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YOUTH GANG WARFARE

A PRESENTATION TO

Senator George N. Zenovich, Chairman  
and Members of  
the State Senate Select Committee  
on Children and Youth

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November 14, 1975

1.

Senator George A. Zenovich, Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Children and Youth, and distinguished members,

May I welcome you to Los Angeles in behalf of the Department of Community Services and the members of the Youth Services Division.

My name is Miguel Duran, Chief of the Youth Services Division.

My topic relates itself to Youth Gang Warfare.

Underlying Causes for Joining Gangs:

In some areas of Los Angeles a youngster doesn't seem to have any alternative but to belong to the gang in that neighborhood. He is born into it like his brothers and sisters before him and their parents before them. The parents see nothing wrong in belonging to the gang. What else is there? In the same breath they tell you that they are against violence; that there should be brotherhood.

If you go to a house party where there are elders in attendance, the men will generally talk about the "good old days." The "good old days" consist of experiences they had as members of a gang or what they did while they were in the army.

It is a great way to pass the time and break the ice with someone you just met.

Many unsuspecting parents move their family into the area because that area is the only one they can afford to live in. The children go out to play and make friends. Conditions of friendship are heaped on them. A youngster anywhere from ten years on up will be made aware of what is expected of him. If the conditions are not agreeable he may tell his parents. The parents are generally disbelieving, calling it "kid stuff". The children might complain a few times to the parents but when nothing happens they accede to the demands of imposed authority or the laws of the street. Once caught up in it, they might find it to their liking. If this happens, as new converts, they may become radical in thought and action. They live, will die, and kill for their new cause. The Barrios/ The Ghetto demands their loyalty and they give it. What else is there?

2.

Who gives a damn about you? Your parents and your teachers? The Police? Society? What the hell is that? "Only my clique cares whether I live or die. When I'm with my Home-boys I am somebody."

The age level for a youngster to join and be accepted as a gang member is about ten years. He is ready to get out at about eighteen. The median age at which he causes the most trouble and brings the world down on his back at the same time is about fifteen-and-a-half.

If he is unfortunate enough to have joined a violent gang or one with a poor reputation, by the time he is eighteen he will have seen Juvenile Hall several times, Forestry Camp once or twice, Youth Authority and maybe even state prison. All in the name of that which he holds dear-his gang.

In the first paragraph we stated that a youngster is born into a gang or, because of pressure, joins it. Consider also:

1. An age where he is alienated by authority.

When we're kids we don't like adult imposition.

2. You seek your own kind.

I don't like school, I'm a Chicano. The fellows understand what I'm talking about.

3. What else is there to do?

There may be lots of things to do but they cost money or are illegal. Scouting and YMCA's Clubs might be available but only "squares" go there. Besides, adult authority tells you what to do.

What goes on during the time the fellows get together?

1. They talk a lot about nothing that's deep or profound to others but it's their reality.
2. They drink, drop pills, smoke grass-rarely openly, unless they want to show defiance or that they control the area.

3.

3. They socialize - party time is all the time. A few records and a few girls and you have a party.
4. They fight - they will tell you they don't look for it but they won't run from it. If the stuff comes down; they will go all out; to the death if necessary.

In spite of all the attention that gangs have received, very little has been done in a consistent manner to deal with the problem.

Gangs have proliferated from the 20's to the 70's. They seem to hit peak periods every ten years or so. Right now we are at a peak which has lasted for three years.

Why are youth gangs so attractive to the young? Especially in Los Angeles County? The fact is that the reason for joining gangs is universal: Those same reasons I listed in prior paragraphs. - Can that be strange to anyone in this room regardless of where they come from or their color or economic circumstances?

## Recent Cases

The County of Los Angeles has several policing agencies. They report homicides as being very high this year. Some 40 have been reported by the news media as being "gang" related. I believe that it is closer to 60.

But beyond the 60 murders there are hundreds of cases of maimings due to the ferocity with which they are willing to go at each other for their cause.

The following is an account from just one jurisdiction out of a possible 150.

