Hybrid Gangs and

Their Hidden Threat to Law Enforcement

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Abstract

This paper examines the unrecognized threats to law enforcement presented by

hybrid gangs and their members. Information contained in this paper was obtained via

literary and historical research and review, personal contact as well as the author’s

previous experience in gang and covert investigations.

In 2001, the United States Department of Justice identified the increasing

development of hybrid gangs and their threat potential. Since that time, hybrid gangs

have flourished and have continued to grow and evolve. Unfortunately, there has been

a lack of updated training for law enforcement concerning the evolution and

development of these gangs. The lack of training, combined with personal apathy

and complacency displayed by some in law enforcement enhances the threat these

entities pose for law enforcement personnel.

**Introduction**

Gang members and violence have long been considered synonymous

in the law enforcement community. As crime and violence in communities has

increased; society has experienced a proliferation of criminal gangs of various forms

(Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Annual Report 2001). These gangs have

developed and evolved into various forms. Among these, are what some refer to as

***hybrid gangs*** (Starbuck, Howell, Lindquist, 2001).

**Historical Review**

In order to understand and recognize gangs, especially hybrid gangs, we must have an

appreciation for their history, evolution, migration, and social status. Furthermore, we must

recognize gangs are not new and have existed in various civilizations, cultures and periods.

If one accepts the basic premises that a gang is a group of individuals, acting together and

engaging in antisocial and criminal behavior, then the term gang and other names commonly

associated with these entities can be found throughout history and are not a new development to

civilization. As indicated by Klein, the term gang can be found in the writings of Shakespeare,

and referred to in “The Merry Wives of Windsor” (Klein, Malcolm W, 1995).

Since the establishment of the United States, gangs have taken several

forms. As seen during the Industrial revolution of the 1800’s, mass immigration to the United

States, compiled with the Industrial Revolution, resulted in a move from an agrarian society to an

urban society. Historically, large urban areas on the East and West Coasts of the U.S. were areas

ethnically segregated, overcrowded, and in social despair. Gang entities such as the Car Barn

Gang, Dead Rabbits, and other commonly known groups developed. In the Post-Civil War era,

these entities evolved and new criminal gangs developed including: outlaw gangs of the old

west. Secondary order effects from prohibition and the Great Depression resulted in the

development of numerous gangs, including: the Dillinger Gang, the Barker Gang, Al Capone’s

Chicago Syndicate and many others. History further shows the 1930’s and 1940’s were also a

period of development and expansion for Hispanic Gangs in the western United States. As

indicated in a 1998 National Alliance of Gang Investigator’s Association Report by AL

Valdez, the development and evolution of Hispanic gangs and their existence in the United

States can be traced back through American history, to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in

1848*,* in which the U.S. assumed control over a large portion of what had previously been

Mexican land.

The Post World War II era saw the development of outlaw motorcycle gangs and the

development of organized contemporary street gangs with national affiliations and the formation

of gang nations with alliances from numerous criminal gangs. The advent of social media and the

internet in the 1990’s, began a change in the various aspects of gang entities enhancing their

ability to communicate and recruit. In 2001, the Department of Justice first acknowledged and

reported the existence and threats from hybrid gangs.

**Literary Research**

Contemporary research into crime and street gangs can be traced back to 1927 with the

work of Thrasher. However, numerous and varied types of gangs in the United States can be

traced back to mid-19th Century with influences of mass immigration, a change from an

agrarian society to an industrialized society with an increase in urban population. Since that

time, these entities have continued to adjust, evolve and migrate according to changes in

society and a variety of environmental variables. With this evolution came an increase in the

threats from these entities. These threats are indicated in various reports sponsored by the

federal government and in gang research conducted and proposed by members of contemporary

academia. Dr. George Knox, P.h.D. posits that “recurrent criminal activity” is an essential

component in defining a gang (Knox, 1991)*.*

In 2005, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) released their Supplementary

Homicide Report*.* As indicated, each year between 1993 and 2003 5% to 7% of all

homicides and from 8% to 10% of homicides committed with a firearm were gang related. The

report further indicated that between 1993 and 2003 younger victims of violence were more

likely than older victims to identify the perpetrator as a gang member. Gang members were

involved in 12% of violent crimes against those age 12 -19. The offender was identified as a

gang member in about 6% of violent crimes against persons age 20-49 and in about 4% of

violent crimes against those age 50 or older in the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice

Programs Bureau of Justice Statistics, Supplementary Homicide Report (2005).

Due to the increased threat from criminal gangs in 2005, the United States Congress

established the National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC). The NGIC is a strategic center

designed to gather, access and provide intelligence to law enforcement and other criminal justice

entities. Its members consist of representatives from various federal law enforcement agencies.

A 2011 assessment produced by the NGIC and the FBI, indicated a key finding was the

fact gangs were “expanding and evolving”. Additionally, these gangs were found to be more

violent and were described as an increasing threat to U.S. communities.” The assessment

further indicated, gangs were responsible for a large portion of violent criminal activity. As

reported in the Assessment’s Key Findings was “Gangs are responsible for an average of 48

percent of violent crime in most jurisdictions and up to 90 % in several others” (Nation

Gang Intelligence Center, pg. 9, 2011).

