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Gang Suppression and Interdiction:
How effective are "specialized" units?

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is directed at the response of police agencies to "battling" the emergence of youth gangs in their jurisdictions. The gang problem has often been defined as a police problem, and the response of the police has differed from agency to agency. Without clear guidelines to follow, many police agencies developed "specialized" units to handle the problem. After the development of these units, many agencies saw an increase activity among the youth. With the re emergence of community-oriented policing, many agencies have noted a significant decrease in activity among youth gangs. In order to continue the trend of decrease gang activity among today's youth, the entire community must become active in the fight against the violence. Gangs are no longer just a police problem.

Introduction

Gangs have always been an intricate part of our society. The purpose of this research is to determine the usefulness of a specialized gang unit in suppression and interdiction of violent street gangs and to propose policies and/or procedures to be utilized by the unit in the future.

In the late 1980's, the Tyler Police Department selected an officer to serve as the gang intelligence officer. This officer was to gather intelligence and investigate crimes determined to be "gang-related" in nature. As in other areas of the country, the City of Tyler was experiencing all the "tell-tale" signs of gang development. These included gang-related graffiti, a rise in violent assaults committed by juveniles, including weapons offenses. In 1994, the Tyler Police Department developed a specialized unit to combat "gang-related" crime. The officers assigned to this unit were utilized as "lead" investigators on all gang-related activity. Three officers were designated to fulfill this duty. Officers in this unit were instrumental in the investigation of several gang-related homicides and aggravated assaults that lead to the arrest and conviction of major "leaders" within the gang structure in Tyler. Citizens of Smith County and the surrounding area look to these officers as "specialist" in gang awareness and intervention. Between 1994 and 1996, the City of Tyler showed a remarkable decrease of "gang-related" activity in the area. Drive-by shootings decreased considerably, gang-related assaults decreased, even graffiti begin to show a decline.

This research paper will address the effectiveness of a "specialized" unit or team in combating gang-related criminal activity and whether or not community oriented policing concepts are as effective in handling gangs. The intended audience is the executive staff of the Tyler Police Department. This research will aid in assessing the effectiveness of the gang unit

and assist in determining standard operating policies and/or procedures in utilizing the unit. Sources of information will include, but is not limited to, books, publications, journals, surveys of other departments concerning their policies and/or procedures relating to the suppression and interdiction of gangs.

The intended outcome of this research is to determine that having a specialized unit to address intelligence gathering, information sharing and investigations of violent street gangs can be a successful tool in the suppression of gangs. Additionally, the specialized unit can be utilized along with community oriented policing techniques in the interdiction of violent street gangs.

Historical, Legal or Theoretical Context

Gangs pose a significant challenge to law enforcement agencies as well as citizens, schools, and the quality of life in our communities (Goldstein & Huff, p. 401). Nicholas determined that, "failure to come to grips (with gangs) will cause the demise of our country" (1994). Street gangs are no easy target; most attempts to influence them have brought more frustration than fulfillment (Klein, p. 137). According to Rush, gangs exist or have the potential to exist in any city, town, or village. And where they exist, exists what Curtis Silwa refers to as the **DID** syndrome: Deny, Ignore, and Delay (Miller & Rush, p. 85). First we *deny* that there is a gang problem or that we even have gangs. Then we *ignore* the signs that appear (dress, graffiti, hand signs, admittance, etc.). Finally we *delay* our response to these signs (Miller & Rush, p. 85). Rush adds one of the first things law enforcement must do in addressing the gang problem is to be in the forefront, to lead the charge against gangs. All too often, it is our police and our teachers who are the first to see the problem developing. Rush intercedes that law enforcement is

in the best position, among all of criminal justice, to appreciably deal with a gang problem focused on gang control through community improvement. Rush concludes that law enforcement must be aggressive in its response (Miller & Rush p. 85-86).

