A GUIDE TO GANGS in Washington County

The presence of gangs is a very serious threat to our community and the future of many of our youth. Gangs have been well established in Oregon and in the Portland Metro area for several years. In Washington County alone, there are approximately 1200 individuals who have been officially documented by law enforcement as “gang members.” In addition to concerns about gang-related crime and violence in our region, a continual rise in gang affiliation among our youth indicates that many young people are making dangerous choices that will likely lead to serious injury, prison, or death.

When gang activity goes unrecognized or ignored by the community, residents become more vulnerable to crime and fear. By learning about gangs and the way they operate, citizens can increase their personal safety and the safety of their children. An awareness of gang behavior and recruiting strategies can also help us support at-risk youth and their families and encourage all young people to reach their full potential as valued members of the community.

PARENTS AND OTHER CARING ADULTS play a vital role in keeping young people out of gangs. Parents can protect their children from gang activity and other risky behavior through pro-active strategies and positive actions:

- building close family relationships,
- providing positive activities for their child’s free time,
- setting boundaries and high expectations,
- helping children to be successful in school,
- monitoring the child’s behavior, and
- encouraging positive friendships.

In addition to being pro-active, parents must be informed about gangs and the warning signs of gang behavior. It is very important for the entire community to have factual information about gangs. The early adolescent years, ages 12 to 14, are a crucial time when young people are exposed to gangs and may consider joining one. Negative influences within the family such as domestic violence, child abuse, harsh or inconsistent parenting practices, and substance abuse by family members all increase the risk that a young person will join a gang.

WHY GANGS?

There can be many different reasons why youth are drawn into gangs but the top four are:

- **Identity or recognition**—being part of a gang allows members to achieve a level of status they feel they cannot achieve outside the gang culture.

- **Protection**—some may join a gang because they live in an area that has been "claimed" by gangs and they are fearful of being subjected to violence by rival gangs. They join believing that gangs will help them stay safe.

- **Fellowship and brotherhood**—the gang functions as an extension of, or substitute for the family and may provide companionship lacking in the home environment.
• **Intimidation**—some members may be forced into joining by their peers. Intimidation techniques range from extorting lunch money to physical assault.

**GANG BEHAVIORS**
Youth who are becoming involved in a gang may exhibit some or all of the following signs:

• Negative changes in behavior
  o Withdrawing from family
  o Declining school attendance, performance, or behavior
  o Staying out late without reason
  o Unusual desire for secrecy
  o Confrontational behavior, such as talking back, verbal abuse, name calling, and disrespect for parental authority
  o Sudden negative opinions about law enforcement or adults in positions of authority (school officials or teachers)
  o Change in attitude about school, church, or other normal activities or change in behavior at these activities

• Unusual interest in one or two particular colors of clothing or a particular logo
• Interest in gang-influenced music, videos, and movies
• Use and practice of hand signals to communicate with friends
• Peculiar drawings or gang symbols on school work, notebooks, clothing, or even walls
• Drastic changes in hair or dress style and/or having a group of friends who have the same hair or dress style
• Withdrawal from longtime friends and forming bonds with an entirely new group of friends
• Suspected drug use, such as alcohol, inhalants, and narcotics
• Non-accidental physical injuries, such as being beaten or injuries to hands and knuckles from fighting
• Unexplained cash or goods, such as clothing or jewelry
• The presence of firearms, ammunition, or other weapons
COMMON GANG IDENTIFIERS

Gang-style clothing and dress:
Gang members may use a certain style of dress to identify with a particular gang set, clique, or crew. This might include clothing or bandanas worn in certain colors that are representative of a gang. Other clothing that might be worn by gang members:

- Pants worn well below the waist (sagging)
- Gang-themed T-shirts with pictures of gang members, prison scenes, graffiti, or slogans
- Two- or three-colored bead necklaces or altered rosary beads
- Sports clothing of specific teams
- Colored fabric belts with a metal buckle that includes the initials of the gang.

It is also important to note that gang clothing trends change and may be different from one location to another, or change over time. Clothing alone may not be enough to indicate a child’s affiliation with a particular gang, but it can be a clue.

Colors:
Many gangs use one or more colors as a symbol to represent their gang. These colors may be worn on shirts, bandanas, multicolored or single-colored beads, belts, hats, shoes, shoelaces, headbands, jewelry, and other items.

Symbols and numbers:
Some symbols and numbers may have special significance within the gang culture in a particular area. A few common symbols from some of the large gangs in the United States are stars, crowns, pitchforks, three dots in a triangle, and numbers.

