National Gang Center Newsletter
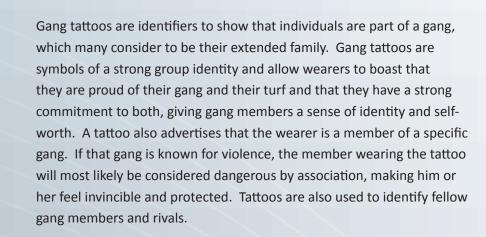
Summer 2016

Gang Tattoos

Article contributed by the
National Gang Intelligence Center

Humans in most countries, civilizations, and cultures have been tattooing their bodies for thousands of years. To date, the oldest human recovered with a tattoo is believed to have lived approximately 5,000 years ago. Tattoos have been used as symbols for culture, status, religion, national pride, and as punishment or healing. In the United States, tattoos have become more popular than ever, among both young and old, and are seen in both genders and among members of almost every race and ethnic group. They come in every size and color and can be located anywhere on the body. Tattoos can boast affiliation with an organization, make a political or emotional statement, or serve as a decoration, but few tattoos bear the significance or stigma of gang tattoos.

Gang Tattoos (continued)

Gang tattoos are identifiers to show that individuals are part of a gang, which many consider to be their extended family. Gang tattoos are symbols of a strong group identity and allow wearers to boast that they are proud of their gang and their turf and that they have a strong commitment to both, giving gang members a sense of identity and self-worth. A tattoo also advertises that the wearer is a member of a specific gang. If that gang is known for violence, the member wearing the tattoo will most likely be considered dangerous by association, making him or her feel invincible and protected. Tattoos are also used to identify fellow gang members and rivals.

Acronyms are often used to identify gangs. Some examples are MS-13 for Mara Salvatrucha, GD for Gangster Disciples, VL for Vice Lords, EME for the Mexican Mafia, and UBN for the United Blood Nation.

Numbers are important indicators in a tattoo. They can represent street numbers, block numbers, or area codes of the geographic area where the gang has a presence, such as the 312 area code for downtown Chicago worn by the Vice Lords. A number can also represent a letter in the alphabet to signify the gang name, such as 13 used by Hispanic gangs to show allegiance to the Mexican Mafia, since M is the 13th letter in the alphabet.

Symbols or **pictures** also can be gang indicators in a tattoo, such as the Black Hand of the Mexican Mafia, the heart with wings of the Black Gangster Disciples, or the top hat and cane of the Vice Lords.

Placement of the tattoo on the body holds a special significance for some gangs. Tattoos can be located on the face, scalp, neck, chest, hands, fingers, legs, or back.

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Bloods

The most common identifiers for the Bloods include the 5-pointed star tattoo, which shows the gang's allegiance to the People Nation; MOB, which stands for either Member of Blood or Money over Bitches; and a dog paw mark made of three burn marks. The positions of the paw marks can designate different Blood sets.

Crips

Among the Crips' identified symbols are the Crips name, the 6-pointed Star of David, and the number 6, which show allegiance to the Folk Nation. The six points of the star stand for life, loyalty, knowledge, wisdom, understanding, and love. They also use the letter C, for Crips.
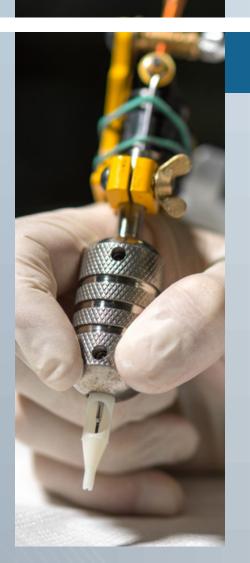

Almighty Latin King Nation (ALKN)

Identifiers for the Latin Kings include the lion, which is the king of the jungle, and the 5-pointed crown, which represents love, honor, obedience, sacrifice, and righteousness. Also common are the letters ADR, which stand for *Amor de Rey*—the love of the King, or the King's love.

EXAMPLES

Sureños

The most common identifier for the Sureños is the number 13, which represents the letter M in the alphabet and signifies the gang's allegiance to the Mexican Mafia. Also common is the word SUR, which means "southern" in Spanish. The two bars with three dots represent Mayan numerology: 1 bar = 5, 1 dot = 1, for a total of 13.

Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)

Symbols and tattoos for MS-13 are the letter M or EME ESE, which is the Spanish pronunciation for the letters MS, and the devil's pitchfork, also known as *La Garra* (Spanish for "the claw"), which, when pointed down, is the letter M.

EXAMPLES

Other Key Tattoos

Though tattoos can be a sign of gang membership, they must be evaluated along with other indicators in order to make a definite designation, since some tattoos are used by both gang members and the general population.
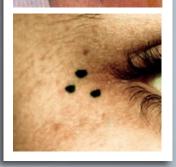
The spiderweb, for instance, is used by street and prison gangs, but it is also popular with nongang members as a decorative tattoo. When the spiderweb is worn by gang members, it indicates that the individual has served or is currently serving time in prison and is "caught in the web" of the justice system. It can also mean that a gang member is caught in the web of the gang lifestyle. Some white supremacist gangs use the spiderweb to support racism.

Three dots—which can be found anywhere on the body, but often on the hand or near the eye—are used by many different gangs as well as nongang members. It means *mi vida loca*, or "my crazy life." It can represent Christianity's holy trinity, or three places gang life will lead: hospital, cemetery, or prison.

The theater-masks tattoo with "Smile Now, Cry Later" or "Laugh Now, Cry Later" is associated with both gang and nongang members. It symbolizes the philosophy to do what you need to do and enjoy life now, because tomorrow you may be dead or in prison. It can also mean stay strong now and deal with whatever life brings later.

Though tattoos have played a major role in gang culture, many gang members are now steering away from large, conspicuous tattoos, since they serve to flag law enforcement. Instead, gang members are either avoiding tattoos altogether; placing them inconspicuously on the body, such as inside the lip; trying to disguise them, such as the lipstick mark used by Sureños, which is symbolism for their 13; or hiding them within larger tattoos.

EXAMPLES

Gang Tattoo Removal

The negative stigma associated with gang tattoos is often a major obstacle for employers who would otherwise be willing to hire former gang members. Although there has been a general proliferation of tattoo-removal services, locating gang-tattoo-removal programs is a continuing challenge for many communities. Jail to Jobs, a Section 501 (c) 3 public charity, is an organization that gives previously incarcerated men and women the tools they need to find employment. Jail to Jobs has amassed a directory of clinics and services across the United States that include gang-tattoo-removal programs. Currently, more than 200 free and low-cost tattoo removal programs in 37 states have been entered into the directory. For more information, visit http://jailstojobs.org/wordpress/tattoo-removal/#.
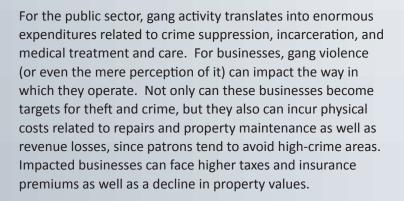
Picture courtesy of Homeboy Industries

Partnerships for Success: A Synergy Between Business and Youth Job-Training Programs

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Office of City Manager—Newport News, VA

Across the nation, gang activity impacts the overall health of our communities. From large metropolitan cities, to small towns and even rural communities, youth gang violence takes a significant toll. Aside from the individual effects felt by these youth and their families, societal costs are placed on both the public and the private sector.

For the public sector, gang activity translates into enormous expenditures related to crime suppression, incarceration, and medical treatment and care. For businesses, gang violence (or even the mere perception of it) can impact the way in which they operate. Not only can these businesses become targets for theft and crime, but they also can incur physical costs related to repairs and property maintenance as well as revenue losses, since patrons tend to avoid high-crime areas. Impacted businesses can face higher taxes and insurance premiums as well as a decline in property values.

Clearly, there are enough justifications for the public as well as the private sector to invest in preventing and curbing gang activity. Moreover, in the case of businesses, engaging in community work has become an imperative as they seek to become more responsible and accountable. The concept of corporate social responsibility continues to be integrated into business practices, recognizing that businesses are key stakeholders that have both the capacity and the responsibility to contribute to social and economic development.

One way for businesses to work toward building stronger communities in gang-impacted areas is to provide employment experiences for youth who are at risk for gang involvement or for those who are members of a gang. Productive opportunities and access to work are among the best ways in which youth can realize their aspirations, utilize their potential, positively participate in society, and lead productive lives.

Training and Then What?

