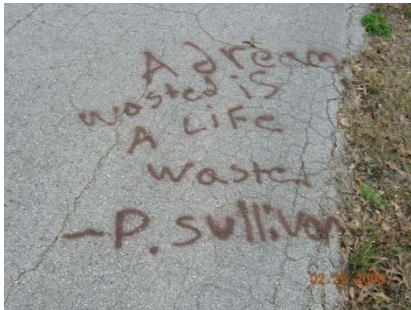


## LOCAL CONCERNS

Unlike Tampa and other communities, Citrus County has a minimal amount of identified street gang members as residents, and only a few sporadic semi-organized groups identifying themselves as street gangs. These groups have been identified through their use of graffiti to mark their territory and through the arrest and interviews of a variety of gang members for various crimes. Interviews with these members reveal that they maintain ties to major Tampa street gangs either through direct membership or as a “Franchise” operating in the suburbs. While these groups lack the sophistication and organization of their Tampa counterparts, they nevertheless pose a potential problem in the future.



Gang presence can mean anti-social and criminal activity which directly affects the quality of life throughout our community. This activity may be in the form of congregating in the public areas or throughout a residential neighborhood, resulting in troublesome confrontations with residents and youth. Gang presence can also mean disorderly conduct situations and other order maintenance types of problems, as well as theft from homes and businesses, auto theft, theft from autos, criminal damage to property, burglary, drug trafficking, and occasional acts of violence. It is of the utmost importance for parents and residents of the community to be aware of the activities that gangs will be involved in and take action when such incidents are observed. If the gang knows that their actions will not be tolerated by the neighborhood, they will be forced to move their activities elsewhere. It is only through combined cooperation between residents and law enforcement that this can be accomplished. The presence of gangs in high schools can disrupt the educational process and create safety issues. School-related gang activity might include harassment of students and teachers, vandalism, intimidation, and theft. Wherever gang influence is felt, it is important that schools, parents, police and residents take active measures to prevent and eliminate it.

## WHAT IS A GANG?

**DEFINITION:** A gang is defined as a group of people associated together in some way. Specifically an organized group of criminals, or a group of children or youths from the same neighborhood banded together for social reasons. However, this definition is too general to be practical.

The law enforcement community defines a gang as an organized group with a recognized leader and underlings, which remain together in times of “peace” and “war,” shows its unity in obvious ways (colors, hand signs, graffiti), and its activities are criminal in nature or otherwise threatening to the community/society at large. The last item is what makes a gang different from any legitimate group, and which makes it a concern to police and community leaders.

## WHAT IS GANG ACTIVITY?

Gang activity is normally criminal in nature and may involve drug trafficking, burglary, theft, criminal damage to property, assaults, intimidation, and in extreme cases homicide. As the gang becomes more organized and membership increases, the level and seriousness of criminal activity increases.

When a street gang enters a neighborhood, they will immediately claim an area as their “turf” with boundaries most often defined by streets or landmarks. This area will be defended by the gang and no other gang is allowed to do business (sell drugs, commit crimes, etc.) or enter their turf. The gang will then mark the area with graffiti to advertise their presence.

The gang will then start recruitment of new members, either by intimidation or offering a sense of belonging or protection to impressionable youths. These youths will, in turn, be used to sell or carry drugs, steal, damage property, and through violence, protect their turf and recruit new members.

Neighborhood businesses are the first to suffer the effects of gangs because they must withstand the loss of customers who avoid known or suspected gang areas where the businesses are located. The local business owner must also absorb the cost of thefts and the repair of graffiti marked buildings and storefronts.



Neighborhood residents will experience a drop in property values and peace of mind when gang related criminal activity increases. When a rival gang infringes on the gang’s turf, which is inevitable, the potential for drive-by shootings and gang fights increases and, in all likelihood, leads to innocent bystanders being injured or killed.

## WHY YOUTHS JOIN STREET GANGS

Most street gang members join at a young age when they are inexperienced and as yet uneducated in the ways of the world and unable to recognize the negative, long-term consequences of gang membership. Many youths are forced into gangs through intimidation, peer pressure, for protection from other gangs. However, some youths with low self image, low income, or family problems may join because a gang offers a sense of belonging, a sense of family, leadership (however twisted), and acceptance. These basic needs may not be filled outside the gang. The sad fact is that the youth will discover too late that gang membership only leads to a criminal record, prison, or death.

