

# Gang Prevention

*“It is so important that adults build relationships with young people around something they are interested in. As adults, we are often tempted to ‘fix’ something going on in the lives of kids, and we focus on what is ‘wrong’ with them. In a youth development setting [and in an educational setting as well], adults have the opportunity to utilize interest-based programs as a vehicle to build a trusting, healthy relationship with young people...”*

– BECKY FLAHERTY, SR. DIR., DELINQUENCY PREVENTION, BOYS AND GIRLS CLUBS OF AMERICA

As researchers and practitioners have gained experience in trying to prevent gang involvement and intervene with youths already deeply part of gangs, they have seen that a broad range of responses is needed. *(Note: when experts talk of gang prevention, it is a short-hand method of saying preventing youth from joining gangs, rather than preventing gangs from forming.)*

Schools will probably take the most active role in the prevention aspects, but can play an important part in the entire spectrum of responses.

**Primary Prevention:** Target the entire population in high-crime, high-risk communities. Services can include prenatal and infant care, truancy and dropout prevention and job programs. Many of these programs are based in the schools. These programs typically target elementary and middle schools. Examples include:

- *Anti-bullying efforts*

Some children report joining a gang for protection from bullying. If schools have a strong anti-bullying program in place, they may help prevent vulnerable children from joining a gang and reduce victimization by others from gangs.

- *Truancy programs*

When children stop attending school, they have more free time to get into trouble and hang out with peers who are doing the same. Truancy can become the first step, and a warning sign, toward delinquency and gang involvement.

- *Gang Resistance Education and Training Program (G.R.E.A.T.)*

This is a 13-session classroom-based course delivered by law enforcement to middle school students. The course is designed to discourage children and young adolescents from joining gangs.

**Secondary Prevention:** This approach identifies young children (age 7-14) at high risk of joining a gang and uses resources of schools, community-based organizations, and faith-based groups to intervene with services before early problem behaviors turn into serious delinquency and gang involvement. Targeted children could include younger siblings of gang members and families with 7- or 8-year-olds who are beginning to show signs of troublemaking such as throwing rocks through schools on weekends. Both secondary prevention and intervention are much more individualized than primary prevention.

As adolescents enter high school, school officials and others must look to intervention strategies.

*“The prevention window of opportunity closes by about age 15 because almost all youth who join gangs have joined by that age,”* writes James C. Howell in *Preventing and Reducing Juvenile Delinquency: A Comprehensive Framework*.

Source: Office of Juvenile Justice, U.S. Department of Education