Law Enforcement Bulletin

Features

Departments

Gangs in Middle America
Are They a Threat?

By DAVID M. ALLENDER

I n the past 30 years, changes have occurred in how the police and the public view, define, and discuss gangs.[1] In the late 1960s and early 1970s, police in large cities generally acknowledged the existence of gang activity within their jurisdictions. During the 1970s, the public was recovering from the Vietnam War and dealing with a wide variety of important social issues and changes. Gangs and crime did not demand the same attention as these other matters.

By the middle of the 1980s, however, the public became increasingly concerned with safety issues. The interest continued into the 1990s, partially due to an aging population. In response to the electorates' concern, federal grant programs and monies proliferated. Several of these projects, such as Operation Weed and Seed and the Office of Community-Oriented Policing Services (COPS) antigang initiative,[2] had as a core ingredient the need to control or dismantle criminal street gangs. Increased attention and discussion also brought new legislation to deal with the gangs. Many states enacted statutes to assist police and prosecutors and mandated that new police officers attending basic police academies receive at least a minimal amount of training in gang topics. Media interest mirrored audience appetite and boosted coverage of gang-related subject matter. Increased reporting of such incidents had the effect of making it appear that gang activity was on the rise. But, is this truly the case, especially in middle America? Are states, such as Indiana, "the crossroads of America,"[3] at risk of becoming infected with the gang menace or has it occurred already?

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An examination of gang history, gang migration, and gang structure, along with the efforts of law enforcement to combat and prevent gangs may provide some answers. In addition, a review of Indianapolis, Indiana's experience with gangs illustrates how a "big small town" in the heart of the United States can become a new target for gangs from other areas of the country.[4]

GANG HISTORY

Historical literature makes frequent reference to groups that engaged in criminal activity. Ancient Egyptians talked about bands of robbers who preyed upon those transporting goods along the caravan routes. China had gangs who committed robberies and kidnappings for profit. Folklore romanticizes pirates on the high seas that made their living by murder, robbery, and kidnapping. According to Hollywood and some authors, large numbers of outlaw gangs populated the American West. As with the pirates, many of these outlaws became folk heroes. Endless examples exist of gangs, bound together through the commission of criminal acts.

A well-documented gang case comes from the British who, from 1834 to 1848, were dealing with what they identified as a gang of robbers and murderers in Budhuk, India.[5] Unable to deal with the gang because of its size and complexity, local authorities turned to the army for help. To gain control of the situation, the government passed legislation prohibiting gang membership, associating with known gang members, and deriving profit from a gang's criminal activity. The military convinced the government to pass additional laws allowing a federalist approach, including permission to house prisoners in jails far from the gang's home territory. Extensive use of informants, working for both pay and sentencing considerations, comprised a main component of the successful effort. Interestingly, police investigating gangs today deal with some of the problems troops encountered during this operation.

America's first identified gang, however, was formed in 1820 in the Five Points District of New York City. Named the Forty Thieves, the gang operated along the waterfront, engaging in acts of murder, robbery, assault, and other violent acts. Composed of recently arrived Irish immigrants, the Forty Thieves recruited a group of young imitators, who called themselves the Forty Little Thieves. To complete the equation, a rival gang, the Kerryonians, organized to ensure that they got their share of the ill-gotten gains. This pattern repeated itself many times over the years.

The end of the Civil War saw large-scale criminal activity on the part of a few veterans who had trouble returning to a peaceful society. Some of these men formed gangs to increase the profits from their illegal actions, such as the infamous brothers Jessie and Frank James who recruited men, often boyhood friends or relatives, to assist them as they traveled to commit robberies. Media reports often attributed crimes to the James Gang that they could not possibly have committed due to the acts occurring great distances apart and on the same day. Although authorities knew where the James family lived, they were unsuccessful in apprehending the brothers. The gang finally met its ruin through a couple of events. The members ventured far from their familiar territory in Missouri to commit a robbery in Northfield, Minnesota. The robbery went awry and degenerated into a running gun battle leaving several residents and holdup men dead or wounded. Captured gang members received long prison sentences.

