

JPIC Corner

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Coordinator's Note

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Missionaries of the Sacred Heart

As of September, 2008, "Approximately 1 million gang members belonging to more than 20,000 gangs were criminally active within all 50 states and the District of Columbia."¹ While it is not easy to clearly define a gang (i.e. various states have different definitions, and some explanations describe only those related to street gangs), it is clear that in the different definitions, some common elements are present. A gang is a definitive group of young persons that normally engages in antisocial behavior and members of a gang usually engage in unlawful activity. These activities include burglary, drug trafficking, rape, vandalism, graffiti, violence, destruction of property, stabbings, drive-by shootings and homicide. Indeed 80% of criminal activities in many neighborhoods are attributed to gangs² and some gangs can be linked to organized crime.

The solution to gang violence seems to hinge on "prevention." According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, prevention takes on three efforts: Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary: Primary prevention focuses on the entire population at risk and the identification of those conditions (personal, social, environmental) that promote criminal behavior. Secondary prevention targets those individuals who have been identified as being at greater risk of becoming delinquent. Tertiary prevention targets those individuals who are already involved in criminal activity or who are gang members.³

Many Church groups, community leaders and those concerned are involved with all three of these prevention tactics. School based programs work on primary prevention. Education is a key



94.3% of gang-related homicides involve the use of a firearm.

factor in gang prevention. It seems that not only do our youth need such education, but adults need to be very much aware of learning about our nation's gang crisis. Programs in gang prevention must teach non-violent means to resolve conflicts, character formation and how people of different races, ethnic origin, religion and social status can live in harmony with one another.

[Read Full Article](#)

Did You Know?

- There are an estimated 27,000 gangs in the United States.
- Gang members are responsible for up to 80% of the crime in some areas of the US.
- The age of gang members varies from under 15 to over 24.
- Some gangs have both male and female members.
- 73% of reported gang-related violence were also drug-related. 60% were due to conflict between gangs.
- Gangs don't just affect large cities. Smaller cities account for approximately 33% of gangs and rural counties for almost 6%.

1. *National Gang Threat Assessment 2009*, Document ID: 2009-M0335-001, January, 2009: <http://www.usdoj.gov/ndic/pubs32/32146/index.htm>
2. *Ibid.*
3. *OJJDP, Preventing Adolescent Gang Involvement*, Juvenile Justice Bulletin, September, 2000, p. 6.

Responding to Gangs - A Shared Responsibility

Gangs inflict much harm on the human community, teaching and encouraging dehumanizing and unlawful behavior. They promote “socially irresponsible values, attitudes, and beliefs. Gangs harm our children, causing or contributing to “school failure, family disruption, drug addiction, arrest, incarceration, disease, pregnancy, permanent injury, and premature death”⁴ among our young people.

Our Christian witness urges us

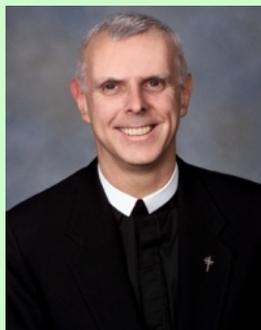
to move forward to respond to the gang crisis in our nation. The United States must take seriously the plight of our youth today. Teenagers are injuring and killing teenagers. They are both the victims and perpetrators. Everyone shares the responsibility to help our youth to grow in a moral, drug-free, non-violent and responsible society. Both the private and political sectors must make the welfare of our youth a priority. They must work

together and support each other in efforts to respond to our youth from a moral perspective. Pliny the Elder stated that “What we do to our children, they will do to society.” We cannot ignore the present crisis with our young. If we desire our children to be of good moral character, to be non-violent and peacemakers, then we ourselves must be committed to living these virtues. When we act in this way, our efforts will not be in vain.

Working to End Gang Violence

While teaching moral theology in my hometown of Reading, PA, I would invite police officers who worked in the “Gangs and Graffiti” program to talk to my sophomore students about the gang situation within the city. Dressed in civilian clothes, these officers would meet with gang members in order to help establish peace among the rival groups. This valuable program came to an end because of “political reasons” as one officer explained.

