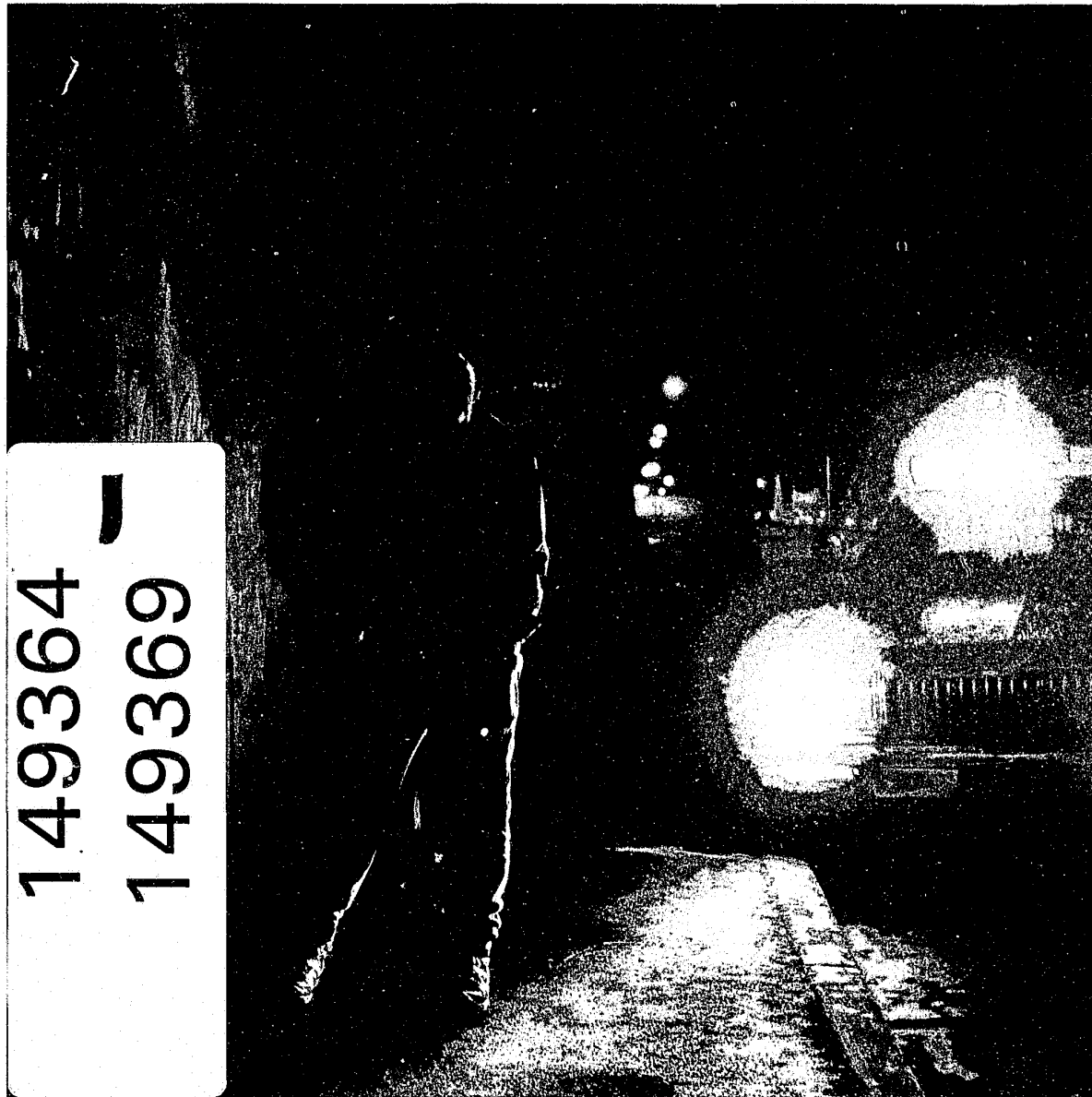


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**Editor**

Dr. Stephen D. Gladis  
*Managing Editor*

Kathryn E. Sulewski

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# FBI Law Enforcement

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## Features

### Focus on Gangs

#### Gangs: A National Perspective

149364 By Alan C. Brantley  
and Andrew DiRosa

1

Gangs represent a formidable challenge to law enforcement agencies across the country.