Unrelated to the robbery, but not long after, an associate murdered Jessie. Faced with the loss of so many of the gang's members, Frank surrendered to authorities. The governor of Missouri later pardoned Frank James, and he escaped punishment for his criminal acts.

Moving from the notorious and infamous to those with more in common with gangs today, a 1927 study of street gangs in Chicago[6] identified 1,313 active gangs in the city at that time. The findings have a common thread that links these historical groups to present-day gang members. For example, many of those who formed or joined gangs felt disenfranchised by society. Many members of Forty Thieves, comprised of recently arrived immigrants, had problems adjusting to a new culture and experienced prejudice due to their immigrant status and ethnicity. In India, the gang's members had to live closely together to avoid arrest. In time, the rest of society would not accept anyone tied to the gang. Thus, they had to remain within the group to support themselves. Pirates often were seamen who had been shanghaied, escaped from authorities, or were estranged in some manner from a normal lifestyle. The James' brothers and their support system of friends and relatives felt strong resentment toward established authority because of their wartime experiences. More examples exist, but the feeling of estrangement exhibited by these groups represents an important theme. These same feelings often occur in modern gangs. The gang often exists prior to entering into any type of profit-making criminal activity. The opportunity

to make money from crime comes about *because* the gang exists. The gang, with the exception of some drug gangs, does not normally form to make money.

The world of outlaw motorcycle gangs illustrates how the gang came first and then the criminal actions. Veterans returning from World War II formed motorcycle clubs. While most were social groups, a few, such as the Hell's Angels, began to engage in criminal activities. As the Angels grew in power and influence, rival gangs, such as the Pagans, Banditos, and

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the Outlaws, formed in other parts of the nation. Because of their organization, the motorcycle gangs controlled certain types of criminal activity within their areas of dominance. Bikers, by their bylaws, actions, and appearance, seek to force their members to remain outside the mainstream of society. In doing so, the leadership bonds the membership closer together as the group mentality becomes one of "us versus them."

Ethnic gangs represent another illustration of gangs forming before any criminal activity takes place. Hispanic gangs grew in strength and influence following the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943. In California,

white, off-duty military personnel attacked Hispanic males who they felt were benefitting from the war while evading the dangers of combat. The physical danger from the rioters, coupled with other acts of prejudice and discrimination, caused the Latino community to band together more tightly. The criminal element, usually present in every group of people, then took over some of the gangs to further unlawful enterprises.

Other ethnic groups, including Asians, Italians, Jews, Jamaicans, and many others, formed gangs because they too had to deal with prejudice and discrimination, which alienated them from mainstream society. The organizations they formed had varying degrees of sophistication. Many of the groups faded away as the ethnic groups assimilated into mainstream culture. A lawful alternative for those that continued to exist was the transition into social or fraternal organizations, promoting cultural identity and positive civic actions. A small percentage mutated into criminal enterprises, which the media and entertainment industry often have romanticized. The extreme example of this genre being the Italian Mafia, portrayed in a positive or humorous fashion in numerous movies, television programs, advertising commercials, and even news reports. The trend continues with the influx of Russian immigrants into the United States. A small percentage of these new arrivals are criminals and gang members, dubbed the "Russian Mafia" by the popular media. In short, the formula for creating and maintaining gangs is not a new concept and is ongoing.

The real problem facing law enforcement is identifying the amount of criminal gang activity present and limiting the damage these groups can do to society.

GANG MIGRATION

How does the idea of establishing a gang spread? Where do aspiring members get information on how to form and structure the gang? Must gang members follow certain rules? How does a potential leader pick and recruit followers? Are there role models in this subculture? To understand the gang subculture, law enforcement officers, school administrators, social workers, and parents must become familiar with the basic concepts that these questions address.

Who Joins a Gang?

Not all street gangs exist to sell drugs or commit criminal acts. Instead, young people normally seek gang involvement for some combination of the following five reasons:

1) Structure: Youths want to organize their lives but lack the maturity to do so on their own. The gang provides rules to live by and a code of conduct.

