

Levels of Gang Involvement

This guide provides a basic understanding of the different levels of gang involvement. Youth do not become gang members overnight—it is a process, and it is common for the levels to overlap.

Wannabe

- May like and admire the gang lifestyle, may casually hang out with gang members but is not an active participant
- Lives in or near neighborhoods with high levels of gang activity or has gang members in the family
- Unsuccessful in school, has a high rate of truancy
- May be searching for a sense of belonging, lacks self-esteem



Associate

- Personally knows and admires gang members
- Associates regularly with gang members
- Adopts gang clothing, lingo, graffiti, flashes signs, etc.
- Detaches from family
- Defiant or aggressive behavior towards parents, teachers and other authority-figures
- Identifies gangs as a source of power, money and prestige.
- Is considering joining the gang

Gang Member

- Associates exclusively with gang members
- May go through a gang initiation
- Generally has a gang nickname or moniker
- Will flash signs, wear tattoos, will adopt lingo and clothing
- Withdraws from home and school
- Prone to drug and/or alcohol use
- May carry a weapon or has easy access to a weapon
- Participates in gang crimes and other gang related activities
- Completely committed to gang lifestyle

Youth who dress like, imitate and hang out with gang members may be putting themselves in just as much risk as jumped-in gang members.

Simply put, a rival gang member is not going to stop and ask if their perceived rival is a wannabe or if he is the real deal. He will simply act or react and the end result could be injury or death.



It is important to understand that the law does not differentiate between the various levels. “Committing a crime while actively participating, or for the benefit of a gang, or in association with a gang, can subject youth to enhanced penalties whether they are just low level “wannabe’s”, “associates”, or actual “gang members.”

-Mario Sulay, Commander,
Santa Cruz County Gang Task



For more information: www.basta.santacruz.k12.ca.us