Here in Illinois, there was the national “Cease-Fire” prayer coalition which sought to end the shootings and killings from gang feuds. We would schedule events for prayer rallies for the city of Aurora and also worked in street-level outreach in gang-related areas to distribute educational literature to families. Unfortunately, IL’s Cease-Fire Chapter had to “cease” existing because the former Governor of IL discontinued funding the program because of budgetary reasons. Most recently, I asked a police officer if the department has any program to prevent gang formation and gang violence. His response was, “No, we arrest them.”



Br. Warren Perrotto, MSC

Gang Recruitment Methods

Recruitment for gang members takes place in the streets, in schools, and in prisons. Some techniques for gang recruitment include: seduction, subterfuge, obligation, coercion, and self-recruitment.

Often gang members attempt to bring about “glorified myths about the gang that are very attractive”⁵ such as “money, power, sex and glamour.” Parties are very useful ways for gangs to recruit new members. (seduction)

There is also a “misrepresentation of what the gang really is and what it stands for.”⁶ This includes lying to the individual e.g., telling him/her that his/her group is not a gang. Gangs also target kids who don’t have a good home life, convincing them that they aren’t loved at home but that the group or club is there for them. (subterfuge)

A member of a gang may do a favor for a person, and then expect or demand in return a favor from the individual. (obligation)

Large gangs increase membership by forcing the individual to join, threatening the individual and/or his/her family. (coercion)

Lastly, many youth will join gangs on their own volition. (self-recruitment) (*See Why Youth Join Gangs p. 3*)

Why Youth Join Gangs

There are many reasons why young people choose to join gangs. The societal structures of increasing poverty, social deterioration of the family and school systems seem to all be contributing factors for why youth enter gangs. Gangs provide a haven, offering acceptance, self-esteem, identity, security, power and prestige. Through membership in a gang, children and teens may find a sense of family and belonging that is often missing from their natural family.

Gangs also have ways of providing money for their members. Criminal activities offer opportunities to make money quickly and older gang members who don't want to be caught may be willing to offer children more money than their parents earn in a week to deliver a package or act as a look out. The ability to make money quickly can serve as the seduction method of recruitment. In addition, many gang members come from lower or low-middle class families who may be struggling financially.

Young people may also join gangs because they feel there are few alternatives, a feeling that can be exacerbated by limited job opportunities. Sometimes children and teens choose to join a gang for protection from violence and attacks from rival gangs in the community.

Some Risk Factors

- Having a relative who is in a gang
- Poverty or lacking adequate resources
- Lacking a close relationship with family, not feeling accepted and loved by family members
- Not having a strong sense of identity
- Few positive recreational opportunities

Watch the video below to explore the links between the impact of the economy on our youth, immigration, and gang membership. (Click on the picture or the link to view the video on YouTube.)



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NhEKLn-eYGk>

Joining A Gang

Entrance into a gang requires passing certain initiation rites. One example of an initiation rite is "Jump-In," in which the candidate must fight several gang members at one time. Such an initiation rites may include the gang members jumping on top of the candidate after the new recruit is punched and wrestled to the ground. The purpose of the "Jump-In" rite is to see how strong the candidate is and whether or not he/she is a fighter.

Another rite of entrance is "Lined-In." In this method, there are "two lines of its members and the recruit has to go between the lines as the gang members beat him/her."²

There is also the "Sexed-In" ritual where the recruits are to throw dice. The number indicated on the thrown dice is the number of gang members with whom the new recruit is to have sex.

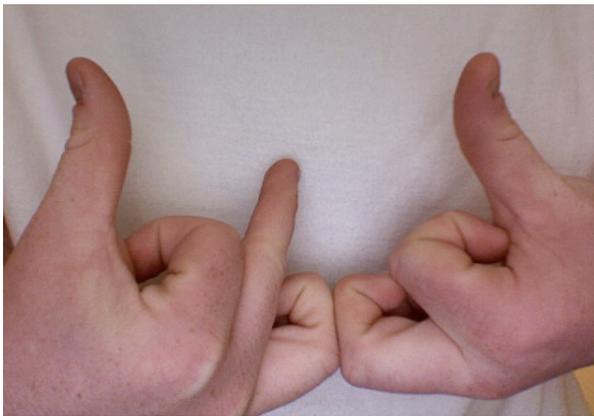
Other recruits are required to commit crimes in order to be

a member of a gang. There are also non-violent rituals of entrance: "Walked-In" and "Court-ed-In." The former is where the individual is free to join without any initiation. The latter may be asked to join without any initiation rite because he/she has a criminal talent which will be an asset to the gang, or he may have drug connections, have a car, or have a reputation for being good at stealing.