Gangs are notorious for hijacking cultural icons or symbols and adopting them into gang culture. For instance, the Nuestra Familia gang has laid claim to the huelga bird and other symbols of the United Farm Workers movement. Religious symbols such as the Virgin of Guadalupe have also been interwoven into gang culture to legitimize their behavior.
Sports items:
Letters, colors, or symbols may have a specific gang meaning in local street-gang culture. For example, a young person affiliated with a sureño gang may wear a (blue) Indianapolis Colts #18 jersey but have no awareness that it represents star quarterback, Peyton Manning. In this case their intent is to show allegiance to the 18th Street gang set. Sports items may be purchased in a nontraditional color to correspond with the gang’s colors or may be altered with graffiti or extra symbols or writing.

Graffiti:
Gangs use graffiti to mark their territory, brag about their reputation, mourn fallen members, and threaten or challenge rival gangs. For this reason, graffiti can be very dangerous and should be removed as soon as possible. Youth who are participating in graffiti may have items such as spray paint, spray-paint plastic tips, wide-tipped markers, or sketchbooks with graffiti projects in progress and may have paint on their clothing, backpacks, or other items.

Tattoos:
Tattoos are used to show an individual’s loyalty to his or her gang. These tattoos often include the name, initials, or symbols of the specific gang and may be found on the hands, neck, face, chest, or arms. A young person who has taken the step to obtain a gang tattoo has made a huge commitment to the gang and is likely to be deeply involved in gang activity.

Hand signs:
Some gangs use specific hand gestures to communicate their affiliation with the gang and threaten or challenge rival gangs.
Gang-influenced music and movies:

“Gangsta” rap is a style of rap music characterized by violent, and often obscene, lyrics that glorify gang culture. Many popular movies also focus on street gangs and their activities. Youth may show their interest in gangs through fascination with music and movies that portray gang culture.

LOCAL GANG IDENTIFIERS
Although gang members represent many ethnic backgrounds, over 90% of documented gang members in Washington County are of Latino descent. There are two major groups of Latino gangs: **Norteños (northerners) and sureños (southerners)**

- **SUREÑOS**
  - In Washington County since the early 90’s.
  - Loyal to the color blue & number 13 (represents 13th letter of the alphabet = M/ emé or La emé which refers to the “Mexican Mafia”)
  - Sureños include many subsets—including Westside 18th Street, Hillside 12th Street & Sur Trece Califas, and numerous other gangs.
  - Sureños are the most prevalent gang sets in Washington County.

- **NORTEÑOS**
  - Norteños are loyal to red & the number 14 which represents the letter N/ené.
  - N also represents “Nuestra Familia” (Our Family)
  - Increasing numbers of norteño gang members have become active in Washington County over the past few years, including North Side Villains.
  - Numerous violent confrontations with Sureño gang members have occurred.

For more information on specific gang sets, numbers, colors, tattoos, and graffiti in Washington County, check this link to the Washington County Interagency Gang Enforcement Team (IGET):

[www.co.washington.or.us/Sheriff/FightingCrime/SpecialResponseTeams/gang-enforcement.cfm](http://www.co.washington.or.us/Sheriff/FightingCrime/SpecialResponseTeams/gang-enforcement.cfm)
WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

- **Talk to your children about gangs and ways to avoid them.** Let them know that you disapprove of gangs and do not want to see them hurt or arrested.

- **Tell your children NOT to**
  - Associate with any gang members
  - Hang out where gangs congregate
  - Attend any party or social event sponsored by gangs
  - Use any kind of hand signs that may be meaningful to gangs
  - Wear clothing that may have meaning to gangs in your area
  - Explain to your children that these clothing items can put them in danger and that you will not purchase them or allow them to be worn.

- **Get to know your children’s friends and the friends’ parents.** Be aware of their attitudes toward drugs, alcohol, and gangs. When children start to feel pressure to use drugs or join gangs, it usually comes from their friends.

- **Talk to your children about ways to deal with pressure from friends.** Help your children practice simple ways to respond to peer pressure. For example, if your child is challenged by a peer who says, “If you are my friend, you would...” your child can respond, “If you were my friend, you wouldn’t ask.” Then, he/she should walk away.

- **Set firm limits with your children and teens.** Children and teenagers need to know clearly what is expected of them and the consequences for acting otherwise. Do not rescue your children from the consequences of their decisions.

- **Plan family time.** Make time for your family to play, eat meals together, take trips (even to local parks or activities), keep family traditions, and have family meetings to talk about plans, feelings, and complaints.

IF YOUR CHILD IS A VICTIM OF GANG INTIMIDATION or

IF YOU THINK YOUR CHILD IS ABOUT TO JOIN A GANG:

Contact your local law enforcement agency and/or the Washington County Juvenile Department. The Washington County Interagency Gang Enforcement Team (IGET) gathers intelligence on local gangs and investigates gang-related crimes in Washington County.

- Police Non-emergency: 503-629-0111
- **Washington County Juvenile Department**: 503-846-8861
- Interagency Gang Enforcement Team: 503-846-5850
- Washington County Crisis Line: 503-291-9111