

# Street gangs



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Street gangs are very common in America and especially amongst African American populations. The history of street gangs can be traced back to the 1930s when African Americans were undergoing challenging moments considering that it was an era of great racial discrimination. Different street gangs have different names for instance, famous street gangs in the US included The 'Kelleys', The 'Driver Brothers', The 'Boozies' as well as The 'Magnificents'.

Activities of such gangs evolved from violence, robbery, drug dealing, and prostitution to covert missions. In addition, street gangs have been usually composed of juveniles. Composition of the street gangs has always been around peers such as friends, sisters or brothers. Although street gangs lack clear ideology in the struggle for black liberation street gangs were seen as the voice of black struggle within the black community and very little was done by the community to deal with the problem of street gangs.

Today, street gangs have various definitions depending on who is defining them. For instance, a researcher's definition is different from a police definition and definitions have varied from author to author with different authors giving different definitions for street gangs. For example; (Skogan, 1990) defined street gangs as groups of teenagers who congregate around street corners not necessarily for covert missions but also because of social pressures such as lack of shelter (Sarnecki. 2001).

Another author, Sheriff and Sheriff (1964) defined street gangs as an elaborate network of young persons whose goal is to violate the law (Sarnecki. 2001). This shows how greatly the topic of street gangs has been surrounded by mystery in America. However, there is agreement that street

gangs in America are largely networks of people with a loosely threaded ideology which is temporary. In addition, membership to street gangs is never permanent as the street gangs have very strict 'code of conduct' which often see members fall apart.

In addition, street gangs cut across racial, religious, national and ethnic backgrounds and today, unlike before the definition of street gangs goes beyond 'black' gangs (Jennifer Lee, Min Zhou, 2004). Street gangs have a way of identifying themselves which is distinct from other competing gangs. For instance, each gang in America has their particular label of clothing or shoes which is only specific to that gang and anyone found to be using the same label outside the gang membership is often met with punishment which can include lynching or assault and in some cases, death (Jennifer Lee, Min Zhou, 2004).

Street gangs also use specific types of tattoos on their bodies to further define themselves and as a result differentiate themselves from other competing gangs (Jennifer Lee, Min Zhou, 2004). Also common amongst street gangs is the use of hand signals which are unique to members of the given street gang and is a way of communication, identity and a sign of loyalty to the particular street gang. Street gangs also have their unique communication styles embedded in both verbal and non-verbal use of language and this is further used to promote the culture of the given street gangs.

As mentioned earlier, street gangs are rarely permanent in terms of the duration which members last in the gang. Leadership of street gangs is often autocratic and oppressive, something which is responsible for the rampant

fallout amongst members which makes it very difficult for members to stay long in the groups. Another factor which defines street gangs in American is the fact that all street gangs have their turfs which they control and fight any effort by police or other law enforcement agents to oust them.

As a result, street gangs come to form part of the life of the area where they occupy, something which has led to the spread of gang life especially practices such as drug abuse, prostitution and violence in the areas occupied by street gangs (Jennifer Lee, Min Zhou, 2004). Another factor, which defines street gangs in America, is the fact that all are involved in criminal activities and rarely do street gangs engage themselves in any constructive activity apart from some form of art such as rap music.

It is generally accepted that street gang is a problem which is not only a threat to social order but also to national security. In the advent of terrorism, the police and other law enforcers cannot leave anything to chance when it comes to addressing loopholes in national and homeland security. To that end, several policing strategies, new legislations and other changes have been implemented in America to not only address the danger posed by external aggression but also the potential of threats within the United States of America. Street gangs are known to carry out any business for money indiscriminately.

Therefore it does not matter whether it is a terrorist that the gang is working for. All that matters to a gang is that it forms a source of income. To counter the potential of street gangs posing a significant threat to homeland security, the police have moved as a measure to contain the street gangs within their 'territories'. As mentioned earlier street gangs operate strictly

on their territories and rarely do they move to new locations. This has presented an opportunity to the police to contain and deal with street gangs in a more localized manner.

To ensure that the influence of street gangs does not spread widely into the community the police have come up with a strategy of road patrols which are made to make the community safer and secure. This is made to counter the possibility of gangs using the roads to harm their victims or to infiltrate fear amongst the members of the community. This has greatly worked well although it has been faced with the problem of racial profiling, given the fact that members of racial minorities are often targeted by police searches aimed at countering street gangs.

