



Gangs in Schools

RESPONDING TO GANGS IN SCHOOLS: A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO SCHOOL SAFETY

A guide designed to provide schools and law enforcement with sound practices and collaborative techniques to identify, assess, and address gang activity in the school setting.

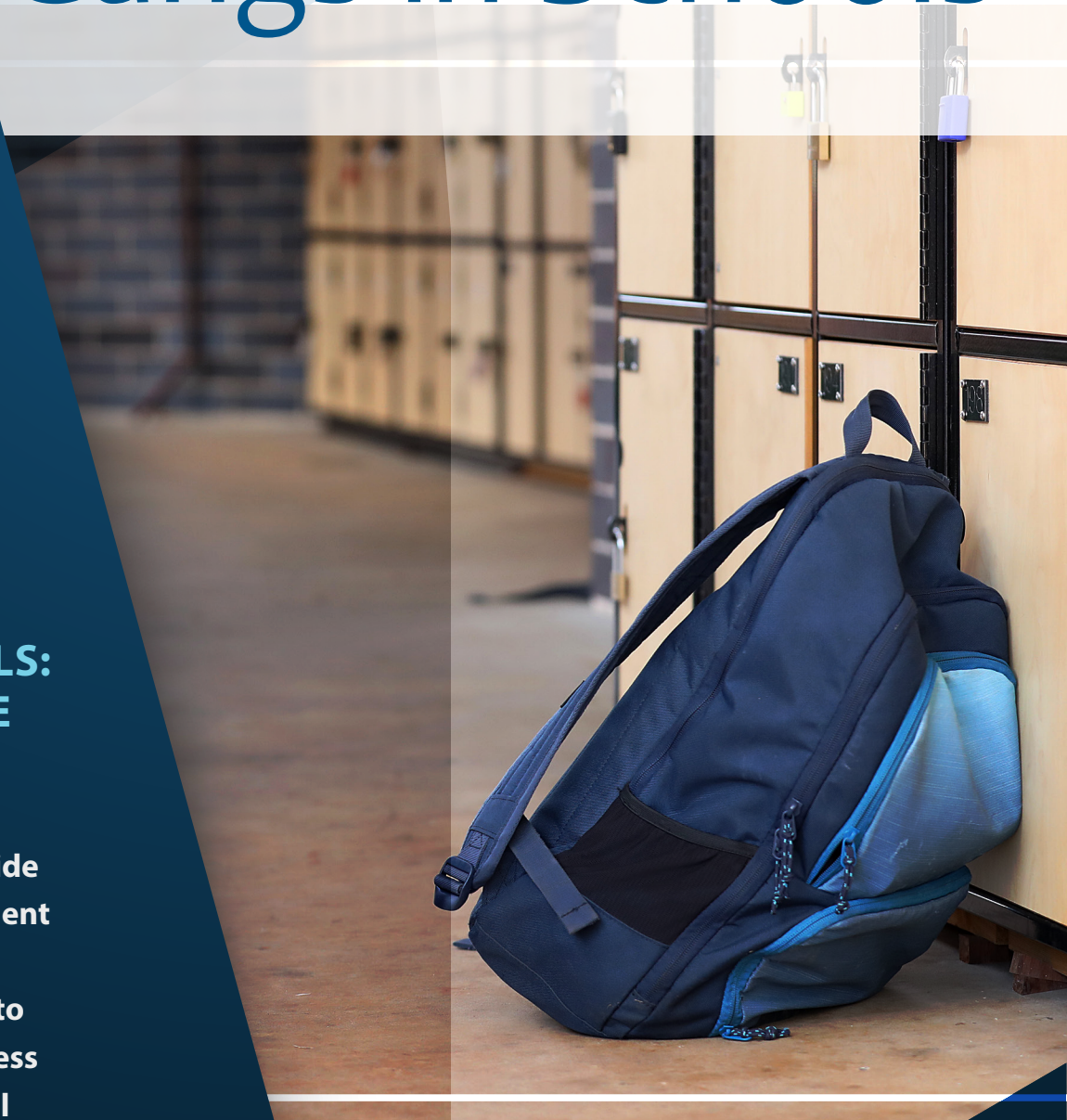


Table of Contents

Impact to Schools.....	1
What Does Gang Activity Look Like?.....	2
Creating a Collaborative Process Between Schools and Law Enforcement.....	3
The Role of Law Enforcement.....	4
The Role of School Administration.....	6
School Prevention Strategies to Consider.....	9
School Intervention Strategies to Consider.....	10
School Suppression Strategies to Consider.....	12
Resources and Reference.....	13

