GROWTH OF LAW ENFORCEMENT SPECIALIZED GANG UNITS: CHANGES IN INVESTIGATION PRACTICES AND GANG DESIGNATIONS OF HOMICIDES

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During the late 1970's and into 1980, Los Angeles County experienced a notable increase in the number of gang-related homicides. County-wide, according to the numbers available to us, 200 homicides were designated as gang-related in 1978; that rose to 276 in 1979 and jumped to 351 in 1980. This rise across a span of only 3 years sparked a series of preventive and deterrent efforts by law enforcement, probation, and both the city and county governments. Then in 1981 the numbers fell from the 1980 high of 351 to 292 and dropped again in 1982 to 205.

Despite the considerable attention that surrounded the upswing in gang homicides and the ensuing responses by local agencies, there has been little more than speculation as to the reasons for the 1980 peak and the subsequent decline. Yet, some understanding of the factors that produced these fairly dramatic changes seems an important precursor to the development of strategies for curbing gang violence, whether aimed at prevention or at deterrence. It was in part for this reason that we became interested in studying these changes.

Several hypotheses suggest themselves as explanations of the increases and decreases in gang homicides -- for example, that they were reflections of more general trends in homicide, or that they were produced by changes in gang structure, or by changes in gang activities. However, an alternative hypothesis suggests that the increase and subsequent decrease in gang homicides reflected changes in the definitional and recording practices of law enforcement personnel. Concurrent with the increase in gang homicides, gang investigation and intelligence units in both the Los Angeles Police Department and the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department were growing in size and sophistication. This expansion accelerated following the 1980 peak. As these changes promote greater knowledge of and familiarity with the gang world, as well as increasing sophistication in the investigation of possible gang incidents, they may also be accompanied by the refinement of recording and definitional practices. The decision to include a given incident in the gang statistics represents the application of a definition of what constitutes a gang-related homicide. Changes in that definition or in the availability of the information on which that definition is based would clearly produce changes in the statistics.

Not suprisingly, it is this last hypothesis which has been the subject of our attention. To the extent that changes in the numbers of gang homicides reflected changes in police activities

rather than changes in the world of gang homicides, this has important implications for efforts to control gang violence. But if we can feel reasonably sure that the changes were not artifacts of the recording or investigation practices of law enforcement then the strategies to deal with gang activity take on added significance and validity.

Our approach to testing this hypothesis was, first to look for changes across the years in the characteristics that distinguished gang homicides from non-gang homicides. We reasoned that if increases in the numbers of gang homicides resulted from law enforcement designating as gang incidents that previously would have been called non-gang, then the differences between the two categories should be diminished as the numbers increase and become greater as the numbers decline. The second step was to examine changes in police activities. Were there changes that suggest the effect of those activities on case designation changed over the years and, if so, that those changes were associated with changes taking place in terms of other characteristics?

The cases for this analysis consist of gang-designated and non-gang homicides collected from the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department and the Los Angeles Police Department. Because of jurisdictional differences, as well as sampling and data collection differences, the cases from the Sheriff's Department

will be analyzed separately from those collected from LAPD. Those from the Sheriff's Department are a sample of more than 300 gang and non-gang homicides that occurred between 1978 and 1981 within the county areas covered by the department. The cases from the Los Angeles Police Department consist of a sample of over 200 homicides occurring between 1979 and 1981 in 3 stations with high gang activity in those years.[1] The data were extracted from the police investigation files for these homicide incidents and include characteristics of the participants, the incident, and police investigation activities.

Previous analyses of these data have demonstrated that gang-designated homicides differ in significant and distinctive ways from non-gang homicides (Maxson et al., 1985). Drawing on these analyses, we have selected several variables characterizing the participants - specifically, the mean age of the victims, the mean age of the suspects and a dummy variable designating the racial predominance of the suspects - and variables characterizing the incident - the number of participants on the side of the victim and on the side of the suspects, the presence of a gun in the incident, and whether or not the incident occurred in a street setting - to examine the changes taking place, if any, in the definition of gang-designated cases as

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[1] See Klein et al. (1984) for a more detailed discussion of jurisdictional differences and of sampling and data collection procedures.

opposed to non-gang cases.

