

# GANG BUSTERS

States respond to rising gang violence.



BY SARAH HAMMOND

**E**arly this year in Los Angeles, 17-year-old Jamiel Andre Shaw, a high school football star, was walking down the street and talking on his cell phone to his girlfriend when someone came up and asked what gang he was in. When he didn't answer, he was shot to death.

Shaw's death is just one example of the thousands of victims killed each year in gang-related crimes across the county. From Boston to Los Angeles, across the Midwest and down to Georgia and Florida, gang activity and violence is on the rise. It's also deadlier than ever, thanks to drugs and guns.

While it was once only an inner-city problem, today gangs have spread nationwide to suburbs, small towns and Native American reservations. And they draw new members from all walks of life.

*Sarah Hammond specializes in juvenile justice issues for NCSL.*

According to the FBI, there are now more than 30,000 different gangs across America with some 800,000 members. They're in all 50 states and the U.S. territories.

## WHY DO KIDS JOIN?

The FBI defines a gang as "a group of three or more individuals bonded together by race, national origin, culture or territory, who associate on a continual basis for the purpose of committing criminal acts." Many gangs are a product of a specific neighborhood or locale, but some gangs have established national franchises far from their home base.

Kids join gangs for protection and emotional and social support. Mostly, gangs start up in unstable, poor neighborhoods. Broken homes, violent parents and family members, and access to drugs all play a part. At-risk and delinquent youths are usually the same kids who end up in gangs. Sometimes, membership in a certain gang is a family tradition. Kids join the gang that their father, brother or cousins joined before them.

Gangs have more money and power than in recent decades, making them attractive to younger children who see powerful members driving fancy cars and sporting fancy guns. The richer gangs become, the more competitive they are in their recruitment.

There's no denying that the thriving meth trade has accounted for some of the recent increase in gang activity. For decades, homemade methamphetamine was a small-time drug. Meth "cooks" worked in home kitchens, making a few ounces for themselves or to sell through motorcycle gangs. But tough legislation passed in recent years made pseudoephedrine harder to get and shut down numerous meth labs. With meth cooks out of the way, Mexican drug cartels are targeting street gangs, especially on the West Coast and in Arizona, to distribute the deadly and highly addictive drug.

## STATE ACTIONS

As gang crime and violence have increased, state lawmakers have stiffened sentences for



gang members and created penalties for those who recruit minors into gangs. They have passed laws to develop programs to help prevent youths at risk from getting involved with gangs.

That is precisely what Washington state is doing because “gangs are on the rise in every corner of the state,” says Representative Christopher Hurst, a retired police detective with 25 years on the job and sponsor of a comprehensive new law, the Anti-Gang Act.

Hurst says the law is the product of a bipartisan task force that toured the state, taking testimony from citizens, police officers, prosecutors and community activists. It funds three

core components for dealing with gangs:

- ◆ **Prevention**—stopping kids from being recruited into gangs in the first place.
- ◆ **Intervention**—rescuing teenagers from gang membership.
- ◆ **Suppression**—busting up gangs, especially by going after the adults who recruit children.

“Police and prosecutors told us that we can’t arrest our way out of the gang problem,” Hurst says. “The older gang members will just recruit more kids. We need a comprehensive attack to fight the growth of gangs, and that’s what this law is about.”

The Washington law penalizes adults who recruit minors to commit crimes. Arizona and New Jersey are also putting new penalties in place that make it a crime to solicit or recruit a minor into a gang.

Other recent actions include a 2007 California law that requires parents of some gang members to take violence prevention classes, patterned after those that drivers take when they violate traffic laws. They must pay for the classes themselves.

“I was startled with the overwhelming support of both Democrats and Republicans for this legislation,” says its sponsor, Assemblyman Tony Mendoza, a former elementary school teacher in East Los Angeles.

Research indicates that parents play a key role in keeping young people out of gangs, Mendoza says. Negative influences within the family can increase the risk that a child will join a gang.

“We have to help parents take control of their children,” says Mendoza. “There are many parents who want to, but just don’t know how.”

The parenting classes focus on how to recognize signs that a child has joined a gang or is involved in drugs; how to communicate with teens; and how to find alcohol and drug abuse treatment, educational programs, recreational activities and job training. The classes also educate parents about the legal system.

“There are parents whose own alcohol or

## THEMES OF STATE GANG LEGISLATION

◆ **Enhanced Penalties.** This includes creating new crimes for gang recruitment and stiffer penalties for crimes committed by gangs.

◆ **Prevention Programs.** This involves gang awareness education and commissions to study how to prevent gang violence.

◆ **Databases and Websites.** These provide statewide information to help prosecute gang activity.

drug dependencies are so severe that they themselves are involved with gangs,” says Mendoza. “We have to break the cycle of gang activity in families to stop the revolving door of juvenile gang members going in and out of jail.”

The California Legislature also established the Office of Gang and Youth Violence Policy to develop ways to prevent gang violence and youth involvement. And a new law in Illinois now funds gang resistance education and training in all grades, elementary through high school.

Lawmakers are also going after graffiti that claims and defines a gang’s territory with paintings of its name or symbol. Graffiti sends a mindless message of turf and machismo. Arizona and Hawaii created new penalties for property damage from graffiti. Tennessee makes parents responsible when a juvenile vandalizes property and requires them to clean the damage or pay for its repair. Texas requires the juvenile offender to make restitution to the owner of the defaced property.

### FIGHTING BACK

Legislators clearly are coming together to find ways to address the disturbing increase in gang violence.

“The time is now to fight back,” says Hurst. “We need to prevent gangs from terrorizing communities and, first and foremost, stop them from recruiting innocent kids into their dead-end life.”



**REPRESENTATIVE**  
**CHRISTOPHER HURST**  
**WASHINGTON**



**ASSEMBLYMAN**  
**TONY MENDOZA**  
**CALIFORNIA**

➡ **CHECK OUT** a chart on the accomplishments of the FBI Violent Gang Safe Street Task Force and links to information on other FBI efforts to combat gangs.