Why Do Young People Join Gangs?

Young people join gangs for a variety of reasons, some of which are the same reasons children join other pro-social groups such as 4-H and Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts.

Some of the reasons for joining a gang may include:
- A search for love, structure, and discipline
- A sense of belonging and commitment
- The need for recognition and power
- Companionship, training, excitement, and activities
- A sense of self-worth and status
- A place of acceptance
- The need for physical safety and protection
- A family tradition

Risk Factors for Joining a Gang
- **Racism**: When young people encounter both personal and institutional racism (i.e., systematic denial of privileges), the risks are increased. When groups of people are denied access to power, privileges, and resources, they will often form their own anti-establishment group.
- **Poverty**: A sense of hopelessness can result from being unable to purchase wanted goods and services. Young people living in poverty may find it difficult to meet basic physical and psychological needs which can lead to a lack of self-worth and pride. One way to earn cash is to join a gang involved in the drug trade.
- **Lack of a support network**: Gang members often come from homes where they feel alienated or neglected. They may turn to gangs when their needs for love are not being met at home. Risks increase when the community fails to provide sufficient youth programs or alternatives to violence.
- **Media influences**: Television, movies, radio, and music all have profound effects on youth development. Before youth have established their own value systems and are able to make moral judgments, the media promotes drugs, sex, and violence as an acceptable lifestyle.

Protective Factors
- Well-developed social and interpersonal skills
- High sense of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and personal responsibility
- Reflectivity, rather than impulsive thought and behavior
- Internal locus of control (i.e., the belief of being able to influence environment in a positive manner)
- Flexible coping strategies, well-developed problem-solving skills and intellectual abilities

Gang Prevention
Youth gang involvement is not a new phenomenon in the United States. Gangs have been known to exist in our country since the 18th-century. Philadelphia was trying to devise a way to deal with roaming youth disrupting the city in 1791. According to the National School Safety Center, officials in New York City acknowledged having gang problems as early as 1825. The gang problem is not likely to go away soon or to be eliminated easily.

Here are a few gang-prevention strategies:

- **The family and the community** are essential to the development of the child's social, emotional, and physical needs. If the family is the source of love, guidance, and protection that youths seek, they are not forced to search for these basic needs from a gang. The family and community share responsibility for teaching children the risk of drugs.

- **Strong education and training** are directly related to a youth's positive development. Young people who successfully participate in and complete education have greater opportunities to develop into reasonable adults.

- **Graffiti removal** reduces the chance that crimes will be committed. Since gangs use graffiti to mark their turf, advertise themselves, and claim credit for a crime, quick removal is essential.

- **Conflict resolution programs** teach gangs how to deal better with conflicts and help eliminate gang intimidation tactics.

- **Recreational programs** such as sports, music, drama, and community activities help build a sense of self-worth and self-respect in young people. Youth involved in such activities are less likely to seek membership in a gang.

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Gangs pose a serious problem for many schools. Students at schools with gangs are more than twice as likely to be victims of violent crimes than students at schools without gangs, they report greater access to illegal drugs, and they are four times more likely to report seeing a student with a gun in school. Gangs generate an atmosphere of fear and intimidation that pervades the school environment. Schools with gangs are much more likely to employ security measures such as guards, metal detectors, and locker checks. Gangs are reported by nearly 40 percent of students in U.S. public schools, including 25 percent of students in rural areas and more than 50 percent of students in communities with more than 50,000 residents. Nearly two-thirds of Hispanic students, almost one-half of African-American students, and one-third of white students report gangs in their schools.

What is a gang? Definitions vary widely, but usually refer to a self-formed group of individuals who identify themselves by a name and engage in recurrent criminal activity. Gangs typically have recognized leaders, membership requirements and initiation rituals, and an identified territory. Youth gangs contain adolescents, but often also include young adults (persons age eighteen or older). This definition distinguishes youth gangs from other types of groups, such as ideological groups, motorcycle gangs, and organized crime groups, that are primarily adult organizations.

Gangs are not new to the United States, and they have long been associated with unfavorable social and economic conditions experienced by immigrants in urban neighborhoods. Most historians agree that the economic difficulties and sociocultural stresses experienced by immigrant groups of many ethnic backgrounds have generated gang activity. Following a wave of Irish immigration in the 1820s, New York City was plagued by gangs such as the Bowery Boys, the
Dead Rabbits, and the Plug Uglies, who marched brazenly through the streets in distinctive dress and confronted one another in armed combat. Mexican youth formed gangs when their families migrated to the southwestern United States in the early 1800s. More youth gangs followed waves of immigration to major industrial centers during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Many gangs were on the payroll of politicians and union leaders—or worked as junior confederates to organized crime. Frederic Thrasher's classic 1929 study of youth gangs in Chicago focused on the effects of poverty, immigration status, poor parental supervision, and lack of recreational opportunities among ethnic minorities, including Polish, Italian, Irish, Jewish, and other immigrant groups. Thrasher identified more than 1,300 youth gangs, although his definition emphasized allegiance among members and did not require criminal activity.

