

Defining the Youth Gang Issues of the 90's and Strategies for the Future

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Abstract

In recent years youth gang growth from small farming towns to metropolitan cities has escalated at an alarming rate. Delinquent and criminal youth gangs appear to be more prevalent and they are developing in all regions of the country. Nationwide, arrests of youth for violent crimes increased by 29 percent during the past ten years. The youth gang problem has become more complex as well. At-risk youths who are vulnerable to youth gang recruitment are increasing in numbers across the nation. Our lack of knowledge as to the scope of the problem is due in large measure to the absence of a standard definition for the terms "gang" and "gang crime incident." The ways to measure the impact of youth gangs and their criminal patterns differ across cities. Law enforcement agents must first assess the youth gang problem in their community and identify specific objectives. Based on my experience and review of the literature I have developed a law enforcement strategy model. Multiple program strategies are necessary for law enforcement to be effective. These approaches need to be integrated with a special focus on community mobilization and targeted social opportunities.

Introduction

The problem of gangs in large urban centers of the United States is an old one. Dealing with youth gangs is nothing new. Citizens in Philadelphia met to discuss subduing bands of young hooligans as early as 1791, and gangs were reported in New York City in 1825 (Stover, 1986).

Gang growth has increased phenomenally nationwide. No longer limited to large urban cities, it is moving into smaller towns. There is an emergence of youth gangs in smaller and medium-sized cities previously reporting none. A recent study by researchers at West Virginia University estimated that in 1991 there were as many as 4,881 gangs with almost 250,000 gang members in the United States. That year, according to the study, law enforcement agencies reported over 46,000 gang related incidents, including 1,051 homicides (National Youth Gang Information Center [NGIC], 1992). The public's perception of gang violence has been brought into every corner of the country through the media.

The youth gang problem is spreading across the nation. Gang problems may be chronic in certain cities or just emerging in others. In chronic gang problem communities, gangs are entrenched. They are relatively well organized and have long histories. In emerging problem communities, the extent and nature of the gang problem is somewhat less serious. Local youth are at the heart of the problem despite external influence (Huff, 1990).

Malcolm W. Klein's 1992 report, "Street Gangs in American Cities," includes data on 260 cities with a street gang problem. Of the 177 cities having a population of 100,000 or more, 148 or 84% reported a gang problem (Klein, 1992). Forty-one of the cities experienced gang problems prior to 1965. Another 85 first saw gangs emerge

Figure 1
Definitions of "Gang Related"

Los Angeles Sheriffs Department

1. Participants, suspects or victims in an incident are identified gang members or associates.
2. A reliable informant identifies an incident as gang activity.
3. An informant of previously untested reliability identifies an incident as gang activity and it is corroborated by other attendant circumstances or independent information.
4. Even if the incident does not fit the above criteria, if there are strong indications that an incident is gang related, it is considered gang activity.

Metro-Dade Police Department

1. Participants are identified as gang members or associates, acting individually or collectively, to further any criminal purpose of the gang.
2. A reliable informant identifies an incident as gang activity.
3. An informant of previously untested reliability identifies an incident as gang activity and it is corroborated by other existing circumstances or independent information.
4. Even if the incident does not fit the above criteria, if there are strong indications that an incident is gang related, it is considered gang activity.

Chicago Police Department

1. Occurs in the course of an explicitly defined collective encounter between two or more gangs.
2. Gang related motive.

between 1965 and 1984, and 134 have seen them emerge since 1985. It's clear that the problem has been escalating rapidly.

The increase and spread of youth gangs in today's United States constitute a movement that must be recognized and understood. Gangs can no longer be defined in traditional, preconceived terms. Social and economic factors have redefined them, and their growth is a multidimensional movement.

Increased violent crimes by gangs has demanded organized, legislative attention in the past three years. The State of Florida definition for gangs and gang members seems to parallel those states that have a working definition. In Florida, the first law enacted to address youth and street gangs was the Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act of 1990. It was the intent of the Legislature to provide enhanced penalties and eliminate patterns of profits, proceeds, and instrumentalities of youth and street gang activity.

Florida joined the ranks of those states experiencing gang growth in the past decade. In 1987, a newly impaneled grand jury studied gangs in Dade County. The grand jury concluded that the number of gangs was far below that of urban cities of comparable size, but it warned that gangs appeared to be an emerging phenomenon, destined to grow if not controlled (Weisel and Eck, 1992).

