

The following material was taken from: Mayer, G. R., & Ybarra, W. J. (2003). *Teaching alternative behaviors schoolwide: A resource guide to prevent discipline problems*. Downey: Los Angeles County Office of Education, Safe Schools Center. For more information contact Bill Ybarra at the LACOE or G. Roy Mayer at: grmayer@aol.com.

# GANGS

The incidence of gangs in schools nearly doubled from 1989 to 1995 (Howell & Lynch, 2000). The proliferation of gangs, even into small cities and towns, has fueled the public's fear and increased misconceptions about gangs.

## Facts on Gangs in Schools

Here are some facts (Howell & Lynch, 2000). When gangs are present in a school:

- More students report knowing a student who brought a gun to campus, or seeing a gun on campus
- More students report that drugs (marijuana, cocaine, crack, or uppers/downers) are readily available at school
- The likelihood of violent victimization at school more than doubles

Most gangs, then, but not all, are involved in violence, drug sales, carrying guns, and other criminal acts.

According to research (Curry, Maxson, & Howell, 2001; Esbensen, 2000; Howell & Lynch, 2000):

- Gangs are more likely to be present in schools that are located within central cities with populations between 100,000 and 1 million, but juvenile gang problems affect communities of all sizes and in all regions of the United States
- Gang members tend to be those for whom family and school environments have not worked. They look for identity, recognition, and stability in the gang
- One-half to two-thirds of the youth who join gangs are members for 1 year or less
- The race or ethnicity of gang members is reflected by the composition of the community: "Gang members are white in primarily white communities and are African American in predominantly African American communities" (Esbensen, 2000, p. 4)
- Students who join gangs tend to be already delinquent, but dramatically increase their criminal activity during their gang membership. Frequent association with delinquent peers is one of the strongest predictors (or risk factors) of gang membership
- Los Angeles and Chicago have the highest rates of gang homicides in the nation
- The schools that contain gangs are characterized by high levels of student victimization, numerous security measures, and a large number of readily available drugs
- The high level of victimizations in the schools are not strongly reflected in the community, suggesting "that the school environment makes a unique contribution to the criminal victimization of adolescents" (Curry et al., 2001, p. 6)

## Interventions

No one program has had a substantial impact on preventing adolescent gang involvement. However, two salient points were made above: (1) Youth that tend to join gangs are antisocial before joining; and, (2) the school environment has been identified as a contributor to antisocial behavior and gang membership. As a result, Esbensen (2000) states, “*General prevention efforts that target the entire adolescent population may also prove beneficial in reducing youth gang involvement.*” Thus, factors that contribute to problem behavior, such as those identified in Chapter 2, need to be addressed. Programs for addressing such factors are described throughout this book and need to be stressed, for as Howell (1998) points out, *the most promising and cost effective anti-gang strategy is preventing youth from joining gangs in the first place.*

To keep abreast on developments regarding addressing gangs, see the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC) for up-to-date information ([www.iir.com/nygc](http://www.iir.com/nygc)). Also, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) put out a booklet (Morle et al., 2000) on “Comprehensive Responses to Youth at Risk.” It contains several illustrative communitywide approaches to gang free schools and communities.

A number of gang abatement programs have been developed, but their results, while positive, have been small. The lack of more meaningful results is probably because they have not addressed the variety of factors that help to cause the antisocial behavior. However, two of the better known ones used in schools are briefly outlined below.

### G.R.E.A.T.

The Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program is a gang-specific prevention program that the Phoenix Police Department introduced to provide “students with real tools to resist the lure and trap of gangs” (Humphrey & Baker, 1994, p. 2). It has been incorporated in school curriculums in all 50 states and several other countries. Its objectives are “to reduce gang activity and to educate a population of young people as to the consequences of gang involvement” (Esbensen & Osgood, 1999, p. 198). It contains nine lessons offered once a week by law enforcement officers.

### GRIP

The Gang Risk Intervention Program (GRIP) is funded by the California Department of Education and operates in about 15 of California’s 58 counties. It “provides on-campus counseling about gangs through school counselors, police, and gang specialists. The program includes sports and recreational activities, job training, and apprenticeships. Visit <http://www.cde.ca.gov/spbranch/safety/> for more information” (California Dept. of Ed, 2002, p. 43).

## References

- California Department of Education. (2002). *Safe schools: A planning guide for action*. Sacramento, CA.
- Curry, D., Maxson, C. L., & Howell, J. C. (2001, March). Youth gang homicides in the 1990’s. *OJJDP Fact Sheet*. (# FS-200103). U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC.
- Howell, J.C. (1998). *Youth gangs: An overview*. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Washington, DC.
- Howell, J. C., & Lynch, J. (2000, August). *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. U.S. Department of Justice. (#NCJ183015) Washington, D.C.
- Humphrey, K. R., & Baker, P. R. (1994, September). The GREAT Program: Gang resistance education and training. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 1-4.
- Esbensen, F. (2000, September). Preventing adolescent gang involvement. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. (# NCJ 182210). U. S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC.
- Esbensen, F., & Osgood, D. W. (1999). Gang resistance education and training (G.R.E.A.T.): Results from the national evaluation. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 36(2), 194-225.
- Morle, E., Rossman, S. B., Kopczynski, M., Buck, J., & Gouvis, C. (2000, November). *Comprehensive responses to youth at risk: Interim findings from the safefutures initiative*. Office of Juvenile Justice and delinquency Prevention, Washington, DC.