

TEEN Turning Points



Gang-related Violence

For some, gang-related violence is more frightening than any other type because it can be random and deadly. While any level of violence can harm children emotionally, gang-related violence is especially harmful because it may mean death or disability. If you're a teenager, you can take precautions to protect yourself and your family.

What is gang violence?

A gang is a group of people who "hang" with each other, even if they don't have an official name. Another name for gang is "organization." Members may be males or females, rich or poor. Most involve young males, but some extend even into adulthood. Some are more organized and more dangerous than others. More and more gang activity includes females, who can be just as violent as males.

Many types of gangs exist in most cities – even if the members don't consider their group a "gang." Unfortunately, sometimes teens join groups just to belong or to gain self-esteem, though in reality it's false self-esteem. Others join gangs for the main purpose of protection. Still others become involved in gangs as an art of illegal activities.

Gang violence includes threats or actual violence committed by or against gang members. Examples are taunting, hitting, knifing, shooting and sexual assault.

Types of violence

Much gang violence is internal – members fight each other for power or require new members to commit violent acts as initiation to the group. But many incidents are external – gang members may seek revenge and shoot wildly while driving, resulting in the injury or death of bystanders. Others fight over "turf," attacking members from other gangs who cross the boundaries. Still other gangs commit random acts of violence for the thrill. Do you know anyone who has been injured or killed from gang violence?

Dangers

Gang violence hurts the entire community. The elderly, homeless and disabled are especially vulnerable, as are women. However, teen-agers carry the greatest risk. They are three times as likely to be victims of violent crimes as people over age 30. That's why teens should learn how to protect themselves and to avoid conflict.

How to protect yourself

To keep yourself safe from gang violence, use the following tips:

- **Don't wear gang colors.** This alone could cause someone from another gang to attack you.
- **Keep your expensive jackets, shoes, and jewelry at home.** Some people attack teens to steal their belongings.
- **Take an honest look at your friends.** Do they steal? Do they use drugs? Do they start fights? If so, it's time to find new friends. Even if you don't join in, you're in danger because someone may try to seek revenge against your friends and hurt you too.
- **If you must travel through gang territories, take someone with you.** Groups of people are safer than a person alone.
- **If you see signs of trouble, leave the area.** Tell an adult, such as your parents, security guard, a teacher or principal. Or tell the police.
- **If you're in school, pay attention to signs of trouble,** such as a gun in a locker or on a person, a threat to beat someone up, the use of drugs, or the delivery of drugs. Find an adult you can trust, and tell in secret. You could also send a secret letter to the principal, telling him or her of the danger you noticed. By telling, you will help to keep your school safe. If they know in advance, teachers or the principal can prevent a fight or shooting from occurring and can keep drugs out of school.
- **Learn how to resolve conflict peacefully.** For instance, teens can use humor and patience to diffuse a situation and avoid injury.
- **Avoid alcohol and other drugs.** Many incidents occur when alcohol or drugs are involved. Drugs stop a person from thinking clearly. Teens who drink or use drugs may do things they wouldn't do if they were sober.

Where to get help

If you need more help, talk to your parents, a teacher, counselor or a member of the clergy. Or call Crisis Services, at (810) 257-3740, where a counselor is always available. ©

