

Slide 1

**Cults, Gangs,
and Other Extremists:
Implications for Child Welfare**

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The Challenge:
Defining Youth Gangs

Youth Groups VS. Youth Gangs

- o Groups: Most youth seek out groups with an emphasis on being together and belonging to something.
- o Gangs: Represent an extreme - often illegal - manifestation of peer connections, expectations, and experiences.

Weiner, 1999

The difference between a youth gang and a youth group is not always clear. Features of gangs such as organizational identity and culture, collective action, and a leadership hierarchy are also characteristic of groups of non-gang youth (sports teams, social clubs, etc). Weisheit and Wells, 2001

In a study of gang and non-gang youth by Maxson, Whitlock, and Klien, both gang and non-gang youth reported some similar reasons for joining groups. For example, they both joined groups in order to fill empty time, for support and loyalty, and to feel pride in belonging. Both gang and non-gang youth stated they rarely felt forced to join a group (1998).

According to Dishion, Nelson, & Yasui (2005) in their article "Predicting Early Adolescent Gang Involvement from Middle School Adaptation", "gang involvement in adolescence can be seen as the extreme end of a progression of deviant peer involvement."

The Challenge:
Defining Youth Gangs

Youth gangs

- o Consist of adolescents and young adults – ages usually ranging from 12 to 25
- o Share a collective identity
- o Are territorial
- o Repeatedly engage in illegal activity
- o Can be defined by the social reaction of others

Weiner, 1999
Weisheit & Wells, 2001

Gangs usually express their collective identity through a name, language, and symbols unique to their gang (Weiner, 1999). Members of a gang see themselves as a gang, and are proud of this identity (Maxson, Whitlock, and Klein, 1998).

Members of a particular gang have generally been raised in the same neighborhood as other gang members. Many times their family members have also been gang members. This helps to establish the feeling that they are entitled to reside in the neighborhood – that it is their “turf” Weiner, 1999.

Youth Gangs have identifiable leadership and continuous association and interaction. They want to prove themselves, establish a reputation, and be recognized for their activities, generally illegal. Weiner, 1999.

Klein’s 1971 definition of a gang relied upon the reaction of others to see the group as a problem in the neighborhood, the gang itself to recognize themselves as a denotable group (generally with a name), and the member’s having been

involved in enough delinquent incidents to receive consistent negative responses from neighborhood residents and/or law enforcement (Weisheit & Wells, 2001).

The Challenge
Defining Youth Gangs

Table 45: Criteria Used by Law Enforcement Agencies To Define a Youth Gang: Top Choices, 1998

Gang Characteristic	Agencies Selecting As Most Important Criterion	
	Number	Percent
Commits crimes together	613	50%
Has a name	228	19
Hangs out together	119	10
Claims a turf or territory of some sort	104	9
Displays/wears common colors or other insignia	101	8
Has a leader or several leaders	89	7

Note: Number of observations=1,221.

This table is taken from “Into the Abyss: A Personal Journey into the World of Street Gangs” by Mike K. Carlie. The information in the table was gathered from a 1998 National Youth Gang Survey and includes the top six identifiers used by law enforcement agencies to distinguish a youth gang from a youth group.

The Challenge:
Defining Youth Gangs

- Hispanic Gangs
- African American Gangs
 - Crips vs. Bloods
- Asian Gangs
- Caucasian Gangs
 - Loners, fun seekers, skinheads
- Suburban Gangs
 - Delinquent, ideological, occultic

Weiner, 1999

Hispanic Gangs: cling very closely to their Old World culture and heritage and are devoutly loyal to their neighborhoods. Members totally immerse themselves in gang activities. Members are often between 11 and 25 years old. Many Hispanic gangs have three or four generations of family involvement making being part of the gang a way to identify with family.

African American gangs have members ranging from ages 11 to 35. The two most violent and criminally active gangs are the Crips and the Bloods. The Crips identify themselves with the color blue while their rivals, the Bloods, identify themselves with the color red. These groups are well known for their drug trafficking.

