

Novel Study: Character Profile



This package focuses on an activity based on analyzing the profile of a character from a novel, in order to assess that character's risk for gang involvement. It includes the following pages.

- **Character Profile: Intake** - Students identify and describe the traits of a character and his/her social context.
- **Character Profile: Risks and Protective Factors** - This exercise explores factors that influence someone's decision to join or not join a gang. Internet resources are included to help review, compile and assess the factors.
- **Character Profile: Illustrated** - This is an extension exercise which enables students to use their drawing skills to envision the character and illustrate the risks and influences he or she faces.
- **Character Profile: Risks and Protective Factors Table** - This is an organizer for the information gathered from the Internet research in the previous exercise.
- **Character Profile: Analysis and Referral** - Students compare risks and protective factors to their initial character profile and identify the key factors they think influence the character. Students are directed to identify community resources that may have provided the character with assistance.
- **Teacher's Guide: Potential Risk Factors** - This page gives the teacher a summary of risks that students may identify in their research.

The pages in this activity package can be used together as a complete character analysis activity, or parts of it may be used separately. You may direct students to work individually, in pairs, or in small groups.

This package was created to be used with a novel of your choice. To find appropriate gang-related literature, there are a number of suggestions and links to assist you or your students in choosing a book below. (You may also choose a novel your students are currently reading that has no obvious connection to gangs; this may add interest to the activity and help to clarify the identification of risk factors.)

Finding Gang-Related Literature

Search The Library's Catalogue

Suggested search terms such as “juvenile fiction gangs”, or “young adult fiction gangs”, can be used to identify books available from your local library or through interlibrary loan.

You may also begin with a book you know and search for books with related subject terms. Some suggested books to begin your search: *The Outsiders* (S.E. Hinton); *Durango Street* (Frank Bonham).

Characters in novels from the Alberta Education non-fiction book list may also be assessed for risk and protective factors, although they may not be formally involved in a gang. Some books that may be used for this purpose:

- *Maniac Magee* (Jerry Spinelli)
- *Dragonwings* (Laurence Yep)
- *The Wild Children* (Felice Holman)
- *Oliver Twist* (Charles Dickens)

WebQuests

Many WebQuests, in addition to having useful or innovative activities, have reading lists or bibliographies which are helpful in locating relevant materials.

Here is one example:

https://mail.nvnet.org/~cooper_j/YouthGangWQSite/

Visit the Gang Novels page for a collection of resources.

You can also visit a WebQuest repository; for example, enter the search term “gangs” at

<http://webquest.org/search/index.php>

Character Profile: Illustrated

Draw your character. Incorporate the risks and influences the character faces into your drawing.

Character Profile: Risks and Protective Factors

In this exercise you will explore some of the factors that may influence your character's decision to join a gang, or increase the potential for the character to become involved in a gang.

Joining a gang is a decision made by an individual, but many factors contribute to that decision. From the individual's perspective, it may even seem like the only choice they have. A youth's individual, social, physical, and environmental situation can all play a role in contributing to the decision to join or not join a gang. Risk factors and protective factors are a part of this decision making process.

Risk factors are factors or indicators that encourage someone to decide to join a gang. It's important to understand that these don't necessarily lead to gang membership; some youth may be at risk of joining a gang but never join one. The sniffles may indicate that someone is catching a cold, and lack of sleep may be a risk factor, but these are not causes of a cold. Sniffles can be allergy related; people who get very little sleep do not always catch a cold. In many cases, however, sniffles and lack of sleep may indicate a person is about to catch a cold or is at greater risk of catching the cold virus.

With gang involvement, risk factors may be direct influences, or they may simply be general indicators of issues within a youth's life that may place them at risk. The whole set of risk factors form a composite of attitudes, influences and opportunities.

Protective factors influence someone *against* the decision to join a gang. They may not prevent a youth from joining, but they may indicate individual, social, physical, and environmental conditions that can promote a decision to not join a gang; other opportunities may be seen as more attractive.

Review the following websites for information on risk factors and protective factors related to youth becoming involved in gangs. Each source may cite a different set of risks – make sure you collect and compare several lists. Compile your list on the "Character Profile: Risk and Protective Factors Table" on the following pages.

Ref. #	Website
1	Public Safety Canada, Youth Gang Involvement: What are the risk factors? http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/cp/bldngevd/2007-yg-2-en.asp
2	Edmonton Police Service, Traits of Gang Members http://www.edmontonpolice.ca/CommunityPolicing/OrganizedCrime/Gangs/TraitsOfGangMembers.aspx
3	Winnipeg Police Service, TakeAction in Schools, Gang Awareness Resource http://www.winnipeg.ca/police/pdfs/takeactionschools/gangawareresource.pdf (Risk factors begin on page 2)

4	Nova Scotia Justice, Gang Preventions; A Resource Guide on Youth and Gangs http://www.gov.ns.ca/just/publications/documents/GangPrevention.pdf (See page 6 (PDF page 7), General Risk Factors)
5	Community Solutions To Gang Violence, Resources:Gangs http://www.csgv.ca/content.php?ID=54 (There are a number of resources to gather information from on this section of this website)
6	Youth Gangs: An Overview, Juvenile Justice Bulletin, August 1998 http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/jjbulletin/9808/chart.html
7	Add any other resources or websites used:
8	
9	
10	
11	
12	
13	
14	
15	
16	
17	
18	

Character Profile: Risks and Protective Factors Table

Use this page to record your findings. Cite your sources using the reference numbers from the previous page.

