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## What Is a Gang? Definitions

There is no *universally agreed-upon definition* of "gang" in the United States. Gang, youth gang and street gang are terms that are interchangeably used. In some cases, *youth gangs* are distinguished from other types of gangs. Categories include:

- Youth gangs
- Motorcycle gangs
- Prison gangs
- Hate groups
- Adult organized crime groups
- Terrorist organizations
- Other types of security threat groups

### Official definitions

**Federal definition.** The federal definition of gang as used by the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and is:<sup>1</sup>

1. An association of three or more individuals;
2. Whose members collectively identify themselves by adopting a group identity, which they use to create an atmosphere of fear or intimidation, frequently by employing one or more of the following: a common name, slogan, identifying sign, symbol, tattoo or other physical marking, style or color of clothing, hairstyle, hand sign or graffiti;
3. Whose purpose in part is to engage in criminal activity and which uses violence or intimidation to further its criminal objectives.

4. Whose members engage in criminal activity or acts of juvenile delinquency that if committed by an adult would be crimes with the intent to enhance or preserve the association's power, reputation or economic resources.
5. The association may also possess some of the following characteristics:
  - The members may employ rules for joining and operating within the association.
  - The members may meet on a recurring basis.
  - The association may provide physical protection of its members from others.
  - The association may seek to exercise control over a particular geographic location or region, or it may simply defend its perceived interests against rivals.
  - The association may have an identifiable structure.

The federal definition of gangs excludes drug trafficking organizations, terrorist organizations, traditional organized crime groups, such as La Cosa Nostra, and groups that fall within the Department of Justice's definition of transnational organized crime.

**State definition.** A number of states use the following definition of gang, often with minor modifications (this definition was originally devised by the California legislature):

*"Criminal street gang means any ongoing organization, association or group of three or more persons, whether formal or informal, having as one of its primary activities the commission of one or more of the criminal acts [...], and having a common name or common identifying sign or symbol, and whose members individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal gang activity."*<sup>2</sup>

## **Defining "youth gangs"**

The National Gang Center conducts the National Youth Gang Survey, which reports exclusively on youth gangs, which are described as "a group of youths or young adults [that an agency is] willing to identify as a gang."<sup>3</sup>

Law enforcement agencies indicate that *group criminality* is of the greatest importance in how they define a gang.<sup>4</sup>

Most research focuses on youth gangs and not adult gangs. Researchers accept the following criteria for classifying groups as gangs:<sup>5</sup>

- The group has three or more members, generally aged 12-24.
- Members share an identity, typically linked to a name, and often other symbols.
- Members view themselves as a gang, and they are recognized by others as a gang.
- The group has some permanence and a degree of organization.
- The group is involved in an elevated level of criminal activity.

## Defining "types" of gangs

The National Gang Intelligence Center and the National Drug Intelligence Center collaborated to produce a *National Gang Threat Assessment*, which discusses street gangs, prison gangs and outlaw motorcycle gangs. Each gang type merits its own definition and discussion of characteristics that differ at national, regional and local levels.

## Defining "gang member" and "gang crime"

Local agencies interested in pursuing anti-gang policies, strategies and programs face the difficult challenge of developing working definitions for the terms "gang," "gang member" and "gang crimes."

Failing to define the terms "gang" and "gang crime" undermines the community's ability to reliably measure progress and outcomes related to gang activity.

Multiple criteria needs to be documented, such as:

1. A reliable source must identify the person as a gang member.
2. The person must display gang symbols or use hand signs and display gang tattoos.<sup>6</sup>

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> [About Violent Gangs](#), Criminal Division, U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>2</sup> California Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act. California Penal Code, section 186.22(f).

<sup>3</sup> National Gang Center, *National Youth Gang Survey Analysis*. Retrieved from <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/>

<sup>4</sup> National Gang Center, *National Youth Gang Survey Analysis*. Retrieved from <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Survey-Analysis>

<sup>5</sup> This list adapted from National Gang Center, *What is a gang?*. Retrieved from <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/About/FAQ#q1>

<sup>6</sup> Tita, George, and Andrew Papachristos, "The Evolution of Gang Policy: Balancing Suppression and Intervention," in Robert Chaskin, ed., *Youth Gangs and Community Intervention: Research, Practice, and Evidence*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009

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