As reported by Malcolm Klein “Gangs are no accident; our society inadvertently

produces them, and they will not decline as a social problem until we confront our

relationship to them.” (Klein, Malcolm W, pg. 9, 1995). It is believed one of the major problems

concerning threats to law enforcement is the lack of a clear definition, cognition and awareness

in recognizing gang entities and members, especially when this involves hybrid gangs. This lack

of cognition and awareness is not new and not restricted to members of law enforcement.

Academic theorist dating back to Fredrick Thrasher and his 1927 book, **The Gang A Study of**

**1,313 Gangs in Chicago**.

Thrasher and academic social science who followed, continued to define and equate

gangs and gang members as urban youth groups. This ideology continued until 1995. In The

American Street Gang, Klein indicates the definitions of gangs are affected by how they are

defined by separate jurisdictions. This also affects determining and defining a gang related

crime. Klein further added that until the 1960’s, gangs were traditionally referred to as “juvenile

gangs or delinquent gangs” (Klein, 1995).Both of these referred to the assumption that street

gangs and youth were synonymous. It appears much of the reason for equating gangs as being

youth groups was the result of the accepted stereotype of gangs, which was the accepted norm in

academia from the 1920’s to the 1970’s. This suggested these groups consisted of members from

ages 11 to 22 years old. (Starbuck, Howell, Lindquist, 2001).

The paradigm concerning the equation of street gangs and youth changed when

in 1991, George Knox wrote ***An Introduction to Gangs*** *(*Knox, 1991and later

revised in 1994). Knox presented a different academic definition of gangs which posit, any

group of individuals, whose members engage in recurrent criminal activities constitutes a

gang. As stated by Knox, “The most essential feature of the criminal gang is that its

members routinely engage in law violating behavior. This is done individually, in small

groups and often in an organized continuing fashion” (Knox, 1994, pg. 1).

Knox further advises however, one should use caution in this definition and

indicated not to equate all groups of individuals who may have some members who

engage in criminal behavior and activities as meeting the definition of a gang.

Specifically, Knox advises there are other essential elements to consider before a

group should be considered a gang. Among these is the group as a whole exists or is

designed with the primary purpose of obtaining or enhancing the rewards generated

from on-going criminal activity. Furthermore, members of the group have an open or

overt knowledge about the gang’s illegal activities and members committing on-going

criminal activities.

In 2007, The National District Attorney’s Association, American Prosecutor’s Research

Institute with grant funding from the Department of Justice, prepared a report entitled

“Prosecutor’s Comprehensive Gang Response Model.” Among the findings in the report, it was

indicated part of the difficulty in various jurisdictions in being able to identify gang members.

As indicated in the NDAA report,

*“*Knowing what a gang is means breaking down the misconceptions and

stereotypes about gangs and then defining what a gang is. Despite popular

belief, gangs are **not** necessarily:

• Highly organized criminal syndicates,

• Racially or ethnically homogenous,

• Just a large city or urban phenomenon,

• Male dominated,

• Organized only around the drug trade, or

• Dressed in “colors” or marked with certain types of tattoos.” (NDAA Report, Pg. 5, 2007).

The term gangs is not always well defined and often stereotyped (Peterson,

2004). It is suspected the problem concerning this is due to the lack of a clear, commonly

accepted definition of what constitutes a gang or gang member. Another major problem in

accessing and analyzing gangs is a clear definition of gang related crimes (Peterson, Rebecca,

2004) and the recognition that these entities take several forms and are located in a variety of

settings.

**The Problem and Its Setting**

The amount of training new law enforcement officers are exposed to varies greatly

among jurisdictions and agencies. The Indiana Law Enforcement Academy requires basic

recruits to complete six hours of gang and security threat group training. This is composed of

three hours of training on gangs, one hour of outlaw biker gang training and two hours of

domestic terrorism. Current new recruits with the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department

attend two hours of street gang training during the course of their program. Gang and

security threat group training for recruits attending the Marion County Sheriff’s Department

Academy has varied among classes between four, eight to sixteen hours, depending upon time

available. As reported by the FBI field office in Indianapolis, recruits attending the Quantico,

academy have between two to four.

As reported by IMPD, the Marion County Sheriff’s Department and the FBI, none of

these agencies currently require updated gang and security threat group training as part of annual

in-service training.

Traditionally, members of law enforcement have been trained to use of “totems” or

identifiers and behaviors in order to identify members of gangs. These totems include various

symbols, colors, clothing, body art, jewelry, graffiti and various forms of verbal and non-verbal

behavior. However, with the development of hybrid gangs, these identifiers have become

increasingly vague and harder to recognize.

As previously indicated, gang development and activity in urban environments are

somewhat synonymous. However, contemporary trends in America indicate that gang activity

and presence is not necessarily dependent upon an urban geographical location for their

development and success. As stated by Knox, *“it is not where the gang operates, it is how it*

*operates and functions that distinguishes it in terms of its sophistication and its objective crime*

*threat”* (Knox, 1995, pg. 9).

