

Violence and fear created by gangs criminology essay



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The term “gang” has instilled fear in communities and neighborhoods for decades. This fear is created by the violence exhibited by prison, street and motorcycle gangs. The media shows and tells the public that no one is safe and anyone at anytime could become a victim in the gang wars. This portrayal in the media causes parents, neighborhoods and communities to shut down in the fight against gangs. Gangs are able to survive and thrive off of this fear created not only by their actions but by the media as well. Knowledge is power in the fight against gangs as well as the prevention of membership. Should we be as concerned as this fear has lead us to be?

Gangs: Should We Be Concerned?

A gang is defined as a “group of individuals that work or act together, particularly criminals or juvenile delinquents” (Agnes, 2003, p. 268). A gangster is defined as a “member of a gang” (Agnes, 2003, p. 268). The term gangster was first used in the 1890’s to label the Chicago thugs who used violence and other illegal methods to make sure their favorite candidates for political office were elected (Blackwood, 2002). The period that is most associated with gangsters is the 1920’s. This is the period that the term gangster was used to also include criminals such as bootleggers, kidnappers, bank robbers, extortionists and hit men. The term has maintained popularity over the years and is still used to label members of a gang.

Gangs in the 1920’s and gangs now are similar in that both gained control of an illegal market. The liquor trade was controlled in the 1920’s during Prohibition and the drug trade is currently controlled by gangs (Blackwood,

2002). This control of an illegal market also brings arrests, violence, weapons and money. Being a part of a gang then was about making money and today that is still the goal. Money, however, is just one factor in the desire to become a gangster.

Gangs formed before the 1980's fit the traditional definition of a gang. These gangs began defending turf, however, grew into large organizations that became heavily involved in the drug trade and other criminal activity. Fists, chains and knives that were used in earlier gangs were replaced with automatic firearms and drive by shootings. The average size of a traditional gang is one hundred and eighty members and has distinct structure and organization (Sonder, 1996).

Many cities such as Washington, D. C. and Philadelphia have a few of the larger organized gangs and even more of the loosely organized gangs. These gangs are considered "neighborhood gangs." The newer, smaller gangs tend to be less involved with drugs and violence. These smaller gangs are more diverse and tend to have white, female, and even middle class members. Some of these gangs take names similar to the nationally known gangs and participate in graffiti, etc. but may not be overly violent or heavily involved in drug sales. Parents, police, and the community still need to be vigilant in combating these gangs as there is a possibility of more violence and criminal activity over time (Barbour, 2006).

The statistics that back up the gang problem are eye opening. There were over twenty one thousand gangs identified

in the United States and over seven hundred thirty one thousand gang members identified in 2002. In that same year, one thousand two hundred and thirty two homicides were attributed to gang activity (Barbour, 2006).

The ethnic make-up of gang members is diverse. Forty nine percent are Latino, thirty four are black, ten percent are white, six percent are Asian, and one percent is other (Barbour, 2006). There are more Latino gangs, which include Hispanic, due to immigration, the need for fast money and the perception that there is a need for protection from other gangs.

Gang experts advise there are multiple reasons individuals join gangs. These reasons include but are not

limited to peer pressure, self esteem issues, poverty, yearning for excitement, survival, the want to make fast money, gain

power, and attract members of the opposite sex. The main reason an individual joins a gang is to feel a sense of belonging and protection (Barbour, 2006).

Many juveniles join gangs due to an unstable family environment that normally provides a sense of belonging and protection. For these juveniles, a gang is their family and serves the purpose of a traditional family (Barbour, 2006). For others, it is a rite of passage to join the same gang as their family members are already in. In the latter situation, gangs

and the lifestyle of the gang is simply a way of life for these juveniles

(Barbour, 2006). Juveniles enter the gang early and begin committing crimes immediately.

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Power and entitlement are other factors that encourage gang membership. Gang members are often individuals with high ambitions who have a fantasy about making fast money and gaining expensive cars and flashy jewelry (Sonder, 1996). Obtaining these items seems out of reach and would take too long to achieve so gang life seems the only alternative. Committing crime appears to be an easier method to obtain the fantasy of high achievement (Sonder, 1996).

Gangs are a contributing factor in juveniles committing violent crimes in both small and large cities. Members of gangs are relocating from urban areas to suburban areas. This move expands the gang's control of drug distribution, money, new members, evading law enforcement and other gangs (National Drug Intelligence, 2009).