Because our dependent variable is a dummy variable representing whether or not a homicide incident has been designated as gang-related, we have employed logistic regression. To assess changes in the effects of these participant and incident characteristics on the odds of a homicide being designated gang, we have entered interaction terms into the model which are the main effects variables multiplied by dummy variables for year. Our focus here is on the difference in these effects between the peak year and the years prior and subsequent to it. In the analysis of the homicides collected from the Los Angeles Police Department, the main effects represent the effects of those characteristics for 1980. The interaction terms represent the differences in those effects in 1979 and in 1981. In the analysis of the homicides from the Sheriff's Department, both 1979 and 1980 serve as peak years. In terms of the numbers of gang-related homicides within the Sheriff's jurisdiction, both were similarly high years. Therefore, the main effects in our model represent the effects for 1979 and 1980 combined and the interaction terms represent the changes in 1978 and in 1981.

Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate, in different ways, the changing impact of these characteristics on designation across the 3 years for the LAPD homicide incidents. Quite simply, the effects of the participant and incident characteristics on the odds of a

gang designation did not, on the whole, vary significantly between the peak year of 1980 and either 1979 or 1981. The effect of the number of participants on the victim side in 1981 is the only exception to this, as evidenced by the significant interaction term in Table 1. These results can be seen more clearly when we examine the separate regression equations for each year, as in Table 2. Comparing columns 4 and 6, the effect of an increase in the number of participants on the victim side in 1980 was to multiply the odds of a gang designation by nearly .9; in other words, it had little impact. In 1981, however, such an increase multiplied the odds almost one and a half times. However, this is the only statistically significant change and overall, with a few exceptions, the effects of these variables are quite similar across all 3 years. In general, these results suggest, at least in terms of these characteristics, the designation of homicide incidents as gang did not vary substantially within LAPD across this 3 year period.

Turning to the analysis of the Sheriff's data presented in Tables 3 and 4, more noticeable changes did occur. In Table 3, the significant interaction terms for the mean age of suspects in 1978 and the number of participants on the suspect side and the mean age of suspects in 1981 indicate that these effects were significantly different than in the 1979-80 period. Again, these results are demonstrated more clearly by the regression equations

for each time period, as in Table 4. Comparing columns 2 and 4, in 1978 an increase in the mean age of suspects multiplied the odds of a gang designation by .577; in other words, it reduced the odds by almost half. In 1979 and 80, however, an increase in the mean age multiplied the odds by almost .9, which is to say that it had significantly less effect in those two years. Moving over to column 6, for 1981, the effect is once again to reduce the odds by almost half. Similarly, comparing columns 4 and 6, an increase in the number of participants on the suspect side doubled the odds of a gang designation in 1979 and 80, while in 1981 such an increase multiplied the odds by only .7. While, in all, these results do not suggest major shifts in the definition of gang cases across the time periods, they do suggest that some notable changes were taking place. What is perhaps most interesting is the sharp decrease in R Square (this is an analog to the Ordinary Least Squares regression R Square) for 1981. These variables explain much less of the variation in gang designation for that year than in previous years, suggesting that gang and non-gang cases were less distinctive from one another in 1981. This is supported by the magnitudes of the effects of these variables when compared to the previous years. With the exceptions of the mean age of suspects and street location, the effects of these variables on the odds of a homicide being designated gang were closer, in general, to 1 than in the earlier years. In other words, most of the variables in this model had

only a marignal impact on the odds in 1981, whereas in 1978 and particularly in 1979 and 1980, most of these characteristics made substantial and significant adjustments to the odds. This suggests that the attributes that characterized a gang case in the earlier years were not as strongly characteristic of gang cases in 1981. What is additionally interesting is that this change is associated with a period in which the number of gang-designated homicide incidents was decreasing, rather than increasing as we originally expected. Perhaps with greater numbers of gang cases the differences between gang and non-gang were exaggerated such that as the number of gang cases declined they were less distinctive from non-gang cases. This would suggest that the increases and decreases in numbers reflected real changes in the world of gang homicides not artifacts of police activities. It is also possible, however, that what occurred in 1981 was a redefinition of gang cases as non-gang -- it is true that non-gang cases declined at a much slower rate after 1980 than gang cases did. Calling <u>non-gang</u> incidents that in previous years would have been called gang might have contributed to the lack of discrimination between the two categories.