Police response to gang violence differs from agency to agency. To address the response to this problem, we first have to address the structure of police agencies. Since at least 1829, when Sir Robert Peel organized the London Metropolitan Police, urban police departments typically have been characterized by rigid organizational structures that are highly resistant to change (Huff & McBride, p. 402). Huff noted that the typical law enforcement organization is not well structured to deal with youth gangs. Traditional police departments rely on existing units (patrol, investigations, crime prevention, juvenile bureau, community relations) to respond to gang behavior (Huff & McBride, p. 402). Needle and Stapleton determined that in recent years, several specialized forms of gang control have appeared more frequently. They include the following:

1. The *youth service program*, in which traditional police unit personnel (usually from the juvenile bureau) are assigned gang control responsibility, along with other duties
2. The *gang detail*, in which one or more officers of a traditional unit are given exclusive responsibility for gang control
3. The *gang unit*, in which one or more officers are in a unit established solely to cope with gang problems (Huff & McBride, p. 402-403).

These authors viewed different organizational arrangements as functions of the perceived differences in the scope and seriousness of the gang problem, police department size, and

available resources. In their survey of 27 police departments, Needle and Stapleton reported that only four had any written policies or procedures for dealing with gangs. The authors also noted that few if any of the departments surveyed offered any gang control training. The conclusion that they arrived at is that on a national basis there is a lack of consistency on the gang control policies of the police (Covey, Menard, and Franzese, p. 233-234).

The various types of police anti-gang organization have comprised anywhere from 1 to 500 personnel. According to Huff, the more serious the gang problem in a given community, the more likely it is that a specialized gang control unit will emerge within the department. He goes on to say the emergence of such a special unit may be a two-edged sword (Huff & McBride, p. 403). Furthermore Huff advises internal and external turf wars constitute one of the most common problems facing police agencies. Gang units, like other specialized units, may encounter jealousy when they are initially formed, and may develop some elitist and isolationist practices that, if left unchecked, can undermine departmental efficiency and effectiveness (Huff & McBride, p. 407-408).

Several officers agreed with one officer's perception: "Members of the gang unit profile around and play cowboy. When they do make contact with gang members they do little more than harass them." Another officers stated, "We [patrol officers] are the one who work the gangs. We deal with them on a daily basis. The gang squad is too busy dealing with the media..." (Shelden, Tracy, Brown, p. 212). Consequently however, if the gang unit prepares a weekly newsletter for patrol officers, helps brief patrol officers on current gang activities and threats, and helps respond to backup calls when it is in the area, the esprit de corps is strengthened (Huff & McBride, p. 408).

During the past few years, the federal government has provided assistance in funding through block grants designated for youth gang interdiction. Most often, these grants are used to create and support social-control strategies rather than solution-oriented approaches. One law-enforcement agency was found by Shelden, Tracy, and Brown that formed a special gang unit in order to compete for a piece of the block-grant pie. Surprisingly, it was discovered that this particular jurisdiction did not have a youth gang problem at the time of the application, nor does this agency have a gang problem now. During an interview with the detective in charge of the newly formed gang unit, it was revealed that "The mayor wanted a gang unit because he had heard that federal grant money was available for police departments that adopted this sort of special unit" (p. 209).

Review of Literature or Practice

According to a 1995 National Youth Gang Survey published by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, sixty-three percent of police departments and 48 percent of sheriff's departments reporting youth gang activity had specially allocated personnel to respond. The majority of the responders, 36 percent of police departments and 50 percent of the sheriff's departments reported having no dedicated response units to the gang problem. However, sixty-four percent of the police departments and 50 percent of the sheriff's departments reported having either youth/street gang units, gang prevention units, both type of units or a combination of the two. The responding agencies were asked to assess their current situation, with more than 99 percent responding. Only 10 percent of all reporting localities thought their youth gang problems were getting better (p. 18). The survey went on to say that although not the only type of agency involved with youth gangs, law enforcement agencies are increasingly required to deal

with the problem, and more than 1,200 reported they had formal organizational responses such as prevention or enforcement units. Although they reported gang activity, more than 700 other agencies had no personnel assigned to deal with youth gangs. Two-thirds of the agencies serving “emerging gang localities” had no gang units (USDJ, p. 20).

The results of an informal survey of 14(fourteen) agencies in Texas had similar results. Two-thirds of the agencies surveyed utilize a “specialized” unit to combat gang violence. Fifty-seven percent of the responders had a decrease in gang activity in their areas. The Richardson Police Department utilizes a specialized unit to investigate gang-related offenses. According to Peggy Cole, Police Planner for the department, investigators of the department’s youth crime section man the gang intelligence unit, whose primary function is intelligence gathering. When a threat of gang violence is suspected the unit is deployed as a force. Richardson reported no gang-related homicides since 1993 and approximately 14 drive-by shootings. Ms. Cole went on to say there has been a decrease in overt gang related acts as a whole in Richardson and that a small dedicated unit will be needed to keep them abreast in the years to come (Cole, interview).