#### The Chicago Area Project

149365 By Anthony Sorrentino  
and David Whittaker

8

Direct involvement of community residents and youths can help law enforcement to deal with gangs.

#### Gang Intervention

149366 By Wayne C. Torok  
and Kenneth S. Trump

13

Cooperation between the Cleveland, Ohio, public school system and police department reduced gang problems in both the schools and the community.

#### Police Reserves

149367 By Harvey Wallace  
and Arnold P. Peter

20

The use of volunteers in law enforcement presents a distinct set of legal issues.

#### Search of Abandoned Property

149369 By John Gales Sauls

27

For a warrantless search to be reasonable under the legal theory of abandonment, the facts must show a surrender of privacy interests.

## Departments

### 7 Forensics Update

FBI's New  
Examination Policy

### 18 Case Study

Police Brutality  
Charges

### 12 Bulletin Reports

Community Policing  
Crime and the Elderly

### 24 Focus on Use of Force

Pepper Spray 149368

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149364-

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# Gangs A National Perspective

By  
ALAN C. BRANTLEY, M.A.,  
and ANDREW DIROSA

ENCLOSURE  
MAY 19 1994  
ACQUISITION



Photo © Sigams Inc.

**G**ang violence in America is nothing new. Even before the Nation declared its independence, outlaw groups with names like "The Sons of Liberty" formed in several colonial towns to express their opposition to British rule. A century later, ethnic gangs were well entrenched in many of these same cities along the eastern seaboard, from New York to Boston.

As the Nation grew, gangs emerged in the large urban centers that developed in the Midwest and on the west coast. Cities as diverse as Chicago and San Francisco have

long histories of gang-related crime.<sup>1</sup>

If the formation of gangs is not a recent phenomenon, the number of youths involved in gangs and the level of violence and criminal activity that they perpetuate are. As recently as the mid-1970s, some social scientists and gang researchers seemed prepared to announce the extinction of gangs in America.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1980s, a combination of factors fueled a dramatic increase in gangs and gang affiliation among the Nation's youth. Gang violence grew to unprecedented levels, as an expanded number of groups battled

for control of turf and profits from drug distribution. This trend continues in the 1990s. In Los Angeles County—the focal point of gangs in contemporary America—gang-related homicides increased over 250 percent—from 276 in 1979 to over 700 in 1990.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, during this same period, the number of nongang-related homicides declined significantly.<sup>4</sup>

Still, despite the long history of gang activity in the United States, many communities remained largely unaffected until recently. While media accounts often depict new street gangs in previously gang-free

cities as mere satellite operations of entrenched criminal gangs from large metropolitan areas, this is rarely an accurate portrayal. The majority of new gangs are actually homegrown.<sup>5</sup> They may emulate more infamous gangs and form cooperative alliances with other criminal groups, but they create uniquely local problems.

This fact underscores the challenge to law enforcement. Today, gangs represent a serious threat to the Nation's sense of security. Yet, except for a few notable exceptions, most gangs develop and thrive within a fairly limited geographic area. Any comprehensive response must first address the diverse factors governing gang activity in communities around the Nation. While important steps can be taken on the national level, the localized dimension of the gang problem requires a largely local response.

## DEFINING THE PROBLEM

### Problems of Definition

One of the basic obstacles in addressing gang activity in communities around the Nation is the absence of a universal definition for gangs. Some communities acknowledge difficulties in dealing with "groups of youths," but refuse to concede that they have a gang problem until the gangs become firmly entrenched.

Confusion also stems from the complexity and diversity of modern criminal groups. Outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMG) began forming shortly after World War II, when disgruntled former Armed Forces personnel established groups based on common philosophies and a mutual passion for motorcycles. The FBI has identified approximately 800 OMGs, ranging in size from a single, loose-knit chapter to an organization the size of the Hell's

Angels, which currently fields 63 chapters in 13 countries.<sup>6</sup>

While such organizations may appear to have little in common with typical neighborhood street gangs, they share several common features. These characteristics combine to form a useful working definition.