Know the Signs

Although no one wants to believe that it's even possible that their child is involved in a gang, it is important to know the warning signs, because ignoring the signs or denying the reality just allows the problem to get worse. The sooner you recognize that your child or teenager may either be involved with a gang or is thinking about becoming involved, the sooner you can seek help. In addition to the general warning signs, parents and caregivers should also become familiar with the symbols of local gangs.

Negative changes in behavior can be a sign of many things, including gang involvement. Watch for withdrawal from family, signs of drug use, negative changes in school performance or attendance, or an unusual desire for secrecy or privacy.



A hand sign used by the Bloods

Photo credit: Schyler

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Gang Identification

One step we can all take towards reducing gang membership is to recognize gang colors and symbols. That way if we notice our children or students wearing (or hanging out with people who are wearing) certain symbols or color combinations, we can step in earlier rather than later. Often gang members dress in a way that reflects the hip-hop culture, but non-gang members wear hip-hop style clothing as well. Gang members usually have

distinctive ways of identifying their gang affiliation through the use of colors, tattoos, symbols (such as those worn around the neck or printed on a t-shirt), and both certain types of clothing and accessories and how they are worn (e.g. the baseball cap). The colors red, black and green are associated with the Bloods, while the colors blue and purple are associated with the Crips.

Some gang members wear rosa-

ries around their necks, and in this case, the color of the beads identifies the gang. Sometimes gang membership can be identified through the brand of clothing or shoes worn. For instance, the company British Knights uses the logo BK on their products so Crip gang members may wear British Knight clothing because the letters BK can stand for Blood Killers (The Bloods are a rival gang).

Continued page 5

Warning Signs - What to Look For

- Admits to hanging out with kids you know are involved in a gang
- Highly interested in 1 or 2 particular colors or a particular logo or brand of clothing (possible methods of gang identification)
- Shows unusual interest in or seems fascinated by gangster-influenced music, videos, movies, websites etc. (remember that one method of gang recruitment is seduction)
- Communicates with friends using unusual hand signals
- Speaks in gang-style slang
- Has been in trouble with the police
- Has gang symbols or a particular drawing or image on school books, clothes, tattoos or on the walls in their room (look for recurring images)
- Has unexplained cash or is able to buy clothes, jewelry, electronics, etc. that seem too expensive for known sources of income (such as birthday money, allowance, part-time job)
- Has unexplained physical injuries that could be the result of fighting (several gang initiation rites involve fighting)
- Carries a weapon
- Stays out late without reason

Gang Identification, continued....

Continued from page 4

Bloods gang members sometimes wear Kansas City CHIEFS jackets (the football team) to signify Crips Hated in Every F---king State. Ordinary symbols and numbers can have special meanings in gangs, and gangs also create their own special symbols. For instance, the number "6" is the number of the Folk Nation (the Folk Nation Alliance is comprised of several gangs). Other symbols include the 6 and 8 pointed star, bulls horns, a pitchfork pointed up, as well as images such as a rabbit with a bent ear and a winged heart. Additionally, gang members have their own argot and unique hand symbols for identification.

Since external identification of gang affiliation can be complex and varied, and in the case of national gangs or gang alliances, different sets might use different symbols, it is important to learn more about any gangs known to be present in or near your community. Your local police department may be a good resource for more specific information about both what gangs are active in your area and their identifying colors, hand symbols, and other characteristics.

For a list of National and Regional street gangs in the United States, please click here to be redirected to the National Gang Intelligence Center's [National Gang Threat Assessment 2009 \(Appendix B\)](#).

Leaving A Gang

It is not easy to leave a gang, for several reasons. A person wishing to leave a gang may have to endure the "Jump-Out" ritual, which is similar to the "Jump-In" rite of initiation where the person must fight several gang members at once. Yet the challenges faced by a person who wants to leave a gang aren't limited to tests of physical endurance. Leaving a gang means losing all the protection that was provided while being a member without losing one's former enemies. In addition, the person must find a way to successfully re-integrate into mainstream society and support himself/herself.

