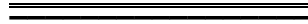


**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**



Implementing a Gang Unit Into a Mid-sized Agency



**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
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Leadership Command College**



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ABSTRACT

This paper is intended to inform the public of the increase of gangs in America. The research will show that gangs are growing in number, and there is no definitive answer in reducing their size and criminal activity. Communities are exposed to the violence and lawlessness of gang life, and many American citizens are endangered in their own neighborhoods. American parents are in danger of losing their children to gang affiliation and their own lives, as well as the lives of their loved ones, to the senseless violence of gang activity. In order to reduce the size of gangs and put the American community back at ease, the community and law enforcement must work together to collect and share information regarding gangs and the crimes attributed to them. In order to support this thesis, research from several police departments, censuses, and reports of gang activity were used to create an argument that not only identifies the problems gangs and their affiliates create, but also gives a way to lessen the problem throughout all types of communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Criminal gangs are forming fast and furious in America, with crime steadily on the rise. Studies and research have shown that as a result of increased gang participation, crime and murder rates are steadily increasing (Victoria Police Department, 2010; Langton 2010). Law enforcement efforts have been ineffective in controlling the growth and development of gangs, and many communities, whether suburban or rural, have issues with gang activity and affiliations. Gangs are not new to the many regions of the United States; neither are they unique to one region of the country. According to Worth (1995), one study showed, "Street gangs [in the 1990s] were present in 94 percent of all U.S. cities with populations over 100,000" (p. 16). If law enforcement and the community do not stop to understand what gangs are about and why they form, then they cannot and will not band together to fight them. Without knowing the familial bonds of gang society and the social and economic difficulties that bring gang activity to the forefront of many communities, a fight against gang violence and unlawfulness cannot hope to begin. To disallow gang activity, it is also important to know the definition of a gang: a gang is "defined in many ways and most definitions have similar components. One common definition of a gang is a group of three or more individuals who engage in criminal activity and identify themselves with a common name or sign" ("Gangs," n.d., para. 2).

To take a look at different cities and their rates of violent crime can sometimes be breathtaking. Victoria, for example, a mid-sized Texas city with a population nearing 70,000, has been ranked the ninth most dangerous city in the United States. Coming in at the eighth spot was Las Vegas-Paradise, Nevada, which has a population of 223,167

(U. S. Census, 2011). In the first spot was Detroit-Livonia-Dearborn, MI M.D with a population of 1,930,388 (CQ Press, n.d.) With statistics like the ones given above, it is reasonable to say that a mid-sized agency would benefit from implementing a gang unit. Gangs are on the rise, indicating that America does have a gang problem, even in its small cities and rural communities (Decker, 2007). Although gang activity certainly cannot be the explanation for all murders, it accounts for a decent number of crimes committed annually.

The Victoria Police Department Annual Crime Report from 2010 showed that the murder rate increased 600% over a one year period, jumping from one murder in 2009 to ten murders in the following year, many of which were committed by gangs and their affiliates (Victoria Police Department, 2010). However, from 2003 to 2008, according to the Victoria Police Department (VPD) Annual 2010 Crime Reports, the VPD reported a total of 24 homicides in Victoria County. As for the Rosenberg Police Department, their Annual 2010 Crime Report showed four homicides between the years of 1996 and 2009, which was a 33% increase over a 13 year period (Rosenberg Police Department, 2010). Rosenberg has a population of 33,900. College Station Police Department Annual 2010 Crime Reports showed six murders from 2009 and 2010 among a population of 80,300 residents (College Station Police Department, 2010). Looking at the above statistics, it is obvious that the Victoria Police Department statistics show the greatest increase over a short period of time. Because criminal activity in Victoria is more closely associated with gangs than that of College Station, a college town, and Rosenberg, an affluent suburb of Houston, it can be said that higher rates of gang activity also lead to a higher rate of homicides.

