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STREET GANG WORK

by

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There is an extensive amount of folklore about the methodologies for contacting and redirecting members of street gangs. The mythology, at times, is so deeply rooted that even the juvenile street gang members, themselves, tend to believe some of the stereotypes and even attempt to perpetuate them. The techniques involved in the professional delivery of street gang services are well known, having been developed for at least 30 years. We know what works. We know what doesn't work. The problem is, however, that not everybody who gets engaged in doing street gang work is necessarily aware of or trained in these techniques.

Almost at the top of the list of misconceptions that would have to be cleared up is that involving the definition of what constitutes a street gang. Some people use that label very loosely and, as a result, tend to misapply it. In the minds and vocabulary of some people, as soon as four juveniles get together and behave in the least way disruptively, the label of "street gang" almost automatically comes to mind.

On the other hand, there are those who tend to be apologists for murderous street gangs. The people making these excuses are often heard to say something to the effect that the Kiwanis is a gang, and that there are other "gangs" among polite white society, and street gangs are really no different in aims and purposes. Such apologists would be hard put to describe the last time when the Kiwanis, the Elks or the Rotarians were running loose on the streets of Philadelphia, carrying deadly weapons, and shooting adversaries to death.

Street gangs that kill are very different not only from other kinds of groupings but also from other kinds of street gangs. In effect, the street gang that kills is a special kind of group that requires special kinds of handling. If this understanding is lost or muddied at the outset, the effort at amelioration is lost before it begins.

Several years ago, street gangs were classified so that those who were working with them could better understand each other. In effect, there were developed agreed-upon

definitions and terminology. In this way, those of us who were doing street gang work would be able to talk to others who were doing the same kind of work, and who would not mislead each other in the process. When one of us used the word "gang", the rest of us full well understood what was being implied. We never confused the "Moroccos" or the "Barbary Coast" with the Kiwanis. Nor did we confuse them with a friendship group of boys engaged in some highjinks common to most teenagers. Gangs that have killed and can kill again are not like other neighborhood youth groups. Even in the worst ghetto, the overwhelming majority of young people do not kill, rape and mutilate. Most are law-abiding and quite normal teenagers. Those who belong to killing gangs are unlike others in the neighborhood and are often socially isolated from other youths.

We divided street gangs into three classes. Class three was applied to a gang that had no fixed membership. Most of the individual members were of a "come and go" variety. Only a very small number of the youths involved in such a group regularly "made it" to the street corner. They formed a nucleus around which the come-and-go members congregated. The kinds of activities normally engaged in by the class three gang revolved around petty violence, truancy, sexual misconduct, and rather regular drinking. Instead of having one fixed "hanging spot" they tended to roam over a wide turf. They take the action as it comes. Most of their activities are of an unplanned, adventitious nature. Fighting is not organized or ritualized.

The class two gang had all of the characteristics of the class three gang, with the major exception being that the organization was much more structured and crystallized. There was an identifiable nucleus of leadership. Their hanging spots become fixed. Their turf becomes identifiable. Although there is still some come-and-go membership, the nucleus has enlarged to include some hangers-on who are regulars. Their acting-out is much more extreme and severe.

In terms of aggressive conduct, class two gangs almost always confine their activities to assaulting or terrorizing youngsters from other class two gangs or class three gangs. They will even commit aggression against non-affiliated youngsters within the neighborhood. Class two gangs, however, rarely aggress against class one gangs. The exceptions to this occur at such times as several members of a class one gang are either disabled, incarcerated, or for other reasons are out of the way. When this happens, a highly assaultive class two gang may erupt against a class one gang for purposes of obtaining higher status. Once this step has been taken, it is almost always irrevocable.

It is at that state that it is possible for a class two gang

to graduate to class one status. However, assault against a class one gang is not the only way in which to acquire class one status. The class two gang may acquire a class one status by having committed a homicide and by having the potential for repeating the act.

This brings us to the class one gang category. The class one gang has all the attributes mentioned up to this point, except that the attributes are much more intensive. A class one gang has an identifiable constant leadership. Even the followership is steady and identifiable, with only a rare person acting on a come-and-go basis. The leadership is frequently divided by specialty. There may be a separate leader for "war". There may be another person acting in a leadership capacity in matters related to social affairs. There may be a third person acting in a leadership capacity in relationship to the "pee-wees". These are the sub-teen members who are affiliated with the street gang. In some highly organized street-corner gangs, there may even be a girls' auxiliary. In addition to the highly organized nature of their structure, one of the major characteristics of the class one gang is that they have killed and retain the capacity to do so again and again.

