

# WHAT PARENTS SHOULD KNOW TO PROTECT THE KIDS AND YOUTH ONLINE

## GANGS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

### **Abstract**

Modern gangs have increasingly shifted from physical street corners to the "digital street," a phenomenon often termed "cyberbanging" or "internet-banging".

### **Gangs utilize social platforms for: Reputation and Identity Building:**

Members use X (Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube to "broadcast badness," displaying money, weapons, and drugs to build "street capital" and group status.

### **Recruitment:**

While direct recruitment is rare, gangs use social media for indirect recruitment by glamorizing the lifestyle to attract vulnerable or disaffected youth.

### **"Beefing" and Conflict:**

Online spaces are used to taunt rivals and issue threats. These digital insults can lead to "retaliatory violence" in the physical world as gangs feel pressured to defend their public reputations.

### **Territorial Marking:**

Digital platforms have made gang territory more fluid. Members may post videos of themselves in rival neighborhoods to signal encroachment, replacing traditional physical markers like graffiti.

### **Criminal Operations:**

More organized groups use social media for "instrumental" activities, such as coordinating drug sales, human trafficking, or even monitoring police movement.

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By: Glen Hutton

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# GANGS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

- **Source: Lethbridge Police Service**
- <https://www.lethbridgepolice.ca/community-safety/online-safety-toolkit/online-risks-in-the-news/>

Gangs are using popular social media platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and even gaming or music apps to recruit teens. They exploit these spaces with manipulative tactics, luring youth with promises of money and status, which threatens the safety of both youth and schools. No community is immune. Organized crime follows the presence of drugs, even in smaller communities.

## THE UTILIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY GANGS IN TEEN RECRUITMENT: WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

- Source: The White Hatter: <https://www.thewhitehatter.ca/post/the-utilization-of-social-media-by-gangs-in-teen-recruitment-what-parents-need-to-know>

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**Caveat” This post was spawned by a parent education night that was sponsored by the Vancouver Island West Shore RCMP, where members from the BC Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit and the Greater Victoria MYST team presented on the topic of Gang activity in British Columbia - more specifically in the Greater Victoria area. This event was truly enlightening for all who attended.**

In today's onlife world, the landscape of youth recruitment into gangs has undergone a significant transformation. Gone are the days when gangs relied solely on street corners and word-of-mouth to lure vulnerable teenagers into their fold. Today, social media platforms serve as potent tools for gangs not only for conducting illicit activities like drug sales (1) or human sex trafficking (2), but also for expanding their reach and drawing in vulnerable teenagers by using social networking platforms to promote gang culture and their reputation.

We here at the White Hatter have had teens share with us how gangs are now using platforms like Snapchat to sell drugs or vaping products online at parties or at schools here in Greater Victoria (3). Many parents and educators may not be aware that Snapchat has a “nearby” feature that allows gang members at schools or even events that teens gather at, like parties or other teen events, to connect with them to purchase the drugs they are selling. At these teen parties and get togethers these same gang members utilize QR codes which provide “menus” of drugs or even illegal vaping products (4) that are available for purchase through e-currency apps. Teens no longer need to travel to buy their drugs or vaping products, gang members will come to them – a gang's version of “DoorDash”, also known as dial-a-dope or text-a-dope.

In British Columbia, no community is exempt from the threat of gang activity. While some may believe that gang activity is solely confined to Vancouver and the Lower Mainland, an officer from the BC Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit (CFSEU), tasked with combating organized crime, emphasized during the parental education session, "If drugs are present in your community, then organized crime (gangs) are likely operating there too, you just done see them" - good point! The Greater Victoria MYST team also confirmed that gang activity is alive and well in Greater Victoria (5) and that these gangs are actively recruiting teens, wherever they hang out, both online and offline, including on school property - MYST member Mia Golden recounted a recent incident here in Greater Victoria, involving a recognized adult gang member who was approached by a school principal while walking down a school corridor during school hours, even though they did not have a child who attended the school.

Gangs operating in the province have adapted to technology, leveraging social media platforms to recruit teenagers into their ranks. Whatever online platforms are popular with youth today, gangs will be leveraging them when it comes to recruitment – Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, online gaming, and even music platforms like SoundCloud to name a few. This alarming trend poses a significant threat to the safety and well-being of our youth and schools, as gangs use sophisticated social engineering tactics to entice teens into a life of crime and violence, promising status, and money (6). As one BC anti-gang educator stated, "They need little soldiers. They need feet on the ground to do their killings and all the bad stuff for them, because the gangs themselves, they're not willing to do it, he said. "They get these young little minions to do it and they take all the risk." (7)

One of the most concerning aspects of gang recruitment via social media is the subtle and insidious nature of the process. Gangs often create enticing online personas, presenting themselves as glamorous or powerful figures who offer belonging, loyalty, status, protection, and financial rewards to vulnerable teenagers. (8) The enticing siren call of, "Why work at McDonalds for minimum wage, when you can come work with us and make all kinds of money" or "Come join us, we offer a brotherhood that watches each other's back and will provide you with status and protection amongst your peers" are common lures that are used very successfully. That work is often the selling of drugs or for the purpose of human sex trafficking.

