

Stop the gangs

By **ASWAD WALKER**
Defender

There are more than 200 gangs operating in the metropolitan Houston area, and the minority community has reason for concern. Blacks and Hispanics make up 90 percent of gang members, and many belong to gangs that thrive on criminal activity.

The community, however, can help keep its families and neighborhoods safe by putting a stop to Houston's gang activity, and the crime and violence that often accompanies it. One way is by submitting anonymous tips online to stophoustongangs.org, while becoming more educated about the problem.

The brainchild of members of the Houston-area Multi-Agency Gang Task Force (MAGTF), stophoustongangs.org has taken a sizeable bite out of gang-related crime in Houston and surrounding areas, and offers a bevy of useful information geared toward parents, educators and youth.

Along with information on gangs operating in the metropolitan Houston area, the site provides information on gang initiation tactics, gang vernacular, warning signs of possible gang activity, prevention services offered by various local agencies, and a list of things communities can do to curb gang activity – of which Houston has an alarming amount.

Program organizers believe the website's impact has room to grow. The overall objective of stophoustongangs.org is to disrupt and dismantle the most significant criminal gangs in Houston and the surrounding area, a lofty vision broken down into two main parts.

"The website is unique in that it has two goals: to educate the public about gangs so they can recognize their activities and the signs in their own children signaling potential gang involvement," said FBI Special Agent Shauna Dunlap.

"The second goal is to provide a way for residents to anonymously report any potential or committed gang related crimes or activities from the comfort and safety of their homes, without fear of retaliation."

Dunlap said the very real fear of a person's name showing up on a police report after reporting suspicious activity, or the danger of being targeted by neighborhood gangs, or gang members in their own family proved to be a huge deterrent to many who wanted to notify police.

That fear, and the desire to provide the public with a gang information education vehicle that operated 24/7, served as the impetus for stophoustongangs.org.

"During the monthly meetings of the MAGTF, we had this idea of a 24-hour tip line, an 800 number. This idea evolved as we realized more and more people are online. Thus, the site was born," said Dunlap.

And it's been effective.

"In terms of tips, we get a little bit of everything, not just gang stuff – robberies, prostitution, thefts," said HPD Lt. Craig Williams who serves as one of the efforts chief organizers. "The site started out with a bang about two years ago, died off a little, and has since been rejuvenated."

"The website has been working. It has a tracker that lists the number of leads we've received – 1,389 tips – and the 316 arrests that

have been made directly attributable to those tips," said Dunlap, who along with Williams, have noticed the tips received are getting better, with information that can lead to arrests.

Dunlap says the site will soon reach 200,000 visitors.

According to Williams, HPD and other law enforcement agencies document gangs using a gang tracker database with each run-in with a gang member.

"We're approaching roughly 20,000 gangsters in Houston and surrounding areas," said Williams, emphasizing that the issue of gangs is not related to any one racial or economic demographic.

"No neighborhood is immune to gang activity. We have gangs in the suburbs, in rural areas on the outskirts of the city. Anyone is susceptible to becoming a gang member," said Williams, who urges parents to keep abreast of their children's activities, and to educate themselves on gangs in their area.

Nationally, there are approximately 1.4 million gang members belonging to more than 33,000 gangs.

"Sixty-to-80 percent of all crimes committed in a given area are attributed to gangs," said Dunlap, "and 60 percent of all gang members will be dead or in prison by the age of 20."

To fortify the website's impact, a new offering was added to the information bullets and revealing videos on every gang-related subject imaginable.

A new "Fugitive of the Week" is posted on the site every Thursday listing the individual's height, weight, aliases, and crimes, along with a mug shot with the intent of removing yet another gang member off Houston streets.

Williams believes the site also encourages more effective prevention at the front end.

"Older kids recruit the younger kids into gangs, so any kid can be solicited if you don't pay attention to what your kids are doing. This happens in middle-class and poor families.

"So look at the website and educate yourself about particular gangs in your area, and about what you can do to stop your child from becoming a gang member. And if you see, know or suspect a gang crime, report it," he said.

Gang warning signs

Juvenile street gang members transcend age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status.

According to stophoustongangs.org, youth who join gangs have different backgrounds and circumstances that lead to their involvement, but there are some common characteristics that they share.

Initiated gang members are most likely between the ages of 12 and 25, though they can be much younger or well into adulthood. The majority are male, from single parent homes, or homes where there is little supervision or high family conflict.

