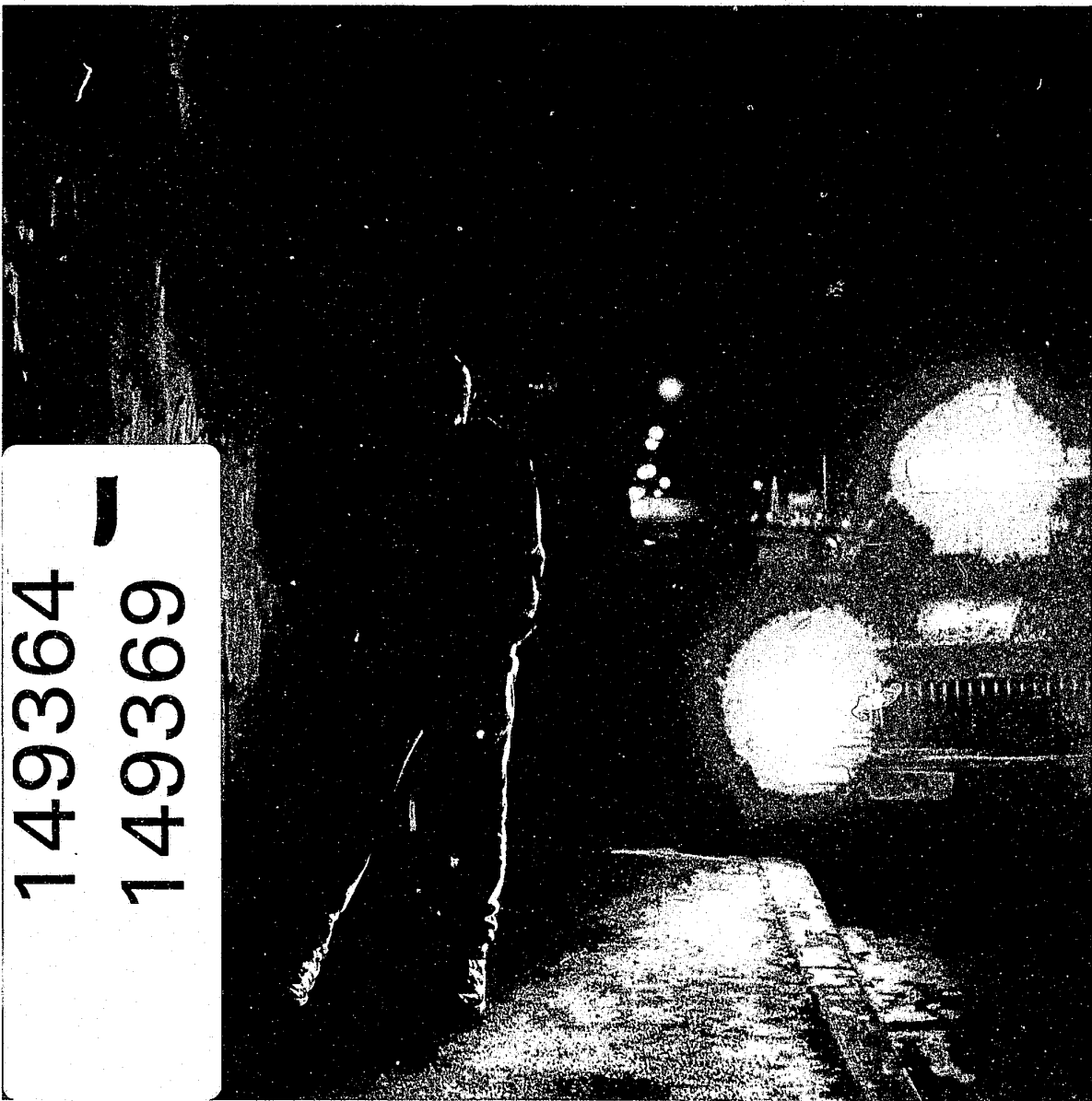


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Features

Focus on Gangs

Gangs: A National Perspective

149364 By Alan C. Brantley
and Andrew DiRosa

1

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

The Chicago Area Project

149365 By Anthony Sorrentino
and David Whittaker

8

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

Gang Intervention

149366 By Wayne C. Torok
and Kenneth S. Trump

13

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

Police Reserves

149367 By Harvey Wallace
and Arnold P. Peter

20

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

Search of Abandoned Property

149369 By John Gales Sauls

27

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

Departments

7 Forensics Update

FBI's New
Examination Policy

18 Case Study

Police Brutality
Charges

12 Bulletin Reports

Community Policing
Crime and the Elderly

24 Focus on Use of Force

Pepper Spray 149368

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149364-

149369

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Gang Intervention

Police and School Collaboration

By
WAYNE C. TOROK and
KENNETH S. TRUMP, M.P.A.

