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Hybrid and Other Modern Gangs



David Starbuck, James C. Howell, and Donna J. Lindquist

The proliferation of youth gangs since 1980 has fueled the public's fear and magnified possible misconceptions about youth gangs. To address the mounting concern about youth gangs, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP's) Youth Gang Series delves into many of the key issues related to youth gangs. The series considers issues such as gang migration, gang growth, female involvement with gangs, homicide, drugs and violence, and the needs of communities and youth who live in the presence of youth gangs.

"Hybrid" youth gangs¹ have existed in the United States at least since the 1920s (Thrasher, 1927). Early hybrid gangs were described mainly as mixed-race or mixed-ethnicity gangs; modern-day hybrid gangs, however, have more diverse characteristics. "Hybrid gang culture" is characterized by members of different racial/ethnic groups participating in a single gang, individuals participating in multiple gangs, unclear rules or codes of conduct, symbolic associations with more than one well-established gang (e.g., use of colors and graffiti from different gangs), cooperation of rival gangs in criminal activity, and frequent mergers of small gangs.

As the new millennium begins, hybrid gangs are flourishing and their changing nature is making it more difficult to study and respond to them. Today, many gangs do not follow the same rules or use the

same methods of operation as traditional gangs such as the Bloods and Crips (based in Los Angeles, CA) or the Black Gangster Disciples and Vice Lords (based in Chicago, IL). These older gangs tend to have an age-graded structure of subgroups or cliques. The two Chicago gangs have produced organizational charts and explicit rules of conduct and regulations, including detailed punishments for breaking gang rules (Spergel, 1995:81). They have developed coalitions with other gangs, forming what are called gang "nations," such as Folks (including the Black Gangster Disciples) and People (including the Vice Lords).

Although many communities have gangs that bear the names of earlier gangs that originated in Los Angeles and Chicago, the actual membership of these newer gangs is often locally based and has little or no real national affiliation. These hybrids—new gangs that may have the names but not the other characteristics of older gangs—are one of the new types of gangs most frequently found in communities that had no gang culture prior to the 1980s or 1990s. Because gangs, gang culture, and gang-related activities are dynamic, affected communities need to recognize the new faces of these groups and avoid popularly held, media-influenced misconceptions (see Best and Hutchinson, 1996; Decker, Bynum, and Weisel, 1998; Fernandez, 1998; Fleisher, 1995, 1998; Klein, 1995; Miethe and McCorkle, 1997; McCorkle and Miethe, 1998).

A Message From OJJDP

Gangs have changed significantly from the images portrayed in *West Side Story* and similar stereotypical depictions. Although newly emerging youth gangs frequently take on the names of older traditional gangs, the similarities often end there.

This Bulletin describes the nature of modern youth gangs, in particular, hybrid gangs. Hybrid gang culture is characterized by mixed racial and ethnic participation within a single gang, participation in multiple gangs by a single individual, vague rules and codes of conduct for gang members, use of symbols and colors from multiple—even rival—gangs, collaboration by rival gangs in criminal activities, and the merger of smaller gangs into larger ones. Thus, hybrid gang customs are clearly distinguished from the practices of their predecessors.

The Bulletin draws on survey data, research findings, and field reports to detail these critical differences, reviewing such issues as gang stereotypes and gang migration in the process.

If law enforcement agencies are to effectively address the problems posed by newly emerging youth gangs, they must understand the differences that distinguish them from the stereotypical concept of traditional gangs. The information provided in this Bulletin should contribute to that awareness.

The public continues to perceive youth gangs and gang members in terms of the media stereotype of the California Crips and Bloods rather than in terms of current scientific data (Klein, 1995:40–43, 112–135). Some jurisdictions may erroneously adapt a response that is appropriate for well-publicized Los Angeles or Chicago gang problems but not for gang issues in their own jurisdictions (Miethe and McCorkle, 1997). For example, misreading local gangs as drug trafficking enterprises rather than neighborhood conflict groups could render interventions ineffective. Because the characteristics of local gangs and their criminal involvement may differ from the features of gangs in distant cities, different strategies may be required to address the local gang problem effectively.