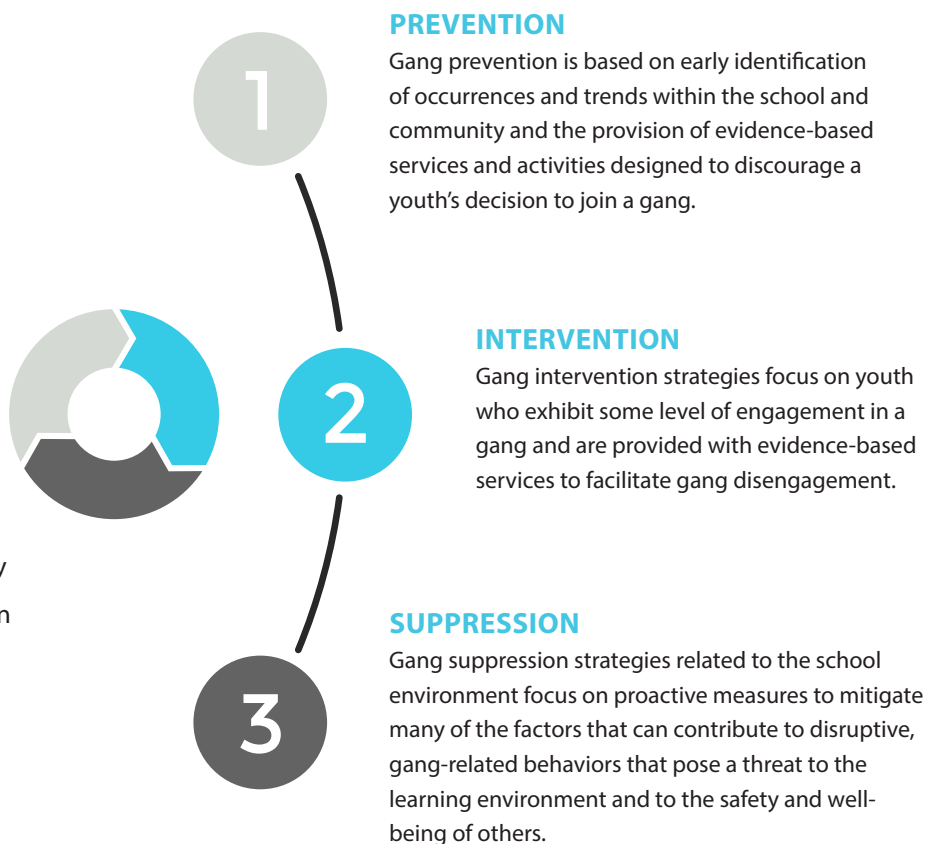
Impact to Schools

Gang affiliation is not something that students leave behind when they come to school. Gang members do not leave their behaviors, attitudes, and conflicts outside the school environment. Gangs, unchecked and unidentified in a school setting, often engage in threat and intimidation; physical and cyber bullying; fighting; recruiting; and criminal activities such as the introduction and use of weapons, assault, sex trafficking, vandalism, and illegal drug sales. The absence of a well-developed, strategic, collaborative, and effective school safety plan can lead to violence and other unsafe and disruptive activities within a school setting.

It is not solely the responsibility of schools to create and maintain a safe learning environment, free from the disruption gangs can cause, for students, faculty, and staff. To develop a comprehensive plan that identifies effective, evidence-based strategies to address gang issues in the school environment requires the involvement of law enforcement, school administrators and staff, and other key sectors of the community. The [OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model](#) highlights such a holistic approach by coordinating the roles of all agencies and organizations within a community that are responsible for addressing gang-related crime and violence. Schools are part of the larger community.

THREE-PRONGED RESPONSE

The best strategies are proactive rather than simply reactive. An effective response begins with the coordination of prevention, intervention, and suppression efforts guided by appropriate information sharing protocols. This establishes shared responsibility for tackling gang-related problems in schools.



What Does Gang Activity Look Like?

