

Bridging the Gap: Reconciling Research and Reality on Street Gang Prevention

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Introduction

Law enforcement in America is under great scrutiny. Last year saw numerous calls for criminal justice reforms due to a perceived racial bias in policing strategies and policies. This crisis of public opinion poses a serious threat to police legitimacy in the coming years. Couple this with a public which increasingly does not trust police capabilities to solve crimes: since 2010, the number of violent crimes reported to police steadily declined, reaching a low of only 40% reported¹. It is clear some reforms to the criminal justice system, and how it interacts with communities, are needed. One of the best ways to begin this task would be to focus on street gangs around the country. These illegal gangs represent a unique prospect for law enforcement to implement improved anti-crime strategies while also fostering relationships with the neighborhoods affected. This article proposes enacting changes to current community policing strategies in order to achieve a more effective community involvement and crime reduction status while increasing police legitimacy.

Background

According to the Department of Justice, there are three main categories of illegal gangs: street gangs, prison gangs, and motorcycle gangs². In order to accomplish its purpose, this article will focus exclusively on street gangs. These groups have influenced American life for almost as long as the United States has existed. There are records which show the emergence of several street gangs on the East Coast following the close of the Revolutionary War in 1783³. James Howell wrote an influential article tracing the history of street gangs in the United States, and as he argues, the modern conception of street gangs did not emerge until the nineteenth century. In this time period, their development occurred in different lengths characterized by geographic factors. In the Northeast, most notoriously in New York City, gangs appeared along with influxes of immigrants⁴. One era was sparked by the migrants passing through Ellis Island in the early twentieth century⁵. Another in the 1950s was brought on by African-Americans and Hispanics surging into the city from the Southern US. In the Midwest and in cities such as Chicago, gangs were often established by immigrants new to the city but quickly evolved into organized crime mobs, most notoriously run by Al Capone⁶. This brief period was then upset by a wave of immigration in the 1930s and 1970s⁷. In the West, gangs were a holdover from the Mexican and Hispanic population. In Los Angeles, especially in the years following World War II, “racial exclusion from mainstream Los Angeles”⁸ was instrumental in the emergence of African-

¹ John Gramlich. 20 November, 2020, What the Data Does Say (and Doesn't Say) about Crime in the United States. FactTank, Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/20/facts-about-crime-in-the-u-s/>

² About Violent Gangs, 2015. Organized Crime and Gang Section, US Department of Justice. <https://www.justice.gov/criminal-ocgs/about-violent-gangs>

³ James Howell and John Moore. “History of Street Gangs in the United States” National Gang Center Bulletin 4 (2010): 1-24.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ James Howell and John Moore. “History of Street Gangs in the United States” National Gang Center Bulletin 4 (2010): 1-24.

⁸ Ibid.

American street gangs. As a region, the South's gang-related emergence took much longer to develop⁹. Unlike the previous three regions, it did not have a central city for proto-typical gang activity to radiate out of. Nevertheless, street gangs in the south still plague cities spanning from San Antonio to Miami, however they tend to be local and decentralized¹⁰.

As shown, gangs are a widespread and longstanding phenomenon, and in rather disparate environments. Criminological theory has long tried to explain why criminals behave the way they do, and gang-related activity is no different. Criminologist Robert Merton developed a theory in the late 1930s that helps explain the formation and prevalence of street gangs. Called Anomie theory, it proposed that "certain phases of social structure generate the circumstances in which infringement of social codes constitutes a "normal" response"¹¹. In other words, sometimes pressure is exerted on an individual which forces them to act in a way society would deem abnormal. Applied to in a criminological context, these abnormalities are behaviors which would violate legal codes and be considered crime. As he explains, society couples its goals or desired end-states with morality, resulting in certain methods of attaining those standards being considered unlawful¹². Under most circumstances, rational actors will pursue these socially acceptable ends using acceptable means. However, social structure can constrict an individual too much to pursue these goals through these acceptable methods. Barriers such as poverty, discrimination, or a lack of education may contribute to individuals pursuing these goals through unacceptable methods. In this case, the rational individual still desires to achieve the end society tells him is needed but lacks the tools to do so through the proper channels. As Merton explains, "Fraud, Corruption, Vice, crime, in short, the entire catalogue of proscribed behavior becomes increasingly common when the emphasis on the culturally induced success goal becomes divorced from... the restraints imposed by society"¹³. Having escaped the moral restraints of society, these individuals turn to crime in order to preserve their rationality.

Merton's theory is supported by several studies which verify connections between criminal behavior and the basic tenets of his model. One prominent study conducted on gang-related homicides in California over a five-year span found "gang-related homicide in Los Angeles is most closely associated with lower income and unemployment"¹⁴. Another study on the relationship of gang activity and poverty found "a statistically significant... effect on gang membership and violent behavior among African-American youth"¹⁵. Additionally, many of the juveniles had high Social Dominance Orientation scores, a measure of how much importance an individual places on improving their place in a social hierarchy¹⁶. Furthermore, a study conducted

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Robert Merton. "Social Structure and Anomie." *American Sociological Review* 3, no. 5 (1938): p. 672.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ D.N. Kyriacou et al., "The Relationship Between Socioeconomic Factors and Gang Violence in the City of Los Angeles" *The Journal of Trauma* 46, no. 2 (1999): p. 339.