This Bulletin addresses youth gangs in the 21st century by considering what constitutes a hybrid gang, whether gangs and individual members are migrating across the country, and how new coalitions such as hybrid gangs differ from stereotypical and traditional gangs. The Bulletin brings together survey data, recent research results, and firsthand reports from the field to examine today's gangs and their members. For reports from the field, the Bulletin draws heavily on insights shared by author David Starbuck, formerly a Sergeant in the Kansas City Police Department's Gang Unit, whose contributions are incorporated throughout the Bulletin, especially in the sidebars that give the law enforcement practitioner's point of view.

The broad range of modern or contemporary gangs, as depicted in research studies and survey data, is discussed in the first section of this Bulletin. The growth of modern gangs provides a social context for the emergence of hybrid gangs. Hybrid gangs are discussed in the second section, and conclusions and policy implications are highlighted in the final section.

Characteristics of Modern Youth Gangs

Location

Once a problem primarily in large cities, youth gangs are now present in suburbs, small towns, and rural areas (Miller, W.B., 2001). In 1999, law enforcement agencies reported active youth gangs in 100 percent of the Nation's largest cities (those with populations of 250,000 or more), 47 percent of suburban counties, 27 percent of small cities (those with populations below 25,000), and 18 percent of rural



counties (Egley, 2000; Howell, Moore, and Egley, forthcoming). The average year of gang problem onset was 1989 for large cities, 1990 for suburban counties, 1992 for small cities, and 1993 for rural counties (National Youth Gang Center, 1999). The localities reporting later onset of gang problems are most likely to be in rural counties, small cities, and suburban counties with populations of less than 50,000 (Howell, Egley, and Gleason, forthcoming).

Gangs are also becoming commonplace in institutions, including schools, that had been considered safe havens. For many students, school has become a gathering place for gangs. More than one-third (37 percent) of a nationally representative sample of students reported gang presence in their schools in 1995, a 100-percent increase over 1989 (Howell and Lynch, 2000). Gang presence is being reported even in the military (Hasenauer, 1996).

Member Diversity

Although many gangs continue to be based on race or ethnicity, gangs are increasingly diverse in racial/ethnic composition. Law enforcement agencies responding to the 1998 National Youth Gang Survey estimated that more than one-third (36 percent) of youth gangs had a significant mixture of two or more racial/ethnic groups (National Youth Gang Center, 2000). Small cities had the largest proportion of gangs with mixed race/ethnicity. The Midwest had a larger proportion of mixed gangs than any other region.

Recent student surveys and field studies of local gangs also report significant gender mixtures (Esbensen, Deschenes, and

Winfree, 1999; Fleisher, 1998; Miller, J.A., 2001). For example, 92 percent of gang youth in one student survey (Esbensen, Deschenes, and Winfree, 1999:42) said both boys and girls belonged to their gang.

Gangs in suburban areas, small towns, and rural areas show more membership diversity than gangs in large cities. Gangs in these areas have more racially/ethnically mixed membership (National Youth Gang Center, 2000:22–23) and include more females, Caucasians, and younger members than gangs in larger cities (Curry, 2000; Howell, Egley, and Gleason, forthcoming).

Organization

Although a fixed definition has not been established, youth gangs are often presumed to be highly organized groups that engage in some level of criminal activity. Several studies challenge the notion that youth gangs are highly organized. Decker and colleagues (1998) compared the two most highly organized gangs (as reported by police) in Chicago, IL, and San Diego, CA. They found that the Chicago gangs were far more organized than the San Diego gangs but levels of organization were not necessarily linked to increased involvement in crime (Decker, Bynum, and Weisel, 1998:408). Their observation that the San Diego gangs were disorganized mirrors Sanders' (1994) findings. Other studies have questioned the extent of youth gang organization in emerging gang cities such as Denver, CO (Esbensen, Huizinga, and Weiher, 1993); Cleveland and Columbus, OH (Huff, 1996, 1998); Kansas City, MO (Fleisher, 1998); Milwaukee, WI (Hagedorn, 1988); Pittsburgh, PA (Klein, 1995); San Francisco, CA (Waldorf, 1993); Seattle,

WA (Fleisher, 1995); and St. Louis, MO (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Decker and Curry, 2000).