However, to a great deal, police road patrols have raised the level of security even in areas where street gangs are common. Another strategy has been to use technological power to deal with street gangs. This has seen the police use sophisticated weapons to fight street gangs whenever confrontations occur and to ensure that the police always remain in control. The police in most states have strategic plans which have seen police set up traffic checks along major roads aimed at ensuring that gangs' activity is limited.

The fact that most gangs trade in narcotics means that police have to strengthen their anti-narcotics units to decapitate the ability of street gangs to carry on illegal drug trade. This has seen the police work closely with intelligence, local community leaders as well as religious bodies to ensure that every member of the society is involved in fighting street gangs. Another great change in law enforcement agencies that has resulted from street gangs activities in America is the introduction of community policy.

Unlike conventional policing, community policing is proactive, less resource laden and problem-solving .

As a result of community policing, violence and drug abuse incidences have significantly dropped in the community level. However, it is worth noting that community policing requires training of local community members to equip them to deal with the sophisticated nature of crime in the society. The fact that police departments lack enough resources has seen a slow implementation of community policing as a strategy of law enforcement. Nonetheless, community policing has led to a decrease in fear levels amongst community members .

Although originally community policing was motivated partly by the threat of street gangs in the community, community policing has turned out to be effective in fighting even crime which is unrelated to street gangs. The strategy of community policing revolves around training of community members to equip them with the necessary tactics and knowledge to deal with crime, establishing of stations at the community level, increased foot patrols of police officers, as well as brainstorming meetings between community members and police in a bid to encourage citizen participation in fighting crime .

It is worth noting that policing strategies, laws and other changes aimed at dealing with the problem of insecurity is largely based on state administration. This therefore means that different states use different approaches to fight with levels of crime considering the fact that different states have different security needs. For instance New York policing strategies is aimed at tackling crimes such as public drunkenness, violent

crimes as well as prostitution. This therefore shows that the nature of criminal issues facing a state may vary and therefore may dictate the types of policing strategies.

In addition, New York State is faced with a high threat of terrorism than the threat of street gangs for example. This therefore means that the changes and strategies by law enforcement agents have been broadly aimed at dealing with threats specific to that state . In Washington DC for example, there are gang legislations which have been specifically enacted to deal with the problem of gangs. This has attracted more funding aimed at empowering law enforcement agents' efforts to deal with prevention of gang activities in Washington.

The availing of funds has seen the police and other law enforcement agents become more capable of dealing with the problem of gang violence, which is deep-rooted in the State. The legislation has also allowed for funding of intervention measures and programs, which have seen the community, enjoy safer neighbourhoods. Other changes aimed at dealing with the problem of street gangs in Washington DC have included the imposition of tough penalties for street gang members who are caught participating in violent crimes . This approach has seen the threat of violent street gangs decrease significantly in Washington DC.

However, it is worth noting that all efforts geared towards dealing with the problem of insecurity and particularly street gang activities need to be integrated into federal laws so as to ensure that the state is able to fully address the challenge. Such legislation such as the companion legislation is aimed at making sure that there is the availability of funds to deal with

lawlessness. In addition, the legislation aims at making sure that the police and other law enforcement agents are able to meet the challenge as well as effectively deal with violence before it becomes widespread (Jennifer Lee, Min Zhou, 2004).

Efforts to deal with the threat of violent street gangs has moved from the preventive level to correctional facilities by empowering correctional officers to put in place reform measures aimed at rehabilitating street gang offenders. It can be said that the tough laws have been largely successful in not only dealing with violent street gangs but also in increasing the level of security in the neighborhoods (Sarnecki, 2001). Not all policing strategies or new laws have been successful in dealing with crime.

However, some strategies such as road policing strategy have been effective due to its ability to prevent crime at the neighbourhood level. Other strategies or changes such as enhanced penalties have to some degree failed given the fact that the prisons where such offenders are sent to are not necessarily effective in correcting the behaviour of the offenders and therefore when such street gangs or any other offenders come out of the prisons they usually continue with the same criminal activities.