Sgt. Dave Tillery with the Lubbock Police Department advised their department unitize a sergeant and four officers in their gang unit, which acts as both an intelligence and suppression unit. Even though Lubbock is showing an increase in gang activities in their area, Sgt. Tillery stated he considered their unit to be extremely effective in identification of the local gangs and their membership. He went on to say that they target both “hot” areas of town and individuals that are repeat offenders. The unit works closely with both narcotics and vice units, and has made many drug arrests and seizures. Eighteen gang related homicides have occurred in Lubbock since 1993 (Tillery, interview).

North Richland Hills Police Department is a member of the Northeast Street Crime unit, which consist of 7 agencies in the Northeast Tarrant County area. This unit works gang crimes from start to finish and file their cases with a special gang prosecution unit at the Tarrant County District Attorney's office. According to Sgt. Joe Slinkard of North Richland Hills, there has been a decrease in gang activity in the area, as many "wanna be's" have lost interest. The true gang members have tried to become very low profile and will not admit to gang affiliation due to harsher court sentences. The harsher sentences have led some gang members to receive 50 plus year sentences with a minimum of 25 years to do. The Northeast Street Crimes Unit has investigated one gang-related homicide since 1993 (Slinkard, interview).

Both Victoria and Cleburne Police Departments showed a decrease in gang activity in their area without the use of a specialized unit. Victoria utilizes a monthly, multi-agency information sharing meeting which includes the police, sheriff's department, District Attorney, Juvenile and Adult Probation, Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission, and a Texas Department of Criminal Justice- Stevenson Unit Gang Investigator. The Victoria Police Department also has directive patrol to the problem areas. They reported four gang-related homicides since 1993 (Victoria Police Department, survey).

Cleburne Police Department has five DARE officers, two School Resource Officers, and two Community Police Officers who conduct proactive programs, such as G.R.E.A.T. (Gang Resistance Education and Training). Cleburne also utilizes an anti-graffiti response where graffiti is photographed and painted over. Cleburne Police Department reported one gang-related homicide since 1993 (Cleburne Police Department, survey).

Discussion of Relevant Issues

In Delinquent Gangs, a Psychological Perspective, author Arnold Goldstein states successful investigation, followed by an aggressive and successful prosecution, will greatly reduce the level of gang activity in a community (p. 41). Kratcoski and Kratcoski (1990) characterized gang suppression programs as the “isolation and destruction” approach. Gang suppression typically involves obtaining information useful to the police through gang intelligence units and the use of that information to secure arrests, prevent major outbreaks of gang violence, and to prevent recruitment of new members into the gangs (Covey, Menard, Franzese, p. 231).

Goldstein indicates police organizations should utilize any and all of the following four strategies in dealing with gang problems:

1. *Intelligence gathering and processing.* This activity involves the collection, maintenance, and analysis of information regarding gangs and their members. Such information may include names, addresses, automobiles owned or driven, weapons owned or used, and items that constitute the individuals’ criminal histories.
2. *Prevention.* Police involvement is quite diverse and ranges from primary prevention efforts targeting youths at risk for gang involvement to tertiary prevention efforts aimed at forestalling further crime by youths already deeply involved in gang activity. An example of the former is school information programs; an example of the latter is police mediation between rival gangs.
3. *Enforcement.* These activities are often the core of police gang work.

Enforcement activities include diverse proactive and reactive attempts to suppress criminal activity by gang members and apprehend youths who are believed to have committed crimes. Patrol, surveillance, apprehension, and arrest are examples of enforcement procedures.

4. *Follow-up investigation.* These are an array of also fairly standard police procedures, in this instance used in conjunction with and in response to the enforcement activities described above. Included are such dispositions of apprehended youths as counsel and release, and referral to juvenile court (p. 42-43).