Distinctive indications of gang activity present themselves in many forms. Determining the presence of gangs, the level of gang activity, and possible threats within a community or school starts with intelligence gathering. Law enforcement agencies use these techniques to gather specific facts that are designed to ascertain and understand the level of gang activity within a community or school and are critical to accurately identifying specific individuals involved in delinquent and criminal activity associated with gangs. Coordination of information sharing between law enforcement and school administrators is essential in answering the following questions:

- Are just a few students creating problems? Who are they? What is the level of these students' gang association or affiliation?
- Are there rival gangs on campus fighting among themselves?
- Are there outside influences or circumstances entering the school grounds and driving the gang activity?
- Are the incidents in question actually gang-related?

Depending on the community, gang identifiers among young people can shift over time, in the same manner that fads and trends change among mainstream youth. However, common gang identifiers can include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Cliques of students wearing the same colors in clothes, bandanas, specific types of belts/buckles, jewelry, charms, or team sports clothing.
- Tattoos, graffiti, and drawings/sketches on folders, notebooks, or school assignments, including area codes and geographical locations represented numerically.
- Hand signs, handshakes, and other expressions of gang association or affiliation.

The reliability of gang identification depends on the sharing and validation of information between school personnel and local law enforcement. Taken together, this authentication of information establishes a more **accurate** picture of the level of disruption and threat to school safety posed by gang activity. It protects individual students from unsubstantiated labels. It equips school administrators with the ability to develop data-driven policies.

Creating a Collaborative Process Between Schools and Law Enforcement

The ultimate goal of a collaborative process to abate gang activity is to:

- Ensure school and community safety.
- Coordinate resources for gang-involved youth to promote successful gang disengagement.

The best way to identify, document, and respond to gangs within the school environment is to create a process that:

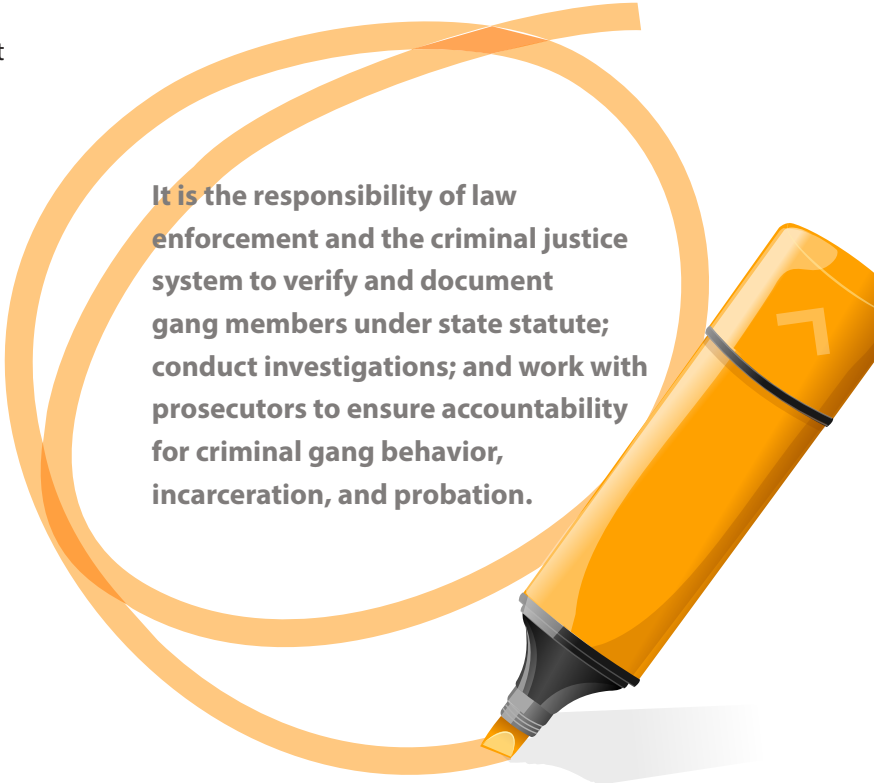
- Begins with awareness, understanding, and documentation of the gang issue.
- Develops active collaborations among agencies and organizations that can reduce gang activity within the school environment.
- Identifies students involved in or susceptible to gang activity.
- Provides a range of prevention measures.
- Addresses specific gang behaviors with consistent consequences and offers youth avenues to reduce or disengage from gang involvement.
- Establishes school safety and crisis planning.
- Includes ongoing staff training.



