

LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE OF TEXAS

SUBURBAN YOUTH GANGS: ON THE MOVE!

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ABSTRACT

Through a combination of socio-economic factors and inner city law enforcement pressure inner city youth gangs are migrating to the suburbs. As suburban law enforcement entities struggle to identify and calculate the full impact of the migration of youth gangs from the inner city to the suburbs. It is the purpose of this paper to be an aid to suburban law enforcement leaders in their search for ways to identify the youth gang problem, seek answers for the community, and approach local government for additional funding for equipment and personnel. It is my hope that armed with information contained in this research, law enforcement managers will be prepared to make decisions and attempt to combat this migration of youth gangs into the suburbs.

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I. INTRODUCTION

It is extremely difficult to pick up a newspaper without reading an article about youth gang crime. Until recently youth gangs were an issue for which most citizens and law enforcement leaders had no mutually agreed upon definition and some did not even acknowledge. If asked to define a “youth gang” most law enforcement leaders could not even agree on a definition.

As law enforcement entities identify and calculate the full impact of the youth gang problem, it is the purpose of this paper to be an aid to suburban law enforcement leaders in their search for ways to identify the youth gang problem, seek answers for the community, and approach local government for additional funding for equipment and personnel. It is my hope that armed with information contained in this research, law enforcement managers will be prepared to make decisions and attempt to combat this migration of youth gangs into the suburbs.

The ready availability of automobiles and improved freeway systems in our metropolitan areas, has also provided gang members with vastly increased geographic mobility. Gang members described in detail the planning and execution of auto thefts in suburban shopping malls far away from their own homes, for example. The implications for law enforcement are clear, to effectively contain this gang related offenses, police must have some centralized unit or, at the very least must share intelligence on gang members and their activities. Whether a department has a gang unit, a juvenile bureau or a highly decentralized organizational structure, it must identify and be able to recognize gang leaders and members who criss-crossed the metropolitan area at will and who may show up at

citywide events, such as rock concerts, to "shake down the squares" from the suburbs (intimidate and rob suburbanites coming into the big city for such events). (Huff 1989)

In 1991, Attorney Dan Morales in his report Gangs in Texas Cities, wrote "There is very little doubt that gangs are of the urban landscape in Texas. Almost one-third of Texas Youth Commission referrals are members of named gangs, and another third belong to a circle of friends who at least sometimes think of themselves as a gang." (Morales 1991)

Youth gang members have been increasingly responsible for increasingly violent crimes. Youth gang members of today are likely to be armed with firearms and have precious little regard for human life let alone personal property. The fact is that gang activity is and has been on the rise. It has risen in large municipalities, small municipalities and unincorporated areas of counties. In Attorney General Dan Morales' 1992 Gang Report he advised that "in many major urban settings, gangs are now regarded as an extremely serious threat to public safety and law enforcement." (Morales 1992) It is clear that concerns about the youth street gang problem have increased.

In 1993, Houston Police Chief Sam Nuchia told the city council that gang activity in the Houston area had increased by a staggering 752 percent. The number of identified gangs has risen from 23 to 196 in 1993 alone, with a corresponding increase in number of gang members from 1,098 in 1989 to 1,645 in 1993. Youth gang activity has a broad based impact on the community as a whole. Youths that are not members of a youth gang become victimized at an alarming rate. Youths that are not members of youth gangs find themselves breaking the law by arming themselves with edged weapons and firearms.

During a recent interview with a fourteen year old juvenile who had just been arrested for unlawfully carrying a handgun he said "I gotta' pack a gun or they're gonna' kill me." The juvenile was making reference to a gang that flourished in his community with whom he had several confrontations with in the past. (Field notes 1994)

The violent criminal lifestyle that we have come to know as the youth gang subculture, adds to the already tense environment faced by non-gang youths. Youths that are members of gangs tend to face a future of prolonged criminal activity that may even be intensified by the youth gang membership.

Gang members actually spend most of their time in exaggerated versions of typical adolescent behavior (rebellious against authority by skipping school, refusing to do homework and disobeying parents; wearing clothing and listening to music and sets them apart from most adults; and have a primary allegiance to their peer group instead of their parents or other adults. (Huff 1989)

This is a real problem with real winners and losers with real victims and predators. A complex problem with far reaching ramifications if it is not solved. The problem of youth gangs migration to the suburbs is multi-faceted and is going to take a multi-faceted approach to solve it. However, we must start here in an attempt to find the answer to the question, why?

II. DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Youth gangs are no longer the exclusive problem of large municipalities. Suburban communities, with their naive attitudes towards youth gangs combined with a very profitable market for drugs and other illegal enterprises have become extremely vulnerable to the problem of the migration of youth gangs to the suburbs. As one gang member said during his interview, "people may say there is no gangs 'cause they don't see no colors, but if they be robbin' people, shootin' people, and killin' people, they still a gang." (Huff 1989)

In the large municipalities, as the issue of youth gangs moves to the forefront of their fight against crime, new and innovative ordinances, such as curfews, are implemented displacing youth gang criminal activity. The displaced youth gang activity ends up in the unincorporated areas of counties and smaller municipalities that have not yet enacted curfew ordinances. The unincorporated areas of the counties are not able to pass local laws and therefore have become a haven for youth gang operation. In unincorporated areas of a county the only hope for enacting a curfew is the passage of state law, that allows for the implementation of a curfew. Some small municipalities are either unable due to political pressure, or unwilling to acknowledge the youth gang problem by passing their own curfew ordinances.

These municipalities may be paralyzed by "official denial", when they refuse to acknowledge the existence of gangs in their areas. For a variety of reasons, not the least of which is protection of a cities image, political leaders and others in key

leadership roles are reluctant to acknowledge the existence of gangs. Official denial of gang problems appears to facilitate victimization by gangs, especially in public schools. School principals in several Ohio cities are reluctant to acknowledge "gang related" assaults for fear that such problems may be interpreted as negative reflections on their management abilities. This "Political Paralysis" appears to encourage gang related assaults and may send the wrong signals to gang members, implying that they can operate with impunity in the vacuum it creates. (Huff 1989)

III. The Migration

During the early to mid 1980's, and to some extent today, certain economic factors took place that drove down the price of suburban real estate. This economic downturn has had a great impact on the migration of youth gangs to the suburbs. During a recent interview with several real estate professionals they said that "the complexion of the suburban real estate market changed remarkably, people who may have never had the financial opportunity to enter into the suburban house buying market purchased homes and moved into the suburbs." (Field Notes 1994)

It is no secret that the American family is deteriorating, the breakdown of the essential family unit has left a void in the infrastructure. In an attempt to fill this void youth turn to gang membership.

Once in the suburbs some youths were faced with several obstacles to their assimilation into the suburban community. These youths may have had previous contact with law enforcement and this may be the very reason for the families' migration to the suburbs. Also, these youths may not have been very well prepared to face a more structured and many times more academically challenging educational environment. These youths are also faced with the issue that fellow youths in the suburbs may have had more tangible material possessions. Being faced with the fact that they may have been ill-prepared academically, financially disadvantaged and not able to break into the very competitive area of organized school sports. These youths then return to what they are familiar with, gang activity.

On the edge of every community there are youth that are on the fringe of our society. These youths are often misfits that just do not seem to fit in. Sometimes this is because of a lack of motivation, poor academic abilities, poor physical abilities or an act of rebellion. More often than not these youths align themselves with these "Skilled" youth gang members. Mutual promises of excitement, money, "family" and belonging cement the partnership.

Suburban communities are not very familiar with gang activity. Citizens in the suburbs equate gangs with "Big City" life not that of the suburbs. During a recent interview of concerned citizens I was informed that "there are not any gangs in the area." (Field Notes 1994) This lack of an informed citizenry allows for a naive attitude toward youth gangs.

The above issues combined with a very lucrative drug and other illegal activity market provide a very friendly environment for the proliferation of youth gangs.

In an interview of one hundred past and present youth gang members 98 were male and 2 were female. This information is consistent with youth gang membership in the area which is predominantly male. Most females although they may in fact be gang members are reluctant to claim their gang affiliation to police. The 100 were comprised of 63 whites, 20 blacks, 12 Hispanics and Asians. I found this to be generally a cross section of the basic demographics of the community and not surprising due to the fact that members are recruited from community schools and neighborhoods. 72 were currently attending school and 28 were not. I believe this to be a testament of the inability of the school districts to resolve this problem single handedly. 67 were employed 23 were not employed.