According to a national law enforcement survey, there were approximately 28,700 gangs and 780,200 gang members active in the United States in 1998. Gangs increased rapidly during the 1980s and early 1990s. There is considerable research and debate on reasons for the increase in youth gangs; among the most likely factors are the emergence of the crack cocaine market, an influx of Asian and Latin American immigrants who had few employment opportunities, the proliferation of gang federations and alliances, and a sustained, national surge of single-parent households. Gangs are most prevalent in the western United States and least prevalent in the Northeast. Youth gangs are most common in large cities, especially Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Houston. Ninety-four percent of U.S. cities with populations of more than 100,000 report youth gangs, though gangs are also present in smaller communities. Half of all suburban counties, one-third of all small cities, and one-fifth of rural counties report active youth gangs. Although gang membership declined nationwide from 1996 to 1998, the number of gang members in rural counties increased by 43 percent.

**Gang Characteristics**
In his studies of Detroit gang activity in the 1980s, Carl Taylor distinguished three types of gangs. *Scavenger gangs* are informal groups that come together periodically and commit opportunistic, impulsive crimes. They are not well organized, leadership is variable, and the existence of the gang may be short-lived. In contrast, *territorial gangs* have many of the features commonly associated with gangs: a well-defined territory or turf that they defend from outsiders, membership requirements and initiation rituals, leadership by an individual or core group of members, distinctive dress, and use of symbols or hand signs for covert communication. Taylor used the term *corporate gang* to characterize highly organized and profit-oriented gangs engaged in extensive, well-defined criminal enterprises, such as drug dealing and extortion. Such gangs display a corporate-like structure in the differentiated assignment of roles and responsibilities to members, who may be involved in marketing, sales, or distribution, or in more specifically criminal activities such as enforcement.

Although media accounts sometimes refer to "gang migration" from larger to smaller cities, research suggests that organized migration is rare. When it does occur, it is generally the result of families moving from one city to the next for mundane reasons. In some cases, a youth who moves to a new city may claim membership in a well-known home-town gang in order to bolster his or her status in the new community. Most small-town and rural gangs are homegrown independent groups, and some may take on the name of nationally known gangs in an effort to gain prestige and status. Many gangs are poorly organized and short-lived, and such a gang's reputation may generate unwarranted public fear and concern.

Although gangs are often referred to as *youth gangs*, law enforcement estimates in 1998 suggested that 60 percent of gang members were adults (over age seventeen). Youth gangs have often been ethnically or racially homogeneous, although during the 1990s more than one-third of gangs were reported to have a racially mixed membership. Nationally, in 1998, 46 percent of gang members
were Hispanic, 34 percent were African American, 12 percent were white, and 6 percent were Asian.

Most studies report that fewer than 10 percent of gang members are girls, although some studies have found rates as high as 30 percent, perhaps suggesting a trend toward greater female involvement in gangs. Early studies suggested girls formed auxiliary groups to male gangs, but in the 1990s many gangs had mixed gender membership, and 1 to 2 percent of gangs had more than 50 percent female membership. Gender studies indicate that girl gang members commit more crimes than girls who are not in gangs, but fewer crimes than boy gang members.

**Gangs and Crime**

Gang membership substantially increases a youth's involvement in criminal activities, even though youths who join gangs tend to be predisposed to delinquency and often have previous arrest records. Youths who join gangs engage in more crime than youths with similar backgrounds, even if those youths do associate with delinquent peers. Association with gang members is linked to greater involvement in delinquent activity than association with delinquent nongang peers.

Gang members commit a disproportionate share of juvenile crime, especially serious crime. In some studies, gang members were found to commit crimes at twice the rate of other arrested youths. Gang crimes vary over time and across gangs, but most frequently involve weapons offenses, drug sales, assault, and auto theft. Shootings, particularly drive-by shootings, are strongly associated with gang conflicts. Violent gang crime is more common in large cities, while gang involvement in breaking and entering and other property crimes is relatively more common in rural and suburban areas.

Although many youths join gangs for protection, studies show that gang membership greatly increases the risk of violent injury or death. Gang members
are more likely than other youths to carry concealed weapons, and gang rivalries often lead to violent feuds and turf battles. Informal codes of honor in many gangs demand that members respond aggressively to perceived acts of disrespect so as to protect and bolster their reputation. Acts of aggression often stimulate vengeful counter-attacks, followed by further retaliation in an escalating pattern.