## **GANG STRUCTURE**

The internal structure of a street gang is generally similar to the organizational structure of many corporations. The leader (chairman of the Board) is surrounded by a close-knit and trusted group of associates. These associates may have different titles such as generals or counsel members. Below the associates are the street soldiers or enforcers who are directly involved with defending the “turf,” handling drug transactions and marking areas with graffiti.

This type of business-like organizational structure is not true for all street gangs. Many of the Latino gangs, such as the Latin Kings, do not have a definitive leader. Instead, a council of leaders representing each faction rules them.

## **GANG SYMBOLS AND COMMUNICATION**

Gang members use hand signals, graffiti and tattoos to signify their membership in a gang and to communicate or “show” their gang affiliation to others. Each individual street gang has their own unique sign, signal, jewelry, dress and colors. These serve to promote group solidarity and to identify gang members.

It is very important to the gang to protect its symbols from insults by rivals. There is no greater humiliation for a street gang than to have its symbols insulted by rival gangs. If you see graffiti in which a gang symbol (emblem, tattoo) is upside down, it is a degradation to that gang and was most likely written by a rival gang member. This type of symbol degradation has been the basis for several instances of gang violence.

**GRAFFITI:** One of the first indications that gangs are in your neighborhood is the appearance of gang graffiti. To the gang member, graffiti is a marking of territorial boundaries and serves as a challenge and warning to rival gangs. Gangs will use graffiti on any available space (walls, street signs, restroom stalls, etc.). The purpose of the gang graffiti is to glorify the gang. Any gang graffiti that is found should be reported to the police for documentation, and then removed as soon as possible.



**HAND SIGNALS:** Hand signals are used by gangs to communicate gang affiliations and/or to challenge rival gang members. Gang members use several means of non-verbal communication, including hand signals or “throwing signs.”

**TATTOOS:** Tattoos may be viewed as an extension of graffiti, used to identify the wearer as a member of a particular gang. Like graffiti, tattoos will usually include the initials, name or symbols of a gang. There is really no rule as to size, number, or complexity of gang members tattoos. While some may be inscribed professionally, most are homemade. Tattoos are not found in any particular place on the body, and may be found wherever there is usable skin area.

## **THE GANG'S VIEW OF GANG ACTIVITY**

Although we in Citrus County do not have the problem of highly organized street gangs, the potential for their existence as in every other suburb, is something that residents and police must recognize.

A gang member's view of gang activity differs from the general public's view. Traditions of solidarity and brotherhood run deep. Pride in one's gang and one's turf is intense. The gang member has a driving need to belong. They need to tell others that they belong to a gang and that this is their neighborhood.

While most gang members are involved in criminal activity, a major function is "partying and "hanging out" with other members of the gang of "homeboys" or "homies." Loyalty outweighs all other personal interests, and an individual cannot just merely join a gang; they must somehow prove their toughness or worth to the group. It is not uncommon for an individual to become involved in violence or other criminal activity to prove themselves and build their reputation.

## **LAW ENFORCEMENT'S VIEW OF GANG ACTIVITY**

Most law enforcement agencies view gang activity as a problem, which, if not addressed at its early stages, could lead to progressively more anti-social behavior, resulting in a large potential for violence. Efforts to control the problem range from community awareness programs to special enforcement units designed to combat gangs. The more active gangs receive most of the law enforcement attention for the time that they are criminally active.

The reason for this attention is to let the gang know that their activities will not be tolerated within a community and that the residents and police will use every means at their disposal to rid themselves of the problem. This is the point where the neighborhood becomes the most important part of the solution. If gang activity is not reported and is allowed to go unchecked, it will grow like a cancer. Full cooperation between the community and the police is of the utmost importance.

## **WHAT THE CITRUS COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE IS DOING**

The Citrus County Sheriff's Office is one of the most progressive in the state of Florida. We are attacking gang issues from several different areas. We are members of the Florida Attorney General's Office Gang Reduction Task Force which brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to the table. We educate our patrol officers and specialty units by sending personnel to several schools/seminars each year. Our officers are taught how to identify gang members and how to combat gangs.

