

Approximately 40% of gang members in the United States are 18 years old or younger.¹

What is a gang?

Georgia law states a “criminal street gang” is any organization, association, or group of three or more persons who engage in criminal gang activity (e.g., rape, racketeering, criminal trespass, or any offense that involves violence, use of a weapon, or possession of a weapon, among others).

A gang can be established by a common name or identifying signs, symbols, tattoos, graffiti, attire, or other distinguishing characteristics.²

What is youth violence?

Youth violence is the intentional use of force or power by 10- to 24-year-olds to threaten or harm others.³ Committing youth violence increases the risk for:⁴



Academic challenges and school drop-out



Substance use



Depression



Suicide



Behavioral and mental health difficulties

Most youth who commit violence, including through gangs, lack positive supports from parents, schools, peers, and their community.

RISK FACTORS

Risk factors for youth violence and gang membership include:⁵



- Child abuse and neglect
- Academic problems or school discipline issues
- Lacking parental involvement
- Poverty
- Aggressive, violent, or delinquent behavior
- Alcohol or drug use
- Mental health problems
- Exposure to violence outside the home, including racial prejudice
- Parent criminality and/or parent-child separation

The more risk factors a young person experiences, the greater their chance of committing youth violence, including through gang membership.⁶

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Protective factors against youth violence and gang membership include:



- Parental involvement
- Family support system
- Coping and interpersonal skills
- Positive social connections
- Peer support
- Academic achievement
- Reducing alcohol and drug use

The more protective factors a youth is exposed to, the lower their chances of committing youth violence or gang involvement.⁷

Given this, prevention strategies are aimed at increasing these crucial supports in a youth's life: security, connectedness, and safety.

PREVENTION STRATEGIES

STRATEGY	APPROACH	SOME GEORGIA OPTIONS
Promote family environments that support healthy development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early childhood home visitation • Parenting skill and family relationship programs 	DPH and DFCS home visiting and parental skill-building, DJJ's Parenthood Project, and Strengthening Families Georgia
Provide quality education early in life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preschool enrichment with family engagement 	Georgia Pre-K, Head Start, CAPS, and Quality Rated Child Care
Strengthen youth's skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universal school-based programs 	Georgia Apex Program, Youth Mental Health First Aid and Teen Mental Health First Aid (tMHFA), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, and comprehensive school-based health centers
Wrapping children who are at risk of becoming gang-involved with an array of supportive services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive behavioral treatment 	Cobb County Juvenile Court R.I.S.I.N.G. Program diverts participants from the juvenile justice system by offering a specialty court that has been developed based on an accountability court structure.
Connect youth to caring adults and activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentoring programs • Afterschool programs 	Boys and Girls Club, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, DBHDD's Resiliency Support Clubhouses, DFCS's Afterschool Care Program, YMCAs, and 4-H
Create protective community environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modify the physical and social environment • Reduce exposure to community-level risks • Street outreach and community norm change 	Community-oriented policing, afterschool programs and community centers like the @PromiseCenter, Front Porch Community Resource Center, Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative, norms change programs like CureViolence (happening in some South-west Atlanta neighborhoods)
Intervene to lessen harms and prevent future risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treatment to lessen the harms of violence exposures • Treatment to prevent problem behavior and further involvement in violence • Hospital-community partnerships 	Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT); DJJ's evidence-based programs for cognitive restructuring, problem-solving, and crisis management; DJJ's Georgia Preparatory Academy, Pathways to Succeed, and Connections Graduate Programs, offering educational and vocational opportunities; and mental health and substance abuse treatment through DJJ

MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORTS FOR GANG AND YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION



Tier One: Targeted enforcement and prosecution through a gang accountability court. May account for 4-8% of offenders.

Tier Two: Intensive treatment, like group therapy, family therapy, mentoring, and cognitive-behavioral therapy.⁸

Tier Three: Less intensive levels of the same interventions as used for Tier Two.

Tier Four: Primary prevention strategies, like school-based, mentoring, and afterschool programs.⁹

RECOMMENDATIONS

PREVENTION

- Expand trauma-informed training to all school faculty and staff (including school resource officers), afterschool and youth development professionals.
- Ensure that all school resource officers receive training on developmentally appropriate responses, and that school personnel receive training regarding appropriate use of school resource officers.
- Expand federal and state funding to afterschool and summer learning programs to increase access and ensure affordability.
- Increase the number of mental health and social work professionals in schools.
- Expand and create positive engagement initiatives between public safety personnel and the communities they serve.
- Ensure that school codes of conduct are data-reliant, trauma-informed, and free of inadvertent bias, and developed in coordination with local child-serving stakeholders (such as child psychologists, social workers, juvenile courts).

INTERVENTION

- Strengthen partnerships between community-based afterschool programs, school districts, juvenile courts, and other community partners to align services for young people, perhaps through Local Interagency Planning Teams or truancy prevention programs.
- Create incentive grants for afterschool programs to use trauma-informed practices and evidence-based programs to build protective factors.
- Promote the use of mentoring programs in communities (e.g. partner with local chambers of commerce, rotary clubs, chapters of 100 Black Men, Big Brothers Big Sisters, or other civically focused organizations).
- Increase employment apprenticeships.
- Use restorative and, when necessary, evidence-based therapeutic responses to behavior which threatens the safety of himself or others.
- Continue funding evidence-based interventions for children at high or medium risk to reoffend through the Juvenile Justice Incentive Grant Program and Community Services Grants Program.
- Improve technical assistance and develop a reliable funding mechanism for all juvenile courts' Children in Need of Services (CHINS) programs.
- Expand the jurisdiction of juvenile courts to encompass children under 18.
- Eliminate provisions that automatically transfer (without juvenile court approval) certain youth to adult courts.
- Improve staff and youth safety by require all DJJ staff be trauma informed and responsive.

RESTORATION

- Raise the maximum age of juvenile court jurisdiction up to 18.
- Increase access to evidence-based practices for mental and behavioral health in schools.
- Increase access to educational and work remediation.
- Expand and develop effective juvenile gang accountability courts, including wraparound services that support the youth and the youth's family.

WHAT CAN AFTERSCHOOL PROVIDE?^{10 11 12}

- Trauma-informed practices to help kids overcome trauma and adverse experiences and reduce their chance to develop substance use disorders and other health conditions.
- Safe, supervised environments to explore new interests and build confidence in their abilities.
- Quality relationships with caring and supportive mentors.
- Opportunities for positive peer interaction like how to reach consensus and work collaboratively.
- Academic instruction for remediation, enrichment, or enhancement.
- Problem-solving and critical thinking skills through interactive learning experiences.

AFTERSCHOOL OUTCOMES^{13 14 15 16}

Regular participation in high quality afterschool programs leads to a reduction in crime and juvenile delinquency:

- Decrease in number of arrests and gang activity.
- Decrease in drug, tobacco, marijuana, and alcohol use.
- Decrease in likelihood of selling drugs.
- Decreased reports of misconduct in school and disciplinary incidents, including aggression, noncompliance, and conduct problems.
- Decreased likelihood of dropping out of school.

Regular participation in high quality afterschool programs leads to improved behavior and decision-making skills:

- Gain self-control and confidence.
- Develop strong social skills.
- Build healthy relationships with adults and peers.
- Improved school day attendance.
- Improved work habits and classroom behavior.
- Gains in reading and math.
- Increased graduation rates.

Sources for Gangs and Youth Violence

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