Modern youth gangs are generally less territory based than gangs of the past (Klein, 1995; Miller, 1992; National Youth Gang Center, 2000). In the older gang cities and the Southwest, gangs traditionally were tied strongly to their neighborhoods or barrios. The Mexican-American “turf gang” pattern, transmitted across generations and ethnicities, has given way to autonomous gangs as the predominant pattern (Klein, 1995:102). These autonomous gangs consist of single, named groups occupying smaller territories and may be based in a neighborhood, a public housing project, or another community location (such as a schoolyard or shopping mall).

Some gang research in the 1960s suggested that youngsters were pressured to join gangs by peers who used strong-arm tactics (Yablonsky, 1967). Community (adult) representatives view peer pressure to join gangs as irresistible (Decker and Kempf-Leonard, 1991). However, it is not as difficult for adolescents to resist gang pressures as is commonly believed. In most instances, adolescents can refuse to join gangs without reprisal (Decker and Kempf-Leonard, 1991; Fleisher, 1995; Huff, 1998; Maxson, Whitlock, and Klein, 1998).

Perpetuating the myth of lifetime membership helps sustain a gang, because the group’s viability depends on the ability of active members to maintain the perception that leaving the gang is nearly impossible (Decker and Lauritsen, 1996:114). The reality is that members (especially marginal members) typically can leave a gang without serious consequences (Decker and Lauritsen, 1996; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Fleisher, 1995). In fact, most adolescents do not remain in gangs for long periods of time—particularly in areas with emerging gang problems. Studies in three cities that developed gang problems fairly recently—Denver, CO; Rochester, NY; and Seattle, WA—show that from 54 to 69 percent of adolescents who joined gangs in the three cities stayed in them for 1 year or less and 9 to 21 percent belonged for 3 years or more (Thornberry, 1998).

Onset of Local Gang Problems

It appears that the emergence of gangs in new localities² in the 10-year period 1986–96 has contributed to the growth of hybrid gangs. For example, the use of names and symbols of traditional gangs may provide

a sense of “legitimacy” to new groups, but the context of the new localities may produce adaptations that lead to divergence from the traditional patterns. Data from the 1996 National Youth Gang Survey show that nearly 9 in 10 (87 percent) of the localities reporting gang problems said that onset occurred during the 1986–96 period (National Youth Gang Center, 1999). An analysis of National Youth Gang Center (NYGC) survey data on early onset (before 1990) versus late onset (during the 1990s) localities (Howell, Egley, and Gleason, forthcoming) found that gangs in the newer gang-problem localities were distinctly different in their demographic characteristics from traditional gangs in jurisdictions where gang problems began much earlier. Gangs in late-onset localities had younger members, slightly more females, more Caucasians, and more of a racial/ethnic mixture. Caucasians were the predominant racial/ethnic group in the latest onset (1995–96) localities. Gangs in localities where gang problems began in the 1990s also tended to have a much larger proportion of middle-class teens.

Gang members in late-onset localities also were far less likely to be involved in violent crimes (homicide, aggravated assault, robbery, and use of firearms) and property

crimes than gang members in early-onset localities. For example, about 8 in 10 gang members in localities with the earliest onset of gang problems (before 1986) were said to use firearms in assault crimes “often” or “sometimes,” compared with fewer than 3 in 10 gang members in localities with the latest onset (1995–96).

