



Not in Our Town?

FINDINGS ON GANG MEMBERSHIP AND ATTITUDE TOWARDS GANGS

From the March 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey
Arlington Virginia

The choices that young people make today have a big impact on their health and well-being, now and in the future.

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) asks young people about the behaviors and habits with the strongest link to health.

This brochure looks at the findings on gang membership and attitudes toward gangs from Arlington's March 2007 survey of middle and high school students.

WHY WORRY?

While relatively few young people in Arlington belong to a gang, the consequences are serious and the problem may be growing:

- According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the number of cities and counties with problems with youth gangs increased substantially from 1985 to 1996, then stabilized through 2001.
- Gang members commit far more violent offenses than expected, given their numbers.
- Gang members are far more likely to carry a gun and to use it, compared to other young delinquents.
- Gang involvement is associated with dropping out of school, early parenthood, unstable employment and drug use.

Gangs are strongest where communities are weakest.

-Steve Nawojczyk, Gang expert and former Little Rock Coroner

GANG MEMBERSHIP

Seven percent of the young people who completed the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) in Arlington reported being in a gang in the previous year. This figure varied from 6 percent of 6th grade students to 10 percent of 10th grade students. Older youth were much less likely to report being in a gang – only 3 percent of 12th grade students. However, this figure may be low because gang members are more likely to drop out of school and thus are less likely to fill out a survey. They may also be more reluctant to report gang involvement.

Having a friend in a gang was much more common than being in a gang. About one-fourth of youth reported having a friend who was in a gang in the past year. This figure ranged from 13 percent of 6th grade students to 32 percent of 8th grade students.

About one third of young people reported the presence of gang members either at school or in the neighborhood. This figure ranged from 16 percent of 6th grade students to 39 percent of 10th grade students.

CHANGES SINCE 2001

Since 2001, the percent of youth who reported being in a gang first *increased* and then *decreased*. Among boys, the figure increased from 7 to 13 percent in 2004 and then decreased to 9 percent in 2007. Among girls, the figure first increased from 1 percent in 2001 to 6 percent in 2004 and then decreased to 4 percent. Fewer young people report having friends who are gang members or gang members at school or in the neighborhood.

HOW WE DID THE SURVEY

These findings are based on a survey of about 2500 students enrolled in grades six, eight, ten and twelve in Arlington's public secondary schools. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Parents had an opportunity to opt out their child. Less than 2 percent did. Eighty-six percent of students in the classes chosen for the survey filled out a questionnaire. Most of those who did not were absent from school.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS GANGS

Research shows that gang members are far more likely to get hurt or in trouble and are not safer than youth who are not in gangs. In fact, gangs target members of other gangs as victims. Are young people aware of these risks? To find out, the survey asked the participants about their attitudes toward gang membership.

Few survey participants thought a young person is safer in a gang. Only 7 percent agreed with the statement that "You are safer in a gang."

Most students agreed that "you would be more likely to get hurt or in trouble if you joined a gang." About 80 percent of young people in 6th and 12th grade agreed with this statement and about 70 percent of young people in 8th and 10th grade.

Girls were more likely to demonstrate unfavorable attitudes towards gangs than boys. Only 4 percent of girls (but 9 percent of boys) agreed "you would be safer in a gang". Eighty percent of girls (but 70 percent of boys) agreed "you were more likely to get hurt or in trouble in a gang."

GANG TASK FORCE

The Northern Virginia Regional Gang Task Force, formed in 2003, is using enforcement, education and prevention to make Northern Virginia "inhospitable for gang activity." For more information on Task Force activities in Arlington or to get involved, contact Robert Vilchez at (703) 228-4230 or rvilchez@arlingtonva.us.

TIPS FOR PARENTS

- Learn the signs of gang membership and gang activity in an area.
- Know your child's friends and know what your child is doing with them. Encourage your child to be involved in supervised activities after school.
- Teach your child to avoid peers who are in gangs and places where there is gang activity.
- Get to know other parents in your neighborhood and help each other keep a watchful eye on all kids.
- Talk to your child about ways to resolve conflicts without fighting. Help them practice these skills.

IDEAS FOR COMMUNITIES

- Provide parenting classes, teen mother mentoring programs and support parents in other ways to strengthen family relationships.
- Make sure that all young people in the community have positive activities after school and on the weekends. These activities help give teens a sense of belonging.
- Support programs to help young people learn to resolve conflicts peacefully. Gang violence can be sparked by an ill-timed look.
- Make sure young people have plenty of positive role models and adult guidance. Every teen needs adults to listen to them and support them.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about youth gangs and how to prevent them, check out these sites:

Why do Kids Join Gangs (Arlington Police Department):

www.arlingtonva.us/Departments/Police/citizens/reference/crime_prevention/PoliceCitizensReferenceCrime_preventionGangs.aspx#why

Myths About Gangs (The Gang Reduction through Intervention, Prevention, Education) at:

www.gripe4rkids.org/myths.html

Parent Resource Guide (The National Youth Gang Center) at www.gangwar.com/parent1.htm

For questions about the data or survey process, contact Amy Graham, Data Coordinator, at (703) 228-1668 or agraha@arlingtonva.us.

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