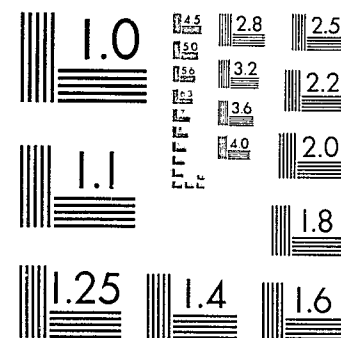


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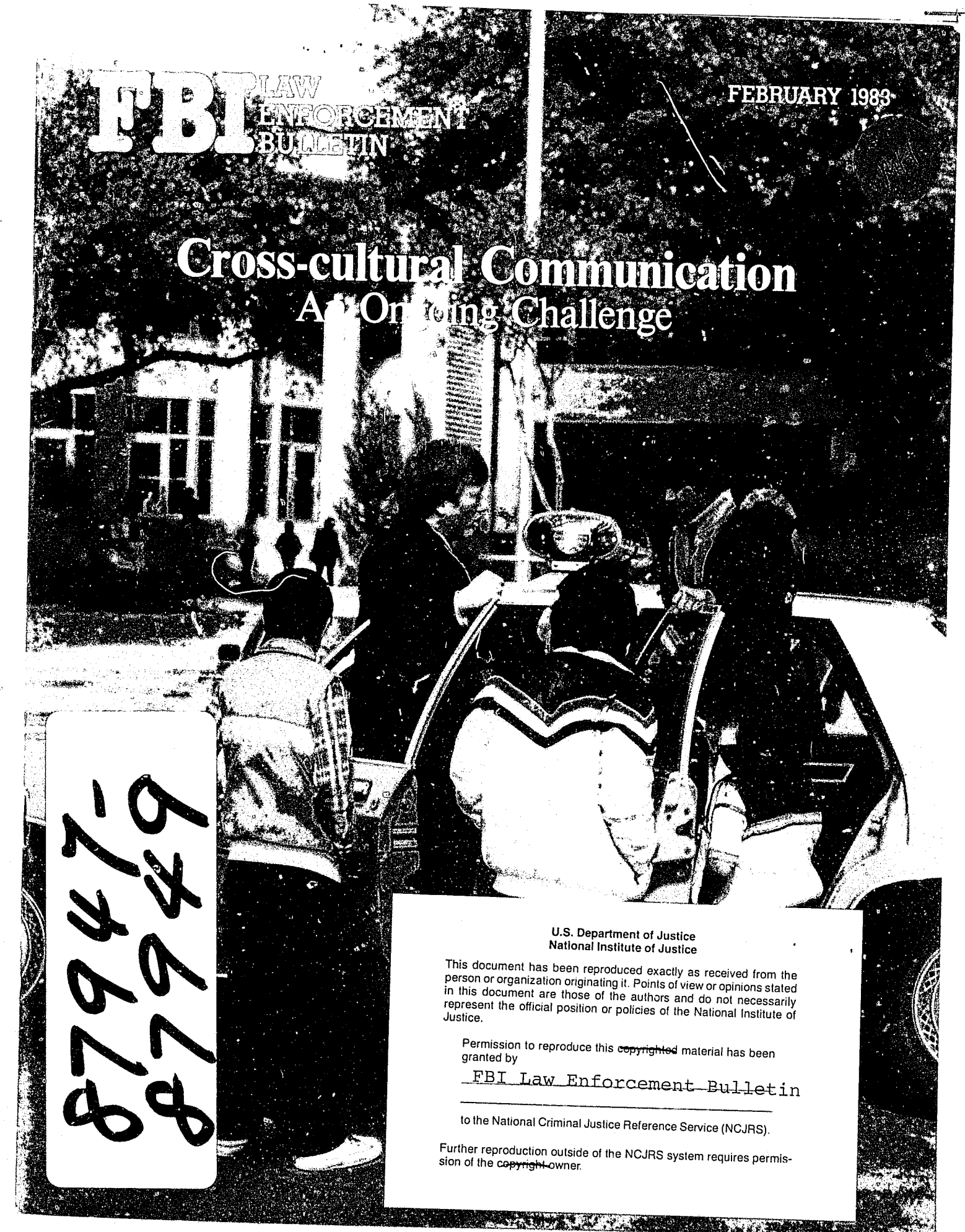
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Crime Problems

"The increase in gang violence and its deep-rooted social problems pose a massive challenge to law enforcement."

RENCE BREEN, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Canada

SCT. MARTIN M. ALLEN
Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department
Los Angeles, Calif.

