

Useful contacts

Neighbourhood Police – to find details of your local team and find out more about the work they are doing in your area, search your postcode at www.police.uk.

Crimestoppers – a free, confidential service where you can report information about a crime anonymously.

Freephone: **0800 555 111**

Web: www.crimestoppers-uk.org

Local Authority/Council – connect to your Local Authority and find out about local specialised work with gangs, parent groups and activities for young people in your area. They can also refer you to parenting support programmes.

Web: www.gov.uk/find-your-local-council

Family Lives – gives advice on all aspects of the parenting role and is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Freephone: **0808 800 2222**

Web: www.familylives.org.uk

National Council for Voluntary Youth Services – network of over 280 national organisations, and regional and local networks that work with and for young people.

Web: www.ncvys.org.uk

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) – runs a wide range of services for both children and adults, including a national helpline and local projects. Their helpline is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Freephone: **0808 800 5000**.

Email: help@nspcc.org.uk

Web: www.nspcc.org.uk

Anti-Bullying Alliance – advice on bullying.

Web: www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk

Victim Support – a national charity supporting people affected by crime.

Web: www.victimsupport.org

Missing People – if your child goes missing for long periods of time, Missing People can help you find them.

Freephone: **116 000**

Text: **116 000** (you can even text this number if you have run out of credit)

Web: missingpeople.org.uk

St Giles Trust SOS

Call: **020 7708 8000**

Web: stgilestrust.org.uk

LET'S TALK ABOUT GANGS

“Every day I am hearing about young people being killed...I am really scared.”

“We ain't a gang...they are just my friends...”

Violent crime appears to be on the increase yet again. Every day seems to bring with it another news story of a knife, gun or gang related crime. We are living in a time where crimes are getting more and more serious and at the same time the age of young people becoming involved appears to be getting younger.

This leaflet exists to give you the parent, carer or guardian the basic facts on what gangs are, possible signs to look for if you are worried about your child and where to go if you need advice.

What do we mean by 'Gangs'?

Thanks to the media it seems everyone has their own idea of what they mean by 'Gangs'. Older generations tend to think of mobster type gangs such as the Krays. Some people think of the American styled gangs which are huge in number, entrenched in rap lyrics, come from the 'slums' or wear bandanas in specific colours and operate in certain neighbourhoods.

In the UK our situation is different, our gun laws, our areas of poverty and most importantly our gang sizes and numbers are much smaller by comparison.

Gangs or Co-offending Groups?

When we talk about gangs we essentially mean groups which carry out criminal acts together. These offences tend range from theft or robbery to drug dealing and distribution all the way up to acts of Serious Youth Violence which covers things such as weapon enabled crime, rape and murder.

What are the odds of my child becoming involved?

Even though there are tragedies of young lives lost through gangs or serious youth violence the reality is it is just a small fraction of young people that end up becoming involved. However, we live in an age where young people are more connected now than ever before. Young people have always wanted to be liked and admired by their friends. The use and shareability of social media means a young person can be hyped up or discredited in an instant. At the same time, various co-offending groups use the same channels to promote and glamourise their activity so that they can recruit others. It's not just boys, girls can get involved too.

Groups involved in criminality live by a 'No snitching code'. They tend not to talk about their activities particularly with adults or those in authority. This makes your job as a parent or guardian much harder.





Why do people get involved?

There are many different reasons that young people may choose to be a part of whatever negative or criminal behaviours their friends do. Even if they know it is wrong.

The following is what young people have told us. It's important to remember that as weird as they may sound to us as adults, it made perfect sense to them.

Young people told us it was about:

- Respect and status
- To gain friends
- A sense of belonging
- A sense of identity
- Excitement
- To find a substitute family
- Reputation
- Power
- Safety and Protection
- To make money
- Peer pressure
- They were recruited
- They were forced to, or felt there was no other alternative or adults would understand or be able to help them

What are the signs?