Asian gangs generally have members ages 13 to 35. Most Asian gangs choose not to identify themselves by color, clothing style, or other gang symbols. They are particularly motivated by money and will victimize members of their own ethnic group.

Caucasian gangs range in ages 11 to early 20's. These members increasingly come from middle or upper class families. Four different categories have been identified. *Loners* live in ethnic or multiethnic neighborhoods and belong to the gang in that neighborhood. They join for protection and many long term members do not trust them. *Fun seekers* are loosely organized groups living in urban or suburban areas who conduct hate crimes. *Skinheads* often have shaved heads, heavy, steel-toed boots, bomber jackets, and racist tatoos. Racist skinheads frequently affiliate themselves with adult white supremacist groups.

Suburban gangs are important because they support the fact that gangs exist outside of large urban inner cities. Delinquent gangs desire profit and brutality, often committing crimes involving money and sexual assault. Ideological gangs form over the believe in a particular ideology. In occultic gangs, members focus on some occultic entity or practice. Youth interested in groups such as cults will be discussed in further length later in the presentation.

Weiner, 1999

The Gang Life:
The Development of the Gang

- The first known organized gang formed in New York City in 1826.
- Early American gangs divided themselves primarily along ethnic, racial, and cultural lines.
- Committed to protecting themselves and their neighborhood
- Gang membership and National concerns

Weiner, 1999

Some of the earliest gangs began as groups of friends. These groups of friends were committed to protecting each other and their neighborhood. Wars between these gangs often erupted because of disputes over territory control.

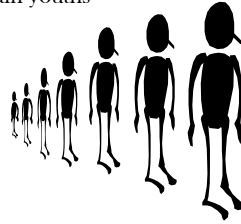
Gang activity tends to decline during times of national struggle. During the Depression and World War II gang activity declined as Americans became more concerned with caring for themselves and protecting their country. Likewise, gang membership and activity also declined during the Vietnam War. However, directly after these national and political events, gang activity increased rapidly as people struggled to put their lives back together. (Weiner, 1999).

The Gang Life: The Development of the Gang

- WHY DO GANGS ARISE?

Traditional, established institutions fail to:

- Meet youth's needs
- Resolve issues surrounding youth
- Include the participation of certain youths



Weiner, 1999

The Gang Life Understanding Values

- Values are used to identify goals and shape behavior.
- Values hold gang members together.
- Shared values help members understand expectations and establish limits.
- Common influences of a gang's values
 - Popular culture
 - Age of members
 - Ethnicity of members
 - Socioeconomic status of members

Weiner, 1999

Gang members feel that their shared values hold them together as well as giving them individual and collective purpose and identity.

Each gang's value system represents a standard of behavior and code of survival.

Symbols allow gang members to represent their values. They hold a special meaning for each gang.

Popular culture, through movies, music videos, music, television, and computers, serves to transmit those gang symbols and at the same time those values which are represented by them.

The Gang Life
Understanding Values

The American Dream

- ❖ Gang members believe in the American Dream just like other young people.
- ❖ Desire material goods, success, elevated economic status
- ❖ The gang helps youth achieve The American Dream through different means.

Fox, 2001
Wiener, 1999


The youth that join gangs generally have the same social expectations and goals as those youth who do not join gangs. However, because mainstream society has left a certain foundation and set of goals out of some youths' reach, the gang helps them discover their own goals and way of life.

As outsiders, those that become gang members are often deprived of the tools (education, employment, economic status) to reach the mainstream goals of the American Dream. When these youth believe they cannot achieve their goals in a legitimate fashion, they often turn to gangs to achieve them through different means, often illegal.

Many scholars see the formation of the gang as a reaction and adjustment to the discriminating middle class society. Those youth that become gang members are not able to fulfill those middle class goals and values, therefore they must create their own society, the gang, within which to function. (Fox, 2001).

The Gang Life:
Gang Activity

- Organized Crime
 - Armed robbery
 - Extortion
 - Alien Smuggling
 - Arms Trafficking
 - Drug Trafficking



Johnson & Mullaussen, 2005

The illustration depicts a bank robbery in progress. A woman in a green top and grey skirt is walking away from a counter, carrying a bag. A man in a brown jacket is holding a gun, aiming it at a man in a blue uniform who is standing behind the counter. Another man in a blue uniform is visible in the background, also holding a gun. The scene is set in a modern bank interior with large windows and a counter.