Although the number of the employed is high the jobs were mostly fast food jobs. 86 admitted their gang affiliation and 14 said that they were not a gang. As law enforcement and other government agencies focus on gangs we appear to have less youth ready to admit gang affiliation. When asked "why did you join the gang?" Out of the 86 that admitted gang membership, 57 cited "belonging," 16 cited "protection," 7 cited "money" and 6 cited "excitement." In response to the question "How were you introduced into the gang?" All 86 responded that they were introduced by a friend. (Field Notes 1994) This supports the theory of recruitment from the suburban community. By recruiting friends and acquaintances constant growth is assured. In the recruiting process each prospective member must be "clicked" or "Jumped" into the gang this process usually includes a physical bashing by the existing gang members and some commission of a criminal offense, usually at the felony level. Most suburban youth gangs prefer that their prospective gang members steal something of value to the gang during this process like a motor vehicle, cash, jewelry or even a firearm.

IV. THE YOUTH GANG PHENOMENON

A. Definition of the Gang

Texas Attorney General, Dan Morales, defined a gang as a group of two, three or more persons who have a common name, identifying sign, identifying symbols, or leadership; and who engage in a pattern of criminal gang activity. Attorney General Morales goes on to define criminal gang activity as murder, capitol murder, involuntary manslaughter, aggravated assault, arson, criminal mischief, robbery, aggravated robbery, tampering with a witness, and retaliation, and various offenses under the Health and Safety Code, having to do with the manufacturing, delivering or possession of controlled substances. Morales 1991)

Youth Gangs have also have been defined as "any cohesive group of adolescents who have a controlling set of norms and a social system specific to that group. The delinquent group is distinguished from other juvenile groups on the basis of the delinquent product of gang interaction." (Harris 1988)

In the information booklet entitled Youth Gangs the following working definitions are listed. I have chosen to include these definitions due to their simplicity and ease of use as well as their accuracy.

B. The Delinquent Youth Gang

A delinquent youth gang is defined as a loosely knit group of youths that

spend a great deal of time in each other's company. They will have some type of identifying signs such as clothing style, hand signs, or colors. This belonging to a gang may be either real or perceived. The criminal activity committed by the gang will be relatively minor in fractions of the law. The primary objective of the criminal conduct may be to get attention in one form or another. This attention would more than likely come in a negative form from parents, clergy, citizens, school officials and law enforcement. I believe it is important to note that if any one member of a gang of this type were to be arrested for a crime the grade of state jail felony or above the gang would then be stepped up into one of the next categories.

These are the youth gangs that are most closely associated with the suburban communities. Committing offenses like criminal mischief, misdemeanor theft, etc.

C. Turf Based Youth Gangs

Turf based youth gangs are usually named groups and may be organized in a very structured way or may be a loosely knit organization. The turf based gangs "success" is based on the protection of their reputation. The turf based youth gang will risk all to protect the status of the gang against threats, be they real or imagined. The turf based youth gang is usually associated with a specific geographic location. This geographic area in which the turf based youth gang operates is usually clearly defined by specific borders and unique gang graffiti. The turf based youth gang by definition is a more violent group made up of youth that more than likely have been handled by law enforcement. Turf based gang

members are predisposed to gang violence and have a great effect on the actual amount of crime and the fear of crime. These turf based youth gangs pose a problem to law enforcement due to their engrained nature. These youths illegal activity revolve around the community where they live making it extremely difficult for law enforcement to combat the turf based gang.

D. "For Profit

The "For Profit" youth gang may also be a very structured or loosely knit organization. The members of the for profit youth gang may and probably repeatedly engaged in criminal activity for monetary gain. The for profit youth gang may and probably will share many of the characteristics of the turf based youth gang, and may also adopt identifying clothing or gang signs. The significant defining characteristic is that at least on one occasion members of the for profit youth gang have worked together in a gain oriented criminal offense such as theft, robbery, burglary or the sale or trafficking of a controlled substance or substances.

