

Gangs: An Overview



What is a gang?

From a legal perspective, gangs are seen as a form of organized crime. They are present in cities, suburbs, and rural areas. The crimes committed can include minor crimes like graffiti, vandalism, and petty theft; to more serious crimes such as break and enter, car theft, extortion, drug trafficking, assault, prostitution, money laundering, and weapons offences. Gang organization can vary from a small loose collection of youth to a large criminal network. The gangs may or may not be easy to identify by their clothing, but their presence may be felt in the community through the associated violence and crime. Gang presence may also be a symptom of other issues of concern within the community.

How is a gang a criminal organization? Let's look at the definition of a "Criminal Organization" from the Criminal Code.

"Criminal Organization" means a group, however organized, that

(a) is composed of three or more persons in or outside Canada; and

(b) has as one of its main purposes or main activities the facilitation or commission of one or more serious offences that, if committed, would likely result in the direct or indirect receipt of a material benefit, including a financial benefit, by the group or by any of the persons who constitute the group.

It does not include a group of persons that forms randomly for the immediate commission of a single offence. (CCC 467.1 (1))

In other words, a gang is a group of people who gather intentionally to commit crime for their material or financial benefit. This definition may include youth involved in a break and enter or a car theft ring. Someone who buys drugs from a dealer in order to resell them to their friends may also be involved in a criminal organization.

Other relevant parts of the Criminal Code include consequences for supporting a gang...

Every person who, for the purpose of enhancing the ability of a criminal organization to facilitate or commit an indictable offence under this or any other Act of Parliament, knowingly, by act or omission, participates in or contributes to any activity of the criminal organization is guilty of an indictable offence and liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years. (CCC 467.11 (1))

...participating in gang activities...

Every person who commits an indictable offence under this or any other Act of Parliament for the benefit of, at the direction of, or in association with, a criminal organization is guilty of an indictable offence and liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding fourteen years. (CCC 467.12 (1))

...or directing gang activities.

Every person who is one of the persons who constitute a criminal organization and who knowingly instructs, directly or indirectly, any person to commit an offence under this or any other Act of Parliament for the benefit of, at the direction of, or in association with, the criminal organization is guilty of an indictable offence and liable to imprisonment for life. (CCC 467.13 (1))

What does a gang member look like?

There is no one set of factors that contribute to a youth becoming a gang member, but there are a number of risk factors. Many of these risk factors are environmental, internal, or unique personal experiences associated with isolation or alienation. Youth that exhibit some or all of the following risk factors are predisposed to gang involvement.

- A disconnected or troubled relationship with their family
- Difficulty identifying with their peer group, or exclusion by their peer group
- Lack of a feeling of belonging to their community; not involved in community recreational activities
- Feeling ethnically, culturally, or linguistically isolated
- Lack of a sense of belonging to their school; learning difficulties or poor school performance
- A background of being in aggressive or violent environments; resultant aggressive or violent self-expression
- Use of drugs or alcohol; involvement in criminal activities
- Poor or inadequate finances - youth may see gang membership as a way out of a bad financial situation or a way to become rich
- Gang presence, either in the community or in the youth's social or family connections
- Personal and developmental factors: poor motivation, low self-esteem; moral values, attitudes and beliefs that support or reinforce violence and criminal behaviour

Given the above, are gangs simply groups of youth committing offences for financial or material benefit, or are they also seeking social benefits and support? Also, because these risk factors relate to inadequacies or deficiencies in a number of social, family, economic or personal factors, what are the implications for dealing with gangs or gang-related issues?

"In our school yard?": Actions for identifying risk

While the risk factors do not guarantee gang membership, you may find yourself thinking:

- "Who are the at-risk individuals in our school?"
- "What are the needs of the marginalized students in our school?"
- "What roles can the school or community play in addressing these students' needs?"

In order to answer these questions, there may be value in taking the following actions:

- 1) Review the risk factors and their relevance to your situation
- 2) Identify individual students who are at risk
- 3) Identify their unique needs
- 4) Identify ways to address these unique needs

In order to maximize the effectiveness of these actions:

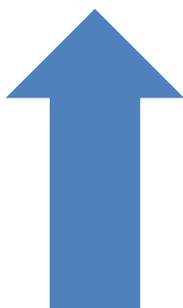
- The youth identified should be involved in the needs assessment (step 3) and response (step 4)
- Responses should be inclusive and not isolate or stigmatize individuals or groups of students. Active immersion of students into school and community culture; connection to positive role models; and empowerment to make effective and positive decisions are all desirable outcomes.
- Responses should be coordinated with police, community, social service organizations and family supports

What do gangs have to offer? Why do kids join gangs?



Surface Attractions

Money
Alcohol
Drugs
Sex
Risk-taking



Underlying Attractions

Acceptance
Belonging
Attention
Power
Respect

Review the risk factors above. If you were recruiting an individual at risk of one or more of these factors into a gang, what would you offer? What attracts youth to gangs?

Think about who attracts the most attention or interest at a party? Now look at the surface attractions: money, alcohol, drugs, sex, and risk-taking. Notice any similarities? How can your local response to youth at risk compete with these motivators?

Next, let's consider the messages beneath the surface and ask "How do these underlying attractions: acceptance, belonging, attention, power, and respect motivate interest in joining a gang?"

Look back at the risk factors again, this time relating

them to the motivations. What are the social, emotional and physical needs of individuals at risk, and how can these needs be met?

While the surface motivators may seem very salient to the youth, the deeper motivators may be more directly related to the risk factors mentioned earlier. Gangs, it would seem, provide a unique social service. Responses which address issues related to the underlying risks and motivators are well on their way to drawing attention away from gangs, as well as the detrimental attraction of many of their surface motivators.

