

## Seminar stresses importance of proaction in fighting gangs

By [Andrew Scott](#)

Pocono Record Writer

August 20, 2008 6:00 AM

Growing up in suburban New Jersey, the last thing Edwin Santana expected to see was gangs in his neighborhood.

"I'm sick and tired of seeing our kids die," Santana, now a corporal in the Morris County, N.J., Sheriff's Office, told about 250 people during Tuesday's gang awareness seminar at Stroudsburg Area Junior High School.

The seminar was put together by the Monroe County Drug Task Force and District Attorney's Office, Monroe County Correctional Facility and Stroudsburg Area School District. In the audience were law enforcement and corrections personnel from Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York, community crime watch members and those who work with children.

"Gangs may not yet be as big a problem here as they've become in Morris County and other areas, but you have to be realistic and not wait for the problem to get worse," Santana said.

Introductory speakers included Lt. Bernard Ortiz of the Stroudsburg Area School District's Safety Division, junior high school principal Maryellen Mross, school district superintendent John Toleno, Sgt. William Searfoss of the county jail, county commissioner Suzanne McCool and district attorney's detective Emanuel Varkanis.

Also attending was Bob McGuire of the recently formed Pennsylvania Gang Investigators Association.

The seminar included films showing how gangs, such as the Bloods, Crips and MS 13, identify themselves using different tattoos, body markings, colored clothes, slang, hand signals and ideologies.

Santana noted many Poconos residents spend most of their time working in New York City or New Jersey and have children who are left without supervision when not in school.

As a result, the children feel neglected and are looking for a sense of belonging. They see gangs, as opposed to positive role models, glamorized in the profit-hungry media and want to emulate gang culture, thinking it's hip and cool and that they're "somebody" if they're in a gang.

The reason for being in a gang is different in areas with higher crime rates, areas where children are second- or third-generation gang members or a gang is the only available alternative to a broken family, Santana said.

But "wannabe" gang members can be just as dangerous. That's because they're more susceptible to recruitment by real gang members who are looking to operate in quieter communities where they feel criminal activities would be more lucrative.

"If a kid believes he's a gang member and tells you that's what he is, then you have to treat him as

such," Santana said. "Don't ignore him and say he's just a wannabe or he's misunderstood. Don't wait for him to hurt or kill someone as part of some initiation to prove himself."

Varkanis said, "The kids we have (in the Poconos) aren't kids who've known nothing but the gang lifestyle since they were 5. Most are basically good kids who are imitating what they see on TV or hear in music. But these imitators are growing in number."

Ortiz said, "There has been a concern about a gang presence among the students in the school district. The presence here may not be as big as it is in other places, but it's noticeable."

One step the district has taken toward addressing this concern is instituting a new school uniform policy in grades five to 12, starting this fall, Toleno said. This should eliminate, among other things, the potential threat of any students wearing gang "colors" on school grounds.

Guest speaker William Sheridan of the New York Corrections Department's Gang Intelligence Fusion Center discussed the importance of being able to identify and distinguish between various gangs among the inmate population.

Sheridan, who is stationed at Riker's Island Penitentiary, presented a film showing gang violence in prison.

"We arrest inmates suspected of gang activity and visitors suspected of smuggling in items to suspected gang members," Sheridan said. "A major challenge we now face is that these folks are making their gang affiliations less obvious, which makes it harder for us to spot them."

Are there gang members in Monroe County Correctional Facility?

"About 15 percent of our inmate population have gang affiliations," Searfoss said.

McCool agreed having such a seminar is important.

"We need to increase the public's awareness and be more proactive in addressing this problem," McCool said. "It's a really tough issue. Parents should know how vulnerable their children are.

"Our Gang Task Force is very well-trained," she said.

"The information presented at this seminar will help them do their jobs even better. Anything we can do to support them, we should."