It is not an infrequent characteristic that the older teenager who acquires the leadership position over the "pee-wees", that is the sub-teen affiliates of the street gang, is a "leftover" who has been left behind and bypassed by the other gang members. He is often immature, and intellectually deficient, although he may have a high degree of street foxiness. As other members of his peer group graduate to the status of "old heads", that is the elder statesmen of the corner, this person is left behind and cannot keep up with them. He functions as a teacher of the very young boys. He teaches them the streetlore, the gang history, and he regales these youngsters with episodes, both real and imagined, of street corner heroics. He naturally places himself in the most heroic role. These youngsters are probably too young to know the truth, and tend to accept his stories as genuine. He is able to posture in their presence and act the role of the big time leader when, in fact, such a posture represents puffery. He is able to achieve high status only among boys much younger than himself. Such status was invariably denied him whenever he had to function in his peer groups.

The hard core fighting element of a class one gang is usually called the "Juniors." These are the boys who have passed through pubescence and are either younger or older teenagers. Another grouping that relates to the class one gang is the "old heads." These are the older teenagers who have gotten too old and too mature for the street corner but have not been able to break away entirely. They are the young adults in the area who are recognized as having been

assiduous participants of street corner violence. They have "reps." They sometimes act as war counselors to the fighting group. They also act, at times, to stabilize the fighting element, particularly in circumstances where the vast experience of the "old heads" would suggest that the "juniors" are engaged in a self-defeating or dangerous enterprise.

Very obviously, therefore, one of the first strategies of street gang work is to identify who are the members of the street gang. Unless this is done at the outset, it is quite possible to find oneself working with the wrong group of youngsters. This has happened on more than one occasion, particularly to new personnel. When that happens, great mystification strikes everyone. The fighting, the mutilation and the murder continue even though a worker is in the area, except that he is working with the wrong group of boys. He may not realize it until another episode of violence breaks out in the area at such time and circumstance when the worker is with the group of boys he had identified, mistakenly.

One of the ways in which a worker is able to identify the proper set of youngsters who are engaged in organized class one gang activity is rather uncomplicated. Upon arriving in the general area, the worker will usually note the nicknames of several youngsters painted and otherwise inscribed on walls and prominent spots in the area. Although it is not an infallible indicator, there are very good chances that the names inscribed on the walls represent a gang roster. The worker makes note of these nicknames. By appearing regularly in the area he will then be able to take note of which names regularly come up in community conversation, identified by the community as the boys who are doing the fighting and the shooting. By cross reference, between the names mentioned by community people and the names inscribed upon the walls, the worker is pretty well able to zero in on a list of who the likely gang members are. His next step is to go to various spots throughout the community which tend to draw young people. These might be hoagie shops, an abandoned house, an alley way, a school yard, or some similar collecting point. By his being alert to the names being bandied about, the worker goes from spot to spot until he recognizes names being called which are identical to the names which are inscribed on the walls and which the community has also identified. The odds are that he has made contact.

Almost as soon as the worker begins to spend time near the gang, they will spot him. Their first impression is that the worker is a policeman. If something were to indicate that this judgment might be inaccurate, the next guess of the group is that the worker is either a latent or active homosexual who is looking to pick up boys. Should this theory fail them, and if the worker keeps showing up wherever the boys

are, sooner or later they will attempt to test who he is and what is his function.

One of the ways in which this test is carried out is quite fascinating. The gang runners, and the rest of the gang for that matter, would like to know who is this stranger. The gang runners, however, do not wish to risk much in the effort at finding out. One of the more frequently used strategies is for the gang runners to identify one of the less bright gang members who is interested in obtaining a reputation.

The gang runner will then assign this not too clever figure to the task of finding out who the stranger may be. In this way, should there be an embarrassing episode in which the stranger "comes on heavy", the leader's reputation is not directly involved. Only the reputation of a flunky might be damaged, and that is no great loss. The flunky doesn't realize he is being used, and tends to believe that he has been singled out for a special high status assignment. The way in which this teenager confronts the stranger is not usually fixed. There are several techniques for such a confrontation. The worker, if he is wise, will notice the beginnings of such an inquiry and will make it easy for the gang member to find out who he is.