"They are usually low academic performers, truants, and cause disciplinary problems at home and school," says the website. "They have low self-esteem and are usually indifferent, angry,

and apathetic because they feel hopeless."

There are specific warning signs parents and loved ones can look out for that could signal potential gang activity. They include:

- Graffiti or tattoos depicting numbers, initials, street names, geographic areas, stars, pitchforks, three dots or crowns
- Wearing clothing of all one color
- Wearing or possessing bandannas
- Using an unfamiliar nickname
- Signs associated with drug and/or alcohol use
- Signs of physical abuse (new gang members are traditionally "jumped" or beaten into gang membership)
- Truancy and/or poor grades at school
- Discipline problems at home and/or school

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REPORT GANG CRIME TIPS

15 facts about gangs

- 1 In the Houston area, more than 12,000 gang members belonging to more than 200 gangs have been documented by area law enforcement agencies.
- 2 Houston-area gang members do commit crimes with members of other gangs.
- 3 From 2010 to 2011, confirmed gang crime in the city of Houston rose by 6 percent.
- 4 Over 30 percent of Houston confirmed gang crime is drug-related.
- 5 The average gang membership is 65 people.
- 6 The average age of gang members is 26.
- 7 Houston's gang population by race is 47.14 percent Black, 43.3 percent Hispanic, (8.9 percent white), less than 1 percent Asian and less than 1 percent "other."
- 8 Houston gangs, like those nationally, are by far predominantly male – 98 percent.
- 9 A criminal gang is defined as three or more persons having a common identifying sign or symbol or an identifiable leadership who continuously or regularly participates in the commission of criminal activities.
- 10 Gang members are the primary retail-level drug distributors.
- 11 Gangs are not just an inner-city problem. Their criminal operations extend into suburban and rural areas to expand their drug distribution and recruit new members.
- 12 Gangs vary in size from small neighborhood gangs to geographic, regional and prison gangs, along with national and transnational gangs.
- 13 Organized gangs are increasingly conducting cross-border criminal activities with transnational gangs engaging in human, weapons and drug trafficking
- 14 According to the 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment and National Gang Intelligence Center, "gangs are responsible for an average of 48 percent of violent crime in most jurisdictions and up to 90 percent in several others."
- 15 Approximately 1.4 million gang members belong to more than 33,000 gangs and are criminally active throughout the U.S.

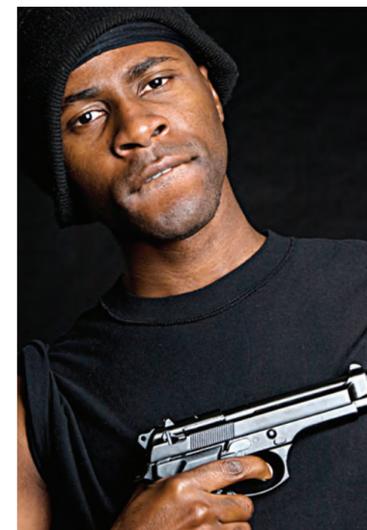
How to prevent gang involvement

There are ways parents can help deter gang involvement.

- Educate yourself on gangs and gang culture so you can recognize the warning signs. Be alert for them.
- Meet your children's basic needs for emotional support and understanding.
- Talk to them, listen to them, and let them know you're there for them.
- Be involved – know their friends, support their interests, participate in their school events, spend time with them.
- Encourage participation in positive extracurricular activities.
- Establish consistent rules and discipline.
- Limit unsupervised time.
- Be a positive role model.

If you suspect gang activity

- Don't allow gang-related behavior or displays of gang affiliation. Talk about these warning signs to determine if kids are just curious or imitating gang culture, if they're being recruited by a gang or if they may already be involved.
- Discuss the dangers and consequences of gang involvement with your kids. Imitating gang-related behavior can also be



dangerous.

- Contact law enforcement to learn about the levels of gang-related crime and activity in your community and at your student's school.
- Contact youth service providers or school counselors for referrals to organizations that have experience in addressing gang and other delinquency related issues.

What schools can do

- Adopt a zero tolerance policy toward gang activity.
- Work with school resource officers or local law enforcement on identification and suppression strategies.
- Educate staff and parents about gangs, warning signs and indicators.
- Provide referrals and assistance to parents and students.
- Document and abate graffiti as soon as possible.
- Institute anti-gang education and prevention programs.
- Develop a conflict mediation process for students.

- Keep up to date on gang activity within the school's neighborhood.
- Share information.