A comparison of drug trafficking patterns in areas with early and late onset of gang problems found that both gang member involvement in drug sales and gang control of drug distribution were much less likely to be significant problems in jurisdictions where gang problems emerged in the past decade (Howell and Gleason, 1999). In the newer gang problem localities, gang control of drug distribution was less likely to be extensive than was gang member involvement in drug sales.

Gang member involvement in drug sales was less extensive in the oldest gang jurisdictions (onset of gang problems before 1980) than in jurisdictions where onset occurred between 1981 and 1990 (Howell and Gleason, 1999). Gang member involvement in drug sales was most extensive in jurisdictions with onset between 1981 and 1985 and then decreased consistently in subsequent onset periods through

Practitioner’s View: The Challenges of Hybrid Gangs

Law enforcement officers from communities unaffected by gangs until the 1980s or early 1990s often find themselves scrambling to obtain training relevant to hybrid gangs. When gang-related training first became widely available in the early 1990s, it often emphasized historical information, such as the formation of the Los Angeles Crips and Bloods in the late 1960s or the legacy of Chicago-based gangs (the Black Gangster Disciples, Latin Kings, and Vice Lords). As law enforcement officers learned about the origins of these influential gangs, they sometimes attempted to apply this outdated information in their efforts to deal with hybrid gangs in their jurisdictions. The assumption that new gangs share the characteristics of older gangs can impede law enforcement’s attempts to identify and effectively counter local street gangs, and actions based on this assumption often elicit inappropriate responses from the community as a whole. Citizens may react negatively to law enforcement efforts when they sense that gang suppression actions are geared to a more serious gang problem than local gangs appear to present.

Because of uncertainty in reporting on problem groups such as “cliques,” “crews,” “posses,” and other nontraditional collectives that may be hybrid gangs, some police department staff spend an inordinate amount of time trying to precisely categorize local groups according to definitions of traditional gangs. When training law enforcement groups on investigative issues surrounding drug trafficking or street gangs, instructors must resist the tendency to connect gangs in different cities just because the gangs share a common name. If the groups engage in ongoing criminal activity and alarm community members, law enforcement officers should focus on the criminal activity, regardless of the ideological beliefs or identifiers (i.e., name, symbols, and group colors) of the suspects. This practical approach would circumvent the frustration that results from trying to pigeonhole hybrid gangs into narrow categories and would avoid giving undue attention to gangs that want to be recognized as nationwide crime syndicates.

1995–96. Thus, gang members in the newest gang problem jurisdictions were much less likely to be involved in drug sales than gang members in jurisdictions where gang problems began during the early to mid-1980s.

Gang Stereotypes

The characteristics of modern gangs contrast sharply with the stereotypical image of gangs that emerged in the 1980s and continues to predominate. From the 1920s through the 1970s, gang members were characterized mainly as young (11–22 years old) Hispanic or African American males who lived in lower class ghetto or barrio sections of the inner city (Klein, 1995; Miller, 1992; Spergel, 1995). In that period, gangs usually were viewed as racially and ethnically homogeneous, spontaneously organized, and authoritatively controlled fighting groups (Miller, 1992). Classic “rumbles” historically were the major form of gang fighting, but they gave way in the 1970s to forays by small armed and motorized bands. Most gang violence was motivated by honor or local turf defense and, to a lesser extent, control over facilities and areas and economic gain (Miller, 1992:118). Gang violence was not a major social concern (Klein, 1969).

In the mid- to late 1980s, this predominant gang stereotype was modified significantly by a California study in which researchers contended that the two major Los Angeles gangs, the Crips and Bloods, had become highly organized and entrepreneurial and were expanding their drug markets to other cities (Skolnick et al., 1988). Where these drug operations appeared, presumably, so did violent crime.

