A gang is a group of people whose members recognize themselves as a distinct entity and are recognized as such by their community. Their involvement in antisocial, rebellious, and illegal activities draws a negative response from the community and from law enforcement officials. Other characteristics of gangs include a recognized leader; formal membership with initiation requirements and rules for its members; its own territory, or turf; standard clothing or tattoos; private slang; and a group name. In a document published by Boys and Girls Clubs of America, the U.S. Department of Justice has divided gangs into several types. Territorial (“turf” or “hood”) gangs are concerned with controlling a specific geographical area. Organized, or corporate, gangs are mainly involved in illegal activities such as drug dealing. Scavenger gangs are more loosely organized than the other two types and are identified primarily by common group behavior.

Since the 1980s, gang activities have become an increasing cause for concern in many areas of the United States. It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of people—perhaps upwards of a million—belong to thousands of gangs in major urban centers, suburbs, small cities, and even in rural areas. A study conducted at the University of Southern California found gang activity in 94% of the country’s major cities and over 1,000 cities altogether. The number of gang members in Los Angeles County alone was estimated at 130,000 in 1991. In the same year there were an estimated 50 gangs in New York City, 125 in Chicago, and 225 in Dallas. Today’s gangs are more involved in serious criminal activities than their predecessors. Gang-related violence has risen sharply, involving ever-younger perpetrators who are increasingly ready to use deadly force to perpetuate rivalries or carry out drug activities. In addition, the scope of gang activities has increased, often involving links to drug suppliers or customers in distant locations.

Gangs are found among virtually all ethnic groups. Mexican American gangs, whose members are sometimes referred to as cholos, have long been active in the Southwest and are now spreading to other parts of the country. Today these groups include not only the traditional Mexican American membership but also new immigrants from Central American countries such as El Salvador. The most visible Hispanic gangs on the East Coast have traditionally been the Puerto Rican gangs in New York City, originally formed by the children of immigrants who came to this country in the 1940s and 1950s. African American gang affiliations often center around the Crips and Bloods, Los Angeles gangs that are bitter rivals, or the Vice Lords and Folk Nation, which are Chicago gangs. Chinese gangs, which began in New York in the 1960s and 1970s, prey on the Asian community, extorting money in return for protection. With the wave of immigration from Southeast Asia following the Vietnam war, Vietnamese and Cambodian gangs have formed, also terrorizing their own communities.

The most visible white gangs are the skinheads (named for their close-shaven heads), who typically embrace a racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-gay philosophy, often involving neo-Nazi symbolism and beliefs. There are thought to be between 3,000 and 4,000 skinheads in the United States, including such groups as the Aryan Youth Movement, Blitz Krieg, and White Power. Skinhead activities have included painting racial slurs on buildings, damaging synagogues and the homes of Jews and blacks, and sometimes fatal assaults on members of minority groups. The white Spur Posse, a gang of white high school athletes in California, received media attention in the late 1990s for sexually molesting teenage girls.

A variety of factors have been cited as causes for involvement in gangs. Social problems associated with gang activity include poverty, racism, and the disintegration of the nuclear family. Some critics claim that gangs are glamorized in the media and by the entertainment industry. On a personal level, adolescents whose families are not meeting their emotional needs turn to gangs as substitute families where they can find acceptance, intimacy, and approval. Gangs can also provide the sense of identity that young people crave as they confront the dislocations of adolescence. Teenagers also join gangs because of social pressure from friends. Others feel physically unsafe in their neighborhoods if they do not join a gang. For some people, the connection to a gang is through family members who belong—sometimes even several generations of a single family. Yet another incentive for joining is money from the gangs’ lucrative drug trade. Drug profits can be so exorbitant as to dwarf the income from any legitimate job: teenagers in one suburban high school in the early 1990s were handling $28,000 a week in drug money, with individual profit averaging $5,000.

