



How Gangs Are Identified

Overview

Gangs can be identified by what they wear, graffiti they display, and hand signals that they gesture. Most gang members are proud of their gang and freely admit their membership. Many gang members display tattoos openly and dress in a style identifying their particular gang. Their personal belongings are frequently covered with graffiti and bear the gang's logo and the member's gang name.

Many individuals on the fringe of gang involvement are reluctant to identify themselves as gang members. They often state that their friends are gang members but they are not. However, rival gang members, shooting from a speeding car, do not make a distinction between a gang member and his associates.

All gangs share common characteristics such as the wearing of distinct clothing or using particular hand signs or signals. Although details will vary, the following overview provides general information about the identification of gang members.

Graffiti

Gangs use graffiti to identify themselves and mark their gang's "turf" or territory. They also use it to advertise the gang's status or power and to declare their own allegiance to the gang. The graffiti they display may include the gang's name, a member's nickname, a declaration of loyalty, threats against rival gangs or a description of criminal acts in which the gang has been involved. Gangs frequently gather in dark areas to avoid being seen. In these locations they will often drink, use narcotics, and deface property with graffiti.

Clothing

Clothing is an important part of gang identity. The uniform of gang members is usually standard and easily recognizable. Most gang members adopt a basic style that includes white t-shirts, thin belts, baggy pants with split cuffs, a black or blue knit cap (beanie) or a bandana tied around the forehead, similar to a sweat band. African American gang members are individualistic in their dress. They tend to identify themselves by adopting certain colors. The "Crips" identify themselves with the colors of blue or black or a combination of the two. "Blood" gangs generally use red accessories, such as caps or bandanas, to identify themselves.

While clothing alone cannot positively determine membership in a street gang, color and style serve to identify each gang or a gang intention. Green can either mean the gang member is declaring neutrality for the moment or is a drug dealer. Black is worn by some Hispanic gangs and Heavy Metal Anglo gangs. Other common gang colors include brown or purple. Note: Some gangs are starting to change their clothing style by no longer wearing their colors, in an effort to deceive law enforcement and conceal their gang affiliation.

Gang clothing styles can be easily detected because of the specific way gang members wear their clothing. Examples are preferences for wearing baggy or "sagging" pants, or having baseball caps turned at an angle. Gang members often prefer particular brands of shoes, pants or shirts. For example, some gangs like to wear plaid shirts in either blue, brown, black or red. These shirts are worn loosely and un-tucked from the pants.

Other Symbols

Gang graffiti, symbols, messages or gang names can be written or embroidered on jackets, pants and baseball caps. Other identifying items include belt buckles with the gangs initials, key chains, starter jackets (team jackets), and red or blue bandannas commonly called "rags". Excessive amounts of dark clothing or a predominance of one-color outfits, for example, white t-shirts and Levi jeans with upturned cuffs, are also indicators of possible gang involvement.

The jewelry that gang members wear may be expensive or cheap, but the ornate and flashy type is preferred. Examples are heavy gold rope chains, earrings and other large rings.

Other signs of gang membership include crude and elaborate tattoos, females wearing heavy eye make-up and dark lipstick, fingernails painted a certain color, certain undergarments, gang-colored shoelaces in their athletic shoes and specific hairstyles (such as heads shaved bald, hair nets, rollers or braids).