



GANGS / VIOLENT STREET GROUPS

In this document we have chosen to use the words 'gangs' and 'violent street groups' interchangeably as we are concerned about violence in all of its forms and manifestations. Furthermore, we also recognize that not all (or most) street violence is perpetrated by organized gangs.

It has been widely acknowledged that Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and many cities across the nation, experienced increased gang activity in the early 1990's. With a tripling of the homicide rate in 1994 in Pittsburgh a series of events occurred that resulted in a marked de-escalation of violent gang activity and a lull in overt gang violence. The most significant of these events was a federally initiated strike to target the most violent of the evolving gangs and their leaders with direct interdiction. Nationally, as the millennium closed, youth violence and gang activity was reduced with the use of various intervention strategies. Even though overt gang violence of the '90's had diminished substantially, since that time there has been a rise in drug trafficking offenses, and its subsequent violence turned away from actual gang activity to criminal enterprise pursuits and apparent 'turf' or territorial disputes.

Moreover, in recent years, there has been an increase in gun violence and homicides in predominately poor neighborhoods in the Pittsburgh region. With the escalating killings of African American males it is clear that gang and violent street group activity is on the resurgence. Therefore, local government and law enforcement agencies have initiated intensive interdiction efforts in attempts to curtail such activities. There may be similar trends in other cities across the nation.

In Pittsburgh "gangs" consist of groups of peers, neighbors and/or classmates that hang around together and sometimes engage in illegal enterprises (drug selling, "petty" thievery, etc.). They are not imported from other cities or states, which may have occurred in the past, although there are those that have migrated to the area for other reasons. Their activity is known to community and family members and sometimes is implicitly encouraged. Gang or group members typically live by a street code which discourages reporting criminal activity or engagement with law enforcement. That code also encourages the use of firearms to settle disputes. However, only a relatively small number of those are engaged in serious violent crime.

The majority of gangs operating in the Pittsburgh area are broken up into locations, even coming down to specific streets. Since the locations are so small police often do not know which group is responsible and may simply lump them together. In 2009 the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police estimated that there was a total of 41 gangs with approximately 875 gang members operating in Pittsburgh.

The Impact of Gangs and Violent Street Groups

- Gangs with access to guns play a significant role in violent crime in many poor communities across our nation.
- Violent gang activity has an increasingly negative impact on the learning environment of students in the affected communities; i.e. excessive tardiness, chronic absenteeism, suspensions and expulsions.

- Many communities are disproportionately impacted by poverty and social disorganization that places young people at greater risk for gang involvement, which in turn results in ongoing criminal activity.
- Although some resources and programs are available in many of the affected neighborhoods to address the issue of gangs and their impact, there is often a lack of coordinated resources that target and enroll violent, gang involved individuals.
- Family problems significantly impact youth in the neighborhoods harboring gang activity and foster gang membership.
- Gang-involved youth are impacted by poverty, unemployment, limited educational achievement, and a lack of positive activities and positive influences and role models. These same factors often keep young African American and minority males trapped in the gang lifestyle into their early twenties.

Gang Legislation Highlights Reported in 2011 by the National Gang Center

- *Of the 50 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.), all but Vermont have enacted some form of legislation relating to gangs or gang-related activity.*
- *Twenty-two have passed gang prevention laws.*
- *More than half the states have laws that provide for enhanced penalties for gang-related criminal acts.*
- *Forty-one states (41) and DC have legislation that defines “gang.”*
- *More than half of the states’ legislatures have laws against graffiti.*
- *Twenty-four (24) states define “gang crime/activity.”*
- *Twenty-three (23) states have legislation on gangs and schools.*
- *Twenty percent (20%) of the states have enacted laws that deal with gang-related databases.*

Strategies to Impact Gang/ Street Group Violence

- **Be open** to the possibility that gangs and gang-related activity actually exists. Acknowledge that such gangs and gang-related/violent street group activities have most likely not really been eliminated, but have been reduced to happening on a smaller scale (i.e. neighborhoods or streets, or the level of intensity).
- **Maintain** regular identification of gangs/groups and their members as a step towards understanding and redirection of gang members.
- **Initiate** collaborations among community, faith-based leaders, parents, students, law enforcement and political leadership, to collectively assess the depths of a region’s gang problem and to determine the realities of what may exist.
- **Deploy** faith-based and community groups, and dedicated street organizations (volunteer as well as professional) to interact with gangs and their members. Such entities can play a very significant role in the redirection of gang members towards more productive endeavors.
- **Help** the healthy growth of our children so that they become law abiding citizens. Encourage and teach the resolution of disputes without resorting to violence and gun play. Let them know that criminal activity is unproductive and unhealthy for the individual, the family, and the community.

- **Promote** messages that encourage the resolution of disputes without violence and gun play.
- **Educate** one's self and family members about the gang culture and learn the signs of gang membership. Don't be afraid to use your influence to correct these behaviors. Also, when signs appear, seek constructive intervention for impacted individuals.
- **Discourage** everyone from selling and consuming drugs or partaking in any illegal matters.
- **Encourage** youth and families to utilize their personal skills and strengths as steps toward a more legitimate, healthy and productive lifestyle.
- **Assist** affected youth in understanding how to constructively deal with grief, loss and disappointment without lashing out destructively or resorting to violence to cope with such issues.
- **Create** opportunities for youth and their families, who have overcome gang violence and who have endured life's obstacles, to become mentors, coaches and educators to others.
- **Mandate** all mentoring programs focused on addressing violent street groups to incorporate community-based and/or professional skills development components for community youth and adult mentors. Include physical, emotional, and social support components for mentees.
- **Encourage** all adults to stop fearing our youth. Invite people from the various neighborhoods to join street level workers to gain a better understanding of the problems youth face. This could include forming neighborhood block watches; holding community celebrations and picnics; engaging youth constructively; or simply by coming out to stand on one's porch. Don't be afraid to talk with our youth.
- **Involve** all segments of the community (including parents, youth, students, elders, etc.) in non-partisan, pro-active community organizing and strategy planning to end violence.
- **Foster** strong, positive, productive and mutual relationships between the community and every level of the school district, the business district, and law enforcement agencies (probation, parole etc.). This relationship must be based upon honesty, integrity and accountability.
- **Insist** that school administrators, local politicians, corporate investors or funders include a process for assessing and determining each community's unique dynamics pertaining to the potential for incidents of violence and crime (including the activities of gangs/violent street groups) in any plans for redistricting schools, government housing complexes and communities. Consider establishing a committee or task force with specific knowledge on these issues/concerns that will help to facilitate the assessment and decision-making process.
- **Pay** special attention to existing or potential neighborhood rivalries when closing schools and relocating students. When redistricting occurs there is a high potential to mix the gangs where, in some instances, there are alliances being created, mostly around drugs and money.

- **Insist** that appropriate regional officials develop and implement a comprehensive regional strategy to deter gang activity that includes coordinating activities among government agencies, local schools and universities, as well as corporations.

Key Points When Working for Gang Peace “Anti-Gang”

Always seek first to understand, then to be understood by others.
Negotiate the Win.



Title the Message.
Incorporate a holistic approach.

Give support and provide the resources and funding to those who want to do this work.
Anticipate push back from those who have not succeeded in this work.
Never give up on the youth and families that are victimized.
Get out and be visible.

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