

## THE DAILY SPECIAL

# How to stop youths from crossing the line

We need to teach children early on that there's no glamour in a life of crime, experts say

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VANCOUVER SUN

It was in the months following 22-year-old Allan Teather's brutal murder last year in an underground parkade in Calgary that his mother decided to make her personal agony public, speaking out in classrooms and at community forums on the startling new reality of just who is falling prey to gang recruitment.

Her message is simple, yet terrifying in its scope. The popular Walnut Grove secondary graduate, a "law-abiding, normal Canadian kid" for the first 20 years of his life, was not the type anyone would have considered to be at risk of getting involved in criminal behaviour.

"But, in the flash of a bullet, he became a gang associate," Andria Teather said.

Teather's powerful story, including the subtle trail of clues her son left behind hinting at his descent into the seductive world of drugs and violence, has particular resonance in Vancouver these days as the bullets fly and the number of young lives lost to the gang wars continues to mount.

The violence has forced many of us to start asking ourselves some tough questions.

How vulnerable are our own children to the lure of gang life? How do we keep them from getting involved and how do we encourage them to leave once they're in? What programs exist in our schools and communities to combat the situation? And what are our responsibilities as concerned citizens and parents?

The complexity of the problem has attracted growing debate and discussion from a broad chorus of voices — from police and academics to front-line social workers, parents such as Teather and even ex-gang members. Their common goal is to find effective and affordable solutions to a complex situation that most experts believe will be years in the making.

"The gang situation isn't circa 2006. It's been fermenting for 20 or 30 years," said Michael Chettleburgh, the Toronto-based author of *Young Thugs: Inside the Dangerous World of Canadian Street Gangs*.

"We are only going to see the fruits of our labours 10 years from now," he said.

## Signs of trouble surfaced

In retrospect, there were signs in the last two years of his life that all was not right with her son, Teather said.

Since moving to Calgary to live with his sister, the good-looking 20-year-old had noticeably — and uncharacteristically — started to bulk up physically. His normally outgoing and friendly demeanour began to change, too, his mother said.

Allan had developed a propensity for swearing and became prone to sudden outbursts of anger. He kept his friends' names to himself and was secretive about his cash flow.

Then there was the curious message on his cellphone noting the voice-mail service was "personal and confidential."

"We thought, 'What do you need a personal and confidential voice mail at your age for?'" Teather said.

According to the experts, most of the estimated 2,000 street-gang members in Metro Vancouver were raised in a very different manner than Allan Teather.



Allan Teather, a Vancouver man who was murdered in Calgary in January 2008 in a drug-related hit, is shown in a family photo with his mother Andria Teather. Teather has been speaking out on the gang problem to alert parents to the warning signs of gang involvement.

They are the products of broken homes, poverty and, in some cases, significant racial discrimination. Many are exposed to family violence and abuse and lack positive adult role models, adequate parental support, supervision, monitoring and consistent discipline.

In school, they are bullied or bully others, and struggle academically.

Gangs are there to fill in the gap, providing a sense of attachment, loyalty and belonging.

"I was so disheartened until I found a gang. It gave me identity. It gave me so many things I was missing," said Amir Javid, a former gang associate in Vancouver who now works to keep youths out of trouble.

In Metro, however, experts are seeing some of the fastest growth in gang recruitment among young people who, like Allan, don't fit the typical risk factors.

"These are kids that are from well-functioning families, whose parents are still together. They have a nice home and have access to wealth and to opportunities in terms of their financial resources," Chettleburgh said.

With this group of youths, the lure of the gang rests in the desire for personal rewards beyond a promise of "easy" money.

"It's power. It's respect. It's the glamour of being a gangster," Chettleburgh said.

Indeed, debunking the pervasive myth of the "glamorous gangster" plays a critical part in anti-gang work underway in schools and communities around the region.

Much of the effort is centred on counteracting the influence of popular culture and the not-so-subtle messages woven into clothing styles, music, movies and video games.

"Being a gangster is a lifestyle ... where kids are socializing in and wearing the trappings of that lifestyle," said Sgt. Shinder Kirk of B.C.'s Integrated Gang Task Force.

In Surrey, where, in 2007, the execution-style murders of two



IAN LINDSAY/VANCOUVER SUN

Amir Javid, a former gang associate, talks to Vancouver high school students about the dangers of getting involved with gangs.

bystanders along with four gang associates, rocketed the region's gang problem to the top of the public agenda, schools are taking the lead in the fight against gang recruitment.

The district is developing two unique anti-gang programs — believed to be the first in Canada — designed to arm children as young as 12 with crucial myth-busting facts about gangs, as well as identifying those who may already be in trouble and providing them with the tools and support they need to get out.

The First Step program, which seeks to intervene in gang recruitment by informing both students and their parents of the

"healthy, mature adults," including police, social workers, adult mentors, tutors, teachers and members of the business community.

"The idea is to 'wrap' that young person with positive, protective factors," said Campbell.

Both programs have drawn early praise from the likes of Chettleburgh, whose research supports so-called "hug-a-thug" solutions that recognize that not all kids are at an equivalent level of risk.