At the first approach of the gang member, the worker may adopt one of several ploys. For example, he may drop a coin into the jukebox and pick only one song and offer the young person a chance to suggest what else might be good to play. Another ploy might be to simply wait for the gang member to make some kind of overture and, once this has been done, to respond to his overture openly and without any guile whatsoever. At the earliest appropriate time, the gangworker identifies himself as such.

It is a rare neighborhood today, in a large urban area, in which street gang youngsters do not know what a gang worker is. Once the worker identifies himself as such, most youngsters will have a rather accurate notion of what he does for a living.

The initial contacts with the gang are often tenuous. It would be unreasonable to believe that the gang members have any basis for trusting the worker. Trust is something that must be built over a long period of time, and is not easily given or obtained. It may even be that the worker not only is not trusted, but also is not liked.

One of the conscious or unconscious strategies frequently employed by gang members is to trade upon the worker's wishes to be liked. Many a new worker has traded away too much in order to obtain some sign that the boys like him. There have been workers who permitted themselves to be very easily exploited because of the trade-offs made in order to be accepted.

It is, therefore, important that the worker, from the beginning, make his role clear to the gang members. He

must do this in an unambiguous fashion. This is in keeping with good professional practice. It has long been recognized that it is absolutely vital for those whose job it is to deliver service, to make it clear to the recipient that there are ways in which the worker can be used and ways in which he will not permit himself to be used. It is not at all uncommon that the recipients of service have no real idea of how to best use this resource for helping. This is one reason why many people who are exposed to helping resources, nevertheless, fail to be helped. They simply do not know how to use the resources. In effect, the worker has the responsibility for not only ensuring that a service delivery is made, he also has the responsibility for educating the client on how to use the array of services that are available to him, even defining for the client what constitutes that array.

It is not possible for the worker to make such a definition unless the worker, himself, fully understands the objectives of street gang work. If the worker's understanding of street gang work is amorphous, nebulous or given over to folklore, he certainly is not in a position to give an accurate and graphic description to the teenagers in such a way as to enable them to understand him and also how to use him properly.

What, then, are the objectives of street gang work? Inasmuch as this paper deals with working with class one street gangs, that is those gangs who have killed and may do so again, it would seem to be self-evident that the first objective of the street gang worker ought to be to keep the youngsters alive long enough for any rehabilitation to work. Another equally important initial objective is to reduce the level of violence so that potential victims will have a chance to live, too. In effect, the initial objectives of the street gang worker are directed toward the saving of lives.

During the early stages of his relationship with the street gang, it is unlikely that the worker will have enough influence to do more than just be tolerated on the street corner. Sometimes he doesn't even rate that much. It may well be that his only mandate for being on the street corner is that which is given him by his own agency or that which is given by his own conscience. More likely than not, since the gang members, themselves, did not send for him, they do not consider themselves as "partners" to any agreement that the worker ought to be on the street corner.

It is highly important that the worker understands that the nature of street gang work is such that it cannot be performed effectively unless the worker behaves in an assertive fashion providing outreach services. He cannot behave in this fashion unless he himself is a true believer in the ethical propriety of his being out there on the street corner,

working with this group. He also has to be a true believer in the quality and validity of the services he has to offer to the young gang members as well as to their families.

This belief must be strong enough so that the worker will not stint in his expenditure of energy. He literally has to be on the street corner for extended periods of time. He also has to be on the street corner during hours that are inconvenient to himself and to his family. Couple this with the fact that the job can be extraordinarily dangerous, and we have all of the reasons needed for a worker to discover that he "ought to be somewhere else." It is a nearly impossible job for workers who do not have a strong commitment or who do not feel a sense of urgency to be on the corner night after night, hour after hour. He must believe that his presence makes a difference.

Honest and dedicated street gang workers do not go home until they can account for all of the members of the street gang with whom they are working, and are sure that these young people are off the street for the night. The classical model for the delivery of street gang services requires that the worker be present as long as any significant segment of the street gang is still out on the loose. The worker's hours must coincide with the active hours of the street gang. If there is any gap during which the street gang is active and the worker is not present, that gap will inevitably be lethal.

There are certain times that will immediately stand out as being hours of high activity. Among these hours are found the "Friday night" hours. In many areas of the inner city community, Friday night is known as "wine night." This results from Friday night being the evening on which pay checks, and checks from other sources of income, are spent. One can readily see the kind of combination that alcohol and violence can make.

