

# Gang Awareness Guide

**Recognize  
the  
Signs**

# Gangs in Grand Rapids

Gangs are not a new phenomenon that occurred overnight in the Grand Rapids area. They have been present for many years, although their activity seems to fluctuate at different levels.

This is consistent with trends across the country. From the smallest towns to the largest cities, there are documented cases of street gangs.

The trend in recent years has shifted from large, well organized, widely recognized gangs to smaller, neighborhood groups. These groups typically are more loose knit and less defined, but still very dangerous.

Nationally, more than 80% of individuals involved in gang activity end up spending time in jail, prison, or end up dead as a result of their gang involvement.

Gang members in the Grand Rapids area have been linked to a multitude of crimes from graffiti and vandalism to burglary, weapons offenses, robbery, and even murder.

The purpose of this guide is to assist you in recognizing the possible signs of gang activity or gang membership.

## What is a gang?

A gang is three or more individuals who associate together, have a common bond and engage in criminal or delinquent activities.

## Where did gangs come from?

Gangs are mostly influenced from the west coast (California) or Midwest (Chicago). However, Grand Rapids sees numerous block-based or neighborhood gangs. This is true for much of the nation where gangs are formed by individuals in their own neighborhoods. The names of neighborhood gangs many times reflect this.

## What are the ages of gang members?

The average age of gang members is from 14-24 years old. This is true in the Grand Rapids area, as well as nationally. However, individuals as young as 8 and those into their 30's have been identified claiming gang membership.





**Each case is different  
but some reasons include:**

- **Acceptance** - Many times kids feel that they are not getting the attention at home that they need. They then turn to an outside source and often find what they are looking for in a gang.
- **Family** - Sometimes older family members are already a part of a gang and kids want to emulate their older relatives.
- **Protection** - In neighborhoods where gang activity exists, it is sometimes easier for a kid to join a gang than be victimized on a regular basis.



# Factors leading to gang involvement

- **Excitement** - Kids sometimes find a thrill in being involved in criminal activity. This is very dangerous because the severity of the crime must often increase to continue the "rush."
- **Peer Pressure** - Kids who hang around gang members are guaranteed to be pressured into joining the gang.
- **Financial Gain** - Gang members many times are involved in drug dealing, thefts, burglaries, and robberies to make money.
- **Socialization** - Gangs have the best parties. Drugs and alcohol are typically readily available at gang parties.



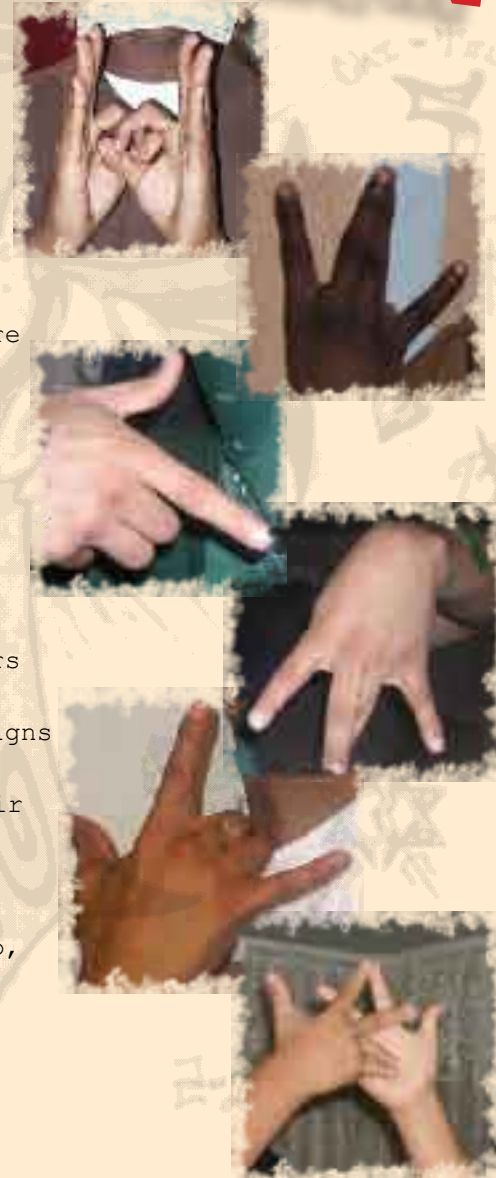
## How do kids join a gang?