Our next step was to try to ascertain whether or not police investigative activities contributed to case designation or were associated with the changes taking place in that designation. To

do this we selected two measures of investigation that reasonably could occur prior to and therefore affect (rather than being affected by) the decision to designate a homicide incident as gang-related. The first of these is the number of interviews or contacts with witnesses; the second is the ratio of the number of individuals designated by law enforcement as suspects in the case to the number of participants on the suspect side.[2] Both of these variables tap the level of investigative activity, so that they might be expected to be associated with a change or refinement in the definition of gang-related.

It is evident from Tables 5 and 6 that, for LAPD homicides, these variables had only a slight impact on the odds of a case being designated gang and that the differences between the peak year of 1980 and 1979 and 1981 were not statistically significant. Tables 7 and 8 demonstrate that, for homicides from the Sheriff's department, the effect of the number of witness interviews was significantly different in 1981 than in the 1979-80 period and that, as was true of other characteristics of these incidents, its impact on the odds of a homicide being called gang was reduced from approximately one and a half times to close to 1, in other words, a negligible effect. Before

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[2] Although both of these measures of investigation activity represent totals for the entire case, usually interviews and designations occur early in the investigative process and are, therefore, more likely to be determinants of, than determined by, case designation.

speculating on the implication of this difference, however, we want to examine it in relationship to the participant and incident characteristics. Since the only statistically significant change which occurred involved the number of witness interviews in the analysis of LASD cases, we will at this point focus our attention there, for the sake of simplicity and brevity.

Tables 9 and 10 demonstrate, conjointly, that, controlling for the other characteristics, the number of witness interviews had a negligible effect on gang designation in 1981. It adds 0.012 to the log of the odds of a gang designation, or it multiplies the odds by just slightly more than 1. While this is consistent with the marginal effects of most of the other variables in the model, it does little to help explain what appears to be a shift in the overall extent to which these variables shaped the odds of a homicide being designated gang as opposed to non-gang or what was perhaps a changing definition of gang-related. This measure of investigative activity had only a marginal effect in all 3 time periods; there was no significant change in its impact between the peak years and 1981, when other characteristics of the incident are controlled. Consequently, the decline in the ability of these characteristics to explain gang designation does not appear to be attributable to the level of investigation accomplished through witness interviews.

In short, what these analyses have indicated is that, first, within our sample of homicides from the Los Angeles Police Department, there is little evidence of a change in the effects of these participant, incident and investigative characteristics on gang designation across this 3 year period. Within our sample of homicides from the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, however, the variables in this model had, in general, notably less impact on the odds of one of those homicides being designated a gang case in 1981 than in the 3 previous years. This suggests that the characteristics that distinguished gang cases from non-gang cases, particularly in years of high numbers of gang-related homicides, were less characteristic of gang cases in 1981. Yet, we found no evidence that this was attributable to the measures of police investigation that we examined. Perhaps more sensitive measures of the investigative and definitional activities of law enforcement would reveal such effects. At this point, however, we would begin to question the suggestion that the dramatic rise and decline in the number of gang-related homicides in Los Angeles County was merely an artifact of law enforcement practices. While they might have played a part in producing these changes, it appears that other processes were also involved, and that an attempt to identify and understand those processes is crucial to the development of a sound strategy for controlling gang violence.

References

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Table 1
Logistic Regression Coefficients for Effects of
Participant and Incident Characteristics
on the Odds of Gang Designation - LAPD

Variable	Beta[a]		e^{Beta}[b]
1) Number of Participants on Victim Side	-0.116		0.891
2) Number of Participants on Suspect Side	0.390		1.476
3) Mean Age of Suspects	-0.229	***	0.796
4) Mean Age of Victims	-0.077	**	0.926
5) Presence of a Gun	0.689		1.992
6) Suspects Predominantly Black	-1.008	*	0.365
7) Street Location	-0.442		0.643
1979	0.915		2.497
1981	-1.461		0.232
1) * 1979	-0.080		0.923
2) * 1979	-0.202		0.817
3) * 1979	-0.065		0.937
4) * 1979	-0.025		0.975
5) * 1979	1.150		3.159
6) * 1979	-0.266		0.767
7) * 1979	0.652		1.919
1) * 1981	0.463	*	1.589
2) * 1981	-0.043		0.958
3) * 1981	-0.004		0.996
4) * 1981	0.026		1.026
5) * 1981	-1.090		0.336
6) * 1981	0.600		1.823
7) * 1981	0.831		2.296
Intercept	6.805	**	902.597
R^2 =	0.228		

[a] Beta is the logistic regression coefficent and represents the change in the log of the odds of a homicide being designated gang per unit change in the independent variable.