Gang Behavior

Psychological and Law Enforcement Implications



Dr. Breen

Today, law enforcement officers are facing an ever-expanding problem of gang membership and activity within their communities.¹ These gangs are present both on our city streets and in our correctional institutions. This link between the "streets" and prison is of concern, given that it most likely displays a lifelong commitment to the gang and to criminal behavior.² In 1980, for instance, there were a total of 351 gang-related homicides in Los Angeles County. This is an increase of 155 in 1 year.³ Perhaps just as dramatic is the fact that in Los Angeles County, a criminal incident involving a gang member will occur approximately every 25 minutes.⁴ These incidents range from petty theft and public drunkenness violations to armed robbery, felony assault, and murder.

A gang is a group of youths, known criminals, or convicts from the same neighborhood or penal facility and generally of the same race, banded together for antisocial and criminal activities. Gang members vary in their affiliation with the gang. The classifications which appear most relevant are:

- 1) Hardcore members who are totally involved;
- 2) Affiliates or associates who socialize with the gang for status, recognition, and protection; and
- 3) Peripheral members who join and leave the gang as their need for the gang arises.

At present, the greatest concentration of gangs is found within large metropolitan cities that contain pockets of segregated people—either racially or economically—in areas called ghettos or barrios. These rundown and overcrowded neighborhoods have become the home, or "turf," of the street gangs. The ghettos or barrios are further divided into neighborhood gang turfs where lifelong battles with other ghetto or barrio neighborhoods are waged. Because of the diverse ethnic backgrounds of gangs, membership in and the actions of these gangs are somewhat different, although they do maintain the common objective of criminal activity.

An illustration is the Brown gang (Spanish or Mexican-American). These gangs are found throughout the southwestern portion of the United States. Some gangs in this area have been in existence since 1930. Almost as common as their existence are their mannerisms, language, and code. Typically, Brown street gang members live in a particular neighborhood and attend a common school. At 10 or 11 years of age, they are sought out by current gang members and a degree of "courting" is undertaken. Gang members attempt to influence a neighborhood youth to join their gang for the protection of the "barrio"—his neighborhood—his family, himself, and his "homeboys"—fellow gang members. The youth is attracted to the gang because gang members frequently do not attend school, they have luxury items, such as stereos, everyone is intimidated by them, and many of the neighborhood girls hang around with the gang. All of these factors, coupled



Sergeant Allen

with the somewhat romantic gangster image put forth by the gang members, are often perceived as attractive, particularly by impressionable youths.

When a youth offers resistance to initial gang overtures, physical beatings by gang members begin. Eventually, unless he becomes a good athlete or excels in another recognizable area, the youth submits and joins the gang. An exception to this is the peripheral gang member who "backs up" the neighborhood.

In Brown gangs, a new member joins a subdivision called a clique, which is comprised of gang members of his approximate age. Initiation of most new members consists of a ritual called "jumping in." Gang members invite the candidate to either drink or use narcotics with them. When all are "high," the candidate is surrounded by gang members and asked to fight with them for an unspecified period of time. During this ceremony, the candidate is expected to prove his manhood and courage. These rituals may last for as little as 30 seconds or as long as 5 minutes. It is not infrequent to find an initiated gang member in a bloody and lacerated state, at times with broken bones.

After a person is initiated, the gang socialization process begins. For example, gangs tend to dress in a particular manner. Brown street gangs usually wear khaki pants, black shoes, and plaid wool shirts. The clothes appear to be too large for the gang member, with the pants gathered around the waist and dragging on the ground. This look is meant to intimidate those who are not in the gang. A trenchcoat may be worn to conceal illegal weapons.

A language called "calo," consisting of fragments and modifications of both English and Spanish, is spoken among gang members in order to conceal some of their communications from nongang members. The new gang member will frequently be given a moniker, or "street name," which reflects one of his physical traits or personal characteristics, such as "Flaco" (thin), "Pelon" (balding), "Lizzard" (pockmarked face), or "Sleepy."

The Black street gang, similar to the Brown gang, subdivides the ghetto into small "hoods" or areas of turf. Their members are also drawn from the immediate hood and either join willingly or are intimidated into joining by other gang members. Unlike the Brown gang, however, there are no "jumping in" ceremonies in most Black gangs. Instead, many require that a prospective gang member commit a criminal act prior to actual membership.

Black gangs are usually broken down into "sets" which, unlike cliques, are determined by actual location of residence within the "hood," as well as by age. Although they may deny that there is a formal leader, Black gangs tend to follow a particular member. This member, usually the oldest or most feared, will determine the general personality of the gang and the direction of their activities.

"The 'Just World' hypothesis suggests some insights into the psychological dynamics of the gang."

Blacks also have their own language, commonly referred to as "smack," and their own manner of dress. Members are frequently seen in bomber-type jackets, "stingy brim" hats, and more recently, warmup suits in the appropriate color for the gang. Black gangs will frequently pick a color—red, blue, or black—which not only identifies them to one another but also to other gangs. A colored handkerchief or bandanna is also a common piece of Black gang clothing.