Gang Related Incident? Lacking Definition

There is still a great deal law enforcement leaders do not know about gang

characteristics or the impact of street gangs. National efforts to estimate the scope of current gang problems are troubled by the lack of standard definitions and by variations in the quality of reporting. Other reporting problems arise because gangs and their criminal patterns differ across cities (Ehrensaft and Spergel, 1991).

Consider the definitions in Figure 1. If two gang members commit a robbery in Los Angeles, the incident is classified as gang related. In Chicago, this same incident is not gang related, because it does not represent gang motivation, gang fighting or something group related. In some cities, gang related incidents include crimes where gang members have been victimized. Others do not use victimization to indicate gang related crimes.

Attempts to document gang related crime suffer from typical crime reporting problems such as lack of victim cooperation and underreporting. Failure to recognize gang association, victim intimidation, and other factors also seriously compromise reliability.

To respond to the growing problem of violent youth gangs, communities, justice professionals, and the general public need access to reliable information. Agencies continue to use the data they have even if it is of questionable quality, because it is the only information available. This information may be less useful than it appears at first glance. Without reliable information, how sure can we be that statements of serious or spreading gang violence deserve the allocation of resources? How will we know whether anti-gang efforts result in a measure of effectiveness?

For example, following a record number of gang related homicides in 1987, the Los Angeles Police Department received funds for a series of 1,000 officer sweeps through various gang areas of the city. They arrested anyone who looked like, talked like, or acted like a street gang member. It is suggested that the rates would have been far lower with a different definition of "gang related."

Given the above discussion, how should "gang related" incidents be defined? At a minimum, the definition should consider the following factors:

1. The definition should require gang motivation, interest or purpose. "Gang motivated" refers to an incident which grows strictly out of gang interest or purposes by at least one of the participants. The offenses must benefit the gang directly.
2. The definition should be based on a national paradigm or standard, but should consider any local characteristics which are important. Using a definition imposed by the news media or other law enforcement agencies may cause agencies to adopt inappropriate policies or use inappropriate tactics to respond to local problems.
3. Reporting should include information on gang members who engage in non-gang motivated criminal activity. These gang members are likely to be serious offenders as well, and information systems should record their activities.
4. Offenses committed by a group of youth which are generally not violent or threatening should not be included as gang offenses, especially if the youth involved hardly know each other and the group may exist only for a short period of time. Such group offenses, however may be precursors to sustained and more identifiable activity.

Juvenile Crime

Law enforcement agencies in the United States made an estimated 2.2 million arrests in 1990 of persons under the age of 18. According to the FBI (1990), these youth accounted for 16% of all arrests, including:

- 14% of murder and nonnegligent manslaughter arrests
- 15% of forcible rape arrests
- 24% of robbery arrests
- 14% of aggravated assault arrests
- 33% of burglary arrests
- 43% of motor vehicle theft arrests
- 7% of drug arrests.

Under the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program, the FBI requires law enforcement agencies to classify an arrest for reporting purposes by the most serious offense charged. Consequently, the arrest of a youth charged with aggravated assault and possession of a controlled substance would be reported as an aggravated assault. It is important to remember this reporting requirement when interpreting juvenile arrest statistics.

The number of youth (between 10 and 17) at risk of being involved in the juvenile justice system in Orange County rose from 65,234 to 76,661 between 1982 and 1991 (17.5%). At the same time, the percentage of increase in crime is far out of proportion to these numbers, or in comparison to the population in general. For example:

- Auto theft cases increased by 547%
- Concealed firearm cases increased by 470%

Offense	Admissions	change 91-92
Murder	17	+8.2%
Attempted Murder	22	+59.0%
Sexual Battery	13	54.0%
Aggravated Assault	55	+60.0%
Battery	45	+31.1%
Armed Robbery	37	+72.0%
Burglary	71	+62.0%
Auto Theft	42	no change
Carrying Concealed Firearm	18	+55.5%
Drugs	90	-1.3%

- Robbery cases increased by 370%
- Sexual battery cases increased by 113%
- Aggravated assault cases increased by 123%
- Misdemeanor assault cases increased by 271%.

The Ninth Judicial Circuit of Florida (Orange and Osceola Counties) admitted 555 juveniles to the circuit's jails during 1992. This represents an increase of over 40% when compared to the 396 admitted during 1991 (Snyder, 1993). Table 1 gives a breakdown of the charges, number of jail admissions, and the percentage of increase or decrease over the previous year. [These numbers are jail admissions, and not arrests.]

