

# Gangs, guns here in Halton: Cop

By **KATHYYANCHUS**  
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There are many reasons, he said, among them a feeling of anonymity in a new area, the lack of competition or to recruit new members.

Halton's population is exploding and with that will come change, which can lead to stress and tension, not just amid families, but communities, he said. Some of these pressures, which can include racial tension, can lead kids to join gangs, as can feelings of instability or low self-esteem.

"Kids are not born gang members; it's a learned behaviour."

Gang members are all fleeing something, whether it's abuse or negligent parenting, and gangs can seem attractive to kids who are experiencing trouble at home or at school, he said.

"Pop culture is huge. Gang life is made to look really glitzy and glamorous. Parents need to know what their kids are listening to."

Just like the medical or educational professions have their own jargon, gangs have intricate and complicated hand signs, he said. They're also identifiable by elaborate tattoos and graffiti.

One of the ways parents can combat this pending threat is ensure their kids are growing up in "really good families and communities."

MacKinnon pointed to the Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents as a reference, which lists external and internal assets for building healthy, caring and engaged children.

Guns and gangs are not just 'a Toronto thing'.

"Even here in Halton, there is some gang activity," said Det. Const. John MacKinnon of the Halton Regional Police Service's guns and gangs unit. "We don't have gang-controlled buildings, they are not looming on every street corner. I'm not here to scare you."

Gangs, however, thrive in communities surrounding Halton— throughout Peel, and in Toronto and Hamilton, said MacKinnon, speaking at a recent forum in Milton on youth gang awareness and prevention aimed at Grades 7 and 8 students and their parents.

The forum went ahead with no one in attendance except representatives from forum presenters, Halton police, Halton District School Board and the Halton branch of the John Howard Society Peel-Halton-Dufferin.

"I'm preaching to the choir," smiled MacKinnon to his meager audience.

Officers in Halton's guns and gangs unit know gang activity is "creeping our way" and are undertaking a proactive approach.

"Early identification of gang-related activity is critical," said MacKinnon. "Do you want to invest in your community and family now or spend money on gang exit strategies?"

Why would gangs infiltrate the peaceful, affluent community of Halton?

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