2) Nurturing: Gang members frequently talk of how they love one another. This remains true even among the most hardened street gangs. These young people are trying to fill a void in their lives by substituting the gang for the traditional family.

3) Sense of belonging: Because humans require social interaction, some young people find that the gang fulfills the need to be accepted as an important part of a group.

4) Economic opportunity: Gang members motivated by this consideration alone probably would become involved in criminal activity anyway. Finding it hard to draw away from the lifestyle, but due to a lack of loyalty for the group, they often will provide authorities with information in exchange for some personal benefit.

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5) Excitement: This often represents a motivation for suburban and affluent youths. Gangs composed of these types of individuals usually have very fluid membership, with associates joining and leaving to be replaced by others with a passing interest.

Few young people that enter into the gang subculture do so for evil or criminal reasons. They are looking for something that they feel is lacking in their lives. For this reason, gangs can form in any city, town, neighborhood, or region. No hard-and-fast rule says that all gang members do one thing or another. To understand the gang operating in any given area, law enforcement agencies must determine what motivates the gang's members and how the gang leadership maintains authority over, and loyalty from, its members.

At present, the most visible criminal street gangs operate in the nation's inner cities. When depicted by either the news media or the entertainment industry, these groups have almost exclusively young black or Hispanic males as members, often portrayed as violent and prosperous because of their involvement in the drug trade. In reality, not all street gangs are involved heavily in drug trafficking; very few street gang members are prosperous; and no shortage of white male gang members exists in inner-city, suburban, or rural areas. Moreover, females often join the gang subculture for the same reasons males do. They may link themselves to a male-dominated gang, or, in some cases, form their own associations. The urban legend about prosperity has grown, however, and many young people see the street gang as a method of achieving both financial and social success. Unfortunately, a few gangsters involved with street gangs are successful, both financially and socially. They become role models to less fortunate young people who are short-sighted and fail to realize the danger and the damage criminal gang activity can do to them, their families, and their neighborhoods.

How Do Gangs Spread?

Criminal street gangs can spread by what some have labeled

the "imperialist method." A large street gang will dispatch members to start a chapter in a new city or neighborhood to further some form of criminal activity. For example, in 1999, the Indianapolis Safe Streets Task Force concluded a multiyear investigation of a drug-dealing gang called the New Breed. This gang arrived as an established enterprise from Chicago and only allowed local residents to fill lower levels of the organization. Members would rotate between Chicago, Indianapolis, and at least six other cities. The group had a set of rules and a belief system, which they brought with them. At the conclusion of the investigation, 15 gang members were charged with federal drug trafficking offenses, based on crimes committed in Indianapolis. Numerous New Breed members operating in other cities were unaffected by this case.[7] Two problems

arise from this type of gang movement. First, surviving gang members in other locations will, after modifying their methods, move to fill the void left by those arrested. Second, local residents who were either gang members or associates will recreate the operation to take advantage of the available profits. Presently, both of these situations may be occurring in Indianapolis.

Another way an established street gang can spread its influence can be referred to as "franchising." Often done to realize a profit from criminal activity, this method calls for an existing gang to contact local residents and recruit them into the enterprise. If, for example, a Chicago-based gang, such as the Four Corner Hustlers, develops contacts that they trust in Indianapolis, they may work an arrangement to supply drugs in exchange for a substantial share of the profits. Both groups

benefit—the locals get a dependable supply of product, and, in this example, the Four Corner Hustlers realize a profit with minimal risk. Most prevalent in drug-dealing enterprises, franchising also can involve such crimes as theft, forgery, or fencing stolen goods.

A new street gang often will form because young people have an interest in the gang lifestyle and will look for sources of information. If possible, the curious will find someone who was, or claims to have been, a gang member in another location (e.g., a young person who recently moved into the area from a city, such as Chicago or Los Angeles). This person now becomes the resident "gang expert," and the gang will shape its structure and rules by this person's information. In addition, gang members and their associates watch movies and television programs depicting gang

life from which they convert information for their purposes. Conversations with former gang members revealed that they also viewed television news reports, read news stories, and watched reality-based television programs to see how gangs in other places operated. Finally, the Internet represents an important source for emerging gangs. Simply by searching the word *gang*, the inquirer can receive a wealth of Web sites, as well as several chat rooms for gang members. Such numerous and varied sources, many of which give conflicting information, account for the wide diversity in street gang structure and methods of operation.