Most of the gang crime is associated with drug and human trafficking activities. Gang members take part in several activities, “such as, auto theft, assault, alien smuggling, burglary, drive-by shootings, extortion, firearms offense, home invasion robberies, homicide, identity theft, insurance fraud, mortgage fraud, operating prostitution rings, and weapons trafficking” (National Gang Intelligence Center, 2009, p. 16). Combating crime should not be what a gang unit is all about; it also should be involved in gathering, investigating, and sharing information about those who commit and organize the illegal activities.

One of the benefits from implementing a gang unit would be gathering intelligence. The information gathered from local crime units would be shared with other agencies to enhance law enforcement’s ability to understand and confront the activities of gangs. Some of the information that could be gathered from gangs and their members concerns their associates, tattoos, vehicles, family members, and how members are initiated into the gang. With this information on hand, law enforcement could use it to assist in future cases or investigations. Sharing the information collected with other agencies could help to build networks between different agencies, allowing them to help each other identify gangs and decrease the rate of crime in their communities. Finally, the idea of the gang unit would be to take a proactive approach. The mission of the proactive approach would be to reduce crime and the fear of crime through outstanding police service in partnership with other agencies and the community. Community involvement is as important to policing in the effort to prevent, control and stop crimes involving gangs (“Information for Parents,” n.d.). Getting the

community involved and helping them understand about gangs should have a positive impact to help educate the public what to look for and what to be aware of.

POSITION

Prison gangs and streets gangs are forming at an alarming rate at this day in age. At this rate, a mid-size agency that averages about 100 sworn police officers and has populations of at least 80,000 or greater should implement a gang unit. Gang membership does not discriminate; it encompasses all races from most socioeconomic levels and is not limited to large cities. One way to address the large number of growing gangs and gang members is for agencies to form specialized gang units. By implementing a gang unit, officers can develop specific expertise and technical skills related to gang characteristics. The gang unit can target prison gangs, street gangs, motorcycle gangs, and taggers. The sole purpose of the gang unit will not be to combat crime, but to also investigate and gather intelligence. National Gang Center (n.d.) found research in the United States that, “reflecting the overall leveling off in recent years of the number of gangs, the percent change from 2005 to 2009 is relatively small (5 percent) and virtually unchanged (less than 1 percent) from 2008 to 2009” (as cited in Decker, 2007, p. 729). This data suggests that gangs in the United States are declining in number, although it does not take into account that gang activity is, in fact, on the rise.

Even though the numbers of gangs are on the decline, crimes are steadily increasing that are related to gang activity. Langton (2010) described that, “Gangs can contribute to higher violent crime rates, induce community deterioration through behaviors such as vandalism, graffiti, and drug dealing, and increase public fear of

victimization” (p. 1). Decker (2007) also talked about “The serious involvement of gang members in violence, particularly retaliatory violence, makes them a public safety concern, as do their increased levels of offending while in the gang” (p. 730). Most crimes involving gangs are due to drug, gun, and human trafficking and money laundering. When situations go wrong within the gang, their reactions are through violent crimes increasing. Some gangs are careless, and when this occurs, innocent bystanders are hurt. This is why it is important to educate both the community and the media so they know what to look for in gangs. Some of the roles for the gang unit will be to maintain high visibility on the street level to deter further crime or violence and to gather intelligence. Knowing what to look for in gangs, such as colors, symbols, hand signs, and tattoos will help assist the community.

One of the first signs of a gang becoming an issue within the community is when a community begins to see graffiti being spray-painted on the local business and throughout the community. Gang members mainly use graffiti to gain recognition, to mark their territory and to express the identity of their gang life. Gangs also use graffiti to challenges their rival gangs and again to show who owns the territory. The gangs then become territorial and when the community sees an “X” over spray painted graffiti that already exist, is stating that one gang is stepping on another gang’s territory (Carlie, 2002). This is only one sign that a community is beginning to have gang issue or possible a gang rival. The presence of gang can be seen in every city, small or large. Gangs thrive on recognition and seek ways to make their presence known or felt in the community. Gangs only go unseen when a community or law enforcement, as well as

educators and parents, fail to recognize the signs of gang activity and an individual's involvement.