Once a concern only for large cities, youth gang activity now impacts communities of all sizes. Gangs tear at the social fabric of America, causing numerous problems for many segments of society.

Unfortunately, even the public schools—once traditional safe havens of society—are no longer immune to gang activity and violence. The scope of the youth gang problem requires specialized law enforcement intervention and prevention strategies on the local level.

In Cleveland, Ohio, the public school system and the Cleveland Police Department joined forces to combat the gang problem. The school board created a Youth Gang Unit within the school system, which now works closely with the police department's Youth/Gang Unit. This article discusses the collaboration of the units and how this combined effort reduced the gang problems in both the schools and the community.

OVERVIEW

Many law enforcement administrators do not readily acknowledge the existence of gangs in their jurisdictions. In fact, a 1988 study of gangs in Ohio identified denial as a typical official response of law enforcement and a major obstacle in addressing youth gangs effectively.¹

This denial actually sends the wrong message to gang members, who then believe they can operate with impunity.² This, in turn, promotes the victimization of communities by gangs.³

Many factors contribute to the official denial of gang activity,

including the problem of definition, the inability to identify the root causes, and the lack of resources needed to address gang issues adequately. However, as gang activity grows, media and community pressure to respond to the problem also grows.

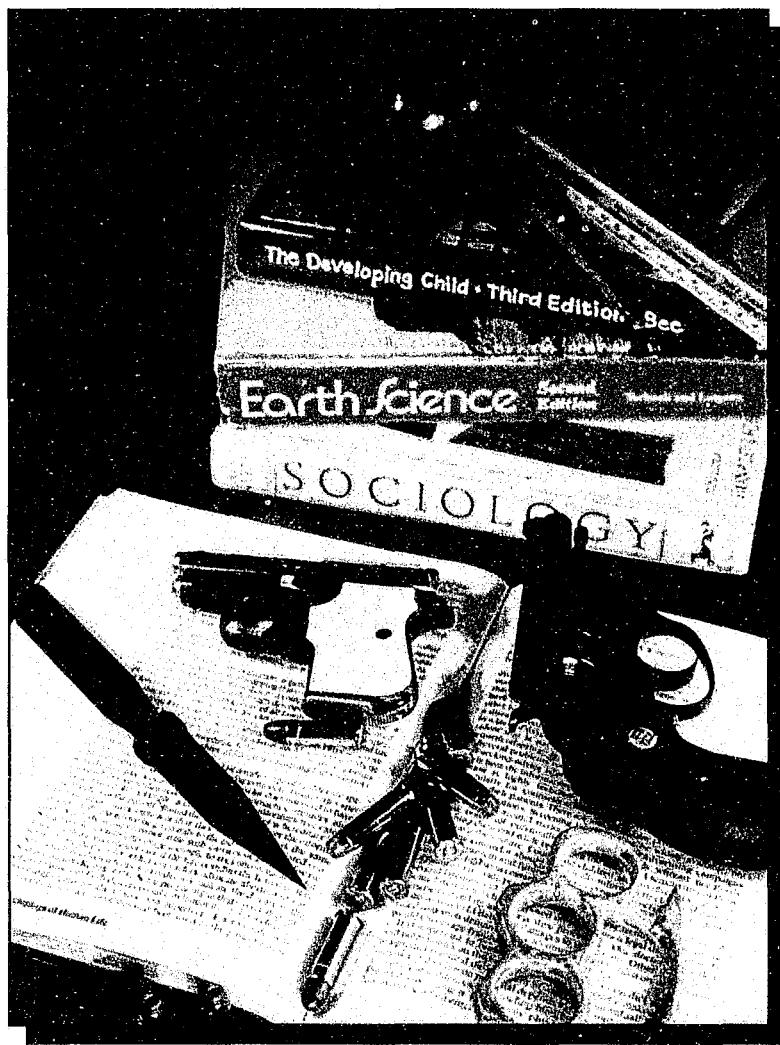


Photo by K.L. Morrison



Lieutenant Torok heads the Youth/Gang Unit of the Cleveland, Ohio, Police Department.



Mr. Trump is the coordinator of the Youth Gang Unit, Division of Safety and Security, Cleveland, Ohio, public schools.

Unfortunately, by the time gangs are officially recognized by the police, they have often become entrenched in the community. As a result, law enforcement agencies respond by creating specialized squads or units designed to eliminate the gangs through strong enforcement. In the beginning, this was the strategy adopted by the Cleveland Police Department.

