

Gang violence



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Today, there is a great concern about gang activity and youth violence. Every day, we can open a newspaper or turn on the evening news and see that another child or victim was killed in gang or youth related violence. Teenage crime and violence has existed for many years. Many people have become more aware of the violence committed by today's youth because of the media coverage of the viciousness of these crimes. The public is also aware of the new breed of criminal and many people want to change the current juvenile justice system... Juvenile gangs have existed for many years in America.

In the past, gang members fought with fists, brass knuckles and sticks. Today's gangs have arsenals of weapons, including sophisticated automatic weapons and they are prepared to use these weapons. The gangs usually come from the poorer areas of the inner cities, which was the case for even the earliest known gangs. Gangs and youth violence has always existed, but the increased interest and concern in their activities has emerged because of the increasing violence and death toll on our youth.

New York City was the first city to have serious problems with gang-related activity because it was the first stop for many new immigrants entering the United States in the late 1800's. These immigrants came to America in search of a better way of life and for many the opportunity for a better life that was sought was not within their reach. The earliest gangs in New York City were Irish immigrants. The earliest known youth gang in New York was the "Forty Thieves." This gang attacked well-dressed people who ventured into their neighborhood and attacked, robbed or pick-pocketed them (Oliver, 1995).

In the late 1800's as more immigrants entered the United States more youth gangs were formed. The poorer neighborhoods became a breeding ground for these gangs. In New York City's Lower East Side, "Mulligan's Alley" became the center of gang activity and was the home to one of the most violent gangs, the "Bowery Boys", who fought turf wars with the other gangs. Some of these fights lasted two or three days. These early gang members were much smaller compared to today's youth because of malnutrition. The average height was about 5' 3" and weight was usually between 120-130 pounds.

Sometimes the memberships in these gangs were in the hundreds. The weapons commonly used by these gangs were brass knuckles, clubs, chains, knives, bricks and in some cases, an occasional pistol (Oliver, 1995). As immigrants moved west and across America, other cities experienced youth gangs and juvenile violence. Jewish and Italian immigrants had difficulty with language barriers and adjustment in the new county causing an increase of youth gangs. By the beginning of the 20th Century, gun use was becoming common during these youth gang wars.

The worst gang war occurred in New York City in 1903 between the "Eastmans" and the "Five Pointers". When the war was finally over, there were 3 killed and seven seriously wounded (Oliver, 1995). Chicago was another city that had gang problems. These Chicago gangs were mostly white youth until African Americans started migrating north. The black youth started some gang activity because like other groups they discovered that urban living created many hardships such as poverty, lack of education and

unemployment. In 1919 a violent racial riot between gangs broke out in Chicago.

Most of the gangs were white immigrants in this riot but a few black gangs were now formed and participated in the riot mostly to protect their neighborhoods (Oliver, 1995). Gangs participated in unionizing American factories. They were hired by both the workers and the factory union leaders. The union leaders hired the gangs to beat and sometimes murder strikebreakers. Factory owners hired gangs to guard workers who crossed the picket lines. Gangs were also used to injure or murder by hire for sometimes as little as two to ten dollars. In the 1920's there was a decrease in gang activity.

Many factors contributed to the decrease in gang activity, but the main reasons were the police put many gang leaders in prison, immigration started to slow down, and opportunities for better jobs allowed recent immigrants to move out of the slums to better neighborhoods. Today, we see an increase in gang activity. Some of these gangs are very structured and some are loosely tied together. Increasingly, we are seeing violence by large groups of teenagers that have joined together, sometimes not even knowing each other and a kind of mob psychology takes over, where there is sometimes a frenzy of violence (Lang, 1991).

In 1989, a “ wolf pack” beat and raped a jogger in Central Park in New York City, leaving her for dead after the attack. In 1989, a sixteen year old black youth was beaten by a gang with bats in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, when he went to purchase a car. In 1986, Howard Beach, Queens, eleven white

youths beat and yelled racial epithets at two black men that had entered their neighborhood. One black was beaten by the group and the other was chased onto a highway where he was struck and killed by a car.

In 1989 a Labor Day College fraternity and sorority party at Virginia Beach with 00, 000 youths turned violent where shots were fired, stores were looted, Many were injured and hundreds were arrested. It was started for no apparent reason. In New York's Upper West Side, well- to- do looking women were attacked in 45 separate incidents and stabbed with needles, hat pins by a gang of girls " just for the fun of it". There are many theories about the increasing violence among our youth and this new " mob mentality" where there is little concern for physical injury or the harm inflicted on the victims. One reason is that these youths get caught up in the beating frenzy.

