

Managing Gangs in Schools

Gang activity in the United States is unlimited in its reach. It cuts across urban, suburban and rural jurisdictions and filters into schools. Actions that schools and law enforcement can take to thwart gang activity was the subject of a presentation at a recent school safety conference.

Cpl. Mike Rudinski is a school resource officer (SRO) with the Hyattsville City Police Department in Maryland, assigned to Northwestern High School. He has been an SRO for 12 of his 26 years as a police officer, and is on the board of the Maryland Association of School Resource Officers. He spoke at the 2011 Mid-Atlantic School Safety Conference sponsored by the Office of Justice Programs' National Institute of Justice (NIJ) in conjunction with the School Safety Advocacy Council (SSAC).

Hyattsville, in Prince George's County, is a city of 17,500 about five miles outside of Washington, D.C. Northwestern High School draws students from several areas and has a diverse student body of 2,500 students.

"This presentation is not about any one city, county, community, ethnicity, race, gender or creed," Rudinski says. "This is about society. This is about young people and why they do what they do today."

The 2011 *National Gang Assessment, Emerging Trends*, from the National Gang Intelligence Center, found that there are 33,000 officially designated gangs in the United States, with 1.4 million members. Rudinski believes the estimate could be low because local jurisdictions that provide the information to the FBI may be underreporting gang activity. The center is composed of representatives from several federal agencies, including the FBI, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Rudinski says a gang is defined as three or more people that have a commonality such as a name, territory or location, and engage in criminal behavior. Gangs in the U.S. range from large, national organizations to small neighborhood groups. According to the county police gang unit, Prince George's County, with a population of 863,000, has more than 390 neighborhood "crews," which

essentially operate as gangs, although they may not use that term.

"The only thing that limits being a gang and not being a gang is what you believe," says Rudinski. "And it doesn't matter what you believe, it only matters what they believe, because if they think they are dangerous, they're going to be dangerous. If they think they are a gang, they will be a gang. Schools serve your communities, and if gangs are in communities, they are going to be in the schools."

Schools can present a target-rich environment for gang activity such as drugs, robbery and extortion. Parents may be unaware of their child's gang involvement until they are contacted by the school.

"My school serves seven separate ZIP codes, so we have kids who don't see each other any time of the day or any time of the year except for in school during the school day," Rudinski explains. "People wonder why a gang may exist inside of a school and nowhere else. When kids go home, they are not appearing to be a gang member, but when they come into schools where their friends are, or when they are on the streets, they have to survive, so they exhibit these behaviors."

Rudinski says sometimes changes by schools to suspension or expulsion policies in reaction to the "persistently dangerous school" component of the federal No Child Left Behind law can make it harder to rid schools of offending students. The law allows parents to transfer students if schools are determined to be persistently dangerous based on definitions created by each state, and schools want to avoid the persistently dangerous label.

Young people who want to leave a gang often have a difficult time because of fear of retribution, a code against "snitching" and an entrenched intergenerational association with gangs.

"I used to talk a lot about how young people join gangs, and it's turning more and more into a family affair and a generational situation," Rudinski explains. "We are now finding young people that are saying, 'I can't get out; my whole family is involved.' It's so all-encompassing for them, they don't know any way out."

Why Do They Join?

Reasons cited by experts as to why young people join gangs include love, money, respect, discipline, belonging, identity and recognition. Rudinski says these factors are important, but he believes the main reason is bullying.

“The more I am in schools the more I think everything revolves around bullying. They join for protection,” he says.

Gangs use violence to create fear. For young people, fear means respect. Gangs recruit through subterfuge, such as countering their criminal activities with good works in the community; seduction of a glamorous life-style; obligation and coercion. Some teens will seek out a gang on their own.

Rudinski notes that prejudice and misunderstanding and distrust of other cultures foster gang development. Young people come into schools from various neighborhoods, communities or countries. They are picked on because of race, material possessions and language.

He says mass media and pervasive violent images have a powerful influence on teens. Music, television, movies, magazines, video games and Internet sites are full of violent messages. Often parents have no idea what their children are listening to, viewing or reading.

Prevention Strategies

Actions school police officers, administrators and staff can take to alleviate and discourage gang activity include the following:

