

Durham tries to stomp out gang membership



Photo by Caitlin Owens

Many children grow up in single-parent households, which can contribute to their decision to join a gang, law enforcement officials say.

**By Caitlin Owens
Staff Writer**

Although not in a gang herself, one teenage girl has seen several of her peers choose to join a gang in search of acceptance.

Money, drugs and relationships with members of the opposite sex serve merely as bonuses. The ultimate prize is the attention and the recognition given to teens by gang membership, said Eleycia Harris, a 17-year-old Durham resident.

"They want to be accepted. They want to hang out with the people who everybody wants to be with: the popular people, the people who make the most money, the drug dealers, the gang bangers," she said.

Chris, a 17-year-old gang member who declined to give his last name, joined when he was in the sixth grade. He grew up around gang influences, both in his neighborhood and his family. Although his parents were not gang-affiliated, some of his brothers and cousins were.

More importantly to him at the time, his friends were gang members.

"I wanted to be a part of it back then," he said. "I thought it was cool."

Gang presence has grown in

Durham throughout the past decade, said Detective Elliott Hoskins, vice president of administration for the North Carolina Gang Investigators Association.

Some factors influencing young people's decision to join have changed over the years. Kids have always joined gangs out of a desire to belong to something. This desire, paired with the need for protection and a source of income, has not changed, said Jim Stuit, Durham's gang reduction strategy manager.

However, when asked why they joined a gang, Durham youth can cite the influence of their family's gang membership more frequently than ever before.

This concept, known as generational gang membership, is one of several trends influencing decisions on whether or not to join a gang.

Durham is experiencing the second generation of gang activity and "maybe just the cusp of the third-generation," Stuit said.

Hoskins said gangs have already influenced the third generation teens and some may have already started to join.

"When I say influences, not too much in the decision that child is making, but more so in what they're dressing him in and the

environment they're putting him in," Hoskins said.

Durham's first generation of gangs originated in the 1980s with neighborhood gangs such as the "Few Crew" in Few Gardens, a public housing community. Their children constituted the second generation. The city is now looking at the rise of a potential third generation of gang members within a family.

Gang presence increased throughout the 1990s, transitioning from neighborhood "crews" to groups claiming affiliation with national gangs. These national gangs have remained in Durham since then and include Crips, Bloods, People Nations, Folk Nations, Latin Kings, MS-13s, Sureños, Norteños, Brown Pride Locos, United Blood Nations and Vice Lords, Hoskins said.

"We began to see an intense growth, because everybody wants to be associated with something that's known," Hoskins said.

Influence can come from fathers, older brothers, uncles, aunts and other extended family members in and out of the household, said Danya Perry, a Communities in Schools North Carolina director.

"The deeper the generation, the more robust the gang will be. Their recruitment pool will enlarge," he said.

Gang culture becomes the norm for children who grow up around it, Stuit said. They learn behaviors such as crime, an aversion to

law enforcement and rejection of authority.

Stuit said he's interested to see if a third generation of gang members will become established or if current policing techniques and nonprofit efforts will be effective.

"We just don't want a third generation," he said.

With gang presence continuing to grow in Durham, generational gangs should be a source of attention and concern, Hoskins said.

"I think it's important to address the fact that gangs exist period," he said. "The generational aspect is because gangs exist. That's like saying should we address the fever or the cold?"

However, Hoskins said that in order to deal with generational gang membership, family issues need to be addressed first.

Aside from the "seductive part of gangs," or drugs, money and sex, kids join gangs to find a sense of identity and a place to belong, Perry said.

"We're all social creatures," he said. "The main reason people join gangs is for a sense of belonging – just wanting to be a part of a family."

The 2010 American Community Survey found that 40 percent of children and 66 percent of African American children live in single-parent households in Durham. Hoskins said he finds this deviation from traditional family structures a crucial indication of youth's decision to join gangs.

"I think family structures have changed," he said. "We have more single-parent households now than ever before. We have more kids growing up and never having any influence from their fathers. When you have a single-parent household and the mother has to work two and three jobs to provide for those children, it almost eliminates any parental supervision at all."