¹⁵ David May. "Another Look at Classic Strain Theory: Poverty Status, Perceived Blocked Opportunity, and Gang Membership as Predictors of Adolescent Violent Behavior." *Sociological Inquiry* 70, no. 1 (2000): p. 55.

¹⁶ Jane Wood et al., "Predicting Involvement in Prison Gang Activity: Street Gang Membership, Social and Psychological Factors," *Law and Human Behavior* 38, no. 3 (2014): p. 204..

on youths incarcerated due to gang-related activity found that many of them had notable anti-authority attitudes¹⁷. These studies illustrate both the potential limitations which affect certain sections of society as well as their desire to rise above these limitations. This serves to verify the credibility of Merton's theory when applied to street gang behavior.

This brings up the dilemma law enforcement faces today: is it possible to enact policing strategies which would mitigate these factors? Fortunately, one police tactic known as community policing has proven effective. This strategy typically involves increased community involvement in law enforcement efforts and is based on the idea that "police are not limited to traditional law enforcement powers in carrying out their work and should draw on community involvement and input to define, prioritize, and address crime problems"¹⁸. According to Charlotte Gill, a prominent researcher on the subject, "Community-oriented policing strategies have positive effects on citizen satisfaction, perceptions of disorder, and police legitimacy..."¹⁹. Another study reinforced the effectiveness of community-oriented policing, saying "positive contact with police—delivered via brief door-to-door nonenforcement community policing visits—substantially improved residents' attitudes toward police, including legitimacy and willingness to cooperate"²⁰. Community policing also works in large-scale programs as well: the New York City Police Department re-instituted its community-oriented system in 2014²¹, and over the following two years experienced a 5.3% drop in major felony cases²².

Proposal

Unfortunately, current methods of community policing have failed to live up to their potential. Gang prevention strategies are scattershot and decentralized across the nation, resulting in significant variations. Although gang related activities did experience a dip nationwide around the turn of the millennia, research from the National Gang Center has shown a steady increase since 2003²³. As established, community policing is a powerful tool and capable of bridging the divide between communities and law enforcement, but it is clear the current methods of community policing must evolve in order to increase their effectiveness.

What this article proposes in order to counter this is a significant shift in how American law enforcement approaches community policing. Despite the rise in gang-related crimes, community policing has shown its effectiveness. As such, these proposed changes are aimed at mitigating the factors previously discussed as influencing gang membership: most prominently, impoverished circumstances and unfavorable views of authority. By evolving a proven method of

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Charlotte Gill, et al., "Community-Oriented Policing to Reduce Crime, Disorder and Fear and Increase Satisfaction and Legitimacy Among Citizens: A Systematic Review" *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 10 (2014): p. 400.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Kyle Peyton et al., "A Field Experiment on Community Policing and Police Legitimacy" *National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. 40 (2019).

²¹ Kristine Lamburini, "Evolution of Community Policing in New York City" Honors College Theses. 200. (2018).

²² *Seven Major Felony Offenses*. 2016. Analysis and Planning, New York Police Department.

²³ Measuring the Extent of Gang Problems. National Youth Gang Survey Analysis, National Gang Center. <https://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/survey-analysis/measuring-the-extent-of-gang-problems>

crime reduction to combat specific factors which precipitate gang membership, this proposal hopes to accomplish a reduction in gang-related activity.

This article recommends achieving this by increasing the amount of time law enforcement officers spend not ‘off duty’, but ‘out-of-uniform’. This time, which is initially proposed to be sixteen hours out of the forty-hour workweek, will then be spent in neighborhoods most affected by gang-related activity doing various community outreach initiatives. These initiatives are adaptable to the specific needs of the community, and also to the capabilities of the officers and municipality. For instance, imagine that a single mother is experiencing plumbing issues. She can then put a request in to the police department explaining her problem. If an officer is familiar with basic plumbing, they would then have a structured time to be able to volunteer to resolve these problems. To be clear, what is being proposed is not a universal plumbing service. Rather, the intent behind it is to get law enforcement officers positively interacting with the communities they serve while also meeting needs. It is difficult to view the police as antagonists when a friendly officer in street clothes unclogs your sink for free. These initiatives have limitless potential and are easily customized to specific localities. In order to be most effective, these changes could be implemented at the federal level and enforced downward, but this would fail to acknowledge the vastly different realities of America’s municipalities. Rather, the changes proposed by this article ought to be implemented strictly on a local, jurisdiction-to-jurisdiction basis, in order to allow flexibility and best mitigate the specific gang-related circumstances in each.