Gangs exploit the vulnerabilities of teenagers, targeting those who may feel marginalized, isolated, or seeking validation and acceptance - especially effective on youth who are experiencing social alienation and peer rejection. They prey on insecurities and offer false promises of respect, status, and financial gain, trapping unsuspecting youth in a cycle of exploitation, violence, and indebtedness that can prove exceedingly difficult to break free from once ensnared.

Through carefully curated posts, messages, and videos, they paint a distorted picture of the gang lifestyle (thug life), glamorizing violence and criminal activity while downplaying the risks and consequences.

However, there are resources like the CFSEU Exit Team in the lower mainland, or the MYST team in the Greater Victoria area, that can help youth who are looking to get out or prevent youth from recruitment in the first place.

Parents can also play a crucial role in safeguarding their children from the dangers of gang recruitment on social media. Here are some proactive steps parents can take to protect their teens:

- Foster open and honest communication with your teenager. Encourage them to talk about their online interactions and any concerns they may have about social media.
- Keep a close eye on your teen's online activity, including the platforms they use and the people they interact with. Familiarize yourself with popular social media platforms and their features.
- Have frank discussions with your teenager about the dangers of gang recruitment on social media. Help them recognize the signs of grooming and manipulation tactics used by gangs.
- Establish clear rules and boundaries regarding social media usage. Consider implementing parental controls and privacy settings to limit exposure to potentially harmful content.
- Encourage your teen to engage in positive activities and surround themselves with supportive peers and mentors who promote healthy choices and lifestyles.
- If you suspect that your teenager may be at risk of gang recruitment or involvement, seek support from trusted professionals, such as school counselors, social workers, or law enforcement.
- If your school does not have a police-based school resource officer program, push to make such a program available. Here in School District 62, we have such a program!

A significant takeaway from this parent education session, as highlighted by MYST team member Cst Gordon Magee, was the advice to instruct your child to politely decline offers from “older” individuals at parties, or other teen gatherings, who offer to give them a ride home, even if a friend says it’s ok. While it may seem convenient, accepting such offers could inadvertently disclose their home address, potentially exposing them or their family to threats or manipulation in the future.

An excellent resource for parents on the “key indicators of youth gang involvement in BC” as well as other valuable parent resources if you suspect that your child may be starting to get involved in gang activity can be located on the BC End Gang Life Website. (9) The BC End Gang Life Website is a must visit websites for all parents, caregivers, and educators!

In today's onlife world, the landscape of youth recruitment into gangs has evolved dramatically. No longer confined to street corners and word-of-mouth, gangs now exploit social media platforms to expand their reach and entice vulnerable teenagers into their fold. This alarming trend poses a

significant threat to the safety and well-being of our youth, as gangs utilize social media to glamorize violence and criminal activity while downplaying the risks involved.

## WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

As parents, it's crucial to remain vigilant and proactive in safeguarding our teens from the dangers of gang recruitment online. By fostering open communication, monitoring online activity, and educating our teenagers about the tactics used by gangs, we can help them make informed choices and steer clear of potential harm. Additionally, seeking support from trusted professionals and utilizing resources like the BC End Gang Life Website can provide invaluable guidance in addressing and preventing gang involvement.

By staying vigilant and proactive, parents can help protect their teenagers from falling victim to gang recruitment in our communities, schools, or on social media. Together, parents, schools, and law enforcement can work towards creating safer communities, where our youth can thrive and fulfill their potential without the threat of gang violence looming overhead. This approach also provides a comprehensive wraparound approach for assisting youth in avoiding involvement in gangs or breaking free from their influence if recruited – something that School District 62 has fully embraced.

Big tip of our White Hat to Cst Mark Hall, and the rest of the West Shore RCMP School Resource Officer Team, who brought this important presentation to the families of the West Shore! Knowledge and the understanding and application of that knowledge is power! Combating gangs revolves around unity, the essential element in preventing and policing this significant threat to our children in all schools across the Greater Victoria Region, regardless of the school district. Without unity, we create a vacuum that provides gangs with the opportunity to get their foot in the door unheeded and unchallenged.

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