Street Gangs in Our Schools:
What to Look For and What You Can Do to Address Them.

Prepared by Lt. Ken Armstrong and Officer Todd Phillips, Lexington Police Department, June 2008 ©
Legal Disclaimer

• This presentation is for informative and training purposes only.

• The information contained in this presentation should not be used as the sole means of determining a subject’s involvement in criminal street gang activity or need for administrative action.

• The existence of one or more of the indicators contained in this presentation does not constitute criminal activity in itself. **Please remember that being a member of one of these groups does not in itself constitute a crime.**

• The totality of the circumstances surrounding an individual or event must be considered before a final determination or course of action takes place.

• If you feel circumstances are present that warrant action you should immediately contact the proper personnel and strictly adhere to all appropriate school policies.
The general purpose of this presentation is to provide our readers/viewers with basic information related to the identification of activities associated to criminal street gangs and its members.

The ultimate goal of this presentation is to provide warning signs and indicators that will assist in ensuring a safe environment is present in our schools and communities.

This information should be used to identify circumstances that may foster an environment that would allow the criminal street gangs to originate and/or increase in size.

Lastly, this information should be used for early detection and intervention purposes, which should be our primary goal for a long term solution.
Introduction

Over the past few years law enforcement personnel and school officials from numerous counties in our commonwealth have reported the appearance and/or increase in the number of young people identifying themselves as a member of a Criminal Street Gang. This trend is occurring nationwide and is affecting not only large metropolitan areas, but smaller communities as well. While a majority of the contacts law environment personnel have with these subjects are occurring away from normal school activities it is clear that the number of criminal street gang members at the school age level is on the rise.

Information also indicates that children as young as nine years of age are engaging in illegal activities linked to these groups on school grounds and active recruitment of these children is occurring. The presence of these gangs in our school districts presents a special concern for those charged with the safety of students. Faculty members, parents and law enforcement personnel need to be aware of the signs related to gang involvement and take steps to intervene.
While it is true most schools and law enforcement agencies in Kentucky have not reported the existence of these criminal groups in their areas, it is also true that it may be a lack of knowledge on the topic, which prevents the proper identification of this issue.

In this presentation we will be outlining a number of key indicators and symbolisms commonly used by criminal street gangs. While it is accurate that these symbols/indicators are not explicitly and exclusively used by these groups they are proven to be common indicators of criminal gang members and their activities.

We will also be addressing a number of warning signs that may manifest themselves in young adults that have either already joined one of these groups or may be considering joining.
Traditional Gang Indicators
(Indicators for Intervention)

The following slides/pages contain information and photographs related to the most common symbols and attire associated to gang activities.
Traditional Gang Symbols

1. **Pitchforks:** Will be related to the gang they are affiliated with or may be used by a rival gang to show disrespect (See #5).

2. **Stars:** Both five and six point stars are used. Number of points delineate what gang the subject wishes to represent.
Traditional Gang Symbols

3. **Crowns:** May have 3, 4, 5 or 6 points. Again this is used to indicate gang affiliation.

4. **Numbers:** Roman Numerals, dots, standard numbers, words representing numbers and/or any combination of all may be used. The number utilized will most likely be linked to the group’s name or other significant related moniker.
5. **Upside Down and Backwards Symbols:**

These type of symbols should be of most concern. In these cases the subject is attempting to disrespect or show dislike toward another gang. Many times this is viewed as a threat and could result in violence. These should be documented and removed immediately.
Traditional Gang Attire

1. **Beads:** May be found on necklaces, key chains, rosaries, and any other jewelry. The colors found on the item can be linked to the gang and the order of the beads may indicate the subject’s status in the group and/or activities they have engaged in.

2. **Tattoos/Markings:** May simply have the gang’s name or symbols associated to gang (i.e. Crowns, numbers, pitchforks, dots, etc). Markings may be applied with pens or markers to be easily removed and prevent detection by parents, educators and law enforcement.
Traditional Gang Attire

3. **Clothing:** Colors are used to show association with the gang. Apparel may have numbers or acronyms related to the group (Very common with sports apparel). Clothing may be altered to identify the gang. Bandanas are the most common piece of clothing members use to represent the gang.

4. **Personal Appearance/Grooming:** Hair styles and eyebrows may have covert numbers or symbols (i.e. lines shaved in eyebrows or hair). Pants worn up on one leg, hat tilted to a certain side and unusual hand gestures may also be used.
Can you see the gang symbolism?
Symbolism

- While graffiti is commonly thought of as the most predominate way in which gang members express themselves, in truth those symbols related to gangs can be found on any item (i.e. notebook, CDs, school books/folders, clothing) or in any setting (i.e. Art Class, Wood Shop, common doodlings). Studies also indicate that 80-85% of all graffiti is not gang related.