A study of delinquent acts in Rochester, NY showed that gang members accounted for sixty eight percent of all violent offenses committed by juveniles. In Denver, a similar study reflected seventy nine percent of all violent offenses were attributed to juveniles that were members of a gang. "Gang related homicides involving juveniles has increased by more than fifty percent according to Professor James Alan Fox, a Northeastern University criminologist" (Barbour, 2006, p. 17). Those statistics are a representation of juveniles and gang activity. Law enforcement officials have reported that eighty percent of criminal activity is gang related, involving both juvenile and adult members (National Drug Intelligence, 2009). As far as what type of gang a juvenile or adult becomes a member of depends, as there are several different types of gangs.

According to the National Gang Intelligence Center of 2009 there are three types of gangs. There are street gangs, prison gangs, and outlaw motorcycle gangs. Street gangs that operate in multi jurisdictions across the country are a huge threat due to the control of such a large geographical area. Street gangs that commit criminal acts such as violence and drugs are the greatest threat to society. That threat becomes intensified as the street gangs migrate from urban areas to suburban and rural areas. Prison gangs are a major threat due to the control and influence over the street gangs in the community, even from prison.

The structure of prison gangs is highly organized and acts as a criminal network within the state and local prisons. Members that have been released from prison also assist in the day to day operations of the prison gang.

Released members

generally return to their community and resume old gang affiliations. Once old gang affiliations are resumed, the

member then recruits street gang members to carry out criminal acts for the prison gang. Prison gangs control the distribution of drugs within the prison but also in the community in some cases as well (Know Gangs, n. d.).

Outlaw motorcycle gangs are also a public safety threat in the communities where they operate as they take part in various criminal acts, frequently use violence, and counter the efforts of law enforcement. Some of the criminal activity outlaw motorcycle gangs participate in are drug and weapons smuggling as well as violent crime. Outlaw motorcycle gangs are highly

organized and structured. There are regulations on

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membership, conduct, and even criminal activity. The size of the gang ranges from a single chapter to hundreds of chapters throughout (National Drug Intelligence, 2009).

The most widely known street and prison gangs are the Aryan Brotherhood, La eme (Mexican Mafia), Latin Kings, Gangster Disciples, Texas Syndicate, Crips, Bloods, and MS-13(Mara Salvatrucha). The most widely known outlaw motorcycle gangs are the Hell's Angels and Mongols. Fear is the one thing that all of these gangs have in common. By putting fear into the community, they are controlling it.

The Aryan Brotherhood originated in 1967 at the San Quentin Prison in California. This gang was originally formed as protection from black prisoners, however, it quickly turned into

a lucrative criminal enterprise. Members have a white supremacist, Neo-Nazi mentality; however, have a working relationship with Le-eme (Mexican Mafia). Symbols of the Aryan Brotherhood are Shamrock clover leaves, swastikas, double lightning bolts, initials " AB", and the numbers " 666"(Inside Prison, 2006). Members have a deep rooted hatred towards blacks and black gangs such as the Crips, Bloods, and Gangster Disciples. A violent act must be committed for initiation " Blood in, Blood out). There is also a creed that all members must abide by: " I will stand by my brother, My brother will come

before all others, My life is forfeited should I fail my brother, I will honor my brother in peace and war"(Inside Prison, 2006). This creed is evident during criminal

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prosecutions against members, such as the one in Santa Ana, California.

In Santa Ana, California one of the largest death penalty cases was tried and involved four Aryan members. The trial revealed that the Aryan Brotherhood is a ruthless gang that murders anyone that opposes them, even their own members. Two of the members convicted were eligible for the death penalty due to their part in ordering a race war at a Lewisburg, Pennsylvania prison that resulted in the death of two black prisoners. Both members ended up with life without parole instead of death. The same two members responsible for the race war along with another accomplice also murdered another prisoner in 1989 (Inside Prison, 2006).

La eme also known as the Mexican Mafia began in California in 1957. The day to day operations are of a paramilitary structure that includes a president, vice president,

lieutenants, sergeants, and generals. Under these high ranking officials, there are soldiers, suppliers and associates.