Risk Factors	Protective Factors

After you've collected a comprehensive list of factors from several sources, circle, check off or highlight the factors that apply to your character in order to assess their risk.

Character Profile: Analysis and Referral

Follow-up:

- 1) Examine your completed Risks and Protective Factors Table. Circle, highlight or check off the factors that apply to your character. Use your “Character Profile: Intake” worksheet to help with your assessment.
- 2) Based on your “Character Profile: Intake” character analysis and the above risk assessment, what factors do you think made the greatest contribution to your character becoming involved in their gang or gang-like behaviour? Explain and defend your reasons.

3) Identify and research organizations and services in your community that could have assisted your character with these issues, and contributed to a decision not to join a gang, or to leave a gang.

Organization or Service	Contact information	Supports the organization or service provides

Teacher's Guide: Potential Risk Factors

There is no absolute set of indicators that point to a youth becoming gang member; however, there are a number of associated risk factors. Many of these risks are environmental factors, internal factors, and unique personal experiences often associated with isolation or alienation.

- **A disconnected or troubled relationship with their family**
(i.e. divorce, neglect, abuse, abandonment, lack of supervision or lack of parental involvement)
- **Lack of identification with a particular peer group or exclusion by a peer group**
(e.g. the youth is bullied, a bully, or the youth is seeking a peer support group they can identify with)
- **Lack of connection or sense of belonging to the community; lack of involvement in community recreational activities**
(e.g. no participation in sports or other recreational activities, perhaps because they don't exist or aren't accessible within the community; no involvement in cultural or religious activities)
- **A feeling of being ethnically, culturally, or linguistically isolated**
(Culture and language groups vary from community to community. Some culture or language groups may be socially separated from the broader community or the predominant culture due to language barriers, religious belief, or for historical reasons. This may mean that some new immigrant communities may be at risk, while others may not – local and individual factors play a role and each community situation is unique. Many communities have gang problems that predominantly involve members of the predominant ethnic, cultural and language groups: in these cases the youth may feel disconnected somehow from that mainstream culture group.)
- **No sense of belonging to their school; learning difficulties or poor performance at school**
(Students with learning difficulties are at higher risk, as their academic and social challenges may lead to a negative schooling experience, which then affects their general world view. Some students may not connect with narrowly focused school activities that don't fit their personal interests, or they may not connect with a mentor in the school who makes them feel like they belong, even if they want to be seen as a unique individual and stand out from the crowd.)
- **Aggressive or violent home environments or backgrounds, possibly resulting in expressing themselves aggressively or violently**
(Many gang members experience or witness violence and abuse at home. This abuse may be verbal, psychological or physical. Some students may be at risk if they have grown up in a culture of violence due to war, civil conflict, or other reasons. Some individuals come to view violence as a normal or acceptable way of interacting.)
- **Youth who use drugs or alcohol, or have prior criminal involvement**
(Drugs and alcohol may be used as a means of dealing with adverse situations, stress, relationships, or as a means of escape. Gangs may be an additional source of support, or a source of drugs. Criminal activity may lead to developing contacts with others who have been involved in criminal activity; this may be through formal or informal networking.)

- **Finances: youth may see gang membership as a means of getting out of a bad financial situation, or as a means of becoming financially successful**
(Financial pressure rather than poverty is the issue. Crime may be seen as the only accessible means of attaining financial goals or needs. Needs may range from basic survival needs to materialistic needs - cars, technology, clothes)
- **The presence of gangs in the community, or through the youth's social of family connections**
(It's easier to join a gang if there's one nearby. If there is a gang across the street, and a community recreation program 1km away, the gang may seem more accessible. If a family member is in a gang, joining a gang may seem like a very normal thing to do.)
- **Personal and developmental factors: poor motivation; low self-esteem; personal values, attitudes and beliefs that justify violence and criminal behaviour**
(These may also relate to psychological issues, developmental issues, or issues related to any of the above risks factors)



COPYRIGHT INFORMATION AND CREDITS

- This document is released under a Creative Commons license, which can be viewed online at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/ca/>
- Some images included in this document are used under a Creative Commons license; all are credited in context where applicable.
- The John Howard Society of Alberta gratefully acknowledges the [Edmonton John Howard Society](#) for creating the original version of this module.
- For more information on this module, and other available modules, visit the John Howard Society of Alberta website: www.johnhoward.ab.ca