Gang Migration

The expanded presence of gangs is often blamed on the relocation of members from one city to another, which is called gang migration. Some gangs are very transient and conduct their activities on a national basis. However, the sudden appearance of Rollin’ 60s Crips graffiti in a public park in rural Iowa, for example, does not necessarily mean that the Los Angeles gang has set up a chapter in the community. Gang names are frequently copied, adopted, or passed on. In most instances, there is little or no real connection between local groups with the same name other than the name itself (Valdez, 2000:344).

Gang migration does occur, however. According to the 1999 National Youth Gang Survey, 18 percent of all youth gang

Practitioner’s View: Gang Migration and Hybrid Gangs in Kansas City

Gangs began moving into the Midwest in the early 1980s, with Kansas City, MO, emerging as a textbook example of a locality experiencing gang migration. Located in almost the geographical center of the continental United States, Kansas City has approximately 5,000 documented gang members and affiliates and numerous Chicago- and California-style gangs in the metropolitan area.¹ No single group has achieved dominance.

The Kansas City Police Department’s Drug Enforcement Unit first encountered gang migration while investigating a new wave of drug entrepreneurs in the 1980s. By 1988, these trafficking suspects included confirmed members of the Crips and Bloods sets (subgroups) from the Los Angeles, CA, area. As the presence of the Crips and Bloods became increasingly pronounced in Kansas City, other law enforcement agencies in the Midwest began sharing similar gang intelligence information. Suddenly, Los Angeles Crips and Bloods were known to be dealing cocaine in most major midwestern cities, including Des Moines, IA; Minneapolis, MN; Oklahoma City, OK; Omaha, NE; and Wichita, KS. By 1990, the arrival of Chicago-based gang members in Kansas City was also confirmed through routine investigations of drug trafficking and homicides.

Although Kansas City has experienced gang migration, the area’s larger gangs continue to be locally based hybrids that may not have any affiliations with migrant gang members. These groups exemplify the evolving modern gangs that are now increasingly common throughout the United States, particularly in suburban areas, small cities, and rural communities. In the past decade or more, Kansas City’s hybrid gang members have adopted traditional gang culture, modified it with personal interpretations and agendas, and become much more of a criminal and societal problem to the community than any of the groups that have migrated into the area.

For example, in two sections of Kansas City, two different gangs operate as the Athens Park Boys (APB). These groups share the name with the original Athens Park Boys, a well-established Bloods set originating in Los Angeles County. Although both of the Kansas City APB gangs engage in criminal activities and anti-social behavior, they have no connection other than the shared name: one set is composed of African American teens on the east side of the city, and the other consists of Caucasian teens, primarily from affluent families in the suburbs. Each group seems to be unaware of its Kansas City counterpart, and neither set is connected to APB in California or any other jurisdiction. Because of their increasing membership and unique characteristics and culture, hybrid gangs (like Kansas City’s APBs) warrant further examination.

¹ According to 2000 U.S. Census projections, the total population of Kansas City, MO, is 443,277 and the population of the Kansas City metropolitan area is approximately 1.2 million.

members had migrated from another jurisdiction to the one in which they were residing (Egley, 2000). Although gang migration is stereotypically attributed to illegal activities such as drug franchising, expansion of criminal enterprises is not the principal driving force behind migration (Maxson, 1998). The most common reasons for migration are social considerations affecting individual gang members, including family relocation to improve the quality of life or to be near relatives and friends. Moreover, in the 1999 National Youth Gang Survey, the vast majority (83 percent) of law enforcement respondents agreed that the appearance of gang members outside of large cities in the 1990s was caused by

the relocation of young people from central cities (Egley, 2000). Thus, the dispersion of the urban population to less populated areas contributed to the proliferation of gangs in suburban areas, small towns, and rural areas.

Law enforcement professionals may not be able to differentiate among local gangs that have adopted names of the same well-known gangs from other locales but have no real connection with each other until they begin to interact with gang members through interviews, debriefings, and other contacts. “Hybrid” versions will begin to display variations of the original gang, such as giving different reasons for opposing

rival gangs or displaying certain colors. Investigators who take the time to cross-check their local gang intelligence with that of other agencies concerning gangs with identical names are likely to find some subtle and some glaring differences.