GANG STRUCTURE

Just as there are numerous gangs for aspiring gangsters to imitate, uncounted sources of information exist on how to establish, structure, and rule a street gang. East Coast and Hispanic gangs generate some interest, but the dominant influences in the Midwest are from the West Coast, especially Los Angeles, and from the Chicago area. Observers also will encounter other types of criminal gangs throughout the area, including prison groups, outlaw motorcycle clubs, as well as Asian criminal enterprises and ethnic street gangs. Perhaps, the most recognizable of these latter sets are the outlaw bikers because of their attire, community activities, and Web sites. However, their sophistication and secretive nature concerning their operations and structure prevent the average street gang member from obtaining enough information to imitate them.

The Four Nations

In the 1980s, West Coast black gangs formed two loose confederations—the largest, the Crips, and their rivals, the Bloods. Contrary to what many believe, there is neither one Crip nor one Blood gang. Rather, numerous sets of each have joined together to either protect themselves or facilitate their criminal activities. These represent two of the Four Nations. The other two originate from Chicago. In the late 1970s, a very large criminal street gang, known as the Gangster Disciples, formed a coalition with several other street gangs to maximize

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drug profits and protect their members from violence perpetrated by rivals. The consolidation called itself the Folk Nation. Other gang sets in Chicago felt the need to form an alliance to ensure their share of the drug market. Led by the Vice Lords and the El Rukins, this band dubbed themselves the People Nation, thus creating the big four street gang nations, in no particular order of influence, the Crips, Bloods, Folks, and People.

The Indianapolis Connection

In Indianapolis, the West Coast message from the Crip and Blood Nations arrives through a variety of mediums. Evidence shows that a few California area gang members have migrated to Indianapolis. Authorities speculate that these gangsters came to the city to spread their illegal enterprises. However, officials have not documented this nor have they determined if the gangs sent these people to the Midwest or if the gangsters are acting from personal interests. The more common means of transmission for West Coast ideas and models come from the entertainment industry, including music artists who encourage violence and gang values; movies glorifying gangs and their lifestyle; and books, television programs, the Internet, and the news media all publicizing the gang subculture.

Many Indianapolis residents look to Chicago for important legitimate influences, such as business, cultural pursuits, and sports teams. Many people have friends and relatives living in the Chicago area and frequently travel between the cities. With these active methods of communication present, information concerning the gang subculture often occurs by word of mouth. The closeness enables Chicago gangs to exert a measure of control over some of those operating in Indianapolis. For these reasons, the Folk and People Nations dominate the Indianapolis gang landscape, confirmed by area street gang graffiti almost exclusively composed of Chicago-area gang names and symbols.

GANG PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

Before addressing ways of handling the gang problem or preventing the formation of such groups, authorities need to determine the prevalence of gangs in America and whether their number is on the rise. However, for a variety of reasons, it is difficult, if not impossible, to prove that criminal street gang activity is on the increase in the United States. Confusion results from the lack of a clear definition of what constitutes a gang, past and present denial by both law enforcement and other officials about gang activity, no baseline data to determine what gangs did in the past, and a myriad of reporting problems. Several sources suggest that gang activity declined in the 1970s. The basis for this claim appears to rest with the lack of information published on gangs during that decade. Without a standardized reporting system, it proves impossible to accurately determine the level of gang activity. What is observable, however, is the growing public appetite for information on crime, in general, and gangs, in particular. For example, a 5-year study (1990 through 1994) conducted in Rochester, New York, attributed 86 percent of youth violence in that city to individuals involved with the gang subculture. The same study contended that gangs controlled the majority of drug trafficking within Rochester. Gary and other Indiana cities advance the same theory.[8] Upon considering these responses, it becomes clear that gangs are a real problem, even though the actual extent remains unknown. The question then becomes how can a gang be effectively dismantled or controlled? More important, parents, teachers, law enforcement officials, and social workers want to know how to discourage young people from joining a gang and how to disengage them from the gang subculture once they become involved.