During the first part of the 1980s, there was a general decline in youth arrests for both violent and property crimes, while adult arrests increased. However, in the latter half of the 1980s, youthful arrests increased at a pace greater than that of adults for violent crimes and less than that of adults for property crimes. More specifically, between 1981 and 1990 the arrests of youth for a violent crime index offense increased by 29% (FBI, 1990).

The 1989-1990 arrest trends provide the best indication of recent changes in the character of youth arrests. Offense categories which showed the largest increases in the number of youth arrests were murder and nonnegligent manslaughter (26%), robbery (17%), and aggravated assault (16%) (FBI, 1990).

While the UCR Program was designed to monitor changes in the workloads of law enforcement agencies, the information reported in Crime in the United States often is used to track more general social problems, such as changes in the officially recognized criminal behavior of youth. Data reflecting changes in the number of annual arrests are inadequate for this purpose because the number of youth in the population fluctuates substantially over time. For example, during the 1980's the number of young people aged 15 through 17 declined by more than 25%. Based on this substantial decline in the age group that produces two-thirds of all youth arrests, one might expect a decline in the number of such of arrests if all other factors remained constant.

Converting arrests to arrest rates removes the impact of the changing population on arrest statistics and enables a more direct comparison of the relative number of youth arrests from year to year (Snyder, 1992). In a period when juvenile population was declining, the juvenile violent crime arrest rate increased from approximately 150 arrests per 100,000 juveniles to nearly 400 arrests per 100,000 juveniles.

Law Enforcement Response to the Problem

Given the additional wide variance between agencies in terms of agency and population size, as well as the scope of their gang problems, it is not unexpected that as many differences as similarities appear in a descriptive review of the responses of agencies to their local gang problems (Weisel and Eck, 1992). Most law enforcement personnel can intuitively describe their target activities. Yet many agency wide discussions, reports and policies tend to generalize widely about gang members and approaches. Reference to "the gang problem" as a definable issue are common, particularly above patrol level.

There have been some attempts to organize gang control efforts on the state level. California has a statewide organization for police officers working gang control. In

Chicago, the Crisis Intervention Services Project (CRISP), was initiated. This was in response to a growing problem of gang violence in certain Chicago neighborhoods. The goal of CRISP was simply gang violence reduction (Spergel, 1986). Most states have failed to develop a strategy. The absence of either a guiding plan or any serious intention to develop one is a critical defect. With few exceptions most current efforts are localized.

The element of violence and potential for spread appears to have significantly raised public attention to the issue and motivated most agencies to respond specifically to gang problems. The violence will generally take the form of increased assaults, robberies, and homicides, particularly drive-by shootings.

Many agencies have been subject to political or community pressure to respond or beef up their responses to gang problems. These pressures are often related to major incidents that occurred within the jurisdiction, such as a well publicized homicide or major youth confrontation. A gang related killing of a police officer in South Miami stands as a crystallizing event in Dade County.

Specialized gang units have been established in some large and even smaller cities. These units may have officers who carry out specialized functions: investigation, tactical patrol, intelligence, and liaison with other criminal justice agencies. In some agencies a variety of units with more general responsibilities, such as community relations, criminal investigations, vice and narcotics, and special patrol units have been assigned to deal with gang crimes.

Although Florida statute requires that each county create a Juvenile Delinquency and Gang Council, no funding was provided by the State. The Broward County Juvenile Delinquency and Gang Prevention Council received a federal grant for the development and implementation of a computerized intelligence system.

In 1990, after 29 drive-by shootings in a six month period and one innocent bystander being killed, the Orange County Sheriff's Office formed the first unit in Central Florida to suppress gang violence. The Orange County Sheriff's Office Intelligence Unit reported that some 900 gang members lived in Orange County then.

The most common failure to deal with youth gang problems for cities is denial of the problem. Denial on the part of public officials is not surprising. Their intuitive and reflexive reaction is to protect their city's image and keep it competitive with respect to economic development and in some cases, tourism. Although some cities have begun intensive law enforcement and prosecutorial efforts to address the gang problem, there is great reluctance to acknowledge the problem publicly or to commit the kind of resources necessary to engage in effective prevention programs.