The Role of Law Enforcement

Law enforcement is an integral component in the development and implementation of any collaborative and comprehensive safety plan to address gang activity within a school setting and surrounding community. Law enforcement can assist school administrators in identifying problems occurring at school as gang-related. There are a number of steps that a law enforcement agency can take to proactively contribute to the safety of a school/school district that is in its jurisdictional area of responsibility.

- Provide training delivered by subject experts to school resource officers, campus security personnel, and other law enforcement personnel. The training should focus on current gang-related trends within their areas of jurisdictional responsibility.
- Provide annual gang awareness training to all school personnel as well as to parents/guardians. The training/education should focus on gangs and gang-related activity specific to the community in which the school is located.
- Regularly communicate with school resource officers and other school safety personnel whose responsibilities include campus security and student engagement. The exchange of situational awareness can head off potential gang-related disruptions on campus and within the community.
- Understand the role of school administrators and the various disciplinary options available to them to help mitigate gang violence. When arrest is not the only option, law enforcement officers, including school resource officers, should work in collaboration with school administrators to determine a best path forward.
- When an arrest is appropriate, leverage the criminal justice system and various criminal justice programs to mitigate potential violence or other disruptions as a result of the arrest.



It is the responsibility of law enforcement and the criminal justice system to verify and document gang members under state statute; conduct investigations; and work with prosecutors to ensure accountability for criminal gang behavior, incarceration, and probation.

- Work with school districts to develop and implement well-written safety plans. Safety plans in place should encompass all hazards but have a specific section outlined to address gang-related hazards. The plan should be exercised three to four times per year. The exercises should include local law enforcement personnel and school safety officers, as well as school administrators and school staff.
- Develop a trusted relationship in which law enforcement officers, school administrators, and school staff can openly share concerns about suspected gang-related activities in the school setting. Trust is vital. **The timely sharing of information is essential to the mitigation of a potential threat.**
- It is not uncommon for a school district's boundaries to encompass more than one law enforcement agency. Law enforcement agencies need to have agreements in place that allow for the timely sharing of critical information and actionable intelligence among themselves. Disparate criminal intelligence databases and lack of information sharing protocols are barriers that can raise the risk of potential gang-related threats. Connecting criminal/gang databases to RISSIntel™ or RISSGang™ is a valuable way to share information within the law enforcement community.




The Role of School Administration

Gang-related crime and violence in the community can spill over into the schools. School administrators can take an active role in providing a safe school environment by collaborating with law enforcement to assess gang-related threats; document gang-related incidents; address gang-related conduct; and implement a continuum of prevention, intervention, and suppression practices.

Steps should include the following:

- Develop juvenile and criminal justice partnerships—it is imperative to know what is happening with gang-involved students outside of the school setting. This knowledge and coordination will be beneficial if a gang-related violent incident occurs that requires a law enforcement response to the school.
- Conduct an assessment of what the problem really looks like within a specific school and its feeder schools. It is also helpful to review data of gang experience from the previous school year. Become informed of the larger picture by learning about the gang history in the community:
 - ▶ What are the current gang alliances and rivals?
 - ▶ What gang violence is currently taking place in the community?
 - ▶ What gang issues are trending in the community?

Law enforcement can provide detailed, accurate, and current information that may have an effect on the safety of a school. Collaborating with local law enforcement is essential to understand specific gang-related issues within the school environment. This information may include specific gangs and their affiliations, as well as the students involved in gang activity. Ensure that communication among partners is timely; otherwise, information may not be relevant by the time it is transmitted.



One of the biggest challenges for school administrators is finding ways to foster safe and positive learning environments that promote success for all students. Working closely with law enforcement agencies and school resource officers will help foster a collaborative approach to success.