Prevention Methods

An educated group, with diverse talents and responsibilities, working together constitutes the first ingredient to an effective gang prevention program. The gang problem is not an exclusive law enforcement problem nor can police deal with it in a vacuum. Important

factors that influence people to enter the gang subculture are not enforcement issues. Boredom, a need for attention, a desire for structure, and the yearning to feel important are not areas that police have the tools to deal with effectively. Society must provide young people with meaningful alternatives that will draw them away from the gang lifestyle. These alternatives should vary and include educational programs, social interaction, recreational activities, and employment opportunities. Obviously, the provision of these services will take cooperation among families, local schools, government-funded social services, area businesses, religious organizations, and other neighborhood resources.

Unfortunately, most communities do not become interested in gang prevention until one or more gangs appear in the area. Because parents and teachers usually have the first interaction with new gang members and their sets, they need to educate themselves on what signs and behavior changes indicate gang membership. Police need to be aware of the indicators and the types of criminal activity of local gang sets. They must scrutinize incidents involving gangsters to see if arrests or enhanced charges based on criminal gang activity are appropriate. Officers need to alert prosecutors when a gang member is arrested or if a crime is gang related. Prosecutors then have the necessary tools that will enable them to effectively present the case to the court. Sentencing for those gangsters convicted of crimes can include orders forbidding association with other gang members, counseling designed to discourage gang participation, anger control classes, and, when appropriate, drug counseling.[9]

Intervention Strategies

Law enforcement agencies must structure their efforts to combat active criminal street gangs

based on the targeted gang set. No program imported from another agency will prove effective without modification. Each gang set has a different level of member dedication based on how strongly members have bought into the belief system that provides the basis for the gang. No two criminal street gangs commit exactly the same crimes. Police need to make cases based on the offenses in their jurisdiction and not try to follow another agency's success story too closely. Police administrators must keep in mind that the experts on area gangs are the uniform officers and detectives who deal with them on a day-to-day basis. To develop an effective plan, the intelligence possessed by departmental personnel represents a vital component. To learn how to apply the information already in their possession, managers need to study the psychology behind gang membership. Officers then should review a number of different successful programs to gain ideas on what might work for them.

The first step in planning a response is to determine if there is a problem. A group of young people who decide to call themselves a gang and then engage in disruptive behavior in the classroom, but stop short of criminal activity, are not yet a police problem. Due to recent events around the country, however, some school officials may panic and request police intervention. The law enforcement agency must identify what they are dealing with.

One popular method employed by many agencies is the SARA technique: scanning, analysis, response, and assessment. After identifying the problem (scanning), the planners must decide what combination of ideas will be most effective (analysis). Implementation of the plan follows (response). The last step (assessment) is not designed to be the final ingredient in the plan. The planners must review what approaches were used, what worked, what did not work, and then decide if the problem was resolved. If the problem was not resolved, the planners go back to the original step and start over. Agencies can complete this process as many times as necessary until the gang ceases to be a problem.

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In addition to law enforcement intervention, the entire social structure must deal with the underlying issues. A working partnership must form to handle the problems faced by the youthful offenders who make up the gang. Many informational sources exist that can provide guidance on where and how to deal with the criminal street gang member. The working group would do well to investigate as many sources as possible, including the Internet, government reports, news stories, and other publications. A number of training programs geared to meet the needs of different audiences are available. Funding sources can sometimes be found to provide training for educators and officers. For example, Indiana schools have a small amount budgeted for training to help stop school violence, and some law enforcement grants provide training for officers involved with gang investigations.

CONCLUSION

No city, town, or neighborhood is totally immune from the threat of gangs. The first step in prevention is for those in authority to study the underlying reasons for gang formation—structure, nurturing, need to belong, economic opportunity, and excitement. If communities meet these needs, gangs will have a hard time establishing a foothold. However, once gang involvement is suspected, authorities must take time to study the situation to determine the extent and type of problem they need to deal with. A variety of social and law enforcement agencies need to become involved in the discussion process from the beginning. Police and community members need to arrive at a consensus of how serious the gang problem is and then work together to combat any criminal activity.