The relationship between gang problem and program strategy must be made sooner or later. Those who have access to financial and human resources must be willing to direct those resources to the solution. The federal budget allocated about \$10 billion for drug programs. A generous estimate of the amounts allocated at the federal level to gang related enterprises is less than 1% of this amount (Huff, 1990). The State of Florida has not allocated funds for a State strategy to combat gangs.

Given the current numbers and the continuing decline of inner-city life, there's plenty of room for the problem to increase. Law enforcement has not yet achieved consensus on how to attack the problem. We need to be talking to each other, and with more firm data than now seems to be available. It would seem logical that the prospects

for developing more effective methods for dealing with a difficult social problem like youth gang crime would be enhanced greatly by the availability of an acceptable explanation of what causes that problem.

The degree of reduction in gang crimes should be dependent in large measure on appropriate selection, timing, and implementation of certain strategies. Law enforcement agencies which have identified youth gangs within their jurisdictions, or suspect the emergence of such gangs, need to develop short- and long-term objectives and plans of action in regard to the identified problem. Multiple strategies are necessary because law enforcement must confront a range of types of gangs and gang situations. Some gangs are newly established while others are well organized, are highly violent and involved in serious criminal activity. A variety of strategies in different combinations need to be employed which make the most efficient use of available law enforcement resources.

Model Law Enforcement Strategy

The fundamental purpose of law enforcement is protection of the community from those engaged in criminal activities. This is achieved primarily through a strategy of suppression, but also through preventive activities (Chance, et al. 1991). Law enforcement needs to address the youth gang problem in both emerging and chronic gang problem contexts. Agency direction to deal with the youth gang problem will vary depending on the scope and seriousness of the problem and available agency resources.

Law enforcement agencies should first map out a set of basic activities by which they plan to reduce gang crimes and periodically update them.

1. Emerging Gang Problems. Recognize the presence of youth gangs and a gang problems where they did not exist before and develop a campaign to sensitize or educate local government officials, community based agencies and others within the criminal justice system.

2. Chronic Gang Problems. Identify the growing seriousness of the gang problem and work with appropriate authorities to develop a campaign to mobilize resources to deal with the problem through both increased law enforcement actions and resources targeted to meet the social and economic needs of gang youth.

Objectives of Law Enforcement

- I. Develop intelligence information on gangs and gang members for investigative purposes and the means of assessing the gang problem.
 - A. Standardize definitions as to what constitutes a gang, gang crime, and gang member.
 - B. Maintain updated information on gangs and gang members.
 - C. Evaluate information to insure that it is relevant for the purposes of developing action plans.
 - D. Insure that constitutional safeguards are built into the collection and

policy dealing with gangs.

- B. Assess the processes and effectiveness of anti-gang efforts, including those of the gang unit, patrol, tactical support and other units.

Many agencies have a gang unit that must meet all of the agency objectives on the gang issue. A primary function of the gang unit is to gather and process intelligence. Reliable information is necessary to prepare cases for prosecution and to keep abreast of criminal activity by gangs. This information is utilized when investigating crimes which have the appearance of being gang related. Specific characteristics of gang motivation, circumstances, or modus operandi will assist the gang investigator in identifying gang crime. Gang intelligence serves as essential role in defining, tracking and understanding the basis for gang activities.

A key strategy of the gang unit is targeted suppression, in which the unit concentrates its attention on the nucleus of the youth gang. Every effort should be made to target and arrest youth gang leadership and hard-core gang members. These cases should be followed from start to finish to see that they are prosecuted to the fullest extend of the law. The Orange County Sheriff's Office Gang Suppression Unit focused on suppression in the early identification of gang problems in Orange County. Immediate success was recorded in the reduction of drive-by shootings and other acts of violence by gang members.

Targeted suppression by itself should not be the exclusive strategy pursued. If there is to be significant and sustained reduction in gang activity, the agency and its gang unit must broaden their functions and take on additional roles and strategies.

Multiple Program Strategies

Multiple strategies are necessary because law enforcement must confront a range of types of gangs and gang situations. Law enforcement should utilize community mobilization and assist with opportunity provision strategies in an effort to reduce the gang problem. Positive relations with the community will serve the gang unit in many ways. Many of the people in the target areas fear law enforcement due to previous encounters with law enforcement. The gang investigator needs to be sensitive to and understand the community's culture.