A Comprehensive Model approach to handling youth gangs is a multimodal, multilevel strategy requiring that substantial resources of diverse types be employed in a coordinated manner. Comprehensive gang intervention programming still remains much more an aspiration than a reality. Two state-level gang task forces, in New York and California, have each recently sought to detail the possible scope of this intervention strategy and the array of means available for its implementation. The following are recommendations made utilizing the comprehensive gang intervention program.

1. Establish or consolidate gang and narcotics enforcement activities within a single, specialized gang and narcotics enforcement unit.
2. Provide ongoing training to the appropriate officers on methods of gang and drug enforcement, patrol, and investigation, as well as on the need to integrate specialized operations with patrol and investigations.
3. Coordinate gang and drug enforcement and prevention within an inter-agency task

force, including schools, prosecution, probation, corrections, and community organizations.

4. Coordinate efforts with fire marshals and health inspectors to abate crack houses (or other facilities used as gang gathering places) by enforcing local health, fire, building and safety codes.
5. Recruit officers, both men and women, from a representative cross section of ethnic groups, possessing bilingual skills and sensitivity to special language or cultural needs.
6. Coordinate law enforcement efforts with business and community organizations as well as with outreach and awareness programs to encourage community participation and victim/witness cooperation.
7. Notify parents or guardians of their children's gang affiliations.
8. Increase the number of peace officers in law enforcement agencies to enhance patrol and field operation staffing, placing more officers on the street to protect the community and to suppress gang- and drug-related crime.
9. Establish a Serious Habitual Offender (SHO) Program within each law enforcement agency to coordinate with prosecution and probation operations in targeting the most serious offenders for apprehension, prosecution, and incarceration.
10. Establish a community advisory group within all law enforcement departments to coordinate and select community-based organization programs that will most effectively provide community service, prevention, intervention, and community

mobilization programs that are necessary to address the gang and drug problem (Spergel, p. 38-39).

The key to successfully organizing the community response to gangs unquestionably rests with timely recognition of gang emergence and quickly overcoming the denial process. Effective responses strike a balance in addressing short- and long-term needs by balancing suppression, intervention, and prevention strategies. Programs should be targeted to include a variety of coordinated services to youth, parents, schools, criminal justice personnel, residents, businesses, and community members (Huff, p. 278-279).

Conclusion/Recommendations

The purpose of this research is to determine the usefulness of a specialized gang unit in suppression and interdiction of violent street gangs and to propose policies and/or procedures to be utilized by the unit in the future. By educating the community, law enforcement officials can explain the importance of keeping youths involved in different programs available to youths. Prevention and Intervention are key factors one must implement in order for youths not to become involved with gangs and drug abuse. Prevention measures taken will be the intervention and disorganization of members through social opportunities, community mobilization, recreational activities, organizational development or change, and creating or restructuring the most important items missing from the members (Cardona abstract).

It is this researchers intent to show that specialized gang units are effective in combating gang-related criminal activity when used in conjunction with community oriented policing concepts. The conclusions and recommendations reached by this research is that utilizing community oriented policing techniques into the fight against gangs can not only build relations

with the community but also unify the police organization. By utilizing the activities of the special unit or team to include aspects of intelligence gathering, information sharing, prevention, enforcement, and follow-up investigation, patrol officers become more involved in the problem of gang suppression. Members of the special unit or team are also utilized to work with members of the community in a "task force" established for information sharing and identification of "at-risk" or gang youths.

It is the recommendation of this researcher that the Tyler Police Department continue with its current practice in handling the gang problem. At present the Tyler Police Department has a significant decrease in gang violence. Gang homicides were down by 75 percent comparing 1996 to 1997 and drive-by shootings are down by 77 percent during the same time frame. Instead of becoming complacent with the issue, the department has chosen to incorporate a "team" effort in addressing the gang issue and to remain abreast of any potential for violence. The "team" consists of three patrol officers from various districts in the city, investigators from major crimes and youth crimes, school liaison officers, the G.R.E.A.T. officer, and an intelligence officer. The team has been effective in flowing information throughout the department regarding not only gangs but other criminal activity as well.

Community oriented policing is implemented by the involvement of the department in a Tyler-Smith County Gang Task Force. Individuals represented in the task force are from the school district, juvenile probation, District Attorney's office, Sheriff's department and community organizations. The monthly meetings address various problems or concerns involving youth violence that have developed within the city.

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