A recommended strategy in youth gang prevention and intervention initiatives is to help these youth gain practical and marketable skills through a comprehensive job-training program. These programs are commonly connected with intensive support services such as one-on-one mentoring, mental health counseling, anger management, substance abuse treatment, and other services that build job readiness skills. The ultimate goal of all these interventions is for youth to be adequately prepared for entry-level employment or internships in today's job market.

However, the path to finding jobs for youth who had or are at risk of having any ties with gang activity is far from simple. Typically, for most youth, summer jobs or internships are their first formal workplace experiences, giving them valuable opportunities to apply newly learned skills, practice workplace behavior, and develop positive professional relationships. Conversely, for gang-involved youth, there are serious barriers to accessing these types of opportunities, since many businesses are apprehensive about hiring gang-involved youth or those at risk, leaving this population stigmatized and devoid of productive options.

How to Engage the Business Community

Job-training programs that seek to truly understand employers' needs are better positioned to provide relevant training and offer real solutions to businesses. Employers want to be assured that the youth presented to them for employment are qualified and part of a comprehensive training program. Employers are often motivated when they see a job-training program as a way to reduce recruitment and internal training costs, since they are able to access a pool of job-ready candidates.

Effective job-training programs serving gang youth must embrace creative job placement solutions such as subsidizing employers who are willing to accept them as interns or employees (e.g., paying for their first month of employment for job-ready youth). Preparing youth to be job-ready means

that they understand what to expect in the workplace and what employers expect of them. To this end, one-on-one mentoring by an individual outreach worker guides and supports youth to problem-solve, respond to supervisors' directions and feedback, and establish an overall good work ethic.

In order to ensure a successful experience, employers who participate in these types of programs should receive guidance and support from job-training specialists and outreach staff on how to structure job placement. Establishing formal agreements about expectations and responsibilities is key. This planning process allows businesses to prepare work assignments and resources in advance and assign appropriate supervision for new workers.

In the long run, when businesses invest in youth, particularly at the local level, they strengthen their public image, which, in turn, leads to greater trust by consumers and enhances investor appeal. At the same time, these target youth and their families and networks are also important stakeholders, and they should be considered as potential customers.

An Innovative Job Training Strategy

An exemplary job-training program is Virginia's Newport News Youth and Gang Violence Initiative's Summer Training and Enrichment Program (STEP). STEP is a ten-week program that serves young people between the ages of 16 and 24. The program is designed to prepare youth for their futures by exposing them to various employment and career options. Young people learn valuable skills such as résumé preparation, job interview techniques, time management, financial management, professional work behavior, and networking. In addition to training, participants are given the opportunity to engage in field trips to various businesses and organizations to gain direct exposure to the business community.

Following an employment prescreening process, these youth are matched with employers, and all will receive support and follow-up every step of the way. Youth outreach workers and job-training staff members monitor the youths' progress at their work sites and engage in ongoing communications with employers to ensure a positive experience for both youth and employers.

The tremendous value of the partnership between job-training programs and business communities cannot be underestimated. Testimonials from participants and mentors reveal the impact of these job placements. For example, according to the Newport News STEP job coach, one youth who was living in a condemned house with her mother when she started STEP went on to secure a stable housing situation. She credits her job in helping her achieve this. Similarly, another participant went from believing that the world was against her and that no one was on her side to working well at her site and having faith in society.
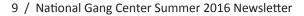
Another success story is of two program participants known for always associating with the wrong crowd. Late one night, as their group was preparing to leave, the two STEP participants stated, "We're not going out tonight—we have to get up early for work tomorrow." STEP and the relationship with the employer had imparted a sense of responsibility and led them to make better decisions. Participants themselves reported that the program had kept them off the streets, provided an opportunity to gain good work experience, assisted them financially, and offered them an opportunity to make a difference.

STEP has been so successful that Canon, Virginia, Inc., a major corporation, is now one of STEP's biggest supporters. Last year was Canon's first time partnering with STEP, and the company did not exactly know what to expect. Canon was so impressed with the job performance of one young male placed with them that he was given the opportunity to participate in an interview process; he is now a full-time employee. Canon is an excellent partner, not only because of its willingness and commitment to provide work opportunities to young people, but also because of its ability to train potential employees. As a result of this positive experience, Canon has signed up to partner with STEP again this year. By providing a short-term work experience to high-risk youth, employers such as Canon are given the opportunity to see whether a given candidate has the potential to fill workforce needs before hiring him or her, creating a win-win strategy in which both the youth and the employer benefit.