Most kids — about 95 per cent — function well and require very little, if any, intervention, Chettleburgh said. It's the five per cent that need help.

"If you could identify and use a tool that allows you to separate the wheat from the chaff and do more intensive interventions to those kids who have higher risk factors, then I think that makes sense," he said.

Chettleburgh said past programs that took a "shotgun" approach to crime prevention and education — such as the popular Drug Abuse Resistance Education that saw police addressing classrooms across the country on the risks of drug use — have proven to be "miserable failures."

"They provide a venue to share information, but they don't change behaviour," he said.

Get-tough strategies such as mandatory minimum jail terms for gang-related crime don't work either, according to Chettleburgh.

"Gangsters aren't listening to the six o'clock news. They aren't hearing these policy prescriptions and saying to themselves, 'I'd better change my behaviour because there is going to be a new law that is going to give me more time in prison.' It doesn't work that way," he said.

## Early intervention urged

Alerting parents to the warning signs is one of Teather's strongest motivations for speaking out on the issue these days. Parents, she said, must be

## GANG WARS: JUSTICE IN OUR TIMES



A special Vancouver Sun five-day series which looks at the hierarchy of B.C.'s 135 crime groups.

**Saturday, June 6:** A guide to gang structure in B.C.

**Monday, June 8:** An overview of the gang problem in the U.S., Mexico and Central America, and the links to B.C.

**Tuesday, June 9:** How police and prosecutors tackle gangs in B.C.

**Wednesday, June 10:** What our judges do when gangsters get to court.

**TODAY:** How can we stop our children from becoming involved in gangs?

able to talk frankly to their children about the dangers that any kind of association, however minor, with a gang may bring.

Teather said her son likely never considered his newfound "friends" would be capable of putting a bullet in him.

"This is not in any way to condone the choices he made, but I don't think that he realized what he was in for," she said.

Chettleburgh recommends the conversation around gang awareness and life skills begin with children as young as six or seven years old.

"The sooner the better," he said. "We know, for example, there are kids who are eight or nine years old who are involved in the business of gangs, who are carrying guns."

"If you wait until your kids are 12 or 13 years old, you may have missed the boat," he said.

Teather also wants to see schools and communities embrace unconventional programs such as that offered by Javid, whose anti-gang presentation has stirred up controversy through his use of a mock handgun, body bag and body armour in the classroom.

"We need to do whatever it takes to reach a broad audience," Teather said.

Total eradication of gangs is not a realistic goal.

"We know that certain individuals will always be attracted [to the lifestyle]," Kirk said.

But, according to Chettleburgh, there is hope for the rest of us, as a society, are willing to put the money and effort into effective programming now.

"We do know that for every dollar spent in prevention, it can save \$7 or \$8 downstream in criminal justice costs," he said.

The problem is the lag between investment and results: "That troubles politicians. They don't think four or five years down the road."

Whatever the answer, it can't come soon enough for Teather. Every day that goes by puts another young life at risk.

"I pray that somebody sees the reality of what is really going on and that the line between being safe and being in danger is so thin," she said.

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## Lower Mainland's gang problem to be discussed at forum tonight

Experts from across the region will gather tonight at the Justice Education Society on Hornby Street to discuss and debate the Lower Mainland's gang problem.

The panel will examine the complexities of the issue as well as the solutions needed by our justice system and communities to take action against gangs.

The forum will be moderated by Provincial Court Judge Pedro de

Couto, president of the Justice Education Society. Also included are:

- Supt. Dan Malo, officer in charge, B.C. Integrated Gang Task Force.
- Teresa Mitchell-Banks, deputy director of prosecutions, attorney-general's ministry.
- Kim Bolan, reporter, Vancouver Sun.
- Theresa Campbell, manager,

safe schools, Surrey school district.

The *Gang Wars: Justice in Our Times* forum, sponsored in partnership with *The Vancouver Sun* and Shaw TV, will be webcast live at [www.vancouver.sun.com](http://www.vancouver.sun.com) and at [www.JusticeInOurTimes.ca](http://www.JusticeInOurTimes.ca), a website dedicated to B.C. justice information.

It will also be broadcast on Shaw TV on June 19 and June 20.

## Kwantlen gets \$1 million to study how gang lifestyle can be avoided

Researchers at Surrey's Kwantlen Polytechnic University have won a \$1-million federal grant to study how to keep young people from falling into the gang lifestyle.

The program will track 900 teenagers, 13 to 18 years old, over the next five years and will use interviews and focus groups with youth, parents, teachers and ex-gang members.

The results will be used to form an "evidence-based" action plan, as well as help shape public policy, said project director Gira Bhatt.

Bhatt said the project takes a unique approach to the gang issue.

"Instead of looking at what's wrong with society, our research will examine what it is society does right with those youth who

reject the gang lifestyle," she said.

Bhatt said the information generated over the course of the project will be made public through radio and television talk shows, interactive theatre, training workshops and through the project's website at [www.actingtogether.ca](http://www.actingtogether.ca).

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