Gang units spend the majority of time gathering intelligence and investigating the results and stimulants of gang activity. They gather this intelligence by patrolling neighborhoods particularly associated with gang activity, initiating field and traffic stops, and making arrests through proactive approaches. Just because a gang unit is implemented, this does not mean that patrol needs to stop collecting information. Patrol, detectives, bicycle officers, and any other pro-active unit need to continue gathering information to pass onto the gang unit. Gang intelligence is critical to gather in order to maintain a database of which gangs are in settle into the community. The intelligence also helps to identify the number of gang members in a community. Some of the information that could be gathered from the gangs and their members is the following: associates, tattoos, vehicles, family members, which gang each member is in by self admittance. With this information gathered, it could help assist in future cases or investigations.

It is also important to establish a networking system with other agencies, such as local sheriff's office, probation, parole, and district attorneys' office in order to share information and build on gang intelligence. The National Criminal Justice Service (2003) paraphrased a National Institute of Justice article by Parent & Snyder (1999) and stated that the "effectiveness of multiagency coordination and integration between police, probation, parole, grassroots organizations, and corrections in controlling and redirecting serious and violent gang members has offered positive results, indicating that serious and violent gang crime can be controlled, if not reduced" (as cited in "Gang-

Related Crime,” 2003, para.8). The gang unit must be willing to work with other units both in the department and outside the department to enhance the effectiveness of both being pro-active and gathering intelligence.

The gang unit should be implemented to take a pro-active approach toward the gangs and their members. The gang unit will target the low income, high crime, gang areas in order to suppress crime. Not allowing gang members to display their colors or use gestures to communicate will also assist in deterring gang violence. For most gang units to be effective in a department, the agencies must have a strong connection with the community, this is critical because community members are the key to a successful response to gangs (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Without a gang unit being willing to work within the department or with other agencies, this will cause more problems, have no effect, and will have no positive results.

COUNTER POSITION

One of the most crucial problems facing local government as they attempt to deter gang activity, particularly given the current economic recession, is obtaining funding. Law enforcement gang units are usually formed by borrowing officers from other divisions within the department. However, when budget cuts are necessary, the gang unit is usually the first to disband. State and federal funding for gang issues is erratic and inconsistent due to the political agendas always shifting. The lack of consistency and continuity of federal assistance projects makes local government hesitate when considering these types of assistance. A gang problem is of such magnitude that with limited federal funding, the available officers are simply

overwhelmed by the problem and must limit their combined task forces to specific targets (McBride, 2010).

The funding from federal and state government is used toward personnel overtime cost, training, and equipment needed for the unit. With this funding, it allows the department to make the expansion and provide the necessities to implement the gang unit. Vehicles used for the gang unit should be discreet, such as unmarked units, when contacting gang members. This makes it much easier to stop and speak with gang members in order to build strong relationships between law enforcement and gang members. Using a marked patrol unit will discourage gang members from approaching the officers due to again being perceived as a snitch. The gang unit should also need to consider uniforms they wear while out in the community contacting gang members. Gang members find it much easier to approach an officer not in full uniform, but rather in a soft uniform, consisting of tactical pants and a neutral color shirt such as grey or any other neutral color. A gang member will hesitate approaching an officer in full uniform or marked patrol unit so that he or she is not looked at as a snitch or rat by other members. If a gang member is considered a snitch or rat, the leaders of the gang will come after the snitch and kill them (Knox et al., 1995). They find it much easier to approach and speak with a gang officer in plain clothes or in an unmarked patrol unit with visible identifiers like a badge and gun.