The after school hours, from the time that key schools let out for the day, on through, at times, to one a.m. and two a.m., represent another critical period. If there was gang violence on a previous night, and some unsettled scores remain to be paid, one of the ways in which the payment is strategized by the gang is to catch their adversaries on their way home from school, while they might possibly be unwary. If gang violence has been particularly active, and if both adversary groups have members going to the same high school, it might be important to have street gang workers present at the school during the day until the unresolved issues are settled well enough so as to ensure that violence won't break out in the school itself. In effect, during heightened periods of violent interaction between adversary groups, it may be necessary for the worker to be on the scene of potential violence for nearly 20 out of every 24 hours. The idea that

successful street gang work can be accomplished within an 8 hour work day is not only painfully naive but patently dangerous.

In working with the street gang members, themselves, the worker must first understand that every single street gang member who belongs to a class one gang is a member because he wants to be. The idea that some young people have been dragooned into membership is absolute poppycock. This may be true of class three gangs or even class two gangs, but it is never true of a class one gang.

The reason for this is that class one gangs are those that engage themselves in very high levels of violence, up to and including killing. No dedicated class one street gang member would want to have along side of himself, with his life depending upon it, a youngster who didn't want to be on the street corner and who is present only because he was intimidated into being present. Every experienced class one gang member knows that his life depends upon the dedication of his fellow gang members. No one will risk his life on the steadiness and dedication of a youngster who is *forced* to be present. Class one street gang members prefer as cohorts only those youngsters who are committed to the relationships and the activities of the gang. Although it is popular for some of the street gang youngsters to say, upon interview with outsiders, that "I was forced into it", it is unknown that a regular, ongoing and sustaining member of a class one gang continues that relationship for any other reason except that he wishes to continue it. Very obviously, before the worker is going to be able to help these youngsters, he must understand the special needs and attractions that bring these youngsters to the street corner night after night, and the mechanisms which provoke lethal acting out — not just once in a while, but regularly.

There is no way possible for the worker to be able to have any serious impact upon the gang members unless he is not only prepared to help them directly but also prepared to help members of their families and other persons who are important to them. This may mean helping an older brother get a job. It may require accompanying mother down to the Welfare Department over an issue in which she needs an advocate. It may mean counseling with the father, the sisters, with aunts and grandmothers. It may also involve negotiating with the school counselor to help the street corner youngster get back into school, in case he is a school drop out. In brief, the street gang worker is a generalist who is capable of delivering services not only to the street corner youngsters but also to family members and neighborhood friends. These services may, and likely will, cover a broad gamut and range. Job counseling, educational counseling, marital counseling, welfare counseling, and the like are just

some examples of the kinds of skills the worker is expected to have and to deliver. Additionally, the worker has to have some recreational skills in sports, games and social affairs. It is by the use of these recreational skills that he is often able to make his first genuine impact of a positive nature.

Many people have wondered why street gang workers, traditionally, have been interested in setting up basketball leagues. There is no therapy in basketball per se. It is, however, an excellent tactical device for dividing the gang into its various component age brackets. By getting the youngsters interested in participating in basketball leagues, the older boys become involved in a league for their age group, as separate and distinct from the juniors who are in a separate league which, in turn, is different from the youngsters engaged in this fashion, the constituent components of the street gang are sent off on separate activities and the communication between these components tends to become more tenuous. After a period of time, when all of these components are engaged separately from each other, the phenomenon will be observed of street corner violence which restricts itself to one particular part of the gang rather than the entire gang because other segments are off playing basketball or otherwise engaged.

If the gang worker is successful, there is a good chance that he will get to sense this in a very concrete fashion. The highest order of leadership within the gang owes its status to the persistent violence in which the gang engages itself. Away from this violent activity, these leaders may lose their entire reason for being. If they are unable to make the transition and derive a leadership role in reference to other kinds of activities besides violence, they may view the gang worker as being the one who has sabotaged their role of leadership. Sometimes it is possible to help them to develop a leadership role in activities less destructive.

On other occasions, it is not possible to do so because some of the key members are pathological. In that event, it would be better to do what is possible in order to ensure that these pathological leaders are picked up by the probation officer. It would be a rare leader of a youth gang who is pathological and who, at the same time, does not have a record that is of a nature that places him under the close supervision of the Juvenile Court's Probation Department. When it is understood that it is not possible for the other members of the gang to survive and be redirected unless this pathological leader is out of the scene, it would be wise to have him removed through revocation of probationary status.

