

## **Police in B.C. are offering gangsters who want to clean up their lives free laser surgery to remove their gang tattoos.**

The head of the Integrated Gang Task Force says it may cost hundreds or even thousands of dollars to have tattoos removed, depending on how big they are, but they are willing to pay if it will get people to leave gangs.

Supt. Dan Malo says the allure of the gangster lifestyle must be targeted with out-of-the-box solutions such as this one.

Police will foot de-inking bills on a case-by-case basis if gangsters cooperate with and provide information to police, Sgt. Shinder Kirk of the BC Integrated Gang Task Force said.

"The individual must cooperate with investigators. We have to be absolutely certain that an individual who has expressed that desire is genuine in leaving the lifestyle," Kirk said Tuesday.

Police are hoping free tattoo removal will be one more tactic to help get people out of gangs by easing their transition into society. Kirk said the practice is relatively new to the Lower Mainland, but widespread in the United States.

Only gang markings would be eligible for removal. "It could be anything, really, that indicates you are part and parcel or a member of a criminal organization or a gang," he said. "It may be words coupled with a pictogram of some sort. It may just be a pictogram or initials."

"You know a gang member who decides to get out of a gang - that, we can work with. To pull out of the gang, we would look at things like removing their tattoo as a permanent sign they have left the gang," said Malo.

"We always hold forth in our dealings with gang members an opportunity to get out of the gang lifestyle," Kirk said. "(If) an individual ... is genuinely interested in walking away from being a gang member we can look at strategies to have that tattoo indicating membership removed."

"In light of the violence that we've seen, if we can remove one individual ... in exchange for informational co-operation, I think the cost outweighs the benefits."

Heavily inked former gang member Amir Javid said the idea behind the program is good. Tattoo removal helps protect former gangsters from being identified and targeted, and in finding jobs and a new identity, Javid said. But he thought police were targeting the wrong people.

"It's for informants," said Javid, who runs the gang outreach program Real World Truth in Vancouver. "It's solely for the exchange of information." Javid said the police should be paying for tattoo removal for people like him after they have demonstrated a real commitment to leaving gang life behind.

"I am the most reformed you can get and if the program is not open to me, who's it in actuality open to? Nobody. It's only if you have information and you want to rat out your buddy," Javid said.

Amir said tattoos show status within gangs. But outside the gang world they can be a barrier to employment. Amir also agrees the tattoo removal cost is a small price to pay to help someone leave a criminal lifestyle behind. "I believe it is a significant step for gang members to step out and want their old tattoos removed basically as a sign that they are entering into a new phase in their life and leaving behind an old one."

"If we don't give them this opportunity, then we are basically probably saying we are willing to pay for your incarceration, but we are not willing to pay for...you to get out of a gang," said Javid. "It would be so significant to help these kids transition and integrate into the community."

Jim Mandelin, who's been counselling youth in the Vancouver area for 20 years, once worked as a debt collector for criminals. He still has a dagger tattoo representing his gang.

He said the tattoos help him connect with the youth he counsels and if that gives him an entry into their lives, it's a reason for keeping it. "I don't regret getting the tattoos, I regret my whole childhood," he said.