- Recognize signs of gang activity and identify those involved. Monitor behaviors for gang affiliation and look for gang identifiers. Things to monitor closely include the following:
 - ▶ Social media outlets, to include identification of social media sites and trends specific to the community and school. Gang-involved youth often will highlight their activities via social media outlets, thus providing school personnel, law enforcement, and other adults with supervisory responsibility over these youth with a direct means for gathering information about them. In addition, social media is beneficial for anonymous reporting of gang involvement and/or activity by concerned parents, students, and staff.
 - ▶ Students who assume leadership roles on campus may have influence over groups of gang-involved students and their activities. Creating a relationship with those students and monitoring their behavior can help reduce or prevent violence.
 - ▶ Behaviors and activities of students in spaces such as lunchrooms, hallways, bathrooms, the schoolyard, the bus stop, the bus, extracurricular school-sponsored events, and other spaces where students can freely congregate before, during, and after school.
 - ▶ Apartment complexes, stores, restaurants, parks, or other establishments near the school. These places can be used for gang-related activity.
 - ▶ Repeated incidents of disrespect, threat, and intimidation by students (verbal and nonverbal).
 - ▶ Reports of delinquent and criminal activity at school.
 - ▶ Registrations of students coming from probation, detention, or other schools with known gang issues.
 - ▶ Rumors of gang activity in the schools and community; for example, rumors of fights or drive-by shootings.
- Work with local law enforcement agencies to keep an accurate and current record to account for all gang-related incidents and associated behaviors. Accurate documentation of both gang-related activity on the school campus and a student's level of gang involvement is dependent on the corroboration of sources that paints a complete picture. This documentation will be beneficial to law enforcement and prosecutors in the event that criminal activity is identified and prosecution is necessary.
- Make a commitment to staff training; empower all school personnel with the knowledge of what to look for and how to safely respond.
- Encourage timely information sharing by school personnel. Teachers and school staff often receive valuable information about gang activities that otherwise may never be shared with law enforcement. They should report this information no matter how small or insignificant the information may seem.
- Develop/foster partnerships with other state, county, local, and private (nonprofit) agencies/organizations that may be able to aid in gang prevention, intervention, and mitigation strategies.

Responding to Gangs Within the School Setting

Contain the spread of gang activity



Mitigate risks that foster gang activity

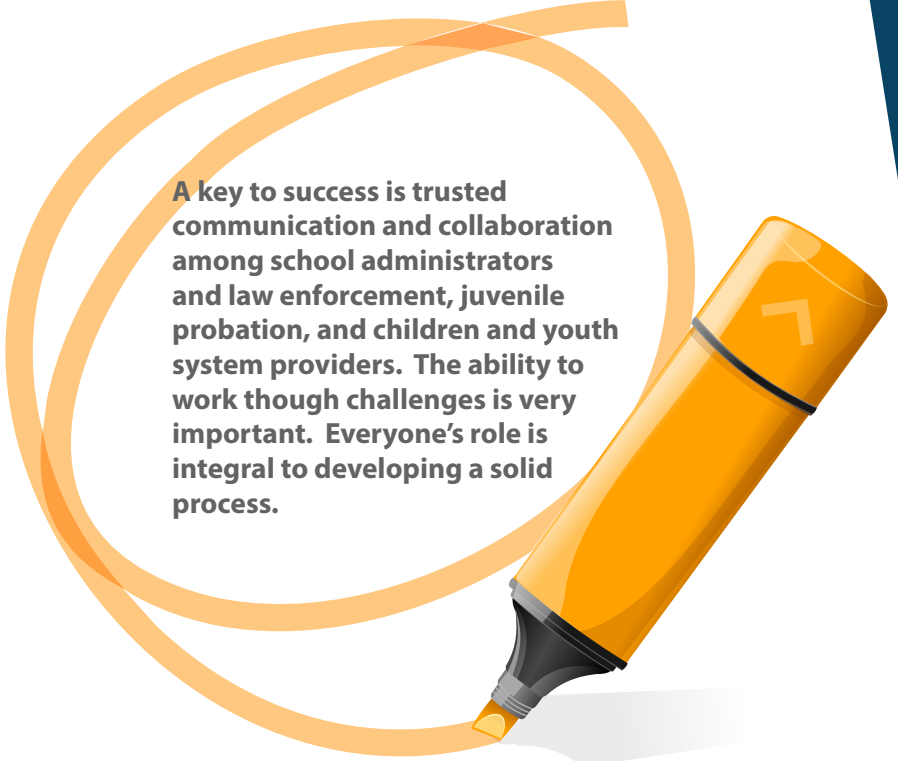
Protect those who are most susceptible



School Prevention Strategies to Consider

Gang prevention is based on early identification of occurrences and trends within the school and community and the provision of evidence-based services and activities designed to discourage a youth's decision to join a gang. Prevention practices can include the following:

