

Stroudsburg seminar urges community to be vigilant against gang activity

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Armed robberies, assaults, drug deals, fights, loitering and harassing passers-by.

These are ways in which gangs negatively impact a community's quality of life. And police in Monroe County say gang activity here has been on the increase in recent years.

About 50 people attended a Friday gang awareness seminar hosted by the Greater Pocono Chamber of Commerce at the Pocono Inne Town in Stroudsburg. Using overhead slides, Trooper David Peters of the state police barracks in Swiftwater presented information on signs of gang activity that residents should watch for.

Bloods, Crips, Latin Kings and Queens, MS-13, Skinheads and certain biker groups are among the better known gangs.

Each gang expresses its own identity, with members all wearing clothes of the same color, showing tattoos and displaying hand signals unique to that particular gang. For example, black and yellow are Latin King and Queen colors, while the MS-13 tattoo shows three dots in a pyramid formation.

Gangs also communicate through graffiti. For example, one gang's graffiti logo being crossed out or written over with another gang's logo means a challenge that can lead to a turf war.

"When you see gang graffiti, read it, record it, report it and remove it," said Peters, who is also the school resource officer at Pocono Mountain East High School. "The longer you leave it up where it can be seen, the more you invite trouble in your neighborhood."

In the audience was Michael Leonard of Stroudsburg, a criminal justice consultant and author of the book, "Youth, Gangs and God."

Leonard said gangs model themselves after corporations, with organized hierarchies and certain tasks assigned exclusively to certain members. Particularly troubling are gang initiations, which involve usually male recruits being beaten into the gang and female recruits being "sexed" or raped into the gang, as well as being required to rob or even kill people, Leonard said.

Gangs have come to the Poconos from New York City and other more urban areas because it's easier to make more money from drug sales and other illegal activities here, Peters said. Gangs are an attractive alternative to some children who have troubled home lives or feel neglected by their families and society.

"These gangs are recruiting kids as young as elementary school to carry out their illegal activities in our area," Peters said.

The seminar ended with some discussion on what the community can do in efforts to eradicate gang activity.

"If you see anything suspicious, please record whatever descriptions or details you can and report it," Peters said. "There's no such thing as stupid or useless information to us."

Parents, schools, nonprofit agencies, businesses and law enforcement can all work together to be vigilant against gang activity and steer children away from gangs by providing positive role models and alternative

activities.

Leonard mentioned Norman McCullough of East Stroudsburg, who runs a weekly program that encourages area high school students to stay in school and go to college or learn trades afterward. McCullough's program also matches students with volunteer adult mentors from the local community who are professionals and businesspeople.

Those interested in learning more about McCullough's program can contact him at (570) 421-1779.