

Current Health

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Gang Grief

Pushing Back Against Violence
That Hurts Teens and Communities



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GANG GRIEF

Violence wounds teens
and communities.

By Melissa Klein

How do you know where you fit in? Some gangs use colors and hand signs to tell their members apart from other gangs.

Members of the Bloods gang engaging in turf battles with rival gang the Crips—that might sound like something out of a movie, but it was real life for Seattle teen Jon Amosa. The Bloods, founded in Los Angeles in the 1970s, is one of the biggest gangs in the country. It considers the Crips, another L.A.-based gang, its enemy. Amosa joined a local chapter of the Bloods at the age of 14, enticed by cousins who were already members.

Amosa was “jumped in”—beaten by other gang members—as an initiation rite. Then he went on to beat up members of rival gangs. “Whatever my ‘big homey,’ or the older guy, whatever they told me to do, I’d go do it, no questions asked,” says Amosa.

In addition to fighting, he sold and used drugs. While rap stars may brag about being a thug or “gangsta,” Amosa, now 18, says it was anything but cool. “I’ve lost a lot of friends to gang violence, a lot of family members too,” he says. “Really, it’s not worth it.” Amosa left the gang after becoming more involved in his church.

A Growing Threat

Gang violence claimed the lives of six teens in the Seattle area in an eight-month period last year and left many others injured. Such violence can affect whole communities, not just people involved in gangs. Recent incidents across the country include the following:

- A curfew for teens was imposed in Hartford, Conn., after a bloody weekend in which 11 people were shot, including a 7-year-old boy. The shootings are believed to be gang-related.
- A Kansas City, Kan., teen was sentenced to life in prison for a shooting that killed a 2-year-old girl. The teen, a gang member, was ordered to fire at the house where the girl was staying with her grandparents, according to court testimony.
- A gang brawl in Nyack, N.Y., north of New York City, was sparked when a high school student ripped a bandana with rival gang colors off the neck of a fellow student.

The most serious gang activity is centered in larger cities such as Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago. But gangs are also present in suburbs and small towns, says

Gangs aren't just a guy thing, either: Experts estimate that up to 33 percent of gang members are girls.

James C. Howell, senior research associate at the National Youth Gang Center.

The center's 2006 National Youth Gang Survey shows there are about 26,500 youth gangs in the United States, with 785,000 members total. Gang members are responsible for a large share of the violent crimes committed by teens in large urban areas, studies show. In Seattle, gang members were responsible for 85 percent of the robberies committed by teens in 1998.

One study found that 8 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds joined a gang at some point in their middle or high school years. And almost a quarter of students surveyed in 2005 said there were gangs in their schools, up from 17 percent in 1999, says Howell. Gangs aren't just a guy thing, either: Experts estimate that up to 33 percent of gang members are girls.

Chantelle S., a 15-year-old from New York City, says many students in her high school are gang members. Fights sometimes break out between rival groups, leading the school to impose lockdowns with increased security. "It's kind of scary because you never know what can happen," she says.

Thug Life

What exactly is a gang? It's not just a group of people getting together to hang out. "If there's no criminal activity, then you are not a gang. A social group is not a gang," says Arthur Lurigio, professor of psychology and criminal justice at Loyola University Chicago. Some gang members are barely teenagers, while others are your parents' age. The level of involvement in the gang may also vary from hard-core members to wannabe gangsters, Lurigio says.

Gangs give teens increased avenues to become involved in criminal activity, says Lurigio. "If you are in a gang, you are more likely to be committing every type of crime. You are more likely to carry a weapon, you are more likely to drop out of school," he says.

What makes gangs attractive to teens is the promise of a sense of belonging that they might not have at home or at school. They also join to be around older cousins or family members. Amosa says he did not have a strong relationship with his parents growing up.

That experience is common. "The gang becomes the parent for many kids. It becomes the school, the church," says Carl Taylor, professor of sociology and senior fellow at Michigan State University in East Lansing. He says gangs appeal to kids who feel they don't fit in elsewhere because the gang "will embrace you, will give you a sense of belonging."

Teens also join gangs because of the mistaken belief that membership will protect them. But gang members are more likely to be victims of crimes than people not in gangs, Howell says. And the risks of gang membership extend to the entire community, with some neighborhoods terrorized by drug dealing or robberies. In New York City, a teen was killed standing at his bedroom window after a member of the Bloods allegedly fired a gun in the air.

Experts say that the glamorization of gang life in music videos, video games, and movies fuels the desire to belong to one or just dress and act like a "G" (or gangster). But gang life often turns out to be very different from what

members imagined. Several studies have found that most people who join gangs drop out within a year because the experience is not what they thought it would be, Howell says. Short-term members typically can leave gangs without consequences, although sometimes they are "beaten out" by other members.