- Consult with local law enforcement to bring in subject matter experts to provide ongoing gang awareness and education for teachers, school personnel, and parents and guardians. This training, to include gang identifiers, should be constantly updated and reinforced.
- Provide opportunities to develop relationships between law enforcement officers and students as early as possible, preferably in elementary schools. Bonding and positive relationships with law enforcement officers can influence student choices in the future.
- Implement the evidence-based Gang Resistance Education And Training ([G.R.E.A.T.](#)) Program, taught by law enforcement officers in the communities and schools they serve, for fourth through seventh grades. The G.R.E.A.T. Summer Program builds stronger bonds with students and their communities, and the G.R.E.A.T. Families component aims to strengthen the resiliency of individual families susceptible to gang influences.
- Refer parents to the [Parents' Guide to Gangs](#) brochure found on the National Gang Center Website. It provides tips on what to look for and how to respond.
- Utilize mentors who are experienced in working with this population as an added support for students who are at risk for gang joining.
- Provide alternative activities and after-school programing; include law enforcement programs such as the [Police Athletic League](#) (PAL).
- Develop a [safe-passage-to-school program](#) for students who have to traverse rival gang territories to get to school.
- Develop community partnerships to support prevention activities.

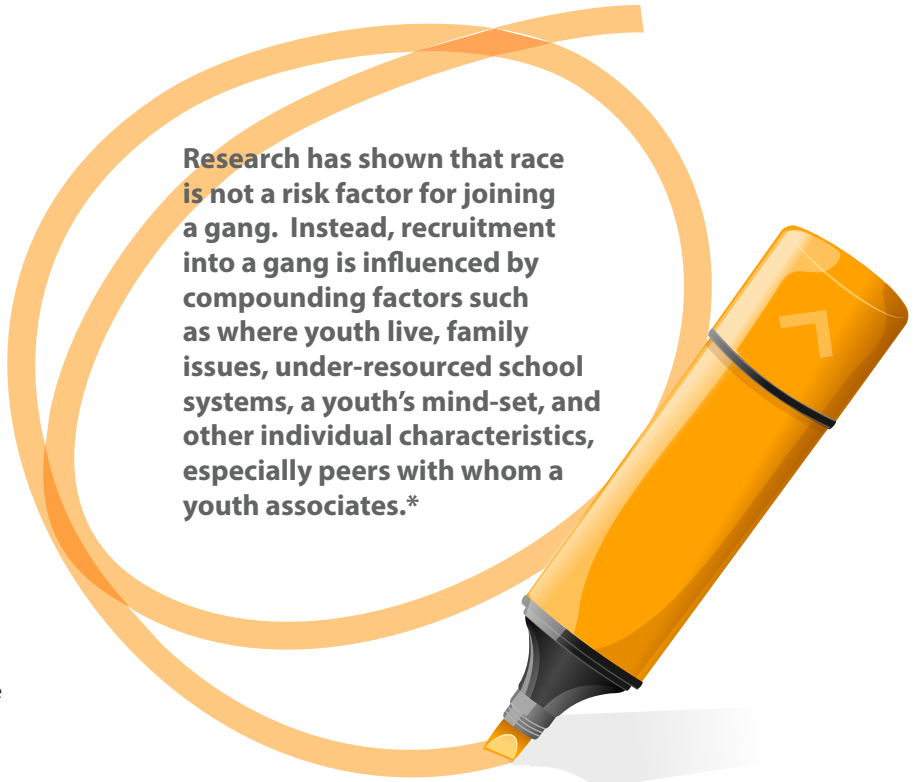


A key to success is trusted communication and collaboration among school administrators and law enforcement, juvenile probation, and children and youth system providers. The ability to work through challenges is very important. Everyone's role is integral to developing a solid process.

School Intervention Strategies to Consider

Gang intervention strategies focus on youth who exhibit some level of engagement in a gang and are provided with evidence-based services to facilitate gang disengagement. School-based activities can include the following:

- Convene a team of school administrators, teachers, school-based counselors, mental health specialists, school resource officers, outside law enforcement, vetted gang intervention specialists, and representatives from agencies that have responsibilities for gang-involved youth (e.g., probation and parole). Everyone has a different perspective and can contribute his or her own professional expertise. The team can focus on the most difficult gang-involved students by collectively monitoring their behaviors and by providing case management, referral to services in and out of the school environment, and constant follow-up.
- Have a plan for confronting/addressing students involved in gang-related activities. Always consider the safety of students and staff in developing this plan.
- Get to know those students who are suspected of gang involvement. Determine each student's level of involvement and commitment as a member or associate. (Is the student deep in the gang, or does the student have a loose affiliation with gang members?) This will assist in determining the best individual approach to use.
- Establish a rapport with these students; sometimes this is as simple as providing intervention techniques such as mentoring, academic support, and a system of wraparound support services to help students disengage from gang involvement. At other times, it may require justice system intervention.