Forfeiture is a strategy aimed at decapitating not only street gangs but other criminals of their ability to coordinate and execute criminal activities. Laws permitting the forfeiture of profits gained from criminal activities have made it possible for law enforcement agents to seize property of criminals and therefore making sure that it becomes very unattractive for criminals to continue with their crime activities (Sarnecki, 2001).



Another change or strategy which can be said to have resulted from the threat of street gangs is the initiation of gangs' data bases which makes it possible for law enforcement agents to trace criminals with this (Jennifer Lee, Min Zhou, 2004) This also allows for easy monitoring of released criminals to monitor whether such have reformed. Having gang data bases also enables the easy exchange and sharing of information amongst law enforcement agents. Another change in the law enforcement agencies, which has been occasioned by the threat of street gangs, is the adoption of information technologies systems .

The introduction of information technology use amongst law enforcement agents has seen a dramatic increase in the ability of law enforcement agents to counter the activities of gangs. This has also made it very possible to collect data on criminal activities. Information technology has led to the quick exchange of information and intelligence on security issues, which significantly has boosted the ability of the law enforcement agents to prevent crime. Information technology has made it very hard for the gang members as well as other criminals to infiltrate law agencies, something which can jeopardize the effectiveness of law agents.

Another strategy, which has been initiated to deal with crime in America, is the empowerment of law enforcement agents (Jennifer Lee, Min Zhou, 2004). This has been done through providing them with better equipment as well as training which makes it possible for law enforcement agents to operate with a high level of efficiency. Lack of capacity can greatly impact negatively on the war against crime. Therefore the move to empower law enforcement

agents must be seen as one of the most effective changes ever in dealing with organized crime.

If the war against crime is to be won, a combination of the above mentioned strategies and changes must be implemented. For instance, having legislations however good, without having a capable human resource to enforce the legislation is likely to yield not better than meager results. The war must be sustained, focused and the aims should be well defined. Clearly, the strategies must address the root causes of criminal behaviour and activities. This should not be left to law enforcement agents alone.

Violent behaviour has been found to be caused by a myriad of factors namely social factors, economic factors, political factors, religious factors and cultural factors. This indicates that the changes and strategies must cut across socio-cultural issues as well as economic, political and religious dimensions. There is an increasing trend of juvenile violence in America. This is a clear indication that there is a social crisis which must be addressed not necessarily by law enforcement agencies but by other departments such as children's department.

In the past, efforts to deal with violent crime have tended to be reactive as opposed to proactive. If this approach is not changed, there is a high likelihood that a lot of resource will keep on being wasted due to using of the wrong strategies to fight lawlessness. Indeed, crime is not a war that can be won by law enforcement agencies only. Hence the reason why all efforts geared towards reducing criminal activities in the American society should be multisectoral. The introduction of community policing strategy is particularly encouraging.

However, it is sad that most legislation aimed at curbing street gang crimes or other forms of crimes in the society have tended to originate from criminal justice. Given the fact that crime is influenced by other factors such as economic factors, there is a need for legislations based on economic principles such as equitable distribution of resources especially to the marginalised communities to be enacted. Such legislations will see youths from the marginalised groups empowered economically and perhaps desist from joining street gangs or any other forms of crimes.

Educational reforms or legislations can also be a great intervention measure in dealing with crime in the society. This is true considering the fact that there is a direct positive correlation between involvement in criminal activities and the level of education. Therefore, empowering people and especially the youths through education is likely to deter a good number from participating in crime. There is a need for education to reach every single youth in America as a way of empowering the society. If this is realized it will be an effective and less costly way of dealing with the problem that crime has become in the society.

There is a need for more research to be commissioned to deal with the issue of street gangs in America. It appears that one of the reasons why law enforcement agencies have been slow in winning the war is the fact that most of the decisions made concerning how to deal with street gangs in America are not based on empirical evidence but rather on egoistic feelings of politicians. Until the law enforcement agencies realise the power of research in dissecting social problems, street gangs and other violent crimes are likely to continue threatening the American society.

In addition, there is the possibility that a lot of resources will be wasted and there will be no resource to show for it. In conclusion, it can therefore be said that the war changes in street gangs in America have had an impact on law enforcement agencies in regard to the type of strategies the police have come up with, laws which have been put in place to deal with crime as well as the resources allocated to the fight against crime. Reference George, L, K and Coles, C. M. 1997. Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order and Reducing

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