"It looks as if it's going to be an idyllic life of protection, fun, [and] excitement," Howell says. But looks can be deceiving, he adds. "It's a rough life."

On Second Thought

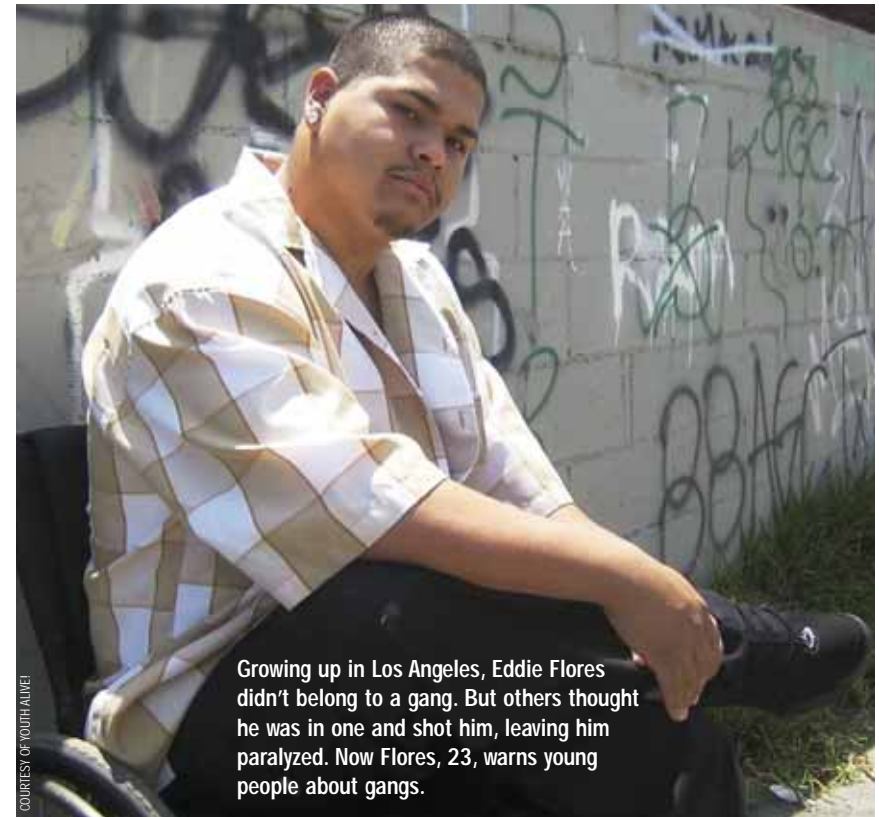
Eddie Flores knows how rough and violent gang life can be. The 23-year-old Los Angeles resident speaks to students about gangs through the violence-prevention program Youth Alive!

At 14, he began hanging out with a "party crew," a group of teens that can be a gateway to more formal gang membership. He sold drugs and stole cars. Flores eventually dropped out of school, was arrested, spent time in jail, and was later shot in two separate incidents.

The second shooting happened when Flores was 20 and part of a group that wasn't a formal gang. But gang members confronted him, insisting that he was from a rival gang and was

invading their turf. The bullet left Flores paralyzed from the chest down.

When he talks to teens from his wheelchair, Flores doesn't sugarcoat what happened to him. Instead, Flores encourages them to make better choices. "If I would have stayed away from the people who were having fun and I was hanging around more with the people who were into studying and being in school," he says, "my life would have been very different right now." CH2



Growing up in Los Angeles, Eddie Flores didn't belong to a gang. But others thought he was in one and shot him, leaving him paralyzed. Now Flores, 23, warns young people about gangs.

COURTESY OF YOUTH ALIVE!

CLOSE TO HOME

Law enforcement agencies reporting gang problems:

Rural counties: 15%

Small cities: 33%

Suburban counties: 51%

Large cities: 86%

GETTY IMAGES

Source: 2006 National Youth Gang Survey

TEENS TAKE ACTION

Fed up with gang violence in their communities, teens from across the country are coming together to work on solutions. They met in regional groups for five months and then came together at World Vision's Youth Empowerment Summit in Washington, D.C., to bring suggestions to Congress.

Stephanie V., 17, of Cicero, Ill., says she got involved in the project because she wanted to take action. There is a lot of gang violence in the community where Stephanie goes to high school,



SHUTTERSTOCK

and some of her friends date gang members. "I think it's a huge problem," she says.

The recommendations the group came up with included providing better after-school programs and more job options to keep teens out of trouble. Jon Amosa, 18, a former gang member from Seattle, thought meeting other teens at the summit was helpful. "To see other cities fighting for the same cause that we were, that inspired us to do even more work," he says.