Research has shown that race is not a risk factor for joining a gang. Instead, recruitment into a gang is influenced by compounding factors such as where youth live, family issues, under-resourced school systems, a youth's mind-set, and other individual characteristics, especially peers with whom a youth associates.*

* Howell, J. C. and Egley, A., Jr. (2005). Moving risk factors into developmental theories of gang membership. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 3(4), 334–354.


- For those students suspected of gang affiliation or association, track and document behaviors and progress in school (e.g., regularly monitor attendance and grades). Address concerns of behavior, grades, and attendance. Utilize existing school supports for academic and behavioral issues.
- Be consistent with discipline; hold youth accountable for infractions. Balance consistent discipline and accountability with positive support.
- Use graduated sanctions based on school discipline policies.
- Use conflict-resolution strategies and other restorative justice practices demonstrated to be effective with gang-involved youth.
- Involve these students' parents/guardians early and consistently. Be proactive with parents, and allow them to be a part of the solution instead of the problem. Notify a parent of possible gang identifiers that the school is noticing with his or her child. Parents appreciate your attempts to inform and help them instead of contacting them when their children are already in trouble. A parent who feels that you are being proactive, rather than simply labeling or picking on his or her child, is more apt to help instead of becoming combative.



School Suppression Strategies to Consider

Gang suppression strategies related to the school environment focus on proactive measures to mitigate many of the factors that can contribute to disruptive gang-related behaviors posing a threat to the learning environment and the safety and well-being of others. As a part of a school safety plan, implement suppression practices to end gang-related incidents on school campuses, on school buses, and at school-sponsored events. Suppression practices can include the following:

- Review district policy and ensure that there is sound policy specific to addressing gang-related incidents.
- Ensure that law enforcement is notified and aware once a student is identified as gang-involved (as a member or associate).
- Document and follow up on gang-related incidents.
- All school personnel should be consistent with all students in enforcing discipline and consequences for school infractions.
- Use random safety checks by police and school administration to prevent drugs and weapons from coming onto the campus.
- Practice site security drills to include lockdown procedures.
- Document graffiti, notify law enforcement, and remove immediately. Graffiti tells a story, which can help law enforcement determine whether a threat or incident is about to occur.
- Confiscate gang paraphernalia, and address the matter with students and parents.



Creating a collaborative process to abate gang activity provides law enforcement and school administrators with a powerful tool to stem the escalation of gang-related situations, as well as a means to hold youth suspected of gang affiliation accountable for their behaviors within a disciplined, supportive structure.

Additional Resources

A Preliminary Report on the Police Foundation's Averted School Violence Database

<https://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-w0871-pub.pdf>

Best and Promising Practices to Address Violence and Personal Safety in Safe Routes to School Programs

<https://www.urbanpeaceinstitute.org/s/SRTS-SafePassage-Paper-FINAL-March-2015-UPI.pdf>

Changing Course: Preventing Gang Membership

<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/239234.pdf>

Department of Homeland Security School Safety and Security

<https://www.dhs.gov/school-safety-and-security>

Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence

https://www.secretservice.gov/data/protection/ntac/USSS_NTAC_Enhancing_School_Safety_Guide_7.11.18.pdf

Framework for Safe and Successful Schools

<https://www.nasonline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/a-framework-for-safe-and-successful-schools>

Gang Resistance Education And Training (G.R.E.A.T.)

<https://www.great-online.org/GREAT-Home>

K–12 School Shooting Database

https://www.chds.us/ssdb/?utm_source=snapshots&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=snapshots_2018-10-02&utm_content=K12SSDB

Multidisciplinary Gang Intervention Teams

<https://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Content/Documents/NYGCbulletin3.pdf>

National Association of Police Athletic/Activities Leagues, Inc.

<http://www.nationalpal.org/>

OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model

<https://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Comprehensive-Gang-Model>

Parents' Guide to Gangs

<https://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Parents-Guide-to-Gangs>

Responding to Gangs in a School Setting

<https://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Content/Documents/Bulletin-5.pdf>

Making Schools



Share gang intelligence/
information

Accountability of
key stakeholders

Foster an
environment of
trust

Educate key
stakeholders

Response
strategies aimed
at suppression
gang activity

www.nationalgangcenter.gov

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