
Signs of Gang Involvement

Are your children and their friends dressing in the same colors and styling their hair similarly? Gang attire and hairstyles, like other fashion trends, are changing constantly. Other signs your children may be involved in a gang may include:

- Graffiti on school notebooks, clothing or items in your children's rooms.
- Tattoos, cigarette burns or body marks indicating initiation into a gang.
- Possession of items you have not seen before.
- Possession of large sums of money or expensive items that cannot be explained.
- Staying out later than usual or being away from home more frequently.
- Desiring excessive privacy.
- Associating with those you consider undesirable, and strangers coming to the house.
- Withdrawing from family members
- Developing attitude problems with parents, teachers and/or those in authority.
- Use of alcohol and/or other drugs.
- Decline in school attendance and/or grades.
- Use of gang verbiage and/or hand signs.
- Use of nicknames.
- Possession of firearm.
- Trouble with the law.



Street Gangs and Parents

What parents need to know about gangs



*Information brought to you by
the Mercer County Department
of Human Services and the
Mercer County Youth Services
Commission*

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The Mercer County Department of Human Services is a county government agency that serves as an advocate for all Mercer County residents. It includes:

Community Services Division

Community Centers and Childcare Services
Homeless Services
Office on Aging
Office on Children and Youth Services
Office for the Disabled

Health and Behavioral Health Division

Health Office
Municipal Alliance Office
Office on Addiction Services
Office of Mental Health Services

Mercer County Geriatric Center

Mercer County Library System

Mercer County Youth Detention Center

Commissions and Councils

Commission on Abused, Neglected and Missing Children
Commission on the Status of Women
Council on Aging
Disability Advisory Council
Human Services Advisory Council
Library Commission
Local Advisory Committee on Alcohol and Drug Abuse
Mental Health Board
Youth Services Commission

For more information on the Department of Human Services, please call (609) 989-6526.

Brian M. Hughes
Mercer County Executive

Marygrace Billek
Director
Department of Human Services

Vision Statement

The Mercer County Department of Human Services is a leader in promoting service excellence, maintaining the highest standards and achieving the best results. Our staff is highly motivated, skilled and dedicated in meeting the diverse needs of Mercer County residents.

Mission Statement

The Mercer County Department of Human Services fosters a comprehensive human service delivery system that enhances the health, safety and quality of life for all residents of Mercer County. Our goal is to create an environment of public trust by empowering and strengthening individuals and families, advocating for sound policy, mobilizing resources, and acting as champions for those citizens who are most vulnerable and in need of services.

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Youth and Gangs

Gangs are a serious problem throughout New Jersey and the United States; they threaten public safety and damage lives. Teens join gangs for many reasons. Some join because they are abused or neglected, or feel that way, and are searching for a substitute family. Some have low self-esteem and seek acceptance. Some seek protection. Some want excitement. Some are lured by the potential to make money.

How should parents best nurture, protect and create opportunities for youth?

Gang prevention starts at home, in the family.

Parents must have good communication with their children and spend quality time with them. Examples include eating dinner together, playing games together, working on projects together, and participating in events or activities. Additionally, parents must provide good supervision, monitor their children's friends and activities, and set limits for their children.

Parents also need to be attuned to behavior changes in their children. This will help parents detect other problems, like drug and alcohol abuse, which are much more common in teens than gang involvement.

Eating meals together is just one good way to spend time with your children and family.



How to stop youth from joining

- *Discourage your children from hanging around with gang members.* Meet your children's friends. Find out what influence they have over your children and how they and your children spend their free time.
- *Occupy your children's free time.* Give them responsibilities at home. Get them involved in after-school, recreation or church activities, or sports.
- *Develop good communication with your children.* Good communication is open, frequent and takes on a positive tone. It allows children to discuss a topic or problem with parents. It does not condemn or put down.
- *Spend time with your children and give them attention.* Plan activities that the whole family can enjoy. Expose them to different places outside your neighborhood, like parks, museums and the beach.
- *Supervise the clothing your children wear.* If your children dress in gang-style clothing, they are expressing an interest in gangs and will attract the attention of gangs.
- *Set limits for your children.* At an early age children need to know what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior.
- *Do not allow your children to stay out late and spend a lot of unsupervised time on the streets.* Enforce a curfew, and know where your children are and what they are doing at all times.
- *Place your children's computer in a family room or other common space in the house.* Also, find out if your child has a profile on myspace.com.

- *Prevent your children from writing gang names, symbols or any other gang graffiti on anything.* Teach them respect for their property as well as for others'.
- *Develop an anti-gang environment in the home.* Clearly and continually express to children at an early age your disapproval of gang activity and of any family members joining a gang.
- *Learn about gang and drug activity in your community.* Learn how gang members dress and speak, and learn their behaviors and activities. Be an informed parent.
- *Participate in your children's education.* Visit your children's schools, meet their teachers and attend meetings. Help your children with their school work. Set high standards for them.
- *Participate in the community.* Know your neighbors. Organize or join neighborhood watch groups. Discourage gangs from hanging around your neighborhood in ways such as removing graffiti from around your home. Attend community functions. Teach your children civic pride.
- *Be a good example.* Be an active parent, not a passive one. Talk with other parents.



It is important that you show an interest in your children's education.

Myth vs. Reality

Myth: Gangs in Mercer County are just an urban or Trenton problem.

Fact: Gangs are present in numerous municipalities.

Myth: A large number of Mercer County youth are members of a gang.

Fact: Although media accounts portray a large gang problem, only a small number of youth are members of a gang. More than 84,000 youth ages newborn to 18 live in Mercer County, and the majority of these youth have no involvement in gangs. On the contrary, the majority of Mercer County youth are in school, involved in extracurricular activities and have promising futures.

Myth: Gangs are just a law enforcement problem.

Fact: Gangs are everyone's business to prevent.

For more information

For more information regarding gangs, or any programs that are available through the Mercer County Department of Human Services, please contact Yolanda León at 609-989-6966. The Mercer County Department of Human Services allocates almost \$4 million per year for youth programs.

To read the Mercer County Gang Prevention and Intervention Task Force's report on gangs titled "Report and Recommendations," please visit the Mercer County Department of Human Services' Website at http://www.mercercounty.org/human_services/index.htm.