YOUTH/GANG UNIT

The Youth/Gang Unit, formed in 1990, is divided into two squads—a youth squad and a gang squad. The youth squad investigates most juvenile, nongang-related crimes. The gang squad investigates most gang-related crimes committed by both adult and juvenile offenders, including misdemeanor crimes, which are not normally investigated by detectives. (The theory behind the investigation of misdemeanor crimes is that

any information—no matter how trivial—adds to detectives' knowledge concerning gangs.)

Members of the gang squad also conduct other in-depth investigations in an effort to identify gang members, to enhance intelligence-gathering by obtaining detailed information on gang territories and methods of operation, and to ensure successful prosecution of gang members. They supplement their investigations with street enforcement.

Initially, street enforcement was designed to reduce overt gang violence and intimidation. However, officials began targeting specific gangs and gang members based on unit investigations and on concerns voiced by citizens, public officials, and others impacted by gang crimes. The combination of investigations, street enforcement, and intelligence-gathering provided a balanced approach to reduce gang activity.

While this approach worked in the beginning, officials came to realize that these strategies alone would not solve the problem. Clearly, the problem called for the involvement of the public education system, where early intervention by school officials might dissuade students from gang involvement.

SCHOOL YOUTH GANG UNIT

Although the majority of youths in school do not participate in gang activity, the incidents that do occur shift the focus from educational issues to safety concerns. Escalating gang conflicts deprive students, teachers, and administrators of valuable time needed for learning. Therefore, school board officials created their own Youth Gang Unit within the Division of Safety and Security, a part of the public school system. The school gang unit works closely with the police gang squad to deter this type of problem within public schools.

The school Youth Gang Unit—the first-line defense against the problem—addresses gang crimes and school rule violations city-wide. The unit, which consists of four school security officers and a unit coordinator, serves 127 schools with over 73,000 students.

Security officers visit schools throughout the day, staying abreast of any gang-related problems that may occur. During its first year of operation, unit personnel investigated approximately 400 gang-related school incidents, identified over 1,000 gang members, and trained over 7,000 staff members,

parents, students, and youth service providers to recognize gang problems. They taught specific intervention techniques that both parents and school staff members can use.

Officers in the unit prioritize investigations, mediate disputes between students, and attempt to dispel gang-related rumors within schools. They also make antigang presentations to students in classrooms and at school assemblies. Finally, the security officers network community-wide to develop programs designed to reduce gang activity and coordinate resources for at-risk and gang-involved youths.

POLICE-SCHOOL COLLABORATION

Prior to the creation of the school Youth Gang Unit, the police department received an overwhelming number of requests for assistance from various school officials. Requests ranged from those for special attention to prevent rumored gang fights at dismissal to those for gang-related training for teachers and staff.

Now, both gang units—school and police—focus on providing specific services. Personnel in the school gang unit act as first responders to gang-related incidents and needs at the various schools, while the police unit addresses gang issues in the community. When situations require additional personnel, such as substantiated threats of gang activity near schools or at school dismissal, the police and school units combine forces. In addition, as a preventive strategy, the units periodically merge to conduct patrols in

areas of frequent gang activity, rounding up truants and returning them to their schools. These patrols also often arrest gang members for various crimes.

A critical element of the successful collaboration is the atmosphere of mutual support that has existed between the public school system and the police department since the inception of the program. For example, the school unit coordinator, who monitored gang activity within schools prior to the creation of the unit, provided an inservice session for police detectives at the onset of their program. In return, gang unit detectives trained security officers in the school unit when it came into existence. These training sessions facilitated an exchange of

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...youth gang activity now impacts communities of all sizes.

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information on gangs that was mostly gained through experience of unit personnel.

Another cooperative effort between the two units includes developing information on rumored gang activity and individuals allegedly associated with gangs. The police unit maintains gang profiles based on their criminal investigations,

while the school unit maintains records of contact with gang members and computerized reports on gang-related incidents. By stripping gang members of their anonymity, crimes are often quickly solved or prevented all together.

Working cooperatively enhances both units' capabilities to analyze gang intelligence quickly. This, in turn, allows the police and schools to respond proactively to potential trouble areas. In addition, it maintains open lines of communication between the units. This continuing association serves to intensify the mutual support and assistance that existed prior to the creation of the separate units.

GANG UNIT MANAGEMENT

Cooperation between police and school gang units provides an accurate picture of gang activity in both the community and the schools. However, numerous management issues also arise with this type of collaboration. These issues may include establishing specific focuses for both units, selecting personnel, working with the media, and cooperating with other agencies and community professionals.