Gangs can be said to be a group of three or more individuals bonded together by race, national origin, culture, or territory, who associate on a continual basis for the purpose of committing criminal acts. In this definition, territory can refer either to geographic location or to the scope of a particular criminal enterprise.

### The Natural Progression of Gangs

Law enforcement officials should remain aware of what may be called the natural progression of gangs when considering the gang problem. Many gangs last only a short time before they weaken and wither away, either because of successful prosecution efforts or a lack of interest by members. More successful gangs excel at extending their economic base and recruiting new members. As these groups flourish, they may extend their reach into legitimate businesses and engage in traditional white-collar crimes, such as money laundering and corruption of public officials. Eventually, these "supergangs" come to more closely resemble organized crime groups than street gangs.

Understanding this progression is important for several reasons. Supergangs generally change their tactics as their criminal focus evolves. For example, there are



*SA Brantley is assigned to the Behavioral Science Services Unit at the FBI Academy.*



*Mr. DiRosa serves in the Law Enforcement Communication Unit at the FBI Academy.*

indications that the Los Angeles-based Crips gang is attempting to unify all Crips sects across the Nation into one major organization with a chief executive officer-style leadership structure.

To protect such entrenched criminal enterprises from the scrutiny of law enforcement, leaders of these gangs often suppress overt acts of violence. In fact, supergangs actually welcome the turf violence of other less-entrenched gangs because it diverts the attention of law enforcement.

Unfortunately, the evolution of supergangs—with their gangland-style “truces”—only serves to disguise the ever-present danger of these powerful criminal groups. As gangs progress, the problems law enforcement does not see may be the ones that should cause the most concern.

### SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

No one knows how many gangs exist in America today. A 1992 survey of police department records estimated that there were 4,881 gangs in the Nation.<sup>7</sup> However, because this survey does not include data from all cities and because different jurisdictions define gangs in different ways, the results of this study do not represent a comprehensive national total. The actual number of active gangs may be much higher.

This same survey estimated that nearly 250,000 individuals were involved in gangs.<sup>8</sup> The factors that lead such a high number of youths into gangs may be as varied as the gangs themselves. While some participants may

become involved in gangs out of primarily economic motivations, the vast majority become involved for more basic reasons.

“  
**As gangs progress, the problems law enforcement does not see may be the ones that should cause the most concern.**  
”

### POSSIBLE CAUSES

#### Why Youths Join Gangs

Most researchers agree that youths who *willingly* join gangs do so in an attempt to satisfy needs unfulfilled in other aspects of their lives.<sup>9</sup> These basic needs may include structure, nurturing, economic opportunity, and a sense of belonging. In the most economically disadvantaged areas, these needs may even include clothing and shelter.

Yet, such factors do not fully explain the atmosphere of crime and violence that modern gangs foster. Nor do these factors explain why seemingly well-adjusted youths from affluent suburbs form and join gangs. It appears that today's gangs fulfill a need that, while not commonly considered as basic, may well be essential to many youths—excitement.<sup>10</sup>

From comic books and video games to movies, music, and televi-

sion programs, many of today's youths are brought up with images of *expressive* brutality—violence with no instrumental purpose, killing for the sake of killing. Although this type of message reinforces the style of violence manifested in such acts as random drive-by shootings, other media images appeal to more basic urges—power and sex.

Interviews with gang members often reveal a fascination with firearms. In settings where youths are overwhelmed by feelings of being powerless and where they sense no legitimate escape route from poverty and despair, guns assume a powerful symbolic, as well as practical, presence. In such situations, an increasing number of youths perceive guns as the quickest and surest route to empowerment. *Firepower* becomes a substitute for the perceived absence of any other kind of power necessary to attain status and wealth. Media images promoting violence as the most expedient way to resolve conflict fortify the connection.

By eroticizing brutality, media messages imply another perilous connection. These messages forge a strong link between violence and sexual attraction and are especially enticing to the youths who make up the lifeblood of new and established gangs.

#### Leading Youths into Gangs

Often, the violent messages merely intensify preexisting sentiments of discontent. By themselves, these messages may have little or no negative impact. However, when combined with dysfunctional home lives, a lack of respect for authority,

and the effects of residing in depressed housing areas, they become an effective recruiting tool.