Emerging Information on Hybrid Gangs

Hybrid gangs are more frequently encountered in communities in which gang problems emerged during the 1990s than in localities that reported onset of gang problems in the 1980s. According to law enforcement respondents in the 1998 National Youth Gang Survey, gangs with a significant mixture of two or more racial/ethnic groups represent a larger proportion of all reported gangs in localities that said their gang problem began in the 1990s (Howell, Moore, and Egley, forthcoming). A more specific question was asked about hybrid gangs in the 1999 survey. The survey questionnaire noted: "Some contend that there are youth gangs 'that don't fit the mold' of any particular gang category. These gangs may have several of the following characteristics: a mixture of racial/ethnic groups, male and female members, display symbols and graffiti of different gangs, or have members who sometimes switch from one gang to another." Respondents were asked if they had gangs that fit this description. Six in ten respondents (61 percent) said they had such gangs. However, the average number of such gangs in a given locality—four—is small (Howell, Moore, and Egley, forthcoming).

Hybrid gangs tend to have the following nontraditional features:

- ◆ They may or may not have an allegiance to a traditional gang color. In fact, much of the hybrid gang graffiti in the United States is a composite of multiple gangs with conflicting symbols. For example, Crip gang graffiti painted in red (the color used by the rival Blood gang) would be unheard of in California but have occurred elsewhere in the hybrid gang culture.
- ◆ Local gangs may adopt the symbols of large gangs in more than one city. For example, a locally based gang named after the Los Angeles Bloods may also use symbols from the Chicago People Nation, such as five-pointed stars and downward-pointed pitchforks.

- ◆ Gang members may change their affiliation from one gang to another.
- ◆ It is not uncommon for a gang member to claim multiple affiliations, sometimes involving rival gangs. For example, in Kansas City, MO, police may encounter an admitted Blood gang member who is also known in the St. Louis, MO, area as a member of the Black Gangster Disciples gang.
- ◆ Existing gangs may change their names or suddenly merge with other gangs to form new ones.
- ◆ Although many gangs continue to be based on race/ethnicity, many of them are increasingly diverse in both race/ethnicity and gender. Seemingly strange associations may form, such as between Skinheads, whose members frequently espouse racist rhetoric, and Crips, whose members are predominantly African American.
- ◆ Gang members who relocate from California to the Midwest may align

themselves with a local gang that has no ties to their original gang.

- ◆ Members of rival gangs from Chicago or Los Angeles frequently cooperate in criminal activity in other parts of the country.

Youth often "cut and paste" bits of Hollywood's media images and big-city gang lore into new local versions of nationally known gangs with which they may claim affiliation. Other hybrids are homegrown and consider themselves to be distinct entities with no alliance to groups such as the Bloods/Crips or Folks/People. Because these independent gangs can be the most difficult to classify, they frequently pose the biggest problems for local law enforcement.

Migrating gang members appear to have contributed to the growth of hybrid youth gangs in newer gang problem localities in the 1990s. Migrant gang members may act as cultural carriers of the folkways, mythologies, and other trappings of more sophisticated urban gangs (Maxson, 1998:3).

Practitioner's View: Gang Trends in the Midwest

Hybrid gangs are particularly prevalent in the Midwest region of the United States. Three features of the Midwest hybrid gangs are troublesome for law enforcement officers: new alignments the hybrid gangs may make, Hispanic gang patterns, and Asian gang criminal activity.

New alignments. Los Angeles gang members relocating to the Midwest may align themselves with a local gang that has no real ties to the California member's original gang set. In certain cases, gang members relocating from Chicago or Los Angeles conduct criminal activity in cooperation with their former rivals. For example, a recent Kansas City investigation identified multiple defendants in a drug trafficking operation. Checking the suspects' backgrounds through Los Angeles law enforcement files, investigators discovered that some of the defendants were affiliated with the 135 Compton Pirus Bloods, and others were affiliated with the rival Los Angeles gang, the 5 Deuce Hoover Crips. This coalition surprised investigators in Los Angeles, but cooperation often occurs when drug alliances form in "neutral" parts of the country, such as the Midwest. Frequently, profit potential outweighs traditional gang loyalties.