This action took place over a period of two months. There were only two murders but please listen to the following cases of bodily assault:

- 2 - murders
- 9 - knifings
- 6 - fistfights
- 2 - assaults with baseball bats
- 19 - shootings
- 1 - holdup with gun
- 6 - robberies
- 1 - grand auto theft
- 1 - assault with pipes and chains
- 1 - rape
- 1 - assault with a brick
- 1 - assault with a bottle

Where possible the gang as the assailant or victim was named in the report.

Multiply this activity by the other police jurisdictions and you get an idea of the immensity of this problem - even half is too much! The end result of all these assaults is that it rarely leaves the victim whole. The victim may never be the same again, meaning that he may be paralyzed for life, left blind, or otherwise physically incapacitated. Beyond that he remains scarred for life inwardly.

5.

He might decide on retaliation. If this occurs he may leave behind a trail of victims.

The following is a composite example of what I mean:

Johnny Goodguy attends a wedding shower party. During the course of the party some uninvited guests show up. They disrupt the party. Johnny is beaten for opposing them. As they leave they fling a challenge, "We're from the Brown Bloods, you know where we hang out. If you think you're bad, drop by."

Johnny who has had his guts spilled and his manhood stepped on remembers. He checks in with a few of his partners. That weekend they cruise the Brown Blood turf. They spot what looks like a house party and young people dressed in the uniform of the day. They slow the car down, roll down the window and Johnny pokes out a shotgun and fires.

When the reporters ask the police on the scene for an explanation they are told that it's another in a series of confrontations between the Brown Bloods and the Royals.

This time the Royals have gone too far. The count this night is one fifteen year old boy dead and two girls seriously injured. The reporter asks the policeman how he knows it was the Royals. The policeman answers that the crowd heard them shout it out as they drove off. Will it be difficult to trace the assailants? Not at all.

Later when these young men are apprehended and questioned they feel no real remorse. They do feel sadness: that of being caught up in something they can't get themselves out of.

"God I hate being in a gang!" "Well why don't you get out of it?"

6.

"Cut of it to what? The only way I'll ever get out is if my folks move a thousand miles away. But my parents aren't going to move. They can't afford it."

Recently a case was being tried in a court which is surrounded by several gangs. Two young men were on trial for shooting and critically wounding two youth whom they had never seen before but they believed to be rival gang members.

During the court proceedings members of the gang which had been shot at came inside the court room disrupting the proceedings by openly challenging the defendants and anyone in the court room who might be friendly to them. The disruption boiled out into the waiting hall. The youth, including girls, were in a wild mood. Not even the presence of several police officers, probation officers and group workers slowed them down. Out in the parking lot more youth were waiting in ambush in case the court defendants were allowed out. The Judge suspended their bail and put them in protective custody.

Let me read a quote by Ron Bloomberg, a newscaster in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, featured in an article, "Street Gangs Turn from Rumbles to Wanton Crime", which appeared in the July 7, 1975 issue of U.S. News and World Report. "Killing has been a way of life among this city's youth gangs for years. Last year 43 youngsters were slain and some 250 seriously injured. This has been about the annual average since 1969." He states that most of the violent gangs are Black and those killed or wounded are Black. He continues, "If we had been seeing 30 to 40 white youths killed every year from gang violence, the city wouldn't have tolerated it. It would have been stopped."

He, in Philadelphia, is saying what I believe to be the case here in Los Angeles. Those meeting violent death at the hands of their peers are not White, they are Blacks and Chicanos. It is a minority problem so why deal with it except in a superficial manner?

7.

#### AMELIORATION OF THE PROBLEM

By now most people feel that amelioration of the problem created by gang members is all they can hope for.

They see no eradication of it. But those who cannot see the eradication are those who are not close to the gang and what causes it.

Another paper, another committee wishing to deal with eradication, indeed a commitment to it, would allow me to explore this further.

For now I present the following as a means for amelioration:

1. No new legislation is necessary. The negative activity happened yesterday and is happening today. Legislation for alleviation is three years away if at all. Dust off what legislation is available now and use it intelligently.
2. In the County of Los Angeles some 50 of the 78 incorporated cities have gang problems. This should be recognized and work begun on them whether they use city, county, state or federal funding.
3. In the unincorporated areas the County Board of Supervisors should take the lead. They can impact on the problem by recognizing existing youth serving agencies with the capacity to do the job and subsidize them.
4. If indeed this hearing and other hearings which have gone on before and those which will come after are held because a collective someone feels the gang as a problem has reached epidemic proportions, then I would urge, each time I am allowed to speak, that action take the place of hand wringing. I maintain that program planning should take place in the area of need with the so-called "needy" in on the planning. Further, that the planners, designers, researchers and analysts be paid less than the program implementers. At present the street worker is penalized;



His wages are poor, demands on his time excessive and expectations for results unreal. These conditions are known so do not attract highly qualified trainable people.