- Ban anything related to gang membership including weapons, violence, illegal activity and gang-identified clothing, insignias and gestures. Staff can expect to be tested constantly by the subtle and changing forms of gang symbols. Confiscate questionable items such as bandannas and sports apparel that may indicate gang involvement.
- Administrators must communicate clear, consistent standards.
- Control all entrances to the school. Vigorously monitor outside as well as inside areas.
- Be alert to the presence of strangers in or around the building and challenge people as to why they are there.
- Adults and authority figures need to be highly visible.
- Reduce the time between classes and discourage loitering.
- Implement a dress code designed to eliminate gang colors and clothing. Possibly adopt school uniforms, but choose a neutral color such as white, black or khaki. Ask the students about colors before implementing a uniform policy. “Kids have to walk home and they will get beat up if they are wearing a particular color,” Rudinski explains.
- Establish partnership academies, schools within schools, alternative schools or in-school suspension programs.
- Establish ongoing professional development and in-service training programs for all school employees, including techniques in cultural diversity. Make training deadlines realistic to allow enough time for training to be conducted by often limited numbers of staff.
- Conduct leadership training classes to assist students.
- Create a climate of ownership and school pride, including students, parents, teachers and community leaders, in the safe-school planning process. “This is where we run into denial,” Rudinski notes. “People don’t want to say there is a gang problem because if you say there is a gang problem then real estate values are going to go down. We have to get it across and we have to use the word gang.”
- Stage regular campuswide graffiti and vandalism clean-up campaigns and clean-up rallies in response to specific incidents of defacement and destruction. Remove graffiti immediately.
- Organize crisis intervention teams to counsel students coping with troubling violence in and near school. Include peer mediation if possible.
- Offer students, especially juvenile gang members, special outreach and afterschool programs as an alternative to gang membership. “Kids come to school because they see some shimmer of light in that building,” Rudinski says. “The ones that actually come in the building are there for a reason and you have to find it and occupy them.”
- Give students respect and exhibit genuine concern. Many join gangs to gain respect from peers and to receive a feeling of belonging. The gang replaces family structure that is missing for many students. “I try to find what the kids need and substitute it,” Rudinski says. “We talk about having sons and daughters at our school. If a kid needs a father figure I’ll be the father figure. Whatever they need and whatever the desire that is causing them to lean toward the gang lifestyle, we will try to substitute and pull them away from the gang lifestyle. We have to work with them and build relationships. They want to have a double life, they want to let the adults see one thing and do everything else on the side, and you have to convince them that it’s unsafe and unhealthy.”
- Emphasize self-esteem. Many of these students don’t have self-esteem. They think they are worthless and that there is no way out of a gang.

- Support or initiate afterschool and weekend extracurricular activities. Such activities should be competitive and require practice.
- Investigate community gang intervention programs that could benefit the school.
- Contact parents if there are signs of gang activity, such as clothing or graffiti evidenced by a student.
- Share information on gang activity with other administrators and authorities.
- Initiate community gang intervention programs.
- Be aware of school areas and times that are most vulnerable for gang activity such as the cafeteria, dismissal time, changing classes, courtyards, hallways, parking lots and bathrooms.

Investigative Tips

School police officers can also do the following:

- Know the culture, language, names and nicknames of the students, leaders, status in the gang, who is beefing with whom and why.
- Know where they hang out inside and outside of school.
- Know how to use the Internet. Some gangs post videos on YouTube. Facebook and other social networking websites can provide valuable information. Information can also be obtained through notebook checks and locker checks.
- Know how to extract photos and videos from cell phones.
- Respect the students (be firm but fair).
- Listen to the kids.
- Give them a way out. Give them a way to contact you at all times.
- Make them know you provide safety.
- Be their dad/mom at school.
- Speak their language. Ask, "Who do you role with?"

During interviews, officers can do the following:

- Always separate friends first.
- Ask everyone the same questions. Interview them all the same way or you can set the teen up to be hurt if the gang detects snitching.
- Do not put yourself between two or more members.
- Don't talk down to them.
- Don't try to intimidate them.
- Act like you know more about the gang than you do.

Educators, law enforcement officers and others involved with teens need to educate themselves on what teens are facing. "They need to try and understand what young people are going through and realize that they face a lot of things at home that are different from when we were all young and growing up," Rudinski says.

The conference, held in Linthicum, Md., provided tuition-free school safety training and attracted 133 attendees from across the country, including school police officers and security personnel, guidance counselors and school administrators.

"I hope they come away with the basic building blocks to secure their schools," says SSAC President Sean Burke. "Unfortunately, in today's hard economic times, school districts and police departments do not have the funding for much-needed training. School safety is not something that is taught in the police academy or in college for educators, so it is something that is our duty to provide them."

For more information on gangs in schools, contact Cpl. Mike Rudinski at mrudinski@hyattsville.org or (301) 985-1400. For information about future conferences, visit www.schoolsafety911.org or contact Sean Burke at sburke57@comcast.net or (978) 479-8963. For information about NIJ's school safety program, contact program manager Mike O'Shea at michael.oshea@usdoj.gov or (202) 305-7954. To view Cpl. Rudinski's presentation, visit <http://youtu.be/QjVOEXJAL0o>.



This article was reprinted from the Winter 2012 edition of *TechBeat*, the quarterly newsmagazine of the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center System, a program of the National Institute of Justice under Cooperative Agreement #2010-MU-MU-K020, awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice.

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