Gangs also exploit other social and personal factors to recruit new members. When describing the recruiting strategies of Chinese gangs, a researcher noted:

“Usually gang members recruit youths who are vulnerable—those who are not doing well in school or who have already dropped out. Young newcomers who have little or no command of English, poor academic records, and few job prospects are the most likely to find gang life attractive and exciting.”<sup>11</sup>

Many of these characteristics can be generalized to describe the vast majority of today’s street gang members. A recent study of African-American gangs in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, revealed that the founder of each gang interviewed had left school prematurely—most were expelled for fighting.<sup>12</sup> The director of a Hispanic youth services organization in Florida estimates that between 50 and 60 percent of the gang members in an antigang program operated by the organization had dropped out of school.<sup>13</sup>

In some areas, gang membership has become a family tradition. Hispanic gang members in East Los Angeles typically reveal in interviews that cousins, brothers, or other family members also actively participate in gangs. Because gangs in such communities have become so deeply entrenched in the social fabric, recruiting becomes less a process of selection than a ritualized custom.<sup>14</sup>

In other cities with an entrenched gang presence, recruiting may be less difficult now than ever before. An official with the Cook County, Illinois, State Attorney’s Office estimates that “in Chicago, 80 percent of the recruitment into gangs is informal occurring through family members, friendship groups, and drug dealing activities. Intimidation probably plays a role in only 20 percent of gang recruitment.”<sup>15</sup>

### GANGS AND CRIME

Despite the localized dimensions of the gang problem, FBI investigations confirm that a growing number of groups operate from coast to coast. Other primarily ethnic gangs, including Asian and Vietnamese gangs, have been identified throughout the United States.

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***Understanding the reasons that compel youths to join gangs is the first step in confronting the problem.***

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Gangs trafficking large quantities of illegal drugs are the most likely to enlarge their scope of influence from the local level, as illustrated by the expansion of the Bloods and Crips gangs outside the Los Angeles area. Large-scale traffickers have also established international connections, which include Iranian, Pakistani, Nigerian, and Colombian drug suppliers.

As gangs increase their involvement in trafficking, they also tend to become more organized. Information gathered by the FBI’s Baltimore Office, for example, indicates that gangs in the area have held meetings to delineate market territory, arrange for the sharing of drug shipments, pool money for increased purchasing power, and settle disputes.

### ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

Understanding the reasons that compel youths to join gangs is the first step in confronting the problem. The next step is to recognize the need for a coordinated response that includes social service organizations, schools, the criminal justice system, and other concerned groups in the community.

#### Coordinated Response

The complex social factors that produce and sustain gangs cannot be addressed by law enforcement alone. However, law enforcement agencies should be in the forefront of developing and supporting proactive efforts to keep youths out of gangs.

Across the Nation, examples of successful initiatives reinforce the importance of a coordinated response. While traditional law enforcement efforts generally focus on crime control, administrators are increasingly realizing the value of crime *prevention*. Effective gang prevention activities range from participating in community-awareness campaigns and sponsoring gang hotlines to delivering presentations at schools and community group meetings.<sup>16</sup>

## The FBI's Response to Gangs

In 1991, the FBI launched its Major Gang Initiative to foster a greater understanding of the extent of gang activity in the United States and, where warranted, to allow field offices to give gang investigations priority attention. The primary focus of the initiative is the investigation of gangs that engage in large-scale drug trafficking.

Under the Major Gang Initiative, Special Agents in Charge (SACs) of FBI field offices may authorize investigations of gang-related criminal conduct where the primary thrust of the investigation is violence not directly associated with or perpetrated by further drug distribution. Cases often involve investigation of other crimes committed by these groups, such as homicide, kidnapping, extortion, burglary, robbery, car theft, extortion, loan sharking, money laundering, and firearms violations.

Operation Safe Streets, another initiative developed to address violent crime, provides a framework for FBI field offices to become more proactively involved in confronting the gang problem in communities. As part of Operation Safe Streets, FBI Special Agents become active in community efforts to keep youths out of gangs.