Stuit said that the family has always influenced gang membership in Durham. The city's transition to a welfare economy in the 1980s and the effects it had on families helped establish gang presence, he added.

In the '80s, welfare allowed for single mothers to support several children without a working father in the home to supplement the household income, Stuit said. Thus, many families experienced a departure of male leadership.

When this lack of male role models pairs with a low economic status and exposure to crime and violence in a child's neighborhood, the child has a higher risk of joining a gang, Stuit said.

"We know that we have a lot of kids that grew up in single-parent households," Hoskins said. "We know that we have a lot of kids that haven't seen

their father or their father is incarcerated. So that's a human need that is missing."

When kids have absent fathers and working mothers, Hoskins said, they also have a lack of supervision or parental influence. This can cause a kid to find influence from a different group: peers.

Chris, the teenage gang member, acknowledged peer pressure while listing reasons for joining a gang.

"One, they feel like they can get the love they're not getting at home," he said. "Two, they feel like they'll get protected. Or they might just be weak-minded people and give in to peer pressure."

Technology, whether television or music-related, has allowed for gang culture to be glorified since gangs first arrived in Durham. It contributed to the growth of gang culture and presence during the 1990s, Hoskins said.

"Whether it's movies, music, videos – I'm sure some media had part of a role in bringing gang culture to mainstream," Hoskins said, speaking particularly on rap music and gang-related movies.

New technology has enhanced gangs' capacity to glorify their culture and behavior. Its impact on gang presence and activity has changed in other ways as well, especially through the widespread use of social media and the Internet.

One of technology's largest impacts has been on the communication methods of gang members, Stuit said. Like the rest of society, gang members can communicate more efficiently than ever before.

"Our parents probably thought of gangs as a bunch of thugs hanging out in front of the convenient store, but that might not be the accurate picture of it right now," he said. "Technology has changed all of that ... I think it is a real game changer."

Gang members can also communicate about what they've done more easily using social media sites, Stuit said. They can simply post pictures on Facebook or tweet about it. Because of the nature of social media, both gang members and nonmembers can view their posts.

The ability to glorify gang membership online or through the media acts as a "free advertisement" for gangs, Perry said.

Technology has also directly changed the way youth join gangs. Chris said that nonmembers can contact known "gang bangers," or active gang mem-

bers, using technology.

"It's easy for you to contact gang bangers via social media or telephone," he said.

After this initial contact, the person can begin the initiation process.

The Internet has affected membership even more directly than enabling potential members to contact known gang members. Youth can now join gangs online, Perry said.

"They can actually join gangs via websites," he said. "As silly as this might sound, you can do initiations online."

The websites give instructions regarding how to join and the potential new member can simply send pictures of himself or herself performing the requirements.

With all of the factors affecting Durham's gang presence, it seems that only one thing can indicate whether or not it will grow or shrink: time.

"We're probably not seeing as many deeply involved members as we did in the generation ago, but other cities have shown that that can change immediately," Stuit said, referring to a recent resurgence of gang activity in Chicago after an apparent reduction.

Although Durham law enforcement concentrated on gang suppression in previous decades, Hoskins said, both law enforcement and nonprofits have begun to focus on prevention techniques.

Schools attempt to foster a "realignment of measures of success" by introducing at-risk students, or even those already involved in gangs, to alternative values and perspectives, Perry said.

Stuit has been working to streamline gang prevention efforts and make them more coordinated. That could improve information sharing and allow for better data collection and analysis.

"If you had a single funding stream going toward a well-coordinated effort, my opinion is it would have better results," he said.

To Hoskins, prevention efforts can only succeed if they keep in mind the underlying reasons for gang membership, particularly the absence of male leaders. Law enforcement combats this void by placing resource officers in schools, attempting to encourage both security and affirmative relationships.

"Gang culture is not just about crime," he said. "It's about a need. Not to try to sound like a social worker, but it takes a human being to fill a human need."