The basic unit in gangs, whatever their origin or larger structure, is a clique of members who are about the same age (these groups are also called posses or sets). A gang may consist entirely of such a clique, or it may be allied with similar groups as part of a larger gang. The Crips and Bloods consist of many sets, with names such as the Playboy Gangster Crips, the Bounty Hunters, and the Piru Bloods. It is to their clique or set that members feel the greatest loyalty. These neighborhood groups have leaders, who may command as many as 200 followers. In groups affiliated with larger gangs, these local leaders are accountable to chiefs higher up in the gang hierarchy. At the top is the kingpin, who has the ultimate say in how the gang conducts its financial operations and oversees its members.
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The lowest level on which a young person may be associated with a gang is as a lookout—the person who watches for the police during drug deals or other criminal activities. Lookouts, who are commonly between seven and twelve years old, can be paid as much as three hundred dollars a week. At the next level are “wannabes,” older children or preteens who identify themselves with a gang although they are still too young for membership. They may wear clothing resembling that of the gang they aspire to and try to ingratiate themselves with its members. Sometimes they cause trouble in or out of school as a way of drawing the gang’s attention. Once wannabes are being considered for entrance into a gang they undergo some form of initiation. Often it includes the commission of a specified crime as a way of “proving themselves.” In addition, gangs generally practice certain initiation rituals, such as “walking the line,” in which initiates have to pass between two lines of members who beat them. In other cases, initiation brutalities follow a less orderly course, with a succession of gang members randomly perpetrating surprise beatings that initiates have to withstand without attempting to defend themselves. Other rituals, such as cutting initiates and mixing their blood with that of older members, are also practiced.

Gangs adopt certain dress codes by which members show their unity and make their gang affiliation visible both to members of other gangs and to the community at large. Gang members are usually identifiable by both the style and color of their clothing. Latino gangs traditionally wore khaki pants, white T-shirts, and plain cotton jackets, but today black pants and jackets are favored, often worn with black L.A. Raiders caps. The Crips are strongly associated with the color blue, typically wearing blue jackets, running shoes with blue stripes and laces, and blue bandannas, either tied around their heads or hanging prominently from a back pocket. (The color of the rival Bloods is red.) Two rival African American gangs in Chicago wear hats tilted in different directions to signal their affiliation. With the increased use of deadly force by today’s gang members, gang clothing codes can be very dangerous: nonmembers have been killed for accidentally wandering onto gang turf wearing the colors of a rival group. In addition to their clothing, gang members express solidarity by adopting street names and using secret symbols and codes, often in graffiti spray-painted in public places.

Although most gang members are male, women do join gangs—either mixed-gender or all-female gangs (which are sometimes satellites of male gangs and sometimes independent of them). Traditionally they have played a subservient role in mixed gangs, assisting the males in their activities and forming romantic attachments within the gang, but generally not engaging in criminal activities more serious than shoplifting or fighting girls from other gangs. To be initiated into a mixed-sex gang, female members have often been required to have sex with multiple gang members. Today girl gang members are more apt than in the past to participate in serious violence, such as drive-by shootings, armed robbery, and “wildings,” savage group attacks on innocent victims in public places, often involving sexual assault.

Perhaps the most troubling feature of gang activity in the 1980s and 1990s is its increased level of violence, which often victimizes not only gang members themselves but also innocent bystanders who unwittingly find themselves in its path. Thousands of people with no gang connections have been killed because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Most gang-related killings are linked to fights over turf (including drug turf), “respect” (perceived threats to a gang member’s status), or revenge. In Los Angeles County, the number of gang-related slayings soared from 212 in 1984 to 803 in 1992. Nationwide, the total number of teenagers murdered every year has risen 55% since 1988, an increase thought to be closely linked to the growth of gang activity. In 1991 over 2,000 people were injured or killed in drive-by shootings, 90% of which are thought to be committed by gang members. A major factor that has raised the level of gang violence is easy access to such weapons as automatic rifles, rapid-fire pistols, and submachine guns.

A common feature of membership in gangs is the difficulty encountered by people who want to quit. They are virtually always punished in some way, ranging from ritualized beatings (mirroring the initiation ceremony) to murder. Sometimes the member’s entire family is terrorized. Many persons—and sometimes even their families—have had to relocate to another city in order to safely end gang affiliations. In some cities, there are or-