Social Opportunities. The school gang problem often originates in the streets. Students who are gang members bring with them destructive gang attitudes and behaviors. They claim the school as "turf," they deface the school with graffiti, and exert control through intimidation and assault of other students. Many gang members are bored with, and feel inadequate in, class and drop out as soon as possible. They develop poor teaming skills and experience academic and social failure at school from an early age. They have little identification with teachers or staff whom they may distrust and dislike intensely.

The school's approach to dealing with the youth gang problem requires first that it be recognized. The extent and seriousness of the problem must be openly and systemically assessed. While there are limits to what the schools can do in regard to basic family and community factors which significantly contribute to the youth gang problem, there is much that schools can do in conjunction with community agencies and groups. There are at least three components to a school's effective control or

suppression strategy:

1. A school gang code, with guidelines specifying an appropriate response by teachers and staff to different kinds of gang behavior.
2. Consistent application of the code within a context of positive relationships and open communication by school personnel with parents, community agencies, and students.
3. A clear distinction between gang and nongang related activity so as not to exaggerate the scope of the problem.

Special training opportunities should be provided to school administrators, teachers, and staff to increase their knowledge of gangs and community resources in regard to the problem. A key concern of training should be the development of ways to enhance both self-esteem and self-discipline of gang youth.

Social Intervention Programs. Law enforcement, including the gang investigators, are in a unique position to link gang members with a variety of social intervention programs in the community. The gang investigator is often the most knowledgeable person about specific gangs, gang activities, and the state of individual youth participation in criminal gang incidents in the local area. Such knowledge can be used to reduce the amount of gang crime by brief counseling and referral of selected gang youth to agency programs which provide alternatives to gang activities.

Social intervention programs or special counseling programs in cooperation with schools, youth agencies or community organizations can serve important diversion as well as treatment and prevention purposes (Chance et al., 1991).

Community Mobilization. Community mobilization is a process of addressing the concerns and involving those most affected by the youth gang problem. This process is a collaboration of community agencies, groups, and community leaders to heighten awareness and improve responses to the youth gang problems. Leaders must be highly committed to the resolution of the problems. Action plans should be based on agreement on the definition of the problem and what appropriately needs to be done. The plan which evolves must not only be supported by community leaders, but also by those directly affected.

Grassroots organization is a traditional American response to problems which affect the local community's welfare. These organizations can closely identify with a specific population. Community mobilization may be viewed as a strategy uniquely fitted to the interests and capacities of the grassroots organization.

Suppression. Suppression is a key strategy of law enforcement. This includes tactics such as arrest, surveillance, prosecution, and prevention. An adequate and successful targeting process can limit the youth gang development and criminal activity. Under this approach youth gang leaders and other hard-core gang members are arrested and prosecuted. Tactical patrols by law enforcement, vertical prosecution, intensive supervision by probation departments, legislation targeted at gang members, and

interagency task forces are included in this strategy. Also included is the gathering, collecting and maintaining information on youth gangs.

Conclusion

Youth gangs are more numerous, more prevalent, and more violent than in earlier decades. A major reason for this situation is the failure to develop a comprehensive strategy in dealing with youth gangs. Resources allocated to the youth gang problem do not match the severity of the problem. There is a tendency at first by authorities to deny the existence of a youth gang problem to protect community interests. Denial only delays community and organizational efforts to successfully cope with the problem. The denial usually continues until some catalytic event prompts an overreaction in the form of the establishment of a police gang unit.

Standardized definitions of the youth gang issues are essential. Having an accurate description of the youth gang problem will enable community leaders, school officials, legislators, and criminal justice leaders to determine well defined objectives. Leadership should acknowledge the problem while keeping it in its proper perspective, understand the social and economic contexts of gangs, and develop coordinated community-wide and system-wide strategies rather than isolated programs. More resources alone for law enforcement or even social service programs would not contribute much to dealing effectively with the youth gang problem. Community mobilization and more resources for, and reform of, the educational system targeted at gang youth or clearly at-risk youth would be most effective in the reduction of youth gang problems.

Gang youth must be held accountable for their criminal acts, but they must be provided with opportunities to change such behavior. Gang youth who do not receive appropriate remedial education, and vocational and social skill development -- whether in the institution or the community -- are likely to return to gang affiliation and related criminal behavior. Success in suppression can only be achieved through cooperative and sustained efforts within the criminal justice system. A mobilized community is the most promising way to deal with the youth gang problem.

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