Discussion

As one can imagine, such a proposition would ultimately encounter a few issues in implementation. One of the most immediate would be cost: how much would a proposal like this inevitably increase public safety budgets? For the sake of example, a rough budgetary estimate has been drawn up based on the city of Chicago. As of fiscal year 2020, the Chicago Police Department had a budget of around \$1.7 billion²⁴. As previously established, if the entire force spent sixteen of their forty hours ‘out of uniform’, then the number of officers on the force would need to increase by a minimum of twenty percent maintain the current ‘in-uniform’ time. Chicago’s force has 14,500 full-time positions, so this would only require a 2,900-position hiring initiative²⁵. Overall, the budgetary increase would be up to \$1.9 billion, which is eighteen percent of the CPD budget and only about 0.03 percent of Chicago’s overall budget. An increase that small would likely not require a tax hike, as it could be allocated from other budget categories. Although the budgetary changes outlined above are slight, it is possible some localities may not have the resources to immediately implement them and may require state or federal funding in order to get the ball rolling.

Additionally, the logistics of this ‘out-of-uniform’ initiative have also been devised. The program would begin when law enforcement identifies areas within their jurisdictions which experience high or concentrated gang-related activities. The residents of this area would then be informed of the program and how to participate. For example, imagine a resident needs groceries but is reticent to leave the house due to the Covid-19 pandemic. They begin the sequence when

²⁴ What is the Chicago Police Department Budget, 2020. The Civic Federation.
<https://www.civicfed.org/civic-federation/blog/what-chicago-police-department-budget>

²⁵ Ibid.

they dial a non-emergency number and relay their request to an administrator. This administrator would then write out the specifics of the request and post it in a central area such as a bulletin board or an online dashboard. From there, law enforcement officers would have two 8-hour shifts designated as 'out-of-uniform'. When reporting for these shifts, they would consult the centralized postings and then go accomplish them. For ease of communication and to avoid redundancy, supervisors can assign certain tasks based on strengths of individual officers: perhaps a specialization or existing rapport with a certain resident. In this example, an officer who does not mind using his personal vehicle for the day has volunteered to get groceries for the individual. The officer then contacts the citizen and asks for details on how he can best be of service. In this case, imagine the officer fulfills the request by picking up a mobile order placed by the resident and delivering it to their address. The officer will have instructions to build rapport with the residents he interacts with, striking up a brief conversation before moving on to his next obligation. Once completed, he recounts his completed requests to the same administrator, closing the sequence.

Up until this point, this proposal is all well and good, but it admittedly experiences difficulty when the inevitable question of how to address contingencies concerning the presence of evidence of criminal activity. For an 'out-of-uniform' officer, there is a marked difference between an 'out-of-uniform' officer encountering a crime, and coming into contact with evidence of a crime. Ideally, when coming across an illegal activity in progress, these officers would react like a normal citizen: notifying law enforcement authorities, and if lives are in danger, intervening if necessary. However, when encountering evidence of a crime, especially in a residence, matters complicate. Because the officer is there without a warrant, any evidence would likely be impermissible in court if the officer collects it. However, if the officer reports it and a warrant is sought on these grounds, whether approved or not, this would sink the program before it begins. In a neighborhood already struggling with positive law enforcement relations, this project would be viewed as a Trojan Horse. The best way to reconcile this is to include a moratorium on reporting or collecting evidence encountered during the course of an officer's 'out-of-uniform' work. This policy should not be too difficult to accept, because as previously mentioned, the officers would be in the residence without a warrant. This ensures that the intent of the program, to incorporate law enforcement into a positive force in the community, is in place and effective.

Conclusion

The aforementioned issues are certainly important and ought to be thoroughly examined in order to mitigate any possible hiccups with the program. Indeed, there are likely other unforeseen challenges which will shake out as the proposal gains momentum. However, the system is designed to absorb these issues. After all, the central tenets of the changes proposed here are simple and twofold. The first is the implementation of the progressed form of community policing previously discussed. The second is this implementation be adaptable to the needs and capabilities of each jurisdiction which participates. This flexibility is what can mitigate many of these issues before they turn into genuine problems. For example, one jurisdiction may have a budget surplus and can easily implement the changes necessary. Another may not necessarily have a large enough gang problem to necessitate implementing this proposal while a neighboring district does. Cooperation and existing circumstances coupled together ought to resolve the majority of the issues which may arise.

This is not to say that this proposal is without flaw and the solution to all community problems. Rather, the advances in community policing suggested here would benefit from further examination and development before being implemented into communities. There are likely yet-unaccounted for issues which could be smoothed out by further refinement. Additional research should also be conducted on the central tenets of this proposal, namely the factors which influence gang involvement, in order to ensure this program achieves success. Should it be advantageous, these changes could be implemented in a neighborhood on a trial basis and then closely monitored for research purposes. This would also be beneficial because it would likely generate more specific funding numbers, which could calculate the viability of implementing this program in other communities. If employed on a significant scale, the proposed evolution of community policing offers a basis onto which future reduction of gang-related crimes may be realized.

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