E. Youth Hate Gang

The youths hate gang adopts a specific identifying style of dress, haircut or insignia and has an ideological or religious rationale, such as racism or Satanism. This type of youth gang includes members who are randomly and senselessly violent. The key defining factor is that at least once in the last year, two or more or its members have committed an assault, a homicide, or an offense that could be reported under the Federal Hate Crimes Act (vandalism, assault or homicide).

V. YOUTH GANG MEMBERSHIP

A. Why do Youths Join Gangs?

There seems to be no specific type of personality that predisposes gang membership. (Spergel 1992) After spending a great deal of time and effort researching this question it would be easy for me to report the obvious, that truly bad youths from bad parts of town comprise these youth gangs, however, that would not be entirely correct. The fact is that all types of youth are joining youth gangs.

Why youths join gangs:

1. Feeling that there is no other choice or intimidation
2. Protection from rival youth gangs or other individual youths
3. Friends of family members belong to gangs or family tradition
4. A way to use unsupervised time or too much unsupervised time
5. Excitement or the lack of anything else to do
6. Money
7. Sense of belonging or avoidance of rejection
8. Gain in a sense of control over one's life and creates self esteem by being successful in gang activities
9. Revenge
10. Recognition
11. Lack of parental attention

The formation of gangs is a response by alienated minority youth to the unavailability of legitimate employment and potential for fulfillment in their local community. (Miller 1990) The classic theory emphasizes the importance of social change and the social disorganization weakens social controls on youth,

particularly adolescent males, which, in turn, creates a need for an alternate socialization institution to the family, school, the youth agency and legitimate employment. The gang becomes such an interstitial organization. (Huff 1989)

1. Many times youths feel they have no choice, they may prefer to not become a gang member but they cannot see another way to aid the situation. Youths may be living in fear on a daily basis and see joining gangs as the only alternative to their problems. The outside pressures can also be a strong influence in the decision by a youth to join a gang. Often parents do not provide the necessary nurturing, caring and loving home environment. In certain situations' parents do not assist in getting the youths to school safely. Parents, sometimes, also fail to remember that it is their responsibility to assure that school is a safe and secure environment to learn.

2. Youths may join gangs as a means of protection from rival gangs. Youths may look at the gang in their community as a form of protection from rival gangs. Youths may look at the gangs in their community as a form of protection from rival gangs. Graffiti and other signs of gang occupation are a constant reminder to the local youth that rival gangs exist. On a daily basis most youths observe other reasons to seek the protection of youth gang membership. These reminders come in several forms the most obvious being assaults on other youth with or without gang affiliation. Quickly the youth learns that if nothing else that there is safety in numbers. The next lesson gang youths learn is that if they work hard to build a violent reputation for the youth gang they will face less resistance in their endeavors.

3. Youths often join gangs if their friends or family members belong to gangs. Youths try to emulate the important influences in their lives and there can

be no greater impact on the decision of a youth to join a gang than the influence of a family with present gang membership.

4. Youths often have unsupervised time. If this unsupervised time becomes excessive, youths will make an active search for something to do to prevent boredom. Youth gang activities can fill time. In the absence of organized activities the possibility of gang involvement increases.

5. Youth gang activities appear exciting to youth. Youths especially in their teenage years like to do new and exciting things and take new and ever increasing risks. Youth gangs provide an endless array of opportunities to take risks and find the excitement that they crave. In the recent past the youth gang lifestyle has been embellished in such a way that it has become very attractive to today's youth. Gang members have a strong need to prove themselves courageous, brave and daring. Violent and criminal encounters "are a form of proof or a way of confirmation." (Spergel 1992)

6. The appeal of obtaining money fast can be overwhelmingly irresistible to youth. We live in a society that advocates immediate gratification at any expense. Youth gangs may be involved in drugs and other criminal activities that give youth the opportunities to get money quickly. Youths may be offered more money for delivering a package or being a look out that their parents can earn in a week. Youths must understand the risks and realize the consequences that they may face.

7. Youth who have low self esteem may be attracted to youth gangs. If parents have not taught the youth how to share, compromise and take turns, how to listen to what others say, and how to be a group, the youth may be at risk.

8. Youth may feel that they do not have a sense of purpose in life and seek youth gang activities to reinforce self esteem.