A gang's survival depends on its ability to maintain a sound financial base.

Require money to buy weapons, transact drugs, bail members out of jail, pay attorney's fees, and to have parties.

Drug trafficking is one way that large amounts of money can be made and is very enticing to gangs. (Weiner, 1999)

According to Weisheit and Wells in their study about non-metropolitan gangs, drug dealing is not the major reason that gangs form in smaller, more rural areas. Many people assume that the gangs from bigger cities seek out local drug dealers in less urban areas to increase their gang's business, however Weisheit and Wells found this was not a reason cited often in their exploration. More often, gang members move into these areas because they move with their families or because of placement in foster homes or care facilities in the rural area (2001).

The Gang Life
Gang Activity

- Juvenile Delinquency
 - Delinquency serves as a subculture – knowledge, beliefs, values, codes, and prejudices.
 - Often steal, damage, or destroy property.
 - Those youth that join gangs have a higher rate of delinquency than do non-gang youth.

Weiner, 1999
Curry, Decker, & Egley, 2002

It is important to remember that not all delinquents join gangs. (Weiner, 1999).

Gang membership is associated with a level of delinquency above and beyond having delinquent friends. (Curry, Decker, & Egley, 2002).

According to Curry, Decker, & Egley's study, gang members self report three times as much delinquency as non-gang members. Delinquent activity generally increases during periods of gang membership and decrease afterwards. (2002).

According to a survey of middle schools done by Curry, Decker, and Egley (2002), the "relationship between gang membership and delinquency emerges in early adolescence" (p. 288).

The Gang Life:
Gang Activity

Why do gang members have a higher rate of delinquency?

- ✿ Selection
- ✿ Facilitation
- ✿ Enhancement

Peterson, Taylor, & Esbensen 2004

According to Thornberry's theory, cited in Peterson, Taylor, & Esbensen's article "Gang membership and violent victimization" there are three explanations for why gang members have a higher rate of delinquency than non-gang youth.

Selection proposes that those youth who join gangs are involved in a high rate of delinquency prior to joining the gang. If this is true, then a high rate of delinquency continues during and after involvement in a gang.

Facilitation suggests that gang membership itself calls for a high level of delinquency. Prior to joining a gang, a youth's levels of delinquency will be relatively low. During membership those rates increase, and after membership they will likely decrease again.

Lastly, enhancement is a combination of these two theories. In this theory, gang youth show some delinquency before joining the gang, an increased level while involved in the gang, and then a decrease upon leaving the gang. This theory suggests that those youth that become gang members have a more natural propensity for delinquency, which may be a reason for joining the gang. (2004).

The Gang Life Violence

- Violence is central to gang life.
- Violence separates gang youth from non-gang youth.
- Gang members are at least 60 times more likely to be killed than non-gang members.
- Gangs are organized for violence
 - Provide training, weaponry, motives, discipline, and leadership for engaging in violence.

Weiner, 1999
Peterson, Taylor, & Esbensen 2004
National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, 2006

Violence is a part of everyday life for gang members. All aspects of the gang life, from initiation to disengagement, involves violence. (Weiner, 1999). According to Peterson, Taylor, and Esbensen (2004), violence serves to strengthen the relationship between gang members. Violence is a value that all gang members share.

The Gang Life:
Violence


Why are Gangs so violent?

- ❖Gangs are organized for violence
- ❖Violence weakens social institutions
- ❖Individuals are selected because of their violent tendencies.
- ❖Violence promotes power.