[b] e^{Beta} is the exponential function (antilog) of Beta and represents the amount by which the odds of a homicide being designated gang are multiplied per unit change in the independent variable.

* p <= .10
** p <= .05
*** p <= .01

Table 2
Logistic Regression Coefficients for Effects of Participant and Incident Characteristics on the Odds of Gang Designation, by Year - LAPD

	1979		1980		1981	
Variable	Beta[a] (1)	e^{Beta}[b] (2)	Beta (3)	e^{Beta} (4)	Beta (5)	e^{Beta} (6)
Number of Participants on Victim Side	-0.196	0.822	-0.116	0.891	0.347	1.415
Number of Participants on Suspect Side	0.188 ***	1.207	0.390 ***	1.476	0.347 ***	1.415
Mean Age of Suspects	-0.293 **	0.746	-0.229 **	0.796	-0.233 *	0.792
Mean Age of Victims	-0.102 **	0.903	-0.077	0.926	-0.051	0.950
Presence of a Gun	1.840 *	6.295	0.689 *	1.992	-0.400	0.670
Suspects Predominantly Black	-1.273	0.280	-1.008	0.365	-0.407	0.665
Street Location	0.210 ***	1.234	-0.442 **	0.643	0.390 **	1.476
Intercept	7.720	2253.628	6.805	902.597	5.344	209.358
R^2 =	.271		.185		.230	

[a] Beta is the logistic regression coefficent and represents the change in the log of the odds of a homicide being designated gang per unit change in the independent variable.

[b] e^{Beta} is the exponential function (antilog) of Beta and represents the amount by which the odds of a homicide being designated gang are multiplied per unit change in the independent variable.

* p <= .10
** p <= .05
*** p <= .01

Table 3
Logistic Regression Coefficients for Effects of
Participant and Incident Characteristics
on the Odds of Gang Designation - LASD

Variable	Beta[a]		e^{Beta}[b]
1) Number of Participants on Victim Side	0.163		1.177
2) Number of Participants on Suspect Side	0.849	***	2.338
3) Mean Age of Suspects	-0.156	***	0.856
4) Mean Age of Victims	-0.033		0.968
5) Presence of a Gun	1.576	***	4.835
6) Suspects Predominantly Hispanic	2.069	***	7.919
7) Street Location	1.254	**	3.505
1978	4.176		65.132
1981	13.512	***	737924.253
1) * 1978	1.753		5.773
2) * 1978	-0.287		0.751
3) * 1978	-0.393	*	0.675
4) * 1978	0.026		1.027
5) * 1978	-0.453		0.636
6) * 1978	1.201		3.323
7) * 1978	-0.868		0.420
1) * 1981	0.199		1.220
2) * 1981	-1.203	***	0.300
3) * 1981	-0.488	***	0.614
4) * 1981	0.023		1.024
5) * 1981	-1.532		0.216
6) * 1981	-1.240		0.289
7) * 1981	1.200		3.320
Intercept	-0.618		0.539
R^2 =	0.480		

[a] Beta is the logistic regression coefficent and represents the change in the log of the odds of a homicide being designated gang per unit change in the independent variable.

[b] e^{Beta} is the exponential function (antilog) of Beta and represents the amount by which the odds of a homicide being designated gang are multiplied per unit change in the independent variable.