Unit Focus

The scope and impact of the gang problem require that both school and police administrators establish a clear focus with precise goals and objectives for their respective units. Police coordinators must determine whether their gang units will perform enforcement, investigative, or intelligence functions—or a combination of these.

On the other hand, school administrators must determine whether their gang units will perform strictly educational or enforcement roles—or a combination of both. However, unit coordinators should be authorized to adjust their operations at any time to ever-changing gang activity.

A balanced approach by each unit is best, as opposed to a single-focus approach that reduces the overall impact of a unit's efforts. But, no matter what the approach, coordinators of both units should recognize that gangs will only be eliminated if the entire community works to impact the underlying social and economic issues. Law enforcement and the schools cannot solve the problem for society.

Personnel Selection

Another critical management issue centers around personnel selection for gang units. Detectives assigned to the Cleveland Police Youth/Gang Unit must be veteran officers, in good physical condition, who have an interest in gangs and young people, excellent verbal communication skills, investigative and organizational skills, and a willingness to change shifts when necessary.

Personnel selected for the Cleveland Public School Youth Gang Unit must have prior experience in a youth service capacity, a demonstrated ability in crisis and conflict intervention, and specialized knowledge and/or training in the area of youth gangs. Here, again, a special interest in the welfare of young people is extremely beneficial.

Media Relations

Managers of gang units must also decide how to handle media relations—an issue both school and law enforcement administrators must address. Unfortunately, gang activity makes for good media stories, and the media produce these stories with or without the cooperation of those most knowledgeable on the subject.

Because the media play such an important role in informing and educating the public, police and

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school officials should develop a rapport with the media. By educating the media on gang issues and by establishing cooperative relationships guided by clearly identified parameters, law enforcement and school officials can convey information to the community in a positive manner. The primary goals of building media relations should be to educate the public on the seriousness of gangs and to make known the impact of joint-agency efforts.

Networking

It is beneficial for personnel in both gang units to network with other professionals in the community. This way, when personnel constraints do not allow unit involvement in specific requests, other professionals in the community can lend a hand.

Educators, social service personnel, and youth agency employees can form a network that allows for a better exchange of information, as well as more effective ways to deal with gangs. For example, appropriate members of the community can conduct prevention sessions with at-risk youths or they can refer youths with specific problems to other agencies.

Other Considerations

Other management issues emerge when creating police or school gang units. These issues may include establishing record-keeping and investigative procedures and developing a good rapport with the community. As unit coordinators develop and modify operational procedures, they should ensure that they adequately document these procedures and communicate them to their personnel, as well as to others who might be affected.

RESULTS

Data on the collaboration between law enforcement and the public schools in Cleveland reveal the program's successes. Juvenile court filings by the Cleveland Police Youth/Gang Unit decreased over 15 percent during 1992, compared to 1991. The public schools experienced a 39-percent reduction

in school gang-related incidents during the 1992-93 school year, compared to the 1991-1992 school year.

CONCLUSION

Close cooperation between schools and law enforcement agencies could be the key to a successful gang reduction program. Law enforcement personnel must balance the specialized investigation of misdemeanor and felony gang crimes with targeted street enforcement and intelligence-gathering.

At the same time, school personnel must balance disciplinary and criminal enforcement with strong intervention and prevention techniques. A cooperative and collaborative approach between the two entities prevents duplication of services and allows police and schools to gain maximum impact in their particular areas of focus.

Communities must recognize the underlying social and economic problems that contribute to gang growth and development and respond with a comprehensive approach. Through cooperative and proactive strategies designed to meet the needs of particular communities, America can move forward to reduce and prevent youth violence and gang activity. ♦

Endnotes

¹ C.R. Huff, "Youth Gangs and Public Policy in Ohio: Findings and Recommendations," Ohio Conference on Youth Gangs and the Urban Underclass, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, May 1988.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Author Guidelines

Manuscript Specifications

Length: 1,000 to 3,000 words or 5 to 12 pages double-spaced.

Format: All manuscripts should be double-spaced and typed on 8 1/2" by 11" white paper. All pages should be numbered, and three copies should be submitted for review purposes.

Publication

Basis For Judging Manuscripts: Manuscripts are judged on the following points: Factual accuracy, style and ease of reading, structure and logical flow, length, relevance to audience, and analysis of information. Favorable consideration will generally not be given to an article that has been published previously or that is being considered for publication by another magazine. Articles that are used to advertise a product or a service will be rejected.

Query Letters: The editor suggests that authors submit a detailed one- to two-page outline before writing an article. This is intended to help authors but does not guarantee publication of the article.

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