1999 Wiener,

Wiener proposes multiple reasons that violence is such an important and prevalent aspect of gang life. First, gangs may be organized to promote violence. Gangs provide their members with all the tools they need to become violent youth – training, weapons, motives, discipline, and leadership. Gang members asked to engage in violence will most likely not think twice, because their group is structured around the concept. Secondly, members of gangs often feel let down by social institutions. Violence is a way to strike back at these institutions they feel have failed them. Also, many times members are chosen by the gang based on their propensity for violence. A youth who shows high rates of violence prior to entering the gang will be appealing to a gang as a prospective member. Finally, many gangs engage in violent behavior because violence promotes power. It allows them to protect their homes and neighborhoods as well as themselves. It allows them to seek revenge on those who have hurt them in the past. Violence acts as a tool to increase the power of the gang itself as well as its members.

The Gang Life:
Violence



- “It feels good, because then we know we have power.” (Wayne, 15)
- “Violence is a part of everyday life...animal instinct.” (Matthew, 17)
- “Violence is a way of respect. If someone disrespects you, you resort to violence to let them know who has the power.” (George, 15)

1999 Wiener,

These quotes are taken from Valerie Wiener’s book “Winning the War Against Youth Gangs.” The quotes pertain to why youth in gangs resort to violence.

Why do Youth Join Gangs?
An Activity

A LOOK AT THE CASES OF
MIKE, ANTHONY,
AND CASSIE

Go over the cases of Mike, Anthony, and Cassie – in small groups? Assume that in all cases, these teens are growing up in an area where gangs are active and that they know people who are in gangs but at present, none of them have joined a gang. Who do you think is at greatest risk to join? Why? Discuss what made you come to the conclusion and any stereotypes which may have influenced your feelings. Is it possible for the group to come to a consensus about who is most likely to join or does everyone have different feelings?

Why do youth join gangs?


Gangs offer members:	Influences:
* Respect	* Family
* Sense of Brotherhood	* School and Education
* Protection	* Peers and Deviancy
* A place to belong	* Individual Traits
* Power and Control	

Weiner, 1999
Wood, et al., 1997
Dishion, Nelson, & Yasui, 2005

Youth join gangs for many reasons. While each youth is different, there are many similarities between gang members and their experiences. Gangs offer youth a multitude of reasons for joining. The family-like organization of gangs attracts many youth (Wood, et al., 1997). Gangs provide youth with “affection, understanding, loyalty, and emotional and physical security” (Wood, et al., 1997). The gang is likely the only place youth is receiving these things. The influence of the family, school, peers, and the youth him or herself will be explored in greater detail.

Why do youth join gangs?
The Family Influence

- Families are frequently chaotic and detached.
- Inconsistency of punishment.
- Family deviancy
- Parental Involvement
- Self-esteem derived from family involvement
- Gang members in the family.



Maxson, Whitlock & Klein, 1998
Wood, et al., 1997
Weiner, 1999

One of the most influential factors in all areas of a youth's life is the family. The family dynamic has a large impact on whether or not a youth will choose to join a gang. Wood, et al., (1997) states that youth often turn to gangs when their families are dysfunctional. When a youth sees his own family as “failing” him, it is not surprising that he might turn to a gang to serve as a “surrogate” family. Families that fit this mold are chaotic. Members feel detached from one another, and many times the youth experience attachment disorders (Wood, et al., 1997). Youth turn to gangs to fill the roles the family has neglected to fill.

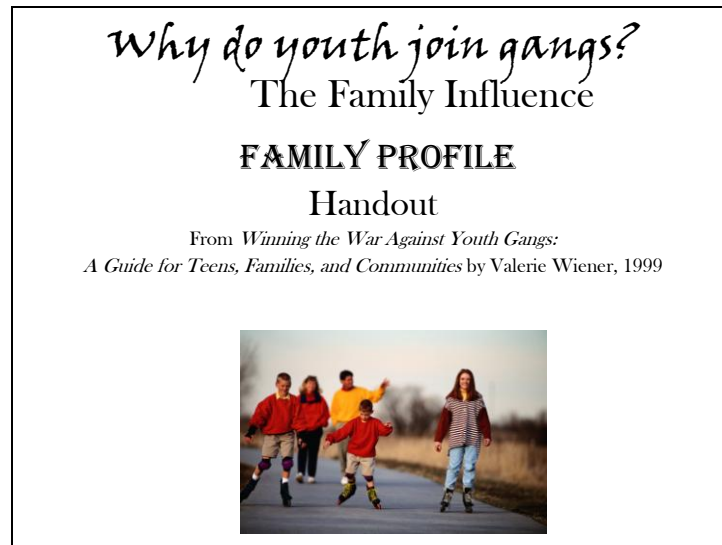
Maxson, Whitlock, and Klein found in their 1998 study comparing gang youth to non-gang youth that youth suffer when there is an inconsistency of punishment in their household. Inconsistency allows the youth no structure and no set of boundaries. Youth actually need and want to have some boundaries, and will often seek out other groups, often gangs, to provide these to them. Wood et al (1997) found that youth in physically or sexually abusive homes were also more likely to join gangs. Violence in the home sets a precursor for youth to be violent outside of the home as well.

