

What is the relation between drugs and gangs?

Street gangs, outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs), and prison gangs are the primary distributors of illegal drugs on the streets of the United States. Gangs also smuggle drugs into the United States and produce and transport drugs within the country.

Street gang members convert powdered cocaine into crack cocaine and produce most of the PCP available in the United States. Gangs, primarily OMGs, also produce marijuana and methamphetamine. In addition, gangs increasingly are involved in smuggling large quantities of cocaine and marijuana and lesser quantities of heroin, methamphetamine, and MDMA (also known as ecstasy) into the United States from foreign sources of supply. Gangs primarily transport and distribute powdered cocaine, crack cocaine, heroin, marijuana, methamphetamine, MDMA, and PCP in the United States.

Located throughout the country, street gangs vary in size, composition, and structure. Large, nationally affiliated street gangs pose the greatest threat because they smuggle, produce, transport, and distribute large quantities of illicit drugs throughout the country and are extremely violent. Local street gangs in rural, suburban, and urban areas pose a low but growing threat. Local street gangs transport and distribute drugs within very specific areas.

These gangs often imitate the larger, more powerful national gangs in order to gain respect from rivals.

Some gangs collect millions of dollars per month selling illegal drugs, trafficking weapons, operating prostitution rings, and selling stolen property. Gangs launder proceeds by investing in real estate, recording studios, motorcycle shops, and construction companies. They also operate various cash-based businesses, such as barbershops, music stores, restaurants, catering services, tattoo parlors, and strip clubs, in order to commingle drug proceeds with funds generated through legitimate commerce.

What is the extent of gang operation and crime in the United States?

There are at least 21,500 gangs and more than 731,000 active gang members in the United States. Gangs conduct criminal activity in all 50 states and U.S. territories. Although most gang activity is concentrated in major urban areas, gangs also are proliferating in rural and suburban areas of the country as gang members flee increasing law enforcement pressure in urban areas or seek more lucrative drug markets. This proliferation in nonurban areas increasingly is accompanied by violence and is threatening society in general.

According to a 2001 Department of Justice survey, 20 percent of students aged 12 through 18 reported that street gangs had been present at their school during the previous 6 months. More

than a quarter (28%) of students in urban schools reported a street gang presence, and 18 percent of students in suburban schools and 13 percent in rural schools reported the presence of street gangs. Public schools reported a much higher percentage of gang presence than private schools.

What are the dangers associated with gang activity?

Large street gangs readily employ violence to control and expand drug distribution activities, targeting rival gangs and dealers who neglect or refuse to pay extortion fees. Members also use violence to ensure that members adhere to the gang's code of conduct or to prevent a member from leaving. In November 2004 a 19-year-old gang member in Fort Worth, Texas, was sentenced to 30 years in prison for fatally shooting a childhood friend who wanted to leave their local street gang.

Authorities throughout the country report that gangs are responsible for most of the serious violent crime in the major cities of the United States. Gangs engage in an array of criminal activities including assault, burglary, drive-by shooting, extortion, homicide, identification fraud, money laundering, prostitution operations, robbery, sale of stolen property, and weapons trafficking.

What are some signs that young people may be involved in gang activity?

Changes in behavior such as skipping school, hanging out with different friends or, in certain places, spray-painting graffiti and using hand signals with friends can indicate gang affiliation.

In addition, individuals who belong to gangs often dress alike by wearing clothing of the same color, wearing bandannas, or even rolling up their pant legs in a certain way. Some gang members wear certain designer labels to show their gang affiliation. Gang members often have tattoos. Also, because gang violence frequently is glorified in rap music, young people involved in gangs often try to imitate the dress and actions of rap artists.

Finally, because substance abuse is often a characteristic of gang members, young people involved in gang activity may exhibit signs of drug or alcohol use.

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NDIC Product No. 2005-L0559-001
Cover photo: Suffolk County (NY) Police Department.

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a component of the
U.S. Department of Justice