Hispanic gang patterns. Factions of Hispanic gangs are becoming increasingly prominent in much of the United States, including the Midwest. It is crucial for law enforcement to know the origins and rivalries of Hispanic gangs, including the Surenos, Nortenos, and Sinaloan Cowboys, because officers increasingly encounter these and other factions. Transient Hispanic gangs may continue their animosity with rivals in other parts of the country and engage in violent encounters with local Hispanic gangs. This phenomenon is more common with Hispanic gangs than with other types of gangs. Hispanic gang members tend to be more loyal and traditional in supporting their gang, even when in transit or when relocating to other parts of the country.

Asian gang criminal activity. In the Midwest, Asian gang criminal activity, much of which is perpetrated by transient gangs, continues to have a great impact. Problems for law enforcement include cultural misunderstandings, identification issues, language barriers, and the transient nature of these gangs (who travel out of State to commit crimes).

Movies and “gangsta” lyrics also have contributed to the proliferation of bits and pieces of gang culture. Law enforcement agencies began to notice hybrid gangs after one such gang was depicted in the movie *Colors* (Valdez, 2000:13). Gang migration, movies, and gangsta music work together to introduce local gangs to large-city gang culture. The lack of an existing gang culture allows for modification and adaptation of the culture of urban gangs.

A field study of the Fremont Hustlers in Kansas City, MO, illustrates a unique form of hybrid gang (Fleisher, 1998). The gang had no written set of rules, no membership requirements, and no leader or hierarchy that might pull all 72 members into a coherent organization. By hanging out and establishing ties with Fremont Hustlers, an outsider is slowly assimilated into the gang’s social life (Fleisher, 1998: 39). Fremont gang youth did not use the term “member”; their closest expression was “down with Fremont” (Fleisher, 1998: 41). Because the Fremont Hustlers was not a cohesive organization and youth did not talk about the group’s structure or operation, the gang structure was difficult to recognize at first. In the study, Fremont gang youth said they were Folks, but they did not know why, except that they liked to draw the pitchfork symbol used by the Folks (Fleisher, 1998:26). Fleisher described this gang as “a haphazardly assembled social unit composed of deviant adolescents who shared social and economic needs and the propensity for resolving those needs in a similar way” (1998:264).

Policy and Program Implications

To devise an appropriate response to hybrid gangs, law enforcement and other community agencies must understand that hybrids do not operate by traditional rules but they often follow general patterns that distinguish them as a new type of gang. That is, they often have members of different racial/ethnic groups, members may claim multiple gangs, codes of conduct may be unclear, graffiti may contain a mixture of symbols, and they may be involved in criminal activity alongside other gangs. In other instances, exemplified by the many cities that have factions of Black Gangster Disciples or Rollin’ 60s Crips, there may be differing levels of true connection to the original gang, or the tie may be primarily related to criminal activities such as drug trafficking. This melting pot

of gangs and gang culture can confuse concerned agencies, including those in the juvenile and criminal justice systems, as they struggle to separate gangs into neat categories that often do not exist. It is vitally important for law enforcement to concentrate on gang-related criminal activity rather than on more ephemeral aspects of gang affiliation or demographics.

When addressing local gang problems, communities need to understand ongoing changes in the Nation’s gang dynamics, provide and participate in updated gang-related training, and monitor the specific gangs and associated cultures within their own jurisdictions. Unfortunately, one thing has not changed with the advent of the hybrid gang. There is no universal formula for a patently successful response, and what works in one city may have little impact in another. An effective strategy must be based on an accurate assessment of the local problem, updated information about local gang activities, an examination of resources in the community, and a realistic appraisal of how to gauge the impact of the response. As many agencies as possible, particularly local government and police administration, must be included early in the process of developing a strategy for gang prevention and intervention. The more resources and partners that are involved, especially those with authority to respond directly to gangs, the greater a community’s chances for success.