Those youth whose families are deviant themselves are often more likely to join gangs (Maxson, et al, 1998). Youth in homes where family partake in illegal drug use and criminal activity less often see the dangers in such behavior and are more likely to take part in these behaviors themselves. Compared to non-gang youth, gang youth more often report adults yelling and fighting as well as having access to guns within the home. Gang members also reported a higher likelihood of having a family member injured or killed in a fight.

Parental involvement is very important. When parents are involved with their youth, the youth will see something worthwhile in themselves. Parents who take the time to get to know their children's friends will know if their child is interacting with peers who may be dangerous (Maxson, et al, 1998). In turn, youth in those situations become involved with gangs less often. Positive relationships with one's family leads to self-esteem. Youth who have higher self-esteem derived from their family are less likely to feel the need to involve themselves in gangs.


Lastly, when other members of the family belong to gangs, youth are more likely to become involved themselves (Maxson, et al, 1998). Youth in homes where family members belong to gangs have a greater chance of knowing about the gang, knowing the gang members, being recruited, and for identifying themselves in a positive way with that family member.

Maxson, et al. found a few surprising variables in their study which did not seem to vary between gang and non-gang affiliated youth. According to their research, whether or not a youth comes from a two parent home does not have as big an influence as they hypothesized. Also parent education and employment did not differ when comparing gang members and non-gang members. Less emphasis can be placed on these factors than on parental involvement, deviancy, and self-esteem.



This handout serves to present a list of familial conditions that should act as warning signs when assessing a youth's risk for joining a gang. Wiener (1999) states that at least one of the conditions listed on these handouts is present in a gang involved youth's home. (Go over the list). However, It is important to remember that just because a family has experienced one of these characteristics, for example, separation or divorce, it does not mean that youth in the family will without a doubt join a gang. This is simply a list of characteristics to keep in mind.

Why do youth join gangs?
School and Educational Influence



- Schools influence peer dynamics and behavior
- Poor grades
- Missing school
- Negative teacher perceptions
- Low academic aspiration

Wiener, 1999
Maxson, et al., 1998
Dishion et al., 2005

The study conducted by Dishion et, al. (2005) looked at school performance and gang involved youth. The study concluded that “school failure in the domains of academics and peer relationships increases the likelihood of young adolescents seeking the company of deviant peers.” This in turn increases the likelihood that those youth will join gangs. When youth do poorly in school, they must find another way to adapt. Often times this means that they form deviant groups as a way to compensate for their poor academic abilities and their lack of positive social relationships. These deviant groups later become associated with gangs (Dishion et al., 2005).