To re-integrate into society, a former gang member needs the support of the larger community, support which unfortunately is not always found. Former gang members may experience discrimination and mistrust from the established society, which affects their ability to find a job. Many employers refuse to hire former gang members. The visible tattoo mark often is an obstacle, communicating to others, including potential employers, that the person is a gang member, even though he/she no longer is associated with the group and has reformed his/her life.

A former gang member also may be asked to testify against another gang member. Witness intimidation often occurs in court cases having to do with gang-related crimes.

Gangs: A National and International Problem - A Quick Glance at the MS-13

Gang members in the USA are increasingly involved in cross-border criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, smuggling people into the US, and smuggling weapons into Mexico.

The Mara Salvatrucha gang (or MS-13) is one of the gangs that operates across national borders. It is also one of the 19 gangs reported to have military-trained members. MS-13's founding members had fled the

long, violent civil war in El Salvador. From Los Angeles, CA, MS-13 spread not only to other parts of the country but also to other countries, such as El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, as gang members used deportation to their advantage.

Today MS-13 is estimated to have 30,000 to 50,000 members and associate members worldwide, 8,000 to 10,000 of which live in the United States.

In addition to trafficking (in drugs, people and weapons), the 2009 National Gang Threat Assessment reports that MS-13 gang members also commit assault, auto theft, carjacking, drive-by shootings, extortion, homicide, identification fraud and robbery.

MS-13 has a reputation for violence. For example:

[Three Suffolk Victims....
The Fight Against MS-13](#)

International Peace Day is 9/21

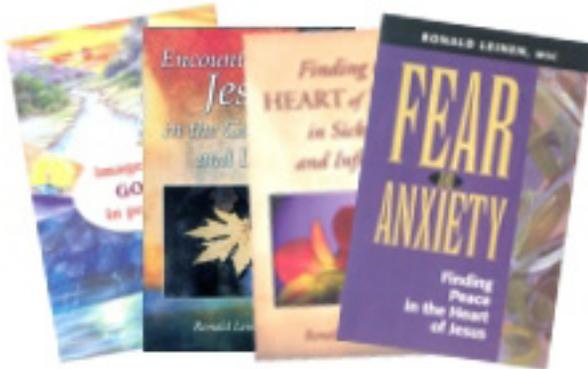
Gangs are one of the most important peace issues facing the United States today. The problem may seem overwhelming, but there are many concrete actions that we can take as parents,



teachers, mentors and friends. One of the most important things we can do is teach our children good decision making skills, to help them be able to make the right choices. We can also take an active role in our children's lives and involve them in positive group activities. *More tips to the right.*

More Resources

- [National Gang Threat Assessment 2009](#)
- [National Youth Gang Survey Analysis](#)
- [Model Programs Addressing Gang Issues](#)
- [Into the Abyss: What is a Gang?](#)



The MSC offer several spirituality books to support your journey to inner peace! [Learn more.](#)

Tell us what you think!

How can parishes and/or individuals help prevent gangs from forming and end gang violence?



Email Br. Warren at jpic@misacor-usa.org.

You Can Make A Difference

What can we as parents, teachers, mentors or friends do to prevent our youth from joining a gang?

Be aware of the following activities around the school or neighborhood:

- Clustering of rival groups (school, parks, parking lots, movie theaters, etc.)
- Movement of groups not common in your neighborhood (carloads of kids not from your neighborhood)
- Reports of fights and arguments on school property (i.e. bus stops, on buses, lunch hours)
- Increase in gang graffiti
- Violent incidents reported
- Sudden / excessive change in dress (wearing the same color/flying rags)

Take an active role in your children's lives:

- Praise your children for doing well / encourage them to participate in positive activities
- Get to know your children's friends and their families
- Set the example / be a positive model
- Talk and listen to your children
- Talk to your children about gangs / discourage participation
- Spend quality time with your children
- Put a high value on education
- Identify with positive role models

Several suggested skills for parents to prevent their children from entering a gang:

- Be a good observer
- Learn the real names of your children's friends
- Monitor living space for gang paraphernalia, weapons and drugs
- Report all crimes
- Seek the facts – kids will tell you what you want to hear
- Set clear limits – follow through with discipline if they break the rules

Source: *Gang Awareness: A Handbook for Parents, Teachers, and Concerned Citizens*, San Antonio Police Department Youth Crime Service Unit,



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