* p <= .10
** p <= .05
*** p <= .01

Table 4
Logistic Regression Coefficients for Effects of Participant and Incident Characteristics on the Odds of Gang Designation, by Year - LASD

	1978		1979-1980		1981	
Variable	Beta[a] (1)	e^{Beta}[b] (2)	Beta (3)	e^{Beta} (4)	Beta (5)	e^{Beta} (6)
Number of Participants on Victim Side	1.916***	6.793	0.163	1.177	0.362	1.436
Number of Participants on Suspect Side	0.563***	1.755	0.849***	2.338	-0.353***	0.702
Mean Age of Suspects	-0.549	0.577	-0.156	0.856	-0.644	0.525
Mean Age of Victims	-0.006	0.994	-0.033***	0.968	-0.009	0.991
Presence of a Gun	1.123***	3.075	1.576***	4.835	0.044	1.045
Suspects Predominantly Hispanic	3.270	26.318	2.069**	7.919	0.829**	2.291
Street Location	0.386	1.472	1.254	3.505	2.454***	11.638
Intercept	3.558	35.090	-0.618	0.539	12.893	397559.4
R^2 =	.531		.504		.374	

[a] Beta is the logistic regression coefficent and represents the change in the log of the odds of a homicide being designated gang per unit change in the independent variable.

[b] e^{Beta} is the exponential function (antilog) of Beta and represents the amount by which the odds of a homicide being designated gang are multiplied per unit change in the independent variable.

* p <= .10
** p <= .05
*** p <= .01

Table 5
Logistic Regression Coefficients for Effects of
Investigation Variables
on the Odds of Gang Designation - LAPD

Variable	Beta [a]	e^{Beta} [b]
1) Number of Witness Interviews	0.156 *	1.169
2) Number of Designated Suspects/ Number of Participants on Suspect Side	-0.086	0.917
1979	-0.498	0.608
1981	-0.350	0.705
1) * 1979	0.143	1.154
2) * 1979	-0.610	0.543
1) * 1981	0.001	1.001
2) * 1981	0.291	1.338
Intercept	-0.129	0.879

[a] Beta is the logistic regression coefficent and represents the change in the log of the odds of a homicide being designated gang per unit change in the independent variable.

[b] e^{Beta} is the exponential function (antilog) of Beta and represents the amount by which the odds of a homicide being designated gang are multiplied per unit change in the independent variable.

* $p \leq .10$
** $p \leq .05$
*** $p \leq .01$

Table 6
Logistic Regression Coefficients for Effects of Investigation Variables on the Odds of Gang Designation, by Year - LAPD

	1979		1980		1981	
Variable	Beta[a] (1)	e^{Beta}[b] (2)	Beta (3)	e^{Beta} (4)	Beta (5)	e^{Beta} (6)
	***		*		*	
Number of Witness Interviews	0.300	1.350	0.156	1.169	0.158	1.171
Number of Designated Suspects/Number of Participants on Suspect Side	-0.696	0.498	-0.086	0.917	0.205	1.227
Intercept	-0.627	0.534	-0.129	0.879	-0.479	0.619

[a] Beta is the logistic regression coefficent and represents the change in the log of the odds of a homicide being designated gang per unit change in the independent variable.

[b] e^{Beta} is the exponential function (antilog) of Beta and represents the amount by which the odds of a homicide being designated gang are multiplied per unit change in the independent variable.

* $p <= .10$
** $p <= .05$
*** $p <= .01$

Table 7
Logistic Regression Coefficients for Effects of
Investigation Variables
on the Odds of Gang Designation - LASD

Variable	Beta[a]	e^{Beta}[b]
1) Number of Witness Interviews	0.348 ***	1.416
2) Number of Designated Suspects/ Number of Participants on Suspect Side	0.182	1.199
1978	-2.039 **	0.130
1981	0.514	1.672
1) * 1978	0.105	1.111
2) * 1978	0.965	2.624
1) * 1981	-0.307 ***	0.736
2) * 1981	-0.041	0.959
Intercept	-0.608	0.544

[a] Beta is the logistic regression coefficent and represents the change in the log of the odds of a homicide being designated gang per unit change in the independent variable.

[b] e^{Beta} is the exponential function (antilog) of Beta and represents the amount by which the odds of a homicide being designated gang are multiplied per unit change in the independent variable.