Unlike Brown gang members, a Black gang member will sometimes change his affiliation from one gang to another. Few possess a lifetime membership as do Brown gangs.

In terms of history, Asian gangs are probably the oldest of gangs. They tend to thrive in Chinese or Vietnamese communities. Their membership is, on the average, older than both Brown and Black street gangs. They are also more secretive about membership, displaying no dress code, and rarely using tattoos as a means of gang identification. Furthermore, their conflicts with other Asian gangs are generally on a more limited scale—there are no gang wars.

Asian gangs are operating more in the organized crime tradition. Asian street gangs have recently been observed in the Chinese community of Los Angeles. Information at this time indicates that they are financed by older, more well-established Asian gangs. Their role appears to be that of enforcers for the "organized" faction of the gang. The small number of members are schooled by older members, and most are well-trained in martial arts. Membership in the Asian gang is for life.

The most commonly confronted Caucasian gangs are those of the outlaw motorcycle groups. Interestingly, these gangs attempt to avoid, rather than confront, police officers. Their members range in age from the late teens, well into the fifties and sixties, with women companions who are as young as 13 or 14 years old. Their primary objectives are the control of drug traffic and acting as paid executioners for organized crime. Membership is very ritualistic, consisting of courting prospective members, a vote of the membership, and an initiation ritual involving the prospective member and his wife or girlfriend. A typical initiation involves numerous sexual acts, with certain badges—sew-on patches for jackets—awarded for the member's "colors"—his sleeveless denim jacket. Also, most of these gangs require initiates to commit a felony prior to membership. This can be a theft, rape, or even murder. This requirement was originally designed to prevent law enforcement officers from conducting covert activities within the gang.

Motorcycle gangs are extremely well-armed and well-organized for any criminal endeavor. They conduct most individual activities in a very secretive manner. Only at large gatherings where their members can intimidate small law enforcement contingents are they found "flying" their colors. These gangs are territorially inclined and are broken down into chapters. Each chapter has a president, vice-president, and

other officers. Members must follow specific rules such as, "We are Outlaws and members will follow the Outlaws' way or get out. All members are your Brothers and your family. You will not steal your Brother's possessions, money, woman, class or his humor. If you do this your Brother will do you."⁵ Penalties, ranging from fines to death, are imposed on members for rule violations.

There are no written rules in the Black or Brown gangs and few rules in general. Their meetings are usually held at "safe houses," with members looking as if they were ordinary neighborhood visitors. Police communications are closely monitored, and members are instructed to be alert so as not to lead law enforcement officers to their meeting places.

What, in addition to fear and intimidation, motivates a person to become a gang member? Obviously, these are very strong factors, but they alone are not sufficient to maintain the temporal integrity of the gang. It is one thing to join a gang while a teenager but it is quite another to maintain a lifelong membership. The "Just World" hypothesis suggests some insights into the psychological dynamics of the gang.⁶ In essence, Lerner and Miller hypothesize that most individuals wish to believe that the world is just and ordered. That is, people get what they deserve and that one has control over his environment, and more importantly, the significant events in one's life. Viewing gang behavior from this prospective makes their activities more interpretable.

Most gangs represent either social or economic minority groups. Despite their potential for violence, use of threats, and intimidation, these gangs and their members are essentially

powerless—they cannot control the police or the court system. While they can control their neighborhood, they cannot control the territory or "turf" beyond that. In a great many cases, they run a substantial risk if they leave their turf and cross through enemy "territory." It is not unlike being in prison. Yet, even in prison there is an attempt to maintain some control, order, and predictability on the part of inmates. Within a particular section or cellblock of the prison, there is most often a dominant leader or group ensuring that their regulations are enforced. The group's sanctions are often harsh and severe, in some cases resulting in death. What is evident is a microcosm, albeit distorted, of the dominant society. It is not uncommon for gang members to regard themselves as the police on their turf. Although they control little else in their world, they can at least control their turf.

Because of fear and intimidation, victims of youth gangs rarely come forward to assist the police. Evident also is a much more subtle form of persuasion consistent with the "Just World" hypothesis. The victims of these gangs display what is called the "shared common fate" phenomenon—both the perpetrator and the victim perceive that they may share a common fate.⁷ As an example, suppose we have a member of a particular ethnic group that is the focus of discrimination. This person works outside the

ghetto in a subservient occupation and can only afford to live in a ghetto or barrio, where her family and friends also live. She believes that she shares a common fate with her neighbors. In fact, her son may even be a member of the gang. It is because of this that when the police respond to the scene of a crime, they are seen as outsiders. Even though the police may be Hispanic or black, they are still seen as outsiders—they are agents of the establishment. After all, they no longer live in the ghetto. They, despite their racial origins, no longer share a common fate with the ghetto or barrio residents.

