

Gangs



What is a gang?

From a legal perspective, gangs are about organized crime. They may be present in the city, suburbs, and in rural areas. The crime can range from graffiti, vandalism, and minor theft to break and enter, car theft, extortion, drug trafficking, assault, prostitution, money laundering, and weapons offences. The organization can vary from a small loosely organized group 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 reflection of other issues for concern within a particular community.

How is a gang a criminal organization? Lets look at the following 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 summary, it is a group of individuals who intentionally gather together to commit crime for their material/financial benefit.

This definition may include youth involved in a break and enter or a car theft ring. Someone who buys drugs from their dealer in order to sell to their friends is probably also involved with 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 not a unified set of factors that indicate a youth will become a gang member, however there are a number of associated risk factors. Many of these risks relate to environmental factors, internal factors, and unique personal experiences associated with isolation or alienation of the youth:

- They may have a disconnected or troubled relationship with their family.
- They may not identify with a particular peer group or may be excluded by their peer group.
- They may not be connected to or have a sense of belonging to their community and are not involved in community recreational activities.
- They may feel ethnically, culturally, or linguistically isolated.
- They may not be connected to or have a sense of belonging to their school and may have learning difficulties or perform poorly at school.
- Some may come from aggressive or violent environments and in turn may seek ways of expressing themselves aggressively or violently.
- Youth who use drugs or alcohol or have criminal involvement are also at greater risk.
- Finances can be a factor as youth may see gang membership as a means of stepping out of a bad financial situation or as a means of being financially successful.
- The simple presence of gangs in the community or through the youth's social or family connections is also a risk factor.
- Personal and developmental factors including poor motivation, low self-esteem and held moral values, attitudes and beliefs that justify violence and criminal behaviour.

Given the above, are gangs simply group of youth committing offences for financial or material benefit or are they are also gathered together for particular social and support benefits? You may have noticed that risk factors for youth involvement in gangs relate to inadequacies or deficiencies in a number of social, family, economic or personal factors. What does this mean for dealing with gang or gang related issues?

“Our School Yard?": 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?” and “What role can the school or community play in addressing these students needs?”

A valuable exercise may be to:

- 1) Review the risk factors
- 2) Identify individuals students who are at risk
- 3) Identify their unique needs*
- 4) Identify ways to address these unique needs*

Maximizing response:

*Appropriate responses may be more effective if the youth identified are involved in the needs assessment (step 3) and response (step 4).

*Responses that are inclusive and do not isolate or stigmatize individuals or groups of students may also be more successful. Immersing and connecting students actively into the school and community culture, as well as to positive role models, and empowering them to make effective and positive decisions are all desirable outcomes.

*Coordinating responses with police, community, social service organizations and family supports can further strengthen the effect of your response.

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

Look back at all of the risk factors on the previous page. If you were recruiting one of these individuals at risk into a gang what would you offer? What attracts youth to gangs?

Surface Attractions				
Money	Alcohol	Drugs	Sex	Risk-taking
Acceptance	Belonging	Attention	Power	Respect
Underlying Attractions				

Think about who attracts the most attention or interest at a party? Now look at the surface attractions: money, alcohol, drugs, sex, 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 on the previous page again: what is the relationship between the risks and 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 the surface motivators as well. Clearly, response to a community gang problem needs to take a broad and holistic approach, taking into consideration and involving 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 commonly gather or hang out. Where do youth in your community hang out if they have nothing to do, nowhere to go and are looking for a good time? These may be the same places where gangs will find potential recruits who are disconnected from their family, community or school. In any given community the place may be different, but it is not the place that is the motivator, it is the company and associated attractions. If a youth has needs that are not being met, they will search out others who may be able to help 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, or get free drugs, or hang with me". It may also involve extortion or manipulation: "Hey I did this for you now you need to do this for me..." and then "...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 involved in gangs. Gang involvement may seem like a natural transition for them. Other youth who are involved with the legal system for an individual crime often meet gang members and are recruited while they are both in care or custody. Simple gang presence can increase the possibility of gang involvement.

How much does it cost to join?

Time and Money

Quite simply, being 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. Particularly, those who enter gangs 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. Further, while the gang may attest to having a code of honour, when it comes to being arrested going to jail, this code quickly gives way to individual personal interests; gang members quickly find themselves on their own again without supports – it is every man for himself.

Health, Medical Benefits, Drugs

Involvement in organized crime can be a dangerous activity. A common characteristic of gangs is the use of violence. Gangs may commit violent acts in their own right or as part and parcel of another crime. Violence may also be used to protect the group, their territorial interests or their market interests.

While gangs may fall under the category of organized crime, they tend to be loosely structured and fluid. Gang membership may change regularly as some individuals transition out of the gang and others transition 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, between gang members.

Where drugs and weapons are involved, there is also the potential for violence or even death; intentional or unintentional. The mere presence of weapons may lead to the increased potential to use that the weapon, be it a knife, club, or a gun. Weapons may be used for protection, to threaten and intimidate, or they may be used 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 wannabe gangsters, and other bystanders are not immune to the violence as it may be applied indiscriminately to the gang member, those around him and others 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 level of addiction or the potential to overdose. Intravenous drug use and the sharing of drug equipment can also lead to the spread of disease including hepatitis C and HIV.

Some gang related crime involves the use of motor vehicles. Any combination of speed, drugs, alcohol and motor vehicle use can increase the opportunities 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. They may seek out the gang member at their family home and this puts their family at risk, even though the gang member may live elsewhere. A gang member's family may be threatened or harmed in order to control or send a message to the gang member. Even after they have left that gang, a gang member 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 everlasting.

Really? In My Neighbourhood?

As mentioned previously, gangs may be present in the city, suburbs, and in 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 identifies organized crime in rural communities across Alberta as an 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.

p.10, Criminal Intelligence Service Alberta (2007) 2007 Report on Organized and Serious Crime
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 including 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 particular concern is an important first step.

Who doesn't want to *Belong, Be Respected, and Be Active?*

Prevention strategies particularly, 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 youths' life and improve the overall health of the community.

For more information or additional resources please visit the **Gangs Links** page on our website at <http://www.johnhoward.org/education/gangs/links.html>