The FBI also participates in multiagency task forces that specifically target violent crime. This makes up an integral component of the FBI's response to gangs. Currently, FBI field offices participate in over 100 task forces around the Nation, combining resources with other Federal, as well as State and local, agencies

## Gang Resources

A number of resources are available to provide wide-ranging information on gangs.

- Drugs and Crime Data Center and Clearinghouse  
1600 Research Boulevard  
Rockville, Maryland 20850  
Phone: 800-666-3332
- National Crime Prevention Council  
1700 K Street, NW, Second Floor  
Washington, DC 20006-3817  
Phone: 202-466-6272
- National School Safety Center  
4165 Thousand Oaks Boulevard  
Westlake Village, California 91362  
Phone: 805-373-9977
- The National Congress of Parents and Teachers  
700 Rush Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60611  
Phone: 312-787-0977

to implement effective enforcement strategies.

### THE FUTURE

The image of the United States as a great melting pot of diverse cultures and ideas is giving way to less-comforting images of a Nation of divergent groups, tenuously held together by laws and institutions. The positive vision of the melting pot has evolved into the unsettling image of society as a pressure cooker.

When viewed within this larger context, the proliferation of gangs in contemporary America can be seen for what it largely is—a reaction to what youths view as the social reality facing them. When perceived reality becomes “us versus

them,” one basic tenet of survival holds true—there is safety in numbers.

To address the gang problem successfully, the criminal justice system and communities across the Nation must confront this mentality. When asked to define gangs, a youth worker offered the following insight, “The word ‘gang’ is a term of the adult community; you would never find youths defining their group as a gang.”<sup>17</sup>

This sentiment further underscores the entrenched feelings of disaffection on which criminal groups capitalize. While some groups revel in gang and “gangster” terminology, others use labels, such as “crews” and “posses,” to describe their groups.



Regardless of the terminology used, members of these groups generally possess a clear sense of association that sets them apart not only from rival gangs but also from society at large. In the future, effective programs must intervene to address this sense of alienation from "mainstream" society that provides fertile breeding ground for the development of gangs.

Law enforcement agencies should also avoid enforcement strategies designed to simply push gangs from their jurisdictions. A strategy of displacement not only transfers gang-related crime to neighboring communities but it also fails to address the root causes of the gang problem. Where possible, agencies should work to develop regional responses that coordinate the resources of schools, community organizations, and all aspects of the criminal justice system.

## CONCLUSION

Gangs have a long history in the United States. Like many trends, they started in large urban areas and are now taking hold in communities of every size and cultural makeup.

The scope of problems presented by modern gangs requires a coordinated response. Neither school systems nor community groups nor law enforcement alone can adequately address the complex issues surrounding the rise in gangs. However, by developing comprehensive responses, communities across the Nation can reverse this tide. The challenge to law enforcement agencies is to sustain effective enforcement efforts while developing and supporting proactive efforts to keep youths out of gangs. ♦

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Carl S. Taylor, "Gang Imperialism" and "Chinese Gangs and Extortion," in *Gangs in*

*America*, ed. C. Ronald Huff (Newbury Park, California: 1990), 103-115, 129-145.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Horowitz, "Sociological Perspectives on Gangs: Conflicting Definitions and Concepts," in *Gangs in America*, ed. C. Ronald Huff (Newbury Park, California: 1990), 37-54.

<sup>3</sup> Internal report, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Criminal Investigative Division, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Supra*, note 2, 39.

<sup>6</sup> *Supra*, note 3.

<sup>7</sup> G. David Curry, Robert J. Fox, Richard A. Ball, and Darryl Stone, *National Assessment of Law Enforcement Anti-gang Information Resources: Draft Final Report*, West Virginia University, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Street Gangs: Current Knowledge and Strategies*, National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC, August 1993, 19.

<sup>10</sup> *Supra*, note 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Supra*, note 9, 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

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**T**he *Law Enforcement* staff is always on the lookout for dynamic, law enforcement-related photos for possible publication in the magazine. We are interested in photos that visually depict the many aspects of the law enforcement profession and illustrate the various tasks law enforcement personnel perform.

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