The gang unit can also find ways to help with training cost, by offering on the job related training. The different agencies can work together and convene a monthly meeting that can enhance the officer's knowledge and provide basic training about what to look for in gangs. These monthly meetings can also include sharing cases and

exchanging information to enhance the data base, too. Certain types of software programs are also available on today's market that is compatible with every agencies current software program. The software allows for specific data to be entered about gangs, vehicles, tattoos, and their associates. With this information, officers and investigators can use it to run specific engine searches when looking for something in particular. With the data gathered, it could also be used to show the department heads and the community the number of gangs and gang members.

Community and department heads have a tendency to proclaim that there are no gangs within the community, stating that there are only a few "wannabes." The term "Wannabes" should never be used (Walker, n.d.). The "Wannabes" are the most dangerous of the gangs because they are careless and do not care who gets hurt when committing crimes. Walker (n.d.) stated, "By overlooking the fact these youth have adopted a gang name, use gang signs and symbols and commit crimes, these youths are "Gonnabes" (para. 3). When both the community and the department fail to recognize any existence of gang activity, this increases the gang's ability to develop a power base. Whether the failure to recognize is through a lack of training, or just plain ignorance, the gang will still thrive on it (Walker, n.d.). Training and educating the community and the department heads about gangs and by accepting the idea that a city does have a gang problem is the first step to re-gaining taking over the city back from the gangs.

RECOMMENDATION

Communities cannot afford to wait for legislators to address the gang plague. Agencies need to begin acquiring the funding resources, training personnel, and fielding

a gang task force from law enforcement and community prevention and intervention programs to target the problem areas immediately. None of this can be done unilaterally by just the law enforcement agency. There needs to be involvement from everyone such as the law enforcement, community, corrections, probation, and parole. The law enforcement agency is the obvious organizer of the gang task force approach as they usually have the paramilitary leadership to pull such a force together and the contacts to make it work. Funding the gang unit should be the main priority toward a true management of the gang problem.

One impact from implementing a gang unit is that it will effect the sheriff's department because of the number of arrest that will be made, the district attorney's office with the increase of cases, the parole and probation office with the number of subjects that will be placed on supervisor release. These expenses will be accounted for when funding the gang unit. The idea of the gang unit will be to decrease the number of gangs and gang members, to reduce the crime associated with the gangs. Finally, for the gang unit to be effect, one benefit would be to gather intelligence for a data base and to share the information with other agencies. Again, one other benefit of the gang unit will be to take a pro-active approach and impact the gang community. When organizing a gang unit it should consist of at least one supervisor and a minimum of five officers to get started. One of which ways the gang unit can be made up is by borrowing officers from other divisions. State and federal funding is also available along with grants the agency can apply for to pay for the officer's salary or equipment.

Communities should also considering adopting gang injunctions. As per the El Paso Police Department, the definition of a civil injunction "is a lawsuit that, if granted by

the court, requires or limits certain actions by the named defendants. In essence, an injunction of this type serves as a protective order for the designated area” (Castillo, 2012). Gang injunctions are issued by a judge and can be used a good resource tool to help suppress gangs and keep them from taking over certain areas. Getting the community to accept the idea that a city does have a gang problem and being able to educate them about what to look for and how to identify gangs and their members is the first lounge toward working together.

Parents, teachers, community leaders, and citizens can all benefit from being educated about gang prevention. If adults who are educated, in turn, choose to educate youth, the likeliness of children and teens choosing to partake in gang activity will decrease significantly. One of the most effective ways to prevent a gang from taking over the community is to get involved. The eyes and mind of the community cannot be closed to gang violence and also cannot be ignorant of it. It is not helpful or practical to assume that anyone is safe from gang violence, as gangs rarely recognize any boundaries. The only way to prevent the formation and expansion of gangs is to build a solid wall of coordinated, civil resistance to their criminal activities, and to see the community for what it is instead of idealizing it. Gang size can be reduced as well as gang activity, but the community and law enforcement must be able to work together to bring peace back to the forefront.

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