Programs such as STEP show that there is a role for communities and business to refocus their commitments to provide an opportunity for disenfranchised youth. Ultimately, gaining work experience is a vital part of these youths' journeys to integrate and lead productive lives.

For more information about the STEP program, visit https://www.nnva.gov/1907/Youth-Gang-Violence-Prevention.

Street Outreach and Law Enforcement Collaboration: Prioritizing Safety When Working With Gang Members

On March 16, 2016, the NGC participated in a collaborative Webinar titled "Street Outreach and Law Enforcement Collaboration: Prioritizing Safety When Working With Gang Members," with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National Training and Technical Assistance Center, Houston Mayor's Anti-Gang Office (MAGO), and Houston Police Department (HPD). More than 600 people from 38 states participated in this Webinar, which featured the collaborative relationship between MAGO and HPD as a best-practice program to address street gang violence. The presenters discussed the importance of building constructive relationships and establishing clear communication protocols among outreach staff, police, schools, and justice systems to develop crisis response and safety plans, including plans to address clients, outreach workers, and public safety in violent, retaliatory, gang-related situations.

To listen/view the Webinar and download all of the supporting documents, visit: https://www.nttac.org/index.cfm?event=trainingCenter.traininginfo&EventID=1575.

See What Attendees Had to Say About the Webinar

"This was really great information, and it was relative to many fields that work with this population."

"My street outreach team was here and got to hear EXACTLY what I have been telling them for months—but from the experts!"

"The case presentations were excellent because they demonstrated pragmatic application of the model and principles involved."

"The closed captioning and PowerPoint slides were great tools for after the presentation. The speakers were very knowledgeable!"

A Plan for Program Sustainability

One of the biggest concerns for any grant-funded program is how it will continue once funding is no longer available. Some programs wait until the final year, and sometimes even the final months of their funding cycles, to consider program sustainability issues. In reality, a sustainability plan needs to be established during the initial phase of the program-planning process. Using this approach helps to ensure that programs have strong foundations and are well-positioned and supported in the long term.

When dealing with evidence-based approaches such as the Comprehensive Gang Model, it is important that a baseline assessment be conducted during the initial program planning as part of the sustainability plan. As cumbersome as it sounds and is in reality, data collection and analysis are at the core of any successful program. The initial assessment will provide the basis for developing violence-reduction strategies and inform critical decision making. It will also serve as a template for ongoing assessments and provide guidance for a more productive path throughout the course of a project. Ongoing data collection and evaluation will provide direction on where to concentrate resources and how to adapt to conditions on the ground.

In some cases, assessments are either not completed prior to program implementation or are done haphazardly. This is often the result of program managers and lead agencies feeling pressured to show that they are making an impact early on in the program. But moving forward to appease or reassure the community simply for the sake of moving forward rarely yields meaningful results. We may think we have enough information, based on our knowledge of our communities, to understand the contributing factors for violence and the best ways to address them. However, without a sound understanding of the real problems and a critical assessment, the true impact of our program interventions will never be known.

WHAT'S NEW

2015 Gang Legislation Update

The NGC Gang-Related Legislation page was recently updated to include updates and changes as of December 2015.

Visit http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Legislation/ for a comprehensive listing by state, subject, and municipal code.

Spanish Parents' Guide to Gangs Is Now Available!

The Parents' Guide to Gangs is now available to download in Spanish ("Guía sobre las pandillas para los padres"). This guide is designed to provide parents with answers to common questions about gangs to enable them to recognize and prevent gang involvement. To download "Guía sobre las pandillas para los padres," visit:

https://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Content/Documents/Gu%c3%ada-sobre-las-pandillas-para-los-padres.pdf.

NGC Training and Conferences

http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/about/other-training-and-conferences

Law Enforcement Anti-Gang Training

http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/training-and-technical-assistance/law-enforcement

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About the National Gang Center

The National Gang Center (NGC) is jointly funded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The NGC conducts research on street gangs and serves as a clearinghouse for individuals and agencies seeking information, technical assistance, and training in the areas of gang prevention, intervention, suppression, and reentry.

IIR Institute for Intergovernmental Research