All jurisdictions experiencing gang problems need to assess their problems carefully in light of the gang characteristics reviewed in this Bulletin. NYGC (2001a) has developed a protocol that communities can use to guide the assessment of their gang problem. This assessment protocol is applicable in communities of all sizes and characteristics.

The U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has invested considerable resources in the development and testing of a Comprehensive Community-Wide Approach to Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression (Spergel et al., 1994). This model, based on a national assessment of youth gang policies and programs (Spergel and Curry, 1990), is a general framework that addresses the youth gang problem through the following five interrelated strategies:

- ◆ Community mobilization.
- ◆ Social intervention, including prevention and street outreach.

- ◆ Provision of opportunities.
- ◆ Suppression/social control.
- ◆ Organizational change and development.

The model is multifaceted and multi-layered, involving the individual youth, the family, the gang structure, local agencies, and the community. NYGC (2001b) has prepared a planning guide to assist communities in developing a plan to implement OJJDP’s Comprehensive Gang Model.

Conclusion

Although hybrid gangs are not new to the United States, they clearly have flourished in the past decade. This Bulletin stresses the “culture” of modern hybrid gangs. This concept means that they are characterized by more than simply a mixture of age, gender, and racial/ethnic membership—although the diverse membership of gangs in newer gang problem localities certainly contributes to a wide diversity of gang forms. The hybrid gang culture sharply distinguishes modern gangs from traditional gangs. Modern hybrid gangs do not operate by traditional gang rules. Their affiliation with gangs based in Chicago or Los Angeles is likely to be in name only. They tend to “cut and paste” gang culture from traditional gangs, and they may display symbols traditionally associated with several gangs. They may form alliances with rival gangs to carry out criminal activity, but their independent mode of operating makes them difficult for law enforcement to classify. Thus, it is very important for law enforcement agencies to recognize the diverse gang culture of hybrid gangs, to approach them without any preconceived notions, and to concentrate on their gang-related criminal activity rather than on their presumed affiliations with traditional gangs. Every community—regardless of the presence or absence of hybrid gangs—should conduct a thorough assessment of its unique gang problem before devising strategies for combating it.

Endnotes

1. In the remainder of this Bulletin, unless otherwise noted, the term “gang” refers to youth gangs.
2. The term “locality” refers to the major types of named place units found in the United States (Miller, W.B., 2001:15). It includes cities, suburban areas, and counties in the National Youth Gang Survey.

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National Youth Gang Center

As part of its comprehensive, coordinated response to America's gang problem, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) funds the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC). NYGC assists State and local jurisdictions in the collection, analysis, and exchange of information on gang-related demographics, legislation, literature, research, and promising program strategies. NYGC coordinates activities of the OJJDP Gang Consortium, a group of Federal agencies, gang program representatives, and service providers that works to coordinate gang information and programs. NYGC also provides training and technical assistance for OJJDP's Rural Gang, Gang-Free Schools, and Gang-Free Communities Initiatives. For more information, contact:

National Youth Gang Center
P.O. Box 12729
Tallahassee, FL 32317
850-385-0600
850-386-5356 (fax)
nygc@iir.com
www.iir.com/nygc

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David Starbuck was formerly a Sergeant with the Kansas City Police Department, where he supervised the Gang Unit. He is vice president of the Missouri Chapter of the Midwest Gang Investigators Association and an adjunct consultant with NYGC. Mr. Starbuck provided the photograph on page 2.

James C. Howell, Ph.D., is an adjunct researcher with NYGC.

Donna J. Lindquist is a senior research associate with the Institute for Intergovernmental Research.

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