* p <= .10
** p <= .05
*** p <= .01

Table 8
Logistic Regression Coefficients for Effects of Investigation Variables on the Odds of Gang Designation, by Year - LASD

	1978		1979-1980		1981	
Variable	Beta[a] (1)	e^{Beta}[b] (2)	Beta (3)	e^{Beta} (4)	Beta (5)	e^{Beta} (6)
Number of Witness Interviews	0.453***	1.573	0.348***	1.416	0.041	1.042
Number of Designated Suspects/Number of Participants on Suspect Side	1.147*	3.148	0.182	1.199	0.140	1.151
Intercept	-2.648***	0.071	-0.608*	0.544	-0.094	0.910

[a] Beta is the logistic regression coefficent and represents the change in the log of the odds of a homicide being designated gang per unit change in the independent variable.

[b] e^{Beta} is the exponential function (antilog) of Beta and represents the amount by which the odds of a homicide being designated gang are multiplied per unit change in the independent variable.

* p <= .10
** p <= .05
*** p <= .01

Table 9
Logistic Regression Coefficients for Effects of
Participant, Incident and Investigation Variables
on the Odds of Gang Designation - LASD

Variable	Beta[a]		e^{Beta}[b]
1) Number of Participants on Victim Side	0.207		1.230
2) Number of Participants on Suspect Side	0.877	***	2.403
3) Mean Age of Suspects	-0.153	***	0.858
4) Mean Age of Victims	-0.034	*	0.966
5) Presence of a Gun	1.608	***	4.993
6) Suspects Predominantly Hispanic	2.122	***	8.346
7) Street Location	1.217	**	3.376
8) Number of Witness Interviews	-0.073		0.930
1978	4.078		59.035
1981	13.585	***	794346.641
1) * 1978	1.681		5.372
2) * 1978	-0.318		0.728
3) * 1978	-0.395	*	0.674
4) * 1978	0.031		1.032
5) * 1978	-0.495		0.610
6) * 1978	1.079		2.943
7) * 1978	-0.788		0.455
8) * 1978	0.137		1.146
1) * 1981	0.145		1.156
2) * 1981	-1.233	***	0.291
3) * 1981	-0.491	***	0.612
4) * 1981	0.025		1.025
5) * 1981	-1.558		0.211
6) * 1981	-1.306		0.271
7) * 1981	1.227		3.410
8) * 1981	0.085		1.089
Intercept	-0.692		0.501
R^2 =	0.468		

[a] Beta is the logistic regression coefficent and represents the change in the log of the odds of a homicide being designated gang per unit change in the independent variable.

[b] e^{Beta} is the exponential function (antilog) of Beta and represents the amount by which the odds of a homicide being designated gang are multiplied per unit change in the independent variable.

* p <= .10
** p <= .05
*** p <= .01

Table 10
Logistic Regression Coefficients for Effects of Participant, Incident and Investigation Variables on the Odds of Gang Designation, by Year - LASD

	1978		1979-1980		1981	
Variable	Beta[a] (1)	e^{Beta}[b] (2)	Beta (3)	e^{Beta} (4)	Beta (5)	e^{Beta} (6)
Number of Participants on Victim Side	1.888***	6.608	0.207	1.230	0.352	1.422
Number of Participants on Suspect Side	0.559***	1.748	0.877***	2.403	-0.357***	0.700
Mean Age of Suspects	-0.548	0.578	-0.153*	0.858	-0.644	0.525
Mean Age of Victims	-0.003	0.997	-0.034***	0.966	-0.009	0.991
Presence of a Gun	1.113**	3.044	1.608***	4.993	0.050	1.052
Suspects Predominantly Hispanic	3.201	24.560	2.122**	8.346	0.816**	2.261
Street Location	0.428	1.535	1.217	3.376	2.443	11.512
Number of Witness Interviews	0.064	1.066	-0.073	0.930	0.012	1.012
Intercept	3.386	29.556	-0.692	0.501	12.893***	397686.7
R^2 =	.513		.497		.355	

[a] Beta is the logistic regression coefficent and represents the change in the log of the odds of a homicide being designated gang per unit change in the independent variable.

[b] e^{Beta} is the exponential function (antilog) of Beta and represents the amount by which the odds of a homicide being designated gang are multiplied per unit change in the independent variable.

* $p <= .10$
** $p <= .05$
*** $p <= .01$