Drug trafficking is commonly associated with gangs, and economic rivalries over drug markets, as well as disputes over drug deals and sales, can lead to violence. Many authorities believe that the development of lucrative crack cocaine markets in the 1980s stimulated the growth of gangs and led to a dramatic increase in violent crimes, particularly firearm-related homicides in large cities. Law enforcement surveys indicate that approximately one-third of youth gangs are specifically organized for drug trafficking, although members of other gangs frequently participate in drug sales in a less systematic manner. Gang involvement in drug sales is common in rural and suburban areas as well as major cities. Nevertheless, the role of drug sales in homicides has proven to be smaller than expected, with substantial numbers of gang-related homicides associated with interpersonal conflicts and gang disputes over status and territory.

**Why Do Young People Join Gangs?**

Historically, sociologists have contended that gang involvement is associated with membership in an underclass—that youths who join gangs tend to be members of racial or ethnic minorities from economically deprived and socially disadvantaged areas. Indeed, young gang members are often poor, minority youth from disorganized neighborhoods. However, membership in the underclass is not a sufficient explanation for gang involvement, since the majority of such youths do not join gangs. Likewise, youths from less disadvantaged backgrounds also join gangs.

Ask a young gang member why he joined a gang, and the most frequent answer will be that his friends are in the gang. Friendship patterns are powerful
influences on gang membership, as is the excitement of involvement in delinquent activity. Gangs grow and spread largely through individual contacts between gang members and prospective members. The appeal of belonging to a powerful, seemingly prestigious group is strong in adolescence, and young teens may aspire for acceptance into a group led by older teens and young adults. Many young teens are characterized as gang "wannabes," and researchers recognize a continuum of gang membership ranging from nonmembers to hardcore members. Although some gangs report lifelong membership, even devoted gang members usually cease active involvement in their gangs during their twenties. Longitudinal studies have found that more than 50 percent of gang members drop out of their gangs within a year of joining.

Gangs are appealing because they offer a sense of identity and social recognition to adolescents who feel marginalized in society and regard their future as bleak or uncertain. Conventional opportunities through education and employment may seem remote or unattainable to minority youth living in impoverished communities. Gangs offer opportunities for excitement, feelings of power and status, and defiance of conventional authority. Gangs also provide a well-defined, reliable peer group for recreation and affiliation, which is a compelling concern during the teenage years. On a more practical level, gang involvement may provide financial opportunities through drug dealing and other criminal endeavors. In many neighborhoods gang membership offers protection from bullying or assault, and some youths may feel pressured to join a gang simply because they reside within the gang's territory.

Though it may be tempting to speculate about the psychological profile of a gang member, there is no simple explanation. Gangs offer a variety of roles and opportunities: one youth may aspire to lead others or serve as protector to his or her neighborhood; another may seek financial gain through crime, while still
another may be drawn into the pattern of violence and neighborhood warfare that characterizes some gangs.

Family factors such as parental absence or inadequate supervision play a role in some cases, but in other cases parents may encourage gang involvement because of their own history of criminal activity or gang membership. Some large, well-established gangs claim generations of gang members within families. Popular culture may also encourage gang membership by promoting positive images of gangs—such as the Jets and Sharks of the Broadway musical *West Side Story* or movies that glamorize gang feuds similar to that between the Crips and Bloods, gangs that originated in Los Angeles. Many celebrities in music and professional sports proudly display their gang affiliation through tattoos, dress, and gestures.

**Prevention and Intervention**

The risk factors for gang membership are generally the same as for delinquency, and gang members are usually delinquent before they join gangs, suggesting that prevention efforts aimed at delinquency are relevant to preventing gang involvement as well. Although several strategies have been found to prevent or reduce general delinquency, programs aimed specifically at gangs have not met with much success. On an individual level, parental supervision and an emphasis on keeping youths from associating with delinquent peers is critically important.

One of the oldest gang prevention strategies attempts to alter the socioenvironmental factors presumed to produce gangs through community interventions such as increased recreational activities, neighborhood improvement campaigns, and direct assistance to gang members in seeking employment, vocational training, health care, and other services. Despite the best of intentions, however, such programs have not demonstrated evidence of reducing gang activity. On the contrary, some critics have reported that such programs tend to increase gang cohesiveness.
In 1991 the Phoenix Police Department introduced the school-based Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) program, modeled on the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program and subsequently supported by the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. The GREAT curriculum consists of nine weekly lessons taught to middle school students by law enforcement officers. The GREAT curriculum is used in schools in all fifty states, but has not been extensively evaluated. Two studies suggest that the program has modest short-term effects in improving student attitudes and reducing self-reported delinquency, but long-term, rigorously controlled outcome studies are needed.

Some demonstrable success in the war against gangs has come through law enforcement efforts leading to the long-term incarceration of gang leaders. Gang intelligence, intensive investigation, and well-planned prosecution have disrupted, and in some cases eliminated, gangs. However, high-profile, intensive policing efforts to suppress gang activity by saturating a neighborhood with law enforcement officers and generating numerous arrests on minor charges have not been successful.

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