B. What is Missing?

In an article in the Dallas Morning News on February 19th, 1994, said that in a telephone poll of 1,009 adults, conducted Feb. 4 -12 for Harte - Hanks Communications Inc., found that most Texans attribute juvenile crime to root causes that predominantly involve drugs and negligent parenting, but a majority also blamed low morals, alcohol abuse, academic problems and physical abuse. According to the director of the National Gang Suppression and Intervention program, the rate of violent offenses for gang members is three times as high as for non gang members. Gangs also appear to prolong the extent and seriousness of criminal careers. (Chance 1990)

Often parents and family fail to see that they must take control and responsibility of redirecting youth activities. All too often parents and family rely solely on the community to control and influence the behavior of youth. Although many community agencies are sincere and dedicated with their efforts, the family unit should be the most important influence on a youth's life. Strong and interested parents and other family can guide youth toward a very constructive use of their leisure time. Regardless of the programs that are developed, parents and family should and must assume the leadership in discouraging their youth from gang activity.

C. Ramifications

Failure to solve the youth gang problem is a consequence of major procedural and policy deficiencies nationally, state wide and locally. Reasons for these deficiencies given by Walter B. Miller, Center for Criminal Justice of the Harvard Law School, from a national perspective are:

1. The nation has failed to develop a comprehensive gang control strategy.
2. The problem is viewed in local terms instead of from a national perspective.
3. Programs are implemented in the absence of demonstrably valid theoretical rationales.
4. Efforts to systematically evaluate program effectiveness has been virtually abandoned.
5. Resources allocated to the gang problem ate incommensurate with the severity of the problem.
6. Responsibility for gang problems is not assigned to any single agency.
7. A deep rooted reluctance to face up to the implications of the social context of gang life. (Miller)

Youth gangs may best be viewed as a symptom of underlying social and economic problems that go far beyond the usual alienation found in youth subcultures in the Western nations. The existence of an urban underclass, with its attendant socially disorganized and fragmented living conditions, give rise to many social pathologies and the gang problem is just one of them. Primary prevention should be heavily emphasized in any strategy advising youth gangs, yet it is probably the most neglected type of intervention. As a number of police officers have said "Simply arresting them and locking them up is not the whole answer. We have to figure out a way to reach kids before they get involved with these

gangs." Police should be aggressive but professional in dealing with gangs. Gangs must learn that they cannot operate with impunity and that their sense of "invisibility" is a false one. (Huff 1989)

VI. OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Youth gangs are the symptomatic of many of the same social and economic problems as adult crime, mental illness, drug abuse, alcoholism, the surge in the homelessness and the multi-generation "welfare families" living in hopelessness and despair. While we are justly concerned with the replacement of our physical infrastructure (roads, bridges, sewers) our human infrastructure may be crumbling as well. Our social, educational and economic infrastructures are not meeting the needs of many children and adults. (Huff 1989)

It is going to take a far more concerned effort on the part of law enforcement and the community if we are going to attempt to make a significant change in the environment in which youth gangs flourish. It is impossible for a fragmented approach to be successful in influencing the youth gang problem.

Miller suggests the following elements must be included in any successful national youth gang policy:

1. Efforts in local communities should be informed by policies based on a national level perspective.
2. Gang control operations should be supported by sound theoretical rationales.
3. The determination of which methods are most effective must be based on carefully conducted research.
4. Serious efforts must be made to convince those who control resources that gang control should be granted a much higher priority.
5. A federal office of youth gang control should be established.
6. Accurate information on the social class and ethnic characteristics of gang communities should be used as a major element in the development of more effective gang control strategies. (Miller 1990)

VII. CONCLUSION

As preventive measures, states should consider establishing state-wide intergovernmental task forces on gangs, organized crime and narcotics. The enormous profits to be made by selling drugs will be difficult for poor youths to resist. Some of the gangs that now exist may also be easy targets for exploitation by organized crime seeking new narcotics' markets. If prevention is to be successful it will require statewide coordination. (Huff 1990)

It is difficult to get everyone to agree on the tack we should take to eliminate this problem, however, it continues to eat away, like a cancer, at the very core of our nation, our youth. This is a problem of immense magnitude that we must martial all of our resources to combat. All segments of government must join together to fight this problem. Also, it is clear that government alone cannot handle this problem. It must be a cooperative effort between government and the community.

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