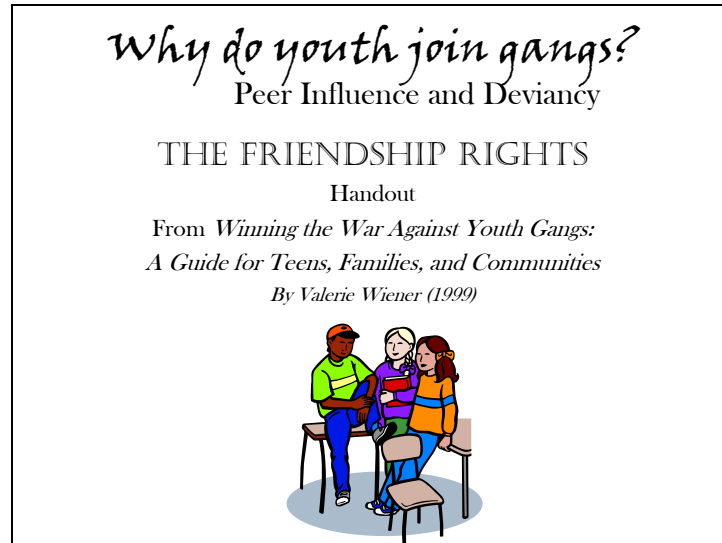
The afore mentioned study by Maxson et al. also looked at school involvement and educational influences in youth (1998). Their research concluded that those youth who were gang affiliated had poorer grades than those non-gang members. Also, youth who were more likely to join gangs felt that their teachers had negative perceptions of them and frequently missed school. Non-gang youth attended school, participated in sports and other extra-curricular activities, and maintained better grades than did youth in gangs.

Why do youth join gangs?
Peer Influence and Deviancy

- ↳ Youth at risk of joining gangs find similarly deviant peers to associate with.
- ↳ Drug use, violence, and crime
- ↳ Friends resolve conflict by threatening or yelling
- ↳ Getting into trouble
- ↳ Friendship bonds are not as strong as those of non-gang youth.

Wood et al., 1997
Dishion et al., 2005
Maxson, et al., 1998

Because antisocial and deviant youth do not fit into mainstream youth social groups, they often seek out those who also exhibit antisocial and deviant behavior (Dishion et al., 2005). Those youth involved in drug use, violence, and crime are rejected by their peers who do not partake in these activities (Wood et al., 1997). They will seek out individuals who also do those things to form friendship groups. Because gangs have high rates of drug use, violence, and crime, it is more likely that youth participating in those activities will find gang members to be friends with and subsequently join the gang themselves. According to Wiener (1999), teens on the fringes of society look to gangs to help them develop feelings of self-worth, importance, and belonging. Gangs also provide teens with direction, structure, and guidance. Maxson et al. study found that gang members were more likely to have friends who resolve conflict by threatening violence or yelling. Gang members also report that activities with their friends include getting into trouble and hanging out. Surprisingly, gang involved youth do not feel as strong of bonds with their friends as non-gang youth report. They are much quicker to agree that the time spent with their friends is time wasted and that their friends are too much trouble. (1998).



Before joining a peer group, teens should consider how the particular group will work and how the group will fulfill their personal needs. Teenagers should be aware that they have several rights when it comes to membership in a group, and they should assess the group in order to see if their needs and rights are being met and respected. This handout gives examples of how youth can do this. (Go over the handout) (Wiener, 1999).

Why do youth join gangs?
Individual Factors

- ☆Techniques of conflict resolution
- ☆Negative stressful events
- ☆Barriers to future success
- ☆Low socioeconomic status
- ☆Drug/Alcohol use
- ☆Low levels of self esteem

Maxson et al., 1998
Wiener, 1999

According to Maxson et al (1998) youth at risk for gang involvement are likely to threaten violence or yell when conflicts arise. Non-gang youth are more likely to talk about their conflicts, calmly working a compromise out through non-violent means. Multiple stressful events in the past year can also contribute to youth joining gangs because the gang provides them an outlet for that stress. According to Maxson et al (1998) youth at risk for gang involvement are likely to threaten violence or yell when conflicts arise. Non-gang youth are more likely to talk about their conflicts, calmly working a compromise out through non-violent means. Multiple stressful events in the past year can also contribute to youth joining gangs because the gang provides them an outlet for that stress. Youth are more likely to join gangs when they view their future as negative. Believing that there is no hope for success causes teens to reach out to negative influences such as gangs (Maxson et al., 1998). Youth who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds or place a high importance on money often join gangs in order to further their financial standing (Wiener, 1999). Drug and alcohol use is also highly correlated with gang membership. One of the greatest reasons youth join gangs is to fill voids in their own lives. Those youth who have low levels of self esteem perceive themselves as not being good enough to fit in anywhere. The gang provides the youth with a place to belong, feel welcome, and important.