The police must act as the point group to bring an operating criminal street gang under control. Officers must target the gang in a variety of ways, including the criminal activities normally associated with the gang. Less apparent, but just as important, is the need to deal with other criminal and antisocial actions on the part of gang members. Officers also should develop

strong working relationships with prosecutors and probation officers so that, when arrested, gang members receive special attention and appropriate sentences. Finally, a standardized reporting system to capture the true extent of gang activity in America remains a goal that all concerned citizens should work toward. Protecting this nation's youth from the dangers of gang involvement requires the effort of all facets of the society. If America's heartland is facing the threat of gangs, the entire country is at risk. ◆

Endnotes

[1] The author based this article on his experience investigating gang-related cases and on information he and his fellow officers have gathered for presentations to the law enforcement community and the general public, contained in a department training guide.

[2] Weed and Seed has existed since 1991 as a comprehensive effort between law enforcement and health and human services to prevent and deter crime in high-risk areas. COPS began as a 6-year, $9 billion federal initiative designed to spur the hiring of more police and promote community policing.

[3] The state motto of Indiana.

[4] Indianapolis, the capital of Indiana, has a population of approximately 750,000 and hosts the annual Indianapolis 500 auto race, considered the largest 1-day event in the world.

[5] Lieutenant Colonel W.H. Sleeman, *Report on Budhuk Alia Bagree Decoits and Other Gang Robbers by Hereditary Profession and on the Measures Adopted by the Government of India for Their Suppression* (Calcutta, India: J.C. Sherriff, Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1849).

[6] Frederic M. Thrasher, *The Gang: The Full Original Edition* (Peotone, IL: New Chicago School Press, 2000).

[7] David M. Allender, "Safe Streets Task Force: Cooperation Gets Results," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, March 2000, 1-6.

[8] U.S. Department of Justice, National Drug Intelligence Center, *National Street Gang Survey Report* (Johnstown, PA, 1998).

[9] Lisa A. Regini, "Combating Gangs: The Need for Innovation," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, February 1998, 25-31.

Crime Data

Serious Crime Figures Remain Relatively Unchanged

According to preliminary statistics released by the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program, the Crime Index, composed of murder, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft, was relatively unchanged from 1999 figures.

Compared with data from the previous year, these preliminary figures indicate that violent crime totals remained relatively unchanged with an increase of 0.1 percent, and property crime totals showed virtually no change.

In the violent crime category, murder declined 1.1 percent and robbery registered a 0.7 percent decrease. Forcible rape and aggravated assault figures indicated an increase of 0.7 percent and 0.4 percent, respectively. In the property crime category, burglary decreased 2.1 percent from 1999 figures. Motor vehicle theft increased by 2.7 percent, and larceny-theft increased 0.1 percent when compared to 1999 data. Arson registered a decline of 0.6 percent.

Regionally, law enforcement agencies in the Northeast and Midwest reported decreases in the Crime Index total with declines of 2.4 percent and 1.1 percent, respectively. In the West, a 1.1 percent increase was registered and a 1 percent increase was noted in the South. A comparison of 2000 and 1999 data showed that violent crime fell 1.7 percent in the Northeast and 0.7 percent in the Midwest. A 1.2 percent increase in violent crime was recorded in the West and an increase of 0.7 percent in the South. In both the South and the West, a 1 percent increase in property crimes was noted.

Among cites, those with populations of 50,000 to 99,999 registered the largest decrease, 1.1 percent, in Index crime. Cities with populations of 25,000 to 49,999 and 100,000 to 249,999 recorded the greatest increase, 0.5 percent. Compared with the 1999 figures, data for 2000 showed that the Crime Index increased 0.7 percent in suburban counties and decreased 0.8 percent in rural counties.

For the complete preliminary annual *Uniform Crime Report* press release, access the FBI's Web site at *http://www.fbi.gov*.