There is a twelve rule Constitution that must be followed by all members:

Membership is for life, all members must be prepared to

kill or be killed for the greater good of the gang, every member must be disciplined and work through weaknesses, never let the gang down, a sponsoring member is completely responsible for all

actions of the new member and if the member turns out to be a snitch the sponsor must eliminate the new member, when disrespected by any person,

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all members must eliminate that person, maintain a high level of integrity at all times, never speak of la eme business, each member can express opinions, each member can organize, arm, and defend la eme, each member has the right to wear la eme tattoo, and the last rule is that la eme is a criminal enterprise and will participate in any and all criminal acts for monetary benefit(Inside prison, 2006). The symbol of the Mexican Mafia is the national symbol of Mexico, which is both an eagle and a snake on a circle with flames, along with crossed knives (Inside Prison, 2006). The Mexican Mafia was created as a way to gain more freedom over the prison underworld which was controlled by whites. The Italian Mafia was the template for the creation of the Mexican Mafia. Over a short period of time they began to control the narcotic traffic in the California prison system and develop their own trademark (Inside Prison, 2006).

The Mexican Mafia has a specific manner in which contract murders are carried out that became their trademark. The manner involves kidnapping, binding, and gagging the victim with duct tape prior to putting bullets into the back of the skull. The body is then wrapped in a blanket and disposed of in a remote location. This method was demonstrated in the 1997 robbery on West French Place that did not go as planned. Five individuals were blindfolded and duct taped then shot several times in the back of the skull (Inside Prison, 2006).

Gangster Disciples, also called Black Gangster Disciples was created in the 1960's by David Barksdale, leader of the Gonzanto Disciples and Larry Hoover, leader of the Supreme Disciples.

These two groups combined and formed the Black Gangster Disciples. David Barksdale was the leader and Larry Hoover was second in command. David Barksdale died in 1972 and Larry Hoover took over (Know Gangs, n. d.).

The Black Gangster Disciples use the six pointed star, Star of David, as their symbol. This symbol represents loyalty, understanding, knowledge, wisdom as well as love. Other symbols include an upside down pitchfork and a heart with wings. Members generally tattoo themselves with a top hat with a staff out of the top which is a pitchfork with the numbers three, six and zero along with an upside down cross at the bottom. Clothing may consist of the sports team Oakland Raiders and carry a black, grey or white bandana (Know Gangs, n. d.).

The Gangster Disciples can be found in cities across the United States, however, Chicago is the location of the leaders and there is a strong presence in the Midwest. In the mid 1990's a federal task force was formed to investigate the involvement of the Gangster Disciples in multiple murders and drug trafficking. The result of the investigation found that the gang was making over one hundred million dollars a year in illegal drug sales. Multiple members were convicted and are now serving life sentences (Know Gangs, n. d.).

Latin Kings first came about in Chicago in the 1940's. The Latin Kings gang was created by a few Puerto Rican immigrants as a way to defend and
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protect themselves from racism and prejudice. Their slogan was that they would rise above racism and prejudice and form an organization of “Kings.” After a period of time, the gang became involved in criminal activity and even though the first members were Puerto Rican, most members now are Mexican-American. Identifiers include the five point crown, which means represent love, respect, sacrifice, honor and obedience. Colors of the Latin Kings include yellow or gold. The head of the entire criminal organization is known as the Inca. Latin Kings have chapters also known as sets in states across the country, each reporting to a leader (Know Gangs, n. d.).

The gang known as Texas Syndicate originated in the early 1970s at Folsom Prison in California. It was started as a direct result of the formation of other gangs in California prisons. Other gangs, specifically Mexican Mafia and Aryan Brotherhood, were targeting inmates that were Texas natives.

The only symbols noted to identify members are tattoos with “TS” somewhere in the design. Some of these tattoos require intense observation in order to locate the “TS”. The tattoos are generally located on the back of the right forearm, however,

have been located on the outside calf area, neck and chest (Inside Prison, 2006). The main criminal activities Texas Syndicate is involved in are drug trafficking, extortion, and internal violent discipline of members. Members in prison have

communication methods with outside members through smuggled cell phones and coded messages.

The Crips were started in 1969 in Los Angeles as a street gang by Raymond Washington and Stanley Tookie Williams. This gang has received the reputation on being extremely violent and aggressive. Stanley Tookie Williams faced the death penalty in San Quentin State Prison on December 13, 2005. He received the

death penalty after being convicted of murdering four individuals during a robbery by shooting them to death with a shotgun in Southern California in 1970. Also, in 1979 Raymond Washington was murdered.

The name "Crip" has different theories as to where the name actually came from. One theory is that a woman from the housing projects filed a police report on two teenagers for stealing. One of the teenagers was Raymond Williams. The description of one of the teenagers was "crip with a stick" meaning a disabled person with a cane. Another theory is that the name came from "Crib," from the Baby Avenue gang in the 1960's. The Baby Avenue gang eventually became known as the Avenue Crips as they were located in the Central Avenue, Los Angeles area (Inside Prison, 2006).