The situation may sound futile, but there are those who are able to move out of the ghetto or barrio. These persons are most likely to be the "dominant" girls who usually complete their secondary education, and if the household has the luck to have an employed wage earner, they sometimes go on to college. . . . They are the most likely to obtain secretarial or other pink-collar jobs, the most likely to marry 'up'. . . .⁸

What are some of the practical implications and applications of the foregoing for the police officer on the street? First, one must look beyond the gang's criminal activities and consider what motivates them. Secondly, at a more pragmatic level, there are some basic principles that may assist law enforcement officers in dealing with these groups. These include the frequently noted observation that gangs believe they need to "advertise," either by wearing club jackets or writing on walls, streets, buildings, or other stationary objects. They may also call out their gang name at the scene of a criminal incident. This is particularly true with Black and Brown gangs.

Once turfs are identified, individual members must be sought out and appropriate records made. These records should include, but are not limited to, monikers, photographs, tattoos, and other gang members frequently observed with a particular subject. It is important to learn their habits and some of their slang. When given encouragement, gang members will often talk for hours about their gang. The listener should appear impressed by the information and must remember that behavior on the street is quite different from that in the controlled environment of the station house so one must practice a degree of understanding and tolerance.

Family members, particularly females, will sometimes supply a great deal of information about the gang. It is important to remember that the primary code of all gangs is that one never divulges information on a fellow gang member; however, information may be obtained if tactful questioning is employed.

Careful display of knowledge by the officer about individual gang members (family, school, moniker, arrest incidents, etc.) serves not only to impress the member but also creates a degree of respect for the officer and the authority he represents. Since gang members usually respect strength, it is imperative that the officer be firm, and above all, fair. The officer should not mislead the gang members

"The most successful investigative approach appears to be one of patience by the investigator. . . ."

by promising things he has no intention of doing or cannot do. The officer should also remember not to favor one gang over another. His position should be one of encouraging them to stay in their own area.

It is not advisable to play one gang against another in conversation. When gang members discuss other gangs, the officer should concentrate on directing the conversation. He should emphasize his desire to prevent conflict and protect all of the ghetto or barrio people.

Gang members are often offended by patronizing law enforcement officers. If the officer is comfortable joking with them and using their slang, it will be obvious to the members and they will probably accept it. If it is not, it will serve only to antagonize the gang.

Gangs generally prey on victims within their own neighborhood—it is unwise to victimize persons in another gang's turf. Because gang members know the personal habits of most residents in their neighborhood, crimes are likely to occur with no witnesses. Stolen property is also easily disposed of by the gang through their contacts, among whom are neighborhood businessmen who engage in criminal activity.

The most successful investigative approach appears to be one of patience by the investigator, who should make frequent contacts with victims and potential or known witnesses to gain their confidence in an attempt to prosecute the violators. Protection should never be promised unless it is sure to be provided.

Another successful technique is trading a weak and probably unsuccessful prosecution case for the simple return of stolen items, no questions asked. Young persons, 8-14 years of age, are frequently an excellent source of leads. The officer should remember when questioning these children to ask specific questions, guarding against their use of imagination.

The increase in gang violence and its deep-rooted social problems pose a massive challenge to law enforcement. Gang culture is so encompassing that the use of specialized gang units is probably the most desirable approach to the problem. Through the use of these units, law enforcement officers can become attuned to the gang's culture, its operations, and its members. Also, the seeming omnipresence of the investigators creates confidence in reluctant neighborhood residents and serves as a deterrent to violence. It is an important problem to be dealt with, and only by the total commitment of the gang officer will preventive measures become effective.

FBI

Footnotes

¹ J. W. Sharif, "Free Enterprise and the Ghetto Family," *Psychology Today*, vol. 15, 1981, pp. 41-48.

² Attorney General's Youth Gang Task Force, *Report on Youth Gang Task Force*, Department of Justice of the State of California, June 1981.

³ Synopsis of Gang Homicides Occurring Within Jurisdictional Area of Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, 1980.

⁴ Estimate based on statistics of gang-related incidents reported by Los Angeles Sheriff's Stations, 1982.

⁵ Excerpt from the bylaws of the Outlaw motorcycle gang.

⁶ M. J. Lerner and D. T. Miller, "Just World Research and the Attribution Process: Looking Back and Ahead," *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 85, 1978, pp. 1030-1051.

⁷ M. J. Lerner and G. Matthews "Reactions to the Suffering of Others Under Conditions of Indirect Responsibility," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1967, pp. 319-325.

⁸ Supra, note 1.

END