some youth who join gangs may not be considered traditionally as “at-risk”. These so called “non-traditional” at-risk youth are often part of a well-functioning family with sufficient resources and connections to their cultural identity. For these youth, the motivation to join gangs is similar to “traditional” at-risk youth: power, prestige, protection, a chance to make money or a sense of belonging.

Enhancing protective factors

Protective factors can build resiliency so that youth are better equipped to resist getting involved in gang-related activity.

Protective factors for youth are enhanced by:

- Building strong family bonds, completing school, and having a positive peer group.
- Creating and sustaining a positive social environment that surrounds the youth – this can be done with the support of community, family and service organizations.
- Promoting social, economic and cultural policies and programs that support positive youth development.



How you can help...

As a service provider you can...

Support prevention approaches

The prevention programs that have the best outcomes are those which combine primary, secondary and tertiary prevention in a multi-disciplinary approach.

- Primary prevention focuses on the entire child and youth population at risk and the biological, personal, social, and environmental risk factors linked to criminal behaviour. The emphasis is on building awareness and education around prevention of gang involvement.
- Secondary prevention targets individuals and groups identified as being at greater risk of becoming gang members. The emphasis is on targeting social problems and individual risk factors and promoting protective factors.
- Tertiary prevention targets gang members directly to hold youth accountable and provide supportive exit strategies.



Explore best practices

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION An approach with positive outcomes that brings people together around the prevention of gangs in neighbourhoods with an emerging gang problem.

SOCIAL INTERVENTION Gang members are more likely to respond to programs taken directly to them. Teams of workers from different disciplines target specific youths, gangs, and social contexts to engage the gang in more pro-social activities or to influence members to exit.



IMPROVING SCHOOL AND WORK PROSPECTS Youth who graduate from secondary school are much more likely to be employed compared to school drop-outs. Unemployment is one of the key risk factors for youth who join gangs.

CULTURAL COMPETENCY Cultural competency is the ability to work effectively across cultures. For individuals, it is an approach to communicating and working respectfully with people from diverse cultures. For organizations, cultural competency means creating the practices and policies that make services more accessible to diverse populations, and that provide for appropriate and effective services in cross-cultural situations.

GENDER RESPONSIVE PROGRAMS Girls and young women face unique risks factors. Programs need to be tailored to meet their specific needs.

WRAPAROUND APPROACH “Wraparound” is an integrative approach to dealing with high-risk youth. A comprehensive continuum of individualized services and support networks are “wrapped around” young people, rather than forcing them to fit into therapeutic programs. The aim is to keep youthful offenders out of institutions whenever possible.

RISK ASSESSMENT TOOLS The Youth Level of Services/ Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI) is an example of a screening tool that allows service providers to examine the risks, needs and strengths of a young person before they are placed in a prevention program. Supplementary tools are often developed to address the unique cultural risk factors that may not be captured by traditional assessment tools.



RECREATION AND PRO-SOCIAL PROGRAMS Recreation and youth development activities provide effective alternatives for youth at risk. They can give youth a chance to discover new interests, form healthy relationships and strengthen leadership skills in safe environments. Recreation providers working with youth require the correct knowledge and skills to make programming successful.

As a parent you can...

- Spend quality time with your children.
- Be a knowledgeable role model, learn more, and regularly provide information to your child.
- Get involved in your child's school activities.
- Know your child's friends and their families.
- Encourage good study habits.
- Help your child develop good conflict resolution skills.
- Encourage your child to participate in positive after-school activities.
- Encourage open and honest communication with your child. Talk with your child about healthy relationships and the dangers and consequences of gang involvement.
- Teach your child/teen to be aware that the media may glorify representations of gang life through music, video games, and movies. The media aimed at youth is designed to sell products. It is not an accurate representation of a gang lifestyle.
- Show your child that status and a good life can be achieved through legitimate means: careers, trades, sports, and the arts.



Build
positive,
open,
trusting
relationships
with the
youth in
your life.

As a community member you can...

- Find out what is happening to prevent youth from joining gangs in your community. You can support and become involved in capacity building, leadership development, and positive youth development programs.
- Build positive, open, trusting relationships with the youth in your life. Speak to them about the dangers of gang involvement and tell them you are there to talk if they have questions or need support.
- If a child or youth seems disconnected or in trouble, reach out to him or her. Try to engage the young person in an open and non-judgmental discussion. Let him or her know that you are there to help.
- Educate yourself and others. Find out more about gang issues and how to help at-risk children and youth.
- Support social and economic measures that directly address barriers to full participation in society of marginalized groups.