There are a number of warning signs that you should be looking out for, such as:

- ◆ Changes or adapting their dress style.
- ◆ Talking differently – new slang or language with an aggressive tone.
- ◆ Poor school results or skipping school altogether.
- ◆ Carrying weapons.
- ◆ Unexplained injuries (which may indicate violence from others and/or self-harming), refusing medical help.
- ◆ Money, clothes or accessories which they are unable to account for.
- ◆ Staying out unusually late or not coming home at all.
- ◆ Interest in music which glorifies weapons/gang culture.
- ◆ Becoming overtly secretive about friends / peers or where they have been (more guarded than usual for a typical teenager).
- ◆ Changes to their profiles on social or networking websites like Facebook.
- ◆ Being stopped in relation to drugs – especially if this is outside your area.
- ◆ Being involved in fights or disorder – again, especially if this is outside your area.
- ◆ Being stopped and searched in the presence of other gang members.
- ◆ Changes in behaviour, becoming fearful and/or withdrawn and/or prone to unexplained outbursts of anger.
- ◆ Distancing from one or both parents/caregivers.
- ◆ Abusing drugs and/or alcohol.

Please note this list is not exhaustive, you should always seek advice if you are concerned.



It's not just boys, girls get involved too...

Girls are affected by gangs and co-offending groups, but their involvement tends to be far more relational, for example through friends (which may normalise unacceptable behaviour as being ok), boyfriends (which may take advantage of her wanting to be seen as a 'woman' or being 'accepted').

Female involvement is harder to spot because rather than a rapid change in behaviour, relationships with negative social circles can lay dormant or remain undetected until actions with serious consequences arise.

They may be asked to hide weapons or drugs, be targeted by male gang members in acts of revenge. They may be asked to steal or rob in order to raise money to 'pay off debts' or coerced into situations where they have to carry out 'sexual favours'. All of this tends to go on 'behind closed doors' and circulated via social media.

Girls who are linked to gang members (sisters, girlfriends, friends, cousins, daughters) as well as female gang members themselves, are at risk of emotional, physical and sexual violence. Many girls who are involved with gangs or co-offending groups may believe that what they are being pressured, forced or choosing to do is acceptable, even normal. They may not realise that what is happening to them is wrong; they may be afraid of what might happen if they tell anyone and/or they may think that no one will believe or protect them.

What can you do?

It is important to remember that you are not to blame, criminal groups exploit the young, the vulnerable and those that are within easy reach. No matter how confident or secure you may feel the child in your care is, the group will present themselves as whatever is missing, or with what the child wants or feels that they need.

However, once they have them, often their treatment of your child will change to coercion, bullying and exploitation.

For these reasons it's important to remember that the child is just as much a victim and there **are** things you can do to help stop your child from being involved or to help them get out.

Here are some helpful tips

- ◆ Talk to your child and listen – you are looking for open, honest and non-judgemental communication without anger.
- ◆ Get to know your child's friends and their parents—it will become harder for them to lie about where they are or what they are doing.
- ◆ Take an active interest in what your child is doing on the internet. Request access to their profiles.
- ◆ Get in the habit of checking your child's room and properly look for all the 'hidden places' that they might be tempted to hide things.
- ◆ Encourage them to get involved in positive activities and to think about their future and employment.
- ◆ Get involved in your child's school activities.
- ◆ Always know where your child is and who they are with.
- ◆ Help them to cope with pressure and how to deal with conflict without the use of violence.
- ◆ Speak to them about the serious consequences of violent or illegal behaviour.
- ◆ Talk to your child about gangs and what it looks like to them, what are their worries or concerns?
- ◆ Look for ways of disciplining children that do not involve harshness, anger or violence.
- ◆ Work with other parents and schools to watch their behaviour.
- ◆ Contact local voluntary organisations that provide mentoring and other support for young people.
- ◆ Talk about your child's behaviour with their school and other parents.

Remember that they may not want to talk about it or may be scared. The vast majority of the young people we work with have been victims too. It is important that they know you want to listen and support them. Make sure they know they have a choice.