

## Youth Gangs

A gang is a structured group of individuals who use intimidation and violence to carry out criminal acts in order to gain power and status or to control certain lucrative activities (4). A *youth gang* is “any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (6). Most youth gang members belong to street gangs rather than a criminal business organization (9, 12). Almost half of youth gangs are multi-ethnic (13). Often there is an identifiable leader and members display or wear common colors or other insignia (3). Less than 0.5% of Canada’s youth belong to a gang; most members are male (88%) and nearly half are 17 years of age or younger (14). Finding group identity, a sense of safety, an opportunity to get ‘easy’ money, or excitement has great appeal for youth (19). The extent to which youth are willing to obtain these things through illegitimate means is typically higher among those who experience the greatest levels of inequality and social disadvantage within society (3).

### Are youth gangs a problem?

Youth gangs are a growing concern. Canada has 434 youth gangs with approximately 7,070 members nationally (3). The highest concentration of youth gangs is in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario (2). Gang affiliated youth are involved in a wide range of crimes, such as graffiti, vandalism, drug trafficking, robbery, prostitution, money laundering, and the smuggling of weapons. The seriousness of crime depends on the nature and purpose of the gang (7). Youth gang members in Canada have engaged in threats, intimidation, assault, and homicide. In schools where a gang presence exists, guns and drugs are more widely available (21), and in large metropolitan areas, guns have been the weapon of choice (2). Youth gangs are also a problem because they may establish relationships with adult organized crime groups (3). Females who participate in gangs are often treated as sexual slaves, and have been involved in secondary activities, such as looking out for police and carrying weapons and drugs for male gang members (15).

### Who is at risk of being lured into a youth gang?

Cultural, societal, and economic factors play a major role in creating a climate of risk for youth involvement in gangs (3). Failures in the educational, welfare, and immigration systems, including social upheaval, poverty, income inequality, and racism are examples of how inequality and social disadvantage may occur (3). In addition, the effects from gang culture (3), early substance use, antisocial/hostile/aggressive behavior, limited attachment to community, family history of gang involvement, parental neglect, low academic achievement or school dropout, and unemployment are contributing factors (1,2). Those who join gangs may desire a sense of power, respect, belonging, money, or social status (17), turning to gangs that initially appear to be able to meet these needs.

*In Canada, youth gang membership exists across all ethnic and cultural communities*

- 18% are Caucasian
- 22% are Aboriginal
- 25% are African/Black (2)

*In British Columbia, 3 minority groups are over-represented in youth gangs:*

- East Asian
- South Asian
- Aboriginal

### Signs of Gang Involvement

- Unexplained Injuries
- Secrecy about new friends
- Abrupt changes in personality
- Preference for single color clothing
- Graffiti on personal items, such as notebooks or bedroom walls
- Tattoos or markings of gang symbols on hands or body
- Unexplained new possessions or money (5)

### Services for Youth

Victims Info Line:  
1.800.224.7233

Youth Against  
Violence Line:  
1.800.680.4264

Youth Online Chat:  
[www.youthinbc.com](http://www.youthinbc.com)

*“Gangs flourish in areas where resources, opportunities, and support are limited”<sup>(2)</sup>*

### BC Centre for Safe Schools and Communities

provides educational resources, activities, and conducts research to promote safety. To obtain specialized resources or conduct research for gang prevention contact the Centre at (1)604-870-5936 or 1-888-224-7233 or order from on-line search catalogue at [www.bccssc.ca](http://www.bccssc.ca)

The risk factors for involvement in criminal activity between males and females are different. For males, this tends to rest in relationships with anti-social peers, while for females, a history of abuse and trauma in the home are often contributing factors. An early and on-going history of victimization from abuse, school failure, dysfunctional home life, isolation, unhealthy and dependant relationships, mental health challenges, and substance abuse also place youth at greater risk for joining a gang (16). Youth who end up in gangs often have feelings of disappointment about society and gangs offer a form of consolation from among a group of like-minded individuals where support for law-breaking is encouraged and criminal behavior is expected (8).

### What is being done to address youth gangs?

Research generally agrees on a three pronged approach. *Preventative* measures include intervention for youth at risk (2), education of the public (9), persistence of youth social workers with youth gang members or those at risk (10), and specific school policies and procedures (11). *Intervention* involves employment and skills training and recreational activities for individuals involved in gang activities (2). *Suppression* consists of “law enforcement, legislative action, punishment and removal of members from community, specialized gang units, and the development of systems to track gang info and activities, such as the Integrated Gang Task Force (2). Critically, cooperation of all members of the community is required to create an effective solution (9). Effectively addressing youth gangs requires attention to the specific risk factors that lead to gang involvement and which take gender, ethno-cultural, economic, and social considerations into account at their core (16).

### How can youth be protected from joining a gang?

Protective factors are positive influences that decrease the likelihood of problem behavior. The more risks a youth face, the more likely their attraction to anti-social behaviours (1). A parent’s or guardian’s role in prevention is crucial. Key protective elements include creating positive social environments through modeling positive relationships, assisting children in building positive relationships with mentors and pro-social peers, and monitoring and being attentive to youth, in particular for the warning signs for gang involvement (see inset). For schools and communities, providing opportunities and resources so that all youth can have positive social experiences (educational, civic, recreational, cultural) is a foundational prevention strategy. Still, developing mechanisms for early identification of youth at risk is critical (2). For youth who already belong to a gang, providing comprehensive and competent services (drug treatment, employment, and educational opportunities) are needed to support what is often the complex process of trying to leave a gang.