



Valley View Public Schools

*Serving portions of Bolingbrook, Romeoville, Lemont,
Plainfield, Downers Grove and Lockport*

School & Community Relations Office

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Many towns and school districts are in denial when it comes to the existence of gangs. They don't think they have a youth gang problem. The fact is gangs are "everywhere" and the dangers from gangs are there "every single day."

So says certified gang specialist Cliff Akiyama who told more than 200 school and community officials at the Valley View School District Safe Schools Conference that there are 24,500 active youth gangs in the United States with more than 750,000 members. More than nine of ten members are male and 78 percent are minorities.

"They believe they won't live past the age of 24. They think 'I am a soldier and I will fight for that no matter what it takes even if it means death,'" he said. "Babies are planning their funerals. No longer do these kids say you're not invited to my birth...it's you're not invited to my funeral.

"They have a distorted sense of reality," he added. "They use violence as a tool with no thought to the consequences. Their philosophy is smile now...cry later."

Akiyama, who is also an assistant professor of forensic medicine, urged the group to watch for certain risk factors that could indicate a youth is vulnerable for, or a part of, gang involvement including involvement in antisocial groups, low hope for a positive future, low motivation, low self esteem, behavior and discipline problems, alcohol and other drug use, poor peer relations, negative police involvement, poor impulse control, exposure to violence in mass media and/or the need for relief from emotional discomfort.

The key, he said, is vigilance.

"Be aware of what's going on around you," he said, imploring attendees to get parents involved in the effort as well. "A lot of parents are naïve."