What resources are available?

Parents, teachers, school counsellors, youth workers, elders, youth and other community members play a vital role in helping children and youth to avoid gang involvement. Services are available for you to call upon.

Youth Against Violence Line

The Youth Against Violence Line is a service that young people or adults can call to seek help, report incidents of gang violence or crime, and obtain information on available services.

- Phone: toll free in BC at 1-800-680-4264
- TDD (Telephone Device for the Deaf): 604 875-0885 (collect calls accepted) or Text 604 836-6381
- Email: info@youthagainstviolenceline.com.
- Website: www.youthagainstviolenceline.com

Crime Stoppers

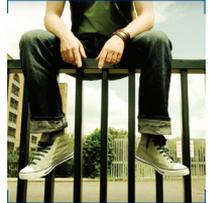
BC Crime Stoppers allows members of the public to provide information about a crime or potential crime without having to identify themselves. Tips on gang activity are welcome at:

- Phone: toll free in BC at 1-800-222-TIPS (8477) or text your tip to CRIMES (274237)
- Website: <http://www.bccrimestoppers.com/links.php>

Police

Police can help young people who are in immediate danger by applying for a peace bond to keep a person away from a child or youth; investigating crimes and arresting perpetrators; and providing information about other agencies. However, they cannot apprehend youth who are resistant to getting help.

- See your local phone book for local contact information or call 911 in the event of an emergency.



Child Protection

Child protection social workers respond to reports of children in need of protection. This may include taking immediate action with other service providers to ensure a young person's safety; engaging a child's family in a plan to keep the child safe and build family strengths; working with a youth to keep the youth safe and develop his or her capacity to live at home or independently; starting a child protection investigation; and seeking a court order (protective intervention order or restraining order) to keep another person away from a child or youth.

- Phone: Report child protection matters through the Helpline for Children: 310-1234 (no area code required)
- TDD (Telephone Device for the Deaf): toll free 1-866-660-0505
- After regular office hours: 1-800-663-9122

Victim Services

Victim service workers, located across B.C. in community agencies or police stations, provide emotional support, justice system information, safety planning, referrals to counselling and other services, help in accessing crime victim assistance benefits (to help pay for things such as medical expenses, counselling, protective measures), and support to victims going to court.

- Phone: VictimLink BC: 1-800-563-0808
- TDD (Telephone Device for the Deaf): 604 875-0885 (collect calls accepted)
- Website: www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/victimservices



Victim Services and Crime Prevention, Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General

Victim Services and Crime Prevention can help you:

- Link with current community activities, such as Community Action and Assessment Networks (CAANs).
- Identify ways to assist community efforts and provide support for communities preventing and addressing crime and violence.
- Phone: toll free in B.C. at 1 800-663-7867; Lower Mainland: 604 660-5199
- Email: CrimePrevention@gov.bc.ca
- Website: www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/crimeprevention

Other services

Contact VictimLink BC at 1-800-563-0808 or the Youth Against Violence Line at 1-800-680-4264 to reach other services including:

- Health clinics and hospitals
- Mental health services
- Anti-violence services including shelters and safe houses
- Youth services geared towards specific groups such as girls and young women, boys and young men, GLBTTQ youth (gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender, Two-Spirit, and youth questioning their gender identity), youth with disabilities, and various cultural groups
- Aboriginal family and youth services. For details, see Aboriginal Organizations and Services in British Columbia online www.gov.bc.ca/arr/services/guide.html





For more information on gangs

- National Crime Prevention Centre
Youth Gang Prevention
www.safecanada.ca/gangs_e.asp
- Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Vancouver
Youth Gang Prevention
www.bgc-gv.bc.ca/tips.asp
- GangPrevention.ca
www.gangprevention.ca
- PSST: Protecting Surrey Schools Together
www.psst-bc.ca
- Youth Help Line (Abbotsford Police Department)
604 864-4787 (local Abbotsford number)

Please note:

This document provides general information only. It is not intended to provide legal information or advice.

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Rob Rai, Surrey School District.

Sgt. Shinder Kirk, B.C. Integrated Gang Task Force.

Rick Stewart, Drugs and Organized Crime Awareness Service (DOCAS), "E" Division, RCMP.

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