**Hybrid Gangs**

As it pertains to hybrid gangs, the term hybrid can be traced back to the original works of

Thrasher in 1927. During this period, hybrid gangs were defined as gangs being non-segregated

racially and ethnically mixed. However, in 2001 the U.S. Department of Justice , Office of

Justice Programs, identified hybrid gangs as a culture. This 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 association with

more than one well established gang” (U.S Department of Justice, Juvenile Justice Bulletin,

2001). The Department of Justice Study further indicated, hybrid gangs are thriving in

contemporary times. Due to this, their altering characteristics and non-adherence to the

status quo makes them more complicated and complex to investigate (U.S Department of

Justice, Juvenile Justice Bulletin, 2001).

Sergeant Dave Starbuck of the Kansas City Police Department and the Midwest

Gang Investigator’s Association addressed the various dynamics of hybrid gangs and the

effects they are having on law enforcement in a 2000 article. Starbuck further described

various ways in which hybrid gangs operate in non-traditional ways. Among these characteristics

are: No well- defined allegiance, the use of colors, symbols or other identifiers commonly used

by traditional gangs, claiming multiple affiliations, fluid membership changes from one group to

another and gangs blending or merging with other groups forming new entities. Starbuck further

indicates that many of these entities “are increasingly diverse in both ethnic and gender

compensation” (Starbuck, pg. 3, 2000).

**Specific Threats of Hybrid Gangs**

Since 2001, hybrid gangs have continued to evolve and their threats to society and law

enforcement have increased with the creation of entities such as the Juggalos and various

entities in smaller jurisdictions.

Juggalos, is a Spanish term referring to individuals who follow the hip hop

band Insane Clown Posse. According to a 2011, National Gang Intelligence Center Report,

Juggalos are expanding and increasing in their violent nature and reported increase in criminal

activities. As indicated in the report, law enforcement has had difficulty in identifying and

monitoring these individuals and groups due to their unique styles, disorganization with little or

no structure, and their migration patterns.

In 2004, an investigation in Indianapolis, Indiana was initiated into a local hybrid gang

located on the near Southside of Indianapolis. The investigation originated after members of

the gang, including their 30 year old leader made threats to kill a former member of the gang and

his family. The gang was known as 21-F.A.T.A.L, an acronym for Faith Among the Almighty

Legion. The gang was developed in the late 1990’s, with the gang’s modus operandi including: a

arson and fire bombings of individuals they believe were a threat to the area in which many of

them lived and frequented. Specifically, among those they believed to a threat were racial and

ethnic minorities who were moving into the predominately working class white neighborhood.

Among the unique hybrid gang concepts practiced by the gang was their detailed use of

numerous symbols and colors commonly associated with members of Vice Lords also known as

“the People Nation.” However, the gang consisted of all white members, who followed white

supremacy ideology.

During the course of the investigation, investigators contacted uniform officers and

district detectives familiar with the group in an effort to obtain intelligence. During multiple

conversations, it became apparent that law enforcement officers working the area referred

to the group as “wanna be’s” and failed to recognize the group and as a gang and were

complacent regarding the gangs potential threat.

The investigation resulted in the service of multiple search and arrest warrants

at various locations and the recovery of several items of evidence. Among these items

were documents directly related to officer safety. Specifically of concern to officer safety

was the recovery of various military type operations orders or plans. These plans were

similar to tactical action plans commonly used by law enforcement. These plans included: the

type of operation, personnel assignments including the use of counter surveillance, contingency

plans and various threat factors with detailed drawings and floor plans of their of their objectives.

As reported in a May 16, 2014 report from WRTV 6, a CBS affiliate in Charlottesville,

Virginia, on January 31, 2014, four members of a Virginia gang called the 99 Goon

Syndicate kidnapped and killed Captain Kevin Quick, a reserve officer with Waynesboro,

Virginia. The report cited a 39 page federal indictment concerning the event and in which a total

of nine (9) members of the gang were indicted. The article further indicated the carjacking,

kidnapping and murder of Captain Quick was done by the four main suspects in an attempt to

gain entrance and receive positions in the gang. 99 Goon Syndicate was described as a local

start-up gang with suspected ties to the nationally recognized Blood’s Gang.

**Conclusion**

As indicated by the previously mentioned 2011, National Gang Intelligence Center

report, hybrid gangs can be found in 25 different states. However, it is speculated their presence

and true numbers may not be known as it is dependent upon local law enforcement’s proper

reporting which relies upon their ability to identify these subjects and groups. Their ability to

properly access and identify hybrid gangs is limit to a variety of factors, which include their

inability to recognize the non-traditional techniques, membership and fluid movement, all of

which are common in hybrid gangs.

As seen throughout the history of gang evolution in the United States, gangs have

constantly evolved and adapted. Unfortunately, law enforcement, other members of the criminal

justice system and members of academia have been complacent in their evolution and

understanding of these criminal entities. They in fact have been stuck in a paradigm paralysis. In

order for all, especially those in law enforcement, to be vigilant, they must be properly educated

and maintain situational awareness regarding the potential dangers of these groups and their

members. Thus updated training and intelligence regarding gangs, especially hybrid

gangs should be included in law enforcement training and annual in-service training.

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