My observations, over a span of 20 years in the youth serving business, are that planning programs are safe. Program implementation is dangerous. Has anyone ever gotten killed, punched in the mouth or fired for making a mistake putting together an organizational chart? While the program implementors, from the supervisor to the street worker, have known the feeling of weak knees, loose guts and broken jaws. A few have been buried and many more are called fools. Amelioration of the gang warfare problem in the County of Los Angeles can happen. I would say the following must take place:

1. Elected officials at local, state and federal levels who know Los Angeles County, must admit that it has reached epidemic proportions.
2. Commit to writing their willingness to cooperate 100% then appoint a responsible person to carry out that commitment.
3. An immediate evaluation of all private and public agencies who are receiving funds to do youth services or delinquency prevention:
  - 1.) That their revenue source be terminated if flagrant discrepancies are found.
  - 2.) That they be helped to bring their program up to standard.
  - 3.) That they be rated publicly if they are above standard.
4. That the "Department of Community Development" if it comes into existence in Los Angeles County be given the responsibility for overseeing the coordination of these agencies in view of the fact they receive CETA or Revenue Sharing Funds from the County.
5. That the responsibility for planning programs and the implementation of those programs along with the necessary budget and staff be given to department in the County who exist in order to carry out these specific Board Mandates.

9.

I have found that at the community level there is constant failure to effect positive change in youth behaviour and if there is change it does not remain constant.

Generally it is not the fault of the program or the plan of implementation. The fault seems to lie in the improper use of personnel.

Improperly trained staff and administrative mismanagement are the biggest reasons for the failure of most programs. Who gets the blame? The Community. Who gets the onus heaped on it? The Community.

I only know of two entities that sent their team of workers through intensive basic training before allowing them to go out into the streets. The City of Baldwin Park and Cleland House Community Center. Both had their training this year so there is no evaluation at this point. We submit that no army sends an inductee into a shooting scene before basic training; then why should we send in our street workers, indeed anyone who is going to deal with the problems of another human being without proper preparation?

I wonder if this committee is aware that there are no legal restrictions on who can be a community worker, or that any funded agency can operate without a license? The minute they receive a grant they are operational. Hiring restrictions are minimal.

If legislation is needed for anything it would be to oversee the licensing and/or credentialing of would be community workers. The Police have the best approach. A civilian, after intensive prior scrutiny, is sent to an academy. The end result is a Police Officer who knows who he is, who he works for, what his job is.

10.

There is no real money being spent on before-the-fact programs. "Established" after care agencies are the gopher holes down which most of the money is poured. Justification for these expenditures are statistically upheld. Alas, we in the field of delinquency prevention can't prove statistically that we saved anyone. Even though I produce someone who will testify in my behalf, they can be "shot down" because there's nothing empirical to substantiate their claim that I was the big saving factor.

Still, those of you who have the power should keep the faith. Be willing to support the use of substantial sums of money for delinquency prevention but go all the way with your convictions. Place it in the hands of governmental departments who are mandated to do that, not with members of the juvenile justice system. Their frame of reference is different than ours.

In Conclusion:

Let me reiterate that 1.) Youthful gang members, whether positive or negative in their actions, were made that way, they were not born that way. We probably will not eliminate the gang because we have nothing better to offer the individual who gravitates towards it. 2.) As long as it remains a minority issue it will not be resolved. 3.) Newspaper accounts, whether factual or not, cover only the tip of the iceberg. There are many murders per year but worse are the maimings, broken bones and scarred insides.

But we can over-come, slow down or alleviate the condition by applying compresses to our affected bodies until the doctor arrives, diagnoses the illness and prescribes the medicine. Or did he do that already? Only we, the patient, have resisted the medicine, wishing to remain terminal in our thinking and acting!

Thank you!