They receive a sense of power to do things in groups they wouldn't normally do alone. They lose their sense of individuality momentarily and do not feel individually responsible. Their actions become anonymous. This also protects their feeling of being directly responsibility. Many are too weak to withdraw and are afraid to run away or stop the rest of the group. For many this group or mob criminality are also their way to communicate their despair or let their pent-up passion and aggression erupt. There are many possible reasons and causes but the nature of adolescence will never change.

What has to change is this new violence. Teenagers have always had their certain rules and codes of conduct. The peer pressure of other teens, their fragile self esteem and physical changes taking place sometimes lead to their aggressive impulses. Many are insecure because of their physical,

mental and emotional changes. Changes in social structure of American also affects the juvenile crime rate. When there are fewer job opportunities and unemployment for adults, it effects our youth in that it is even more difficult for young people to find jobs.

In the poorer inner city areas, many youth believe that they receive poor treatment from the police and other authorities. In addition, in the poorer inner city areas, there is usually a lack of recreation, fewer resources and overcrowding in schools. Another factor is family violence. If problems are solved at home through violence it becomes learned behavior to settle disputes or to control with violence. Many join gangs for security and protection. They feel that they do not have a choice. Kill or be killed because they know that in the rougher neighborhoods no one can protect them, parents, teachers, or the police.

They feel that they must join for survival. Once some of these kids join the gangs, many feel that they have found a place to belong. It becomes a social life and many gangs give their members a feeling of worth and actual love that many do not receive at home. There is also a feeling of unity and sense of belonging which can give these kids a twisted sense of dignity, where the gang becomes the most important thing in their lives. Many test each other for the upper hand to find the limits of others.

This is displayed through physical aggression instead of constructive behavior for the little courtesy they receive from the rest of the world(Lang, 1991). There are different theories concerning why youths engage in violence. Some believe that they have learned criminal behavior through

interaction with others. Some say the role of society plays a part in that children commit crimes in response to their failure to rise above their socioeconomic status or as rebellion against middle class values. Others say that youths have not been sufficiently penalized for previous delinquent acts.

The most recent and important debate over youth violence and putting an end to it centers on whether youth offenders should be punished or rehabilitated. Juvenile court and arrest procedures were originally intended to help the youth who commit crimes. In the past, many of the teenagers who committed these crimes were arrested for minor criminal violations and infractions such as truancy, petit larceny and other minor crimes. Many of these acts would be considered criminal if committed by adults but the original belief was that children were not considered responsible enough to realize the consequences of their actions.

This system was designed to protect children and to try and rehabilitate them. The goal was to avoid harsh treatment of these offenders. These cases are tried in Juvenile or Family Court. The more serious of crimes are tried in the Criminal Court. Today we see an increase in more serious crimes by our youth. The juvenile justice system that was set up is now considered part of the problem. There seems to be little or no impact on the new breed of juvenile offenders. Many know the system very well and know how to beat it. This causes a vicious cycle or revolving door justice.

Many experts feel that the juvenile justice system should be changed to address today's more vicious crimes. The system worked when we were dealing with minor crimes of delinquency and truancy. They feel that the

system no longer is effective because of the violent acts of rape and murder that are being committed by today's youth. We need other alternatives to effectively deal with this growing problem. According to a United States Department of Justice study, the teenage population will increase by 20% over the next decade, violent youth crimes could double and the murder rate could increase by 145%.

If this projection is true, it means that we should be making plans now to change the juvenile justice system. I feel that there is a need to punish the serious offenders. These serious offenders must be taught that they are responsible for their actions and that they will not be allowed to continue it. They should be incarcerated with stricter punishment but at the same time they should be prepared to enter back into society as productive individuals. They also need educational and recreational opportunities as well as social skills.

Our youth need youth leaders, early intervention, communication and the community to get involved in their future to turn the violence around. The less violent need counseling and education to learn to be productive and law abiding citizens. The cycle of violence and revolving door justice will continue until everyone comes together. Law enforcement needs a tighter rein on juvenile offenders, and social agencies, and families and the community need to combine in a joint effort to save the youth of this country and insure a better future.