Identifiers of the Crips gang are the colors blue, gray, orange, and purple. Handkerchiefs or clothing generally reflect those colors. Other identifiers are the six pointed Star of David, the letter B crossed out as the gang "Bloods" is their rival. Specific clothing choices can include tennis shoes, jogging suits or sports teams reflecting Los Angeles teams (Know Gangs, n. d.). British Knight tennis shoes are popular due to the "B" and "K" which represents Blood Killer. Communication between members is facilitated through hand

signs, codes, and graffiti. Although there is no Constitution for the gang there is a book of knowledge that outlines all rules and regulations for the gang.

The Crips gang is involved in criminal activity such as drug sales as well as trafficking, violent robberies and burglaries. Members of the Crips have been located in every city of the United States and even in a few foreign countries. Their rivalry with the Bloods often results in bloodshed and/or murder.

The street gang known as Bloods was started in the 1960's. Neighborhood protection and as a force to combat the Crips were reasons the gang was created. Crips were becoming too powerful as they were allying with other street gangs.

African American men called each other " Bloods" in the Vietnam War and that is where the name came from. Identifiers of the gang include a five point star and the color red. Clothing choices tend to be sports teams such as the Chicago Bulls, Philadelphia Phillies, and San Francisco 49ers (Know Gangs, n. d.). The Bloods are similar to the Crips in that there is no Constitution; however, there is a book of knowledge that outlines rules and regulations of the gang.

The organizational structure for the Bloods is as follows: the first superior, this person is in charge of day to

day operations of the set and in charge of discipline. The next in charge is the second superior who assists the first superior. The minister of information and defense are next and they are

responsible for giving information and strategies to the Superiors. Head of security handles obtaining weapons for the set. The commanding officer is in charge of handing down orders per the superiors. Below those officers there is a captain, who gives information to the lieutenant. The lieutenant ensures orders are carried out and soldiers carry out orders.

In the early 1980's MS-13, also known as Mara Salvatrucha, was created.

After leaving the death squads of El Salvador, a number of Salvadorian immigrants settled in California and

created MS-13. MS-13 was created as protection against rival Mexican gangs and is one of the most violent gangs in the United

States. This gang is a highly organized, paramilitary one with some members formally belonging to the Salvadorian guerrilla forces. Members are generally heavily tattooed, can be identified by blue and black bandanas as well as specific

tattoos of MS-13. Phrases that are specific to Ms-13 are " La Mara" which means gangs, " Salva" which means Salvadorian,

" trucha" which means look out, and Eme Ese which means MS (Gang Awareness, n. d.).

The motorcycle gang, Hell's Angels, began in Fontana, California in 1948. " Hell's Angels" was a term coined for bomber squadrons in World War I and II. Hell's Angels have been linked to criminal activity such as drug trafficking, especially

meth, assaults, weapon possession, and even murder. The most notorious plot that surrounds this gang are the allegations that they plotted to kill rock star Mick Jagger. Mick Jagger supposedly criticized the Hell's Angels after one of its members killed a man at an event in which the gang was in charge of security. The victim pulled a gun and a Hell's Angels member stabbed him. All charges were dropped and it was declared self defense (James, 2009).

Despite the extensive history of the

Hell's Angels, still much is left unknown as what happens at a club meeting, stays there.

Hell's Angels can be identified by their leather or denim jackets with the red and white winged "death's head" ensignia,

the letter HAMC (Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club), and the number eighty one (eighth letter in the alphabet is H and the first letter is A). Each member's status can be located on the jacket

by a patch, each specific meaning is only known to members. Hell's Angels also wear a patch that has "1%" on it which means

they are part of the one percent that are willing to do anything, legal or illegal to accomplish their goals.

Members have road names which are the only way they are known to other members (James, 2009). The Hell's Angels are rivals with the motorcycle gang The Mongols.

The Mongols are also a motorcycle gang that wears the “ 1%” patch and is considered very dangerous. The gang consists of mostly Latin and Hispanic members as the gang was created due to the Hell’s Angel’s not allowing Hispanic members (Mongols Motorcycle Gang, 2008). Other names the gang goes by is the Mongol Brotherhood or Mongol Nation. The headquarters is located in California, however, there are chapters all over the United States, Canada, overseas and Mexico.

The Mongols have been linked and charged in violent organized criminal activity. In 2008 a three year investigation over several states ended with at least thirty eight Mongol motorcycle gang members being arrested. The charges included murder, attempted murder, assault, as well as gun and weapons charges(Mongols Motorcycle Gang, 2008).