There is yet another classical way in which a gang worker can endanger himself besides antagonizing the gang leadership that sees itself as having lost its role due to his efforts. When the street gang worker identifies so strongly

with the street gang with which he is working that he becomes an antagonist of rival street gang members, he endangers himself much more readily than might first appear to be the case. He cannot be seen as a partisan of any one gang. If he is seen in this way, he will be treated accordingly.

In the tactics of the deployment of street gang workers, it is axiomatic that when a worker is assigned to a street gang, another worker must be assigned to the rival gang. In this way, both workers can keep themselves alerted as to the movements of each other's gangs. This tends to prevent the possibility of one worker being surprised by the sudden arrival of the antagonistic gang, with the possibilities that not only will his group be endangered but also so will he. Working with only one half of an adversary relationship is completely ineffectual. If one presumes to do street gang work, then one must also presume to handle the entire equation that deals with the issue of who is fighting with whom.

Finally, it must be understood that street gang work is basically little different from good sound group work. The theory and practice of group work apply very clearly to street gang work. However, the street gang worker must be a combination of group worker as well as case worker. As was stated earlier, he is a generalist who is prepared to deliver a large range and variety of services. In some instances, it might be better to handle individuals as such. Other times, it would be better to function through the use of group processes and in a group oriented setting.

There are no real mysteries to the delivery of a professional level of street gang work. The techniques of group work and case work are well known to us. Problems tend to arise out of an attempt to apply these techniques to the street corner. This does require some skill and ingenuity. One of the more effective ways of training workers how to do this is to place them into the care of a highly experienced and veteran worker who has had long experience at such application.

When sound professional techniques are employed along with a commitment to be at the scene of the action when the action is taking place, and all this is accompanied by activist supervision and administration, evidence has shown that street gang members do not have to kill each other continuously. Although conditions under which street gang workers may have to perform may change from time to time, these changes can be handled by the use of proven methodology and proven procedures. When folklore replaces professional understanding, when the hours of 9 to 5 replace the unlimited hours necessary to being present when the gang is acting-out, when supervisors sit behind desks and never get out into the field to supervise staff and to steady green personnel, when stereotypes replace innovative thinking, this is when youths die needlessly and miserably.

PRISON FROM THE INSIDE

by

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The concept of prison is negative in its essence. Prisons are really not nice places. Prisons are not hospitals, but we have doctors there. They are not churches, though there is likely to be a church on the premises. They are not factories, but we have to perform industrial type jobs there. Prisons are designed to keep people away from the general society. The prisoner does not have a choice once he has been sentenced to prison. And, of course, when you are trying to satisfy that one function — keeping him against his will — you place some limitations on the kind of structure you are going to have. The Quakers, as most of you know, thought they had found the solution to our criminal problem when they caused the erection of Cherry Hill at 21st and Fairmount Avenue in Philadelphia. The institution was going to correct all criminal problems, or so many thought. The design, however, ignored the need for social interchange. One of the side effects of this oversight was that inmates started to lose their minds. Today we would probably predict that; but the reforms of that day started with very good motives. The designers were ignorant of the total impact on the individual of such confinement.

Unfortunately, we are still ignoring total impact in some quarters even today. Recently, a prison in a supposedly enlightened state was built to house 2500 prisoners. Prisons should never be built that big. Graterford in Pennsylvania, for example, was built about 40 years ago (roughly in the late 1920's and early 30's). It was built to house 2000 people, at about the same time the Michigan State Prison at Jackson and the one at Attica, New York, were built to house even more prisoners. The idea, of course, of all these prisons, was to warehouse these men for the sake of economics. The theory was that the larger the prison, the less per unit cost. This transpired in spite of the lofty pronouncements by the American Correctional Association in 1870 which established and verbalized some principles which are still being advocated, but not followed, in too many places. It is just another example in our society in particular, and societies in general, where we articulate lofty principles that we do not attain. Maybe we should verbalize loftily. It gives us something to strive for. But if we don't come up to what we say we have established as standards, then I think that there is a chance of many people becoming disillusioned, becoming bitter, and using that as an excuse for themselves not doing what they can to be responsible citizens in our society.

Prisons cost a great deal of money. The cost of putting up a cell today runs between \$20,000 and \$25,000 per cell.

As I mentioned earlier, prisons were built for control. But people who work in prisons and in prison environments have really

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