

Street Gangs

Canadian Edition - Fall 2009

Waterloo Region

What is a street gang?

A group of three or more persons formally or informally organized, having a common name or identifying sign or symbol, forming an alliance for a common criminal purpose. These members individually or collectively engage in, or have engaged in a pattern of criminal behaviour, creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation within the community.

What is NOT a street gang?

A street gang is **NOT** an organized crime group such as the Hell's Angels or any group of young people who hang out together and cause trouble.

What is a gang member?

To be considered a street gang member by Waterloo Regional Police, a person must have met 3 of the following 7 criteria and must include criteria #1:

1. Direct/indirect involvement in a gang activity
2. Self-admission to gang membership or association
3. Reliable source information
4. Observed association by police
5. Symbolic identifiers (hand signs, clothing etc)
6. Court findings
7. Physical evidence (e.g., photographs, documents, etc.) that speak to gang membership

Who is in a street gang?

In Canada, the majority of street gang members are male (94%) and fall within the age range of 16 to 18 years (39%).

Many gang members start at 14 or younger.

Almost half (48%) of all street gang members are under the age of 18.

There are few female gang members; however, women are involved in street gangs as relatives and as the partners of gang members.

The largest proportion of street gang members in Canada are African Canadian (25%), followed by First Nations (22%) and Caucasian (18%).

36% of street gangs in Canada feature a mixture of two or more racial/ethnic groups. Street gangs in Saskatchewan appear to be the most homogeneous (i.e., exclusively First Nations).

Street gang crime

Crimes that street gangs in Canada are most likely to commit are assault, drug trafficking or vandalism.

Firearms are rarely used in assaultive crimes in Canada.

Where are street gangs?

Saskatchewan, Manitoba and British Columbia have the highest percentage of jurisdictions reporting active street gangs.

Per capita **Saskatchewan** has the highest concentration of youth gang members (1.34:100).

There has been no reported street gang activity in the Northern Territories or the Maritimes, with the exception of Nova Scotia.

Why do youth join gangs?

- Substitute family
- Recognition
- Protection
- Lack of choices
- Money, drugs, gifts
- Generational
- Tradition and hero imitation
- Threats

Interesting facts

1. Youth who have offended previously are attracted to gangs and gangs make youth offend.
2. Once in a gang, victimization levels do not actually decrease. In fact, joining a gang increases the likelihood of being victimized.
3. Exiting a gang is dangerous and often increases victimization.
4. Gang membership is fluid - members join and leave gangs regularly.
5. Members of gangs socialize with other gang members, thereby supporting the idea that many youth join gangs due to a need to belong and/or have a social network that supports them.

Note: victimization often includes friends and family.

Risk factors for joining a gang

1. Lack of basic survival needs and feelings of safety and belonging
2. Alcohol or drug abuse is present in the home
3. Having other family members or friends in gangs
4. Being male
5. Aged 13 - 23
6. Poor performance in school
7. The need to exercise power and control over others
8. Coming from poverty
9. Having low self esteem
10. Being the victim of abuse or neglect
11. Having negative role models
12. Being unemployed with few work skills
13. Having angry, pro-crime attitudes
14. Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)
15. A decline locally in the enforcement of law and order
16. Harsh physical punishment or victimization in the home
17. A lack of opportunity for social or economic mobility

Waterloo Region

- There are approximately 20 active street gangs in Waterloo Region.
- Like other Canadian gangs, those in Waterloo Region are made up mainly of youth from various cultural backgrounds and consist mainly of males under the age of 18.
- Research indicates that many gang members have not completed high school; however, schools offer a prime recruitment setting for gangs looking to increase their membership.
- Street gang members can come from any race or socio-economic class of families.

Currently, the number of street gangs in the Waterloo Region is being investigated. At the moment gangs are not a problem in the area and Waterloo Regional Police and community agencies are working together to keep it that way. A program is being introduced in the Waterloo Region as a prevention measure to ensure street gangs do not become a problem.

For more information call 519-883-2304.