- **Blessed or Walked in** - Sometimes an individual is asked to join a gang and they are allowed to do so without anything further.
- **Jumped in** - This ritual usually consists of an individual having to fight other gang members, usually 3 to 5, for a given time period. This is the most common form of gang initiation and kids usually show the signs of an assault afterwards.
- **Sexed in** - Female gang members sometimes have to perform sexual acts on one or more members of the gang as an initiation.
- **Commit Crimes** - Some gangs require a recruit to commit specific crimes before being allowed to join a gang. These crimes can be anything from graffiti to theft to a shooting.

Many gang members are teenagers, which means many of these indicators below will apply. A combination of 3 or more of these signs could be a good indicator of gang involvement.

## Signs of Gang Involvement

- Admits to gang membership
- Use of unusual nicknames
- Withdrawal from family
- Major negative behavior changes
- Staying out late, without permission or explanation
- Increased injuries
- Develops new, unusual desire for privacy (will not introduce new friends)
- New "Friends"
- Calls from unknown people
- Declining grades or school attendance
- Unexplained obsession with certain sport teams
- Preference of specific colors or clothing
- Practice and use of hand signs
- Tattoos or graffiti on clothing, books, or in their room
- Unusual drawings on books, papers, homework
- Obsession with gangster rap, gangster movies, and guns
- Friends in trouble at school or with police
- New alcohol or drug use
- Appearance of unexplained money or items





# What to look for

- **Clothing** - Gang names, air brushings, RIP, colors, customized shirts, colored shoes and/or shoe laces, colored bandanas, colored beads, and colored rubberbands are all indicators of gang involvement. Sport team colors and logos are also worn many times by specific gangs.



- **Drawings, Writings, Homework** - Gang members will often fantasize about the gang. This is evident by drawings on school folders, homework, lockers, walls, desks, and anywhere else they can leave their mark.



- **Tattoos, Marks, Brands** - Individuals who get gang tattoos usually are planning on staying in the gang for a long time.



# Gang Graffiti

Gang graffiti is sometimes known as the "newspaper of the street." Gang members advertise turf, rivalries, and affiliations through graffiti. Many times graffiti will show disrespect and warnings to rival gang members.



- It should be noted that gang graffiti and "tagger graffiti" are very different. Tagger graffiti is done by "street artists" with no gang affiliation.



EXAMPLE OF TAGGER GRAFFITI

# What can you do to prevent gang involvement?

- Monitor living space for possible gang paraphernalia
- Develop open and frequent communication with children (Talk and Listen!)
- Encourage children to become involved in athletics, clubs, or other positive activities to establish a sense of belonging
- Report all crimes
- Monitor children's exposure to violence (video games, music, television)
- Set clear limits and follow through with discipline if rules get broken
- Put a high value on education and life goals
- Teach children decision making and conflict resolution skills
- Cultivate respect for others' property and community pride
- Get to know the children's friends and families
- Learn the real names of your children's friends
- Be a positive role model and direct the children to other positive individuals
- Spend quality time with the children
- Become involved in a child's life
- Don't overlook the signs, if they are there TALK TO THEM EARLY!

RESPECT

GOALS

Education

Listen

PRIDE

Words-  
Communication

Encourage



## Resource Page

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Grand Rapids Police Department	456-3400
Graffiti Removal Hotline	456-3666
GRPD Crime Prevention	456-3363
Arbor Circle	456-6571
Baxter Community Center	456-8593
Eastown Ministries	785-2721
Central City Weed & Seed	331-7247
Hispanic Center of Western Michigan	742-0200
Jubilee Jobs	774-9944
Neland Ave CRC	245-0669
Urban Family Ministries	365-9009



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