According to the 2008 National Drug Intelligence Center there are over twenty thousand gangs that have approximately one million members that are criminally active in all fifty states of the United States and the District of Columbia. Aside from the nationally recognized gangs, there are also neighborhood “ cliques,” “ crews,” or posses.” These groups usually consist of only twenty to twenty five members and are loosely structured. There is less graffiti, hand signs, and colors identified with them. The philosophy is similar to the national gangs: “ Live by the neighborhood, die by the neighborhood (Barbour, p. 18).

Gangs are not just in the streets, they are also in the schools. Public and private schools are both faced with the reality that gangs are in the schools.

In 1994, a report stated

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that administrators of schools with an enrollment figure of more than twenty five thousand and principals of urban schools reported an increase in gang involved incidents. Even one in

four elementary principals referenced an increase in gang related incidents (Kopka, 1997). In a study of six thousand sixth graders in eleven cities, eleven percent advised they were currently gang members and seventeen percent advised they belonged to a gang at one point(Barbour, 2006). Gangs are becoming a problem in areas that have not been recognized before.

Recognizing the signs that a juvenile or family member is in a gang can start with asking. If there are still concerns about gang membership, look for these signs: change in behavior(becomes defiant), grades drop, truancy at school, new associates, calls from unknown individuals, money and jewelry appearing, preoccupation with particular colors or sports teams,

hand signs, graffiti on books or walls, developing nicknames, and evidence of drug abuse. One of these signs alone may not be indicative of gang membership, however, more than one could be indicative of gang membership (Gang Awareness, n. d.).

After parents determine their child is in a gang it is natural for them to feel anger and even jealousy towards the gang. Feelings that the child has been taken from them by the gang are evoked. Parents handle this information differently. Family first parents put the situation and the child first in an attempt to restore the core family unit. Rescuers minimize their own accountability and fear. Rescuers try to save the child.

The rescuers can be successful in that there is family support, which assists the parents in dealing with the issue as well. Crusaders take on the task of saving their child and other children as well. These parents often suppress the core issues of their own child. The negators acknowledge that they have contributed to their child joining a gang. These parents tend to respond more negatively and deny personal responsibility of the child's poor social, emotional, and spiritual well being. The most extreme are the detached parents. These parents simply do not care and refuse to engage in any attempt to remove their child from the gang (Barbour, 2006). In certain instances,

removing a child from a gang can be difficult and at times require moving away (Barbour, 2006).

Parents can teach their children a critical lesson that can assist in the prevention of gang involvement. This critical lesson is for a child to face reality. This will teach juveniles to take responsibility for their actions as well as the choices they make (Barbour, 2006). And there must always be consequences to bad behavior.

Parents should realize there is a difference between the behavior of their child and the identity of their child.

Behavior is what a juvenile does and identity is who the juvenile is. When teaching choices, it must be taught that life

is filled with actions and reactions. Juveniles need to know the choices made are in their complete control. Being aware of reality and facing it allows children to have control over their

choices and assert themselves in a positive manner (Barbour, 2006).

Most gangs are built on the premise “ Blood In, Blood Out.” In order to get out of a gang, a member must shed blood, or do they? Solutions to get out of a gang may not mean “ Blood Out”. Other suggestions include talking to high ranking members and expressing the interest to get out, ask for help from a relative, guardian or friend, go to the police, or even become an activist (Sonder, 1996).

The solution to gangs is that communities as a whole must stand together. Far too often communities have viewed gangs as an inner city problem, something that would not affect them. Neighborhoods affected and plagued by gangs have been left to defend themselves without assistance. Now, no neighborhood or community is safe. Indiscriminate police sweeps in neighborhoods

have had a negative effect on the way the community views law enforcement. Possible informants refuse to talk and gangs prey on young members that have nowhere else to go.

Treating the gang issue as a law enforcement problem is not going to solve anything. Along with tough policing, the community must take action and not accept gangs in their neighborhoods. Society has failed to deal appropriately with the social root causes, like fatherless homes, which lead to young men

seeking male role models. Popular culture also sends a message that lawlessness is cool as is violence whereas education and hope are not. To combat gangs every member in society plays a part; police, social workers, the church, friends and family members. Each and every person-in the attitudes that are kept, the choices that are made, and even items purchased-helps to shape the culture that must be joined together with the commitment to make communities and neighborhoods safer (Barbour, 2006).

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