- Symbolism is not meant for the general public to understand, but is directed towards fellow gang members and rival gangs.
The Basic Types of Gangs

- There are two basic types of criminal street gangs:

  1) Nationally Affiliated

  2) Locally Affiliated
Nationally Affiliated

Nationally Affiliated Gangs have common symbolisms and names that cross state boundaries. Most have long histories and can be linked to many of the large metropolitan areas. Many of these groups are also known by most law enforcement officials. References to these groups can be found in movies, music, internet sites, written publications and have been covered by many media outlets. These groups will also have numerous subsets that may have different names, but follow the same basic mannerisms.
Locally Affiliated Gangs may or may not have agreed upon symbolisms. They do not normally cross state boundaries. The histories related to these groups vary greatly and they can be found in any community. Some of these groups have been identified by law enforcement officials, but are at times overlooked. References to these groups are not normally found in the media. However, these groups can have the same profound affect on a school system and community. They can be just as aggressive and violent as Nationally Affiliated Gangs and must be addressed in the same manner as those groups. (All gangs began as local groups.)
“Wannabe vs. Gonnabe”

- One of the easiest mistakes that occurs is not intervening when warning signs present themselves. This is commonly due to a dismissive attitude towards the subject/group and a lack of understanding of the issue. If a subject represents themselves as a gang member, has the needed mindset and “wants to be” a gang member then they are most likely “going to be” a member. These subjects cannot be overlooked and present the best opportunity for intervention techniques. Never use the term, “Wannabe”, as it trivializes the real issue and may result in a greater effort by the group/subject to prove their status.
What Should You Be Looking For in a Subject’s Behavior?
Warning Signs

- Admits to hanging out with subjects in gangs or having criminal involvement
- Shows an unusual interest in one or two particular colors of clothing, a particular logo, or odd clothing features such as wearing the belt buckle to the right or left, cuffing one pants leg, etc.
- Has an unusual interest in gangster-influenced music, videos, movies or website materials
- Uses unusual hand signals to communicate with friends
- Has specific drawings or gang symbols on school books, clothes, walls or wants a very specific tattoo
Warning Signs

- Has unexplained physical injuries (fight-related bruises or wounds)
- Has unexplained cash or goods, including clothing or jewelry
- Has been in trouble with the police or at school
- Exhibits negative changes in behavior: withdrawing from family; declining attendance, performance or behaviors; staying out late without good reason or permission; displaying an unusual desire for secrecy; signs of drug use; breaking rules consistently or suddenly using gang-style slang
Carries or expresses a desire for weapons. These can include traditional weapons such as: firearms and knives. They may also include non-traditional weapons such as: baseball bats, brass knuckles, rolled coins, etc.
What Can You Do?
Tips to Preventing Youth from Joining Street Gangs

- Spend quality time with the children
- Get involved in your child’s school activities
- Be a positive role model and set the right example
- Encourage good study habits and academic excellence
- Get to know your child’s friends and their parents and keep an open line of communication.
Tips to Preventing Youth from Joining Street Gangs

- Encourage participation in positive after-school activities with adult supervision, organized sports and youth groups.
- Talk about the dangers and consequences of gang involvement to the child and entire community.
- Teach your child how to cope with peer pressure and help them develop good conflict resolution skills.
- Be proactive and ask questions.
- Report what you hear or see! (Teacher, Parents, Police or Social Services).
Prevention Flyers

- Below are the titles to three flyers that provide basic information regarding what educators and parents should be looking for and what they can do to prevent gang involvement. These flyers may be reproduced and distributed as needed.

  - [www.kysafeschools.org/leftnav/Gangs/Gangs.html](http://www.kysafeschools.org/leftnav/Gangs/Gangs.html)
  - School Guide to Preventing Gang Involvement
  - Parent Guide to Preventing Gang Involvement
  - Guía de Padres en la Prevención del Enredo en Pandillas (Spanish for Parents)
Recommended Efforts to Address the Issue

- Parents, schools officials and law enforcement should foster an exchange of information to reduce gang activity and assist the student in finding alternatives.

- Establish school policies related to the issue and how to address it.

- Start and/or get involved in Prevention Programs.

- Educate school staff and parents in what to look for and what to do when they see a problem.

- Enforce school policies and criminal laws when needed to ensure safety of students. Ensure this is done equally and is based on the student’s actions not their possible affiliations.
Do not Forget!

- Membership in a gang in itself is not illegal

- One indicator or a combination of many does not automatically mean a subject is a member of a criminal street gang.

- Enforcement of all school policies (i.e. Dress code violations) should be done equally and be based on the subject’s actions and not their possible affiliations

- The best defense for preventing a child from joining a gang *Starts at Home.*
Have You Ever Heard This Before!

Don’t Let this be you!!
Contact Information

- If you have any questions, concerns or recommendations regarding this presentation or other matters concerning criminal street gangs, please feel free to contact:
  
  Lt. Ken Armstrong or
  
  Officer Todd Phillips
  
  Lexington Police Department
  
  (O) 859-258-3600 Ext 3537
  
  (C) 859-576-3725

Additional Group Training Sessions May Be Available on Request.
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