In addition, we educate our youth and community. We achieve this goal in several ways. We first attempt to provide education in the schools. The Citrus County Sheriff's Office has four school resource

officers who teach gang prevention classes to all fifth grade students. Gang activity is monitored by school resource officers at middle school and high school stages. If a problem is identified in the schools, additional anti-gang information is provided to the students and the teachers.

The Citrus County Sheriff's Office is reviewing policies and programs to assess their effectiveness in response to any potential gang situations. Deputies are playing a leading role in educating the entire community about gang issues. To address the gang problem in Citrus County, a multifaceted approach is needed to utilize all segments of the community (example: educators, parents, law enforcement, clergy, judicial system and social service agencies). Deputies also address the gang problems by proactive measures, street level enforcement and gathering criminal intelligence. It is imperative that agencies share information and collaborate in order to combat gang problems. Information from the public is also necessary to reach our goals in developing strategies that balance prevention, intervention and suppression.

### ***PREVENTION***

Prevention will be designed to educate, inform and assist in recognizing hazards involved with gang activity and when increased peer and financial pressures occur.

### ***INTERVENTION***

As soon as a youth exhibits any gang behavior, parents must take steps to prevent any association with gangs. Once warning signs become evident, immediate intervention and counseling become necessary to prevent further participation. The single most important step in intervention is prohibitive continued contact with negative influences.

### ***SUPPRESSION***

The Citrus County Sheriff's Office has a suppression program that is an ongoing process. Any success in prevention and intervention strategies will not diminish efforts to identify, arrest, and prosecute gang members.

The Citrus County Sheriff's Office has also developed a parent notification system to inform parents when a youth has met the criteria which suspects gang association or membership. Deputies will implement the information of immediate intervention.

Anyone with gang information is also encouraged to call  
1-888-ANY-TIPS, where you will remain anonymous or call  
352-726-4488 and ask for the organized crime unit.

To report any suspicious or criminal activity, whether or not gang related, call 9-1-1.

## WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

**There is no substitute for involvement.** Show an active, sincere interest in your child's activities, friends, and interests. Encourage and support positive activities. Monitor their whereabouts when not involved in organized activities, and enforce curfews. Know your child's friends, make contact with their parents, and encourage notification of each other if anything unusual occurs with your child or anyone else's. Plan constructive activities through schools, community groups and churches. Confront your teen if you suspect gang involvement. Ignoring or delaying will only increase the chance of problems later. Seek help from school counselors, social services agencies, or the police, and take a strong stand against gangs at every opportunity.

If you suspect gang involvement, examine your child's room and belongings for gang symbols, drugs, and weapons. Encourage and support school policies that address gang related activity. Notify the police or school officials to report gang graffiti or any information related to gang activities.

## HOW TO FIGHT GANG VIOLENCE

1. EDUCATION: Knowledge of the gangs, their symbols, colors, signs and graffiti will help you to assist us in combating gang problems.
2. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT: Cooperation from the community is the best assistance we can have. If you see any type of gang activity (new graffiti, gang Hangouts, criminal activity) in your neighborhood, please call your sheriff's office. Testify in court when necessary.
3. PARENTS: Spend time with your children. Plan family activities, discuss gangs with your children (listen, don't lecture). Find out how they feel about gangs. Know your child's friends (BE AWARE). If your child is bordering on being a gang member, or is presently a gang member, get help. (DO IT NOW!)

## WHAT SHOULD I, AS A PARENT, BE AWARE OF?

1. As we stated earlier, graffiti is the first sign of gang activity in the area. Watch for graffiti, initials, or symbols on your child's personal belongings, i.e., school notebook, jackets, clothing, etc.
2. Tattoos are a common gang affiliation indicator.
3. Sudden increase in your child's standard of living or sudden, new unexplained possessions.
4. Consistent wearing of the same color combinations, as well as wearing of the same color combinations by friends. Jackets from professional sports teams are popular among gang members and associates.
5. Secrecy about activities or time spent away from home.
6. How is your child wearing his/her clothing, such as hats tilted right or left?
7. Major changes in habits, i.e., lower school grades, sudden lack of interest in school activities, change of peer groups, etc.
8. Involvement with drugs.



Any one of the above does not necessarily mean your child is a gang member. A combination of the above does, however, increase the likelihood. In any event, taking an active interest in your child's life can avoid many of the problems vexing our youth of today.