Clearly, response to a community gang problem needs to take a broad and holistic approach, taking into consideration – and involving, where possible – the individual, the family, the school and the community.

Where do I sign up?

Youth are recruited into gangs through people they know, either directly or casually. Youth do not sign up for gangs; they are incorporated into the gang through a gradual process of association and involvement. While there may be a number of enticements, youth who join gangs usually don't do so by accident; it is an active decision.

A youth may get to know someone who is a gang member through their friends, or where they usually gather. Where do youth in your community hang out if they have nothing to do, nowhere to go and are looking to have a good time? These may be the same places where gangs will find potential recruits; youth who are disconnected from their family, community or school. In each community, the place may be different, but it's the company and associated attractions that are the motivators. If a youth has needs that are not being met, they will seek out others who may be able to meet them.

Further, some gang members may identify or target isolated youth with a problem, whether financial or personal, and offer them a solution: profit, protection, or friendship. Involvement in gang activity may even begin as a favour: "Hey, help me out just this once and you can make some quick cash / get free drugs / hang with me". It may also involve extortion or manipulation: "I did this for you, now you need to do this for me," followed by, "wasn't that easy... you keep helping me out and this is what the benefits will be... you don't and this is what your problem will be..."

Some youth who become involved with gangs may have friends or family members who are already gang members. Gang involvement may seem like a natural transition for them. Other youth who become involved with the legal system after committing a crime may often meet gang members and are recruited while they are either in care or custody. The mere presence of a gang can increase the possibility of gang involvement.

How much does it cost to join?

Time and money

Becoming involved in or associated with criminal activity can lead to involvement with the law. Some of the costs of gang involvement are criminal records, imprisonment and court costs. Those who enter gangs specifically to make money increase their risk of arrest, involvement with the law, and imprisonment, especially as the amount of money they attempt to make increases.

Also, while the gang may claim to have a code of honour, when it comes to being arrested or going to jail, this code quickly gives way to individual personal interests. Gang members quickly find themselves on their own again without supports – it's every man for himself.

Health, medical benefits, drugs

Involvement in organized crime is a dangerous activity. Violence is common in gangs. Violent acts may be committed in their own right, as part of another crime, or used to protect the gang, its territorial interests or market interests.

While gangs may fall under the category of organized crime, their organization tends to be loose and fluid. Gang membership may change regularly - individuals move out of the gang and others move in. Violence may be used within a gang to uphold rules, codes of conduct, or to take disciplinary action. With regular changes in leadership and allegiance there may be "revolutions" and "rip-offs", internal conflicts, or disagreements, all leading to the possibility of violence within the gang amongst its members.

Where drugs and weapons are involved, there is also the potential for violence or even death, intended or not. The mere presence of weapons may lead to the increased possibility of their use. Weapons can be used for protection, to threaten and intimidate, or to commit a robbery, assault or murder.

One gang may be targeted by another gang as a territorial threat, for payback, or as a source of money or drugs. Friends, tag-along or would-be gangsters, and other bystanders are not immune to the violence; it may be applied indiscriminately, not only to the gang member but to those around him who may be caught in the crossfire.

Drug use also carries a number of risks. The availability of drugs within gang culture may lead to an increase in the level of addiction or the potential to overdose. Intravenous drug use and the sharing of drug equipment can also lead to the spread of diseases such as hepatitis C and HIV.

Some gang-related crime involves the use of motor vehicles. Any combination of speed, drugs, alcohol and motor vehicle use increases the potential for harm and injury.

Family and retirement planning

Gang members put their families at risk simply by being a target. Other individuals or gangs may target the gang member in order to rob them, take over their business, or as payback. As a result, they may seek out the gang member at his family home, even though the gang member may live elsewhere. The family may be threatened or harmed in order to control the gang member or send a message to him.

Even after someone leaves a gang, he may still be considered a gang member by rival gangs or the police. A criminal record acquired as a youth may follow a gang member into adulthood, and an adult record may stick with them for life, affecting employment, education and travel opportunities. While many gang members may grow out of gang involvement, the impact of their gang association can be for life.

Really? In my neighbourhood?

As mentioned previously, gangs may be present in the cities, suburbs, or rural areas. Their presence is a public safety issue due to the associated violence and criminal activity, but it is also an indicator of the social health of a community.

Criminal Intelligence Service Alberta identified organized crime in rural communities across Alberta as a serious issue, particularly in relation to the drug trade.

Gang activity in the region [North Eastern Alberta] has increased with members of Edmonton based gangs being identified in centres such as Camrose, Cold Lake, Fort McMurray, Provost, Slave Lake and Wainwright. It is further suspected that associates of a Toronto-based gang are present in Fort McMurray. The presence of criminal groups from Lloydminster has also been noted in some eastern Alberta communities including Bonnyville, Cold Lake, Kitscoty and Vermilion.

- *Criminal Intelligence Service Alberta (2007) 2007 Report on Organized and Serious Crime, p.10*

http://www.cisalberta.ca/Annual%20&%20Semi%20Annual%20Reports/2007_Report_Final_Organized&Serious_Crime.pdf

Community-based strategies to reduce gang presence focus on multi-faceted approaches which include prevention, intervention, and suppression. Addressing gang and gang related issues or any crime in your community may involve a coordinated effort between the police, social service agencies, community organizations, schools, and parent groups. Initiating dialogue and involving other groups in the process of assessing and addressing your specific local concerns is an important first step.

Who doesn't want to belong, be respected, and be active?

Prevention strategies in particular can offer safe opportunities for youth to belong, be respected, and be an active part of the community. These strategies can specifically target inadequacies or deficiencies in the lives of youth, while improving the overall health of the community.

For more information or additional resources, visit the Gangs Links page on our website:

<http://www.johnhoward.ab.ca/teachers/gangs.html#links>



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