



Street-Gang Mentality A Mosaic of Remorseless Violence and Relentless Loyalty

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During their more than 20 years of research on violence against law enforcement officers, the authors interviewed hundreds of offenders either housed in various prisons throughout the United States or following release from these institutions after serving their sentences. The authors found marked differences among these individuals who had killed and assaulted officers. One of these variations focused on street-gang mentality, specifically cold-blooded and remorseless behavior.¹ Among the other dissimilarities between self-admitted gang members² and offenders not affiliated with such groups involved the apparent motivation for assaulting the officers. The gang members either attempted to or inflicted injuries of greater severity than appeared warranted under the circumstances. They exhibited no remorse for their actions but, rather, appeared to take pride in attacking sworn law enforcement professionals. In fact, seven gang members told the authors that escape was not the motive for assaulting the officer; three admitted that they wanted to kill, not injure, the officer; and one, who could have successfully escaped, chose not to and assaulted the officer instead.

To help officers better understand gang members, the authors share some observations from their recent study, *Violent Encounters: A Study of Felonious Assaults on Our*

Nation's Law Enforcement Officers. The original design of their research made no attempt to identify gang members. As it progressed, however, 13 offenders admitted street-gang membership.³ What these individuals said caught the authors' attention because of the qualitative differences of their information. The gang members' own words presented in this article offer a chilling glimpse into a lifestyle foreign to most law-abiding citizens.⁴ All officers would do well to study these statements to gain insight into the minds of individuals who have exhibited cold-blooded and remorseless behavior toward those charged with enforcing this nation's laws.

Family Dynamics

"Yeah, it was like another family. You know, at the time, that was all I had to lean on. My family members wasn't there. My mom was on dope, you know, and I was staying with my auntie, and she had five other kids she had to worry about besides me. So, I made my choice to join the gang...."

All gang members lacked male role models in their households. Six never lived with their biological fathers, while seven reported their biological fathers as mostly absent from the home setting. As to the presence of their biological mothers, nine gang members stated that she lived in the home but worked full time, leaving the children unsupervised throughout much of their early childhood. The gang members often lived temporarily with various people, such as grandmothers, aunts, uncles, and friends or acquaintances of their families. The number of people residing in the households constantly changed. For example, over eight people resided in the homes where three gang members stayed, with only three being members of their nuclear families.



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All but one gang member advised that one or more members of their immediate families had a criminal history or abused drugs. Nine disclosed that one or more members of their immediate families abused alcohol, and five indicated that psychiatric problems affected one or more family members.

Most children learn to delay gratification, develop appropriate social behavior, and control aggression toward others through their interactions with well-adjusted family members and other individuals in various social arenas, such as day care and school. Parents teach children not only by what they say but, most important, by engaging in appropriate social conduct. When their children act outside the parameters of socially acceptable behavior, parents immediately correct them, thereby allowing their children to experience the negative consequences of their unacceptable actions. As children grow, develop, and move outside the family, they acquire negotiation skills and incorporate them into their social repertoire of behaviors.

Gang members fail to develop these skills because they remain within a system and structure that reinforces relying on and trusting only those individuals within their group. This reliance intensifies when they learn to see anyone outside the gang as a real and immediate threat to the group's safety and their own personal existence. In effect, the gang becomes a substitute for their family. What conventional society regards as inappropriate or unacceptable behavior that often results in punishment, gang members ignore, encourage, or recognize as adaptive for their survival on the street.

GANG MEMBER QUOTE

“When I turned 16, that’s when I basically started shooting people, putting in work and all. In my neighborhood, people feared me. They feared me because I didn’t have no problems with taking a life. I mean, you know, you disrespect me or do something wrong to me, you’ll die for it.”

Education Levels

“I didn’t need to read to sell drugs. I make more money than those people who write books.” As these comments illustrate, formal education meant little and was not a goal recognized by the gangs. None of the members graduated from high school, and only two obtained a general equivalency diploma (GED) while incarcerated for assaulting an officer. None said that they read newspapers, magazines, or any type of written news material on a regular basis nor had they ever used the Internet. Moreover, the authors observed that several gang members experienced problems reading interview documents.

Criminal Activity

On average, the gang members committed their first criminal offense at the age of 9. From this first encounter, their criminal histories escalated. Five gang members had committed murders, 10 had perpetrated armed robberies, 11 had effected burglaries, and

all had engaged in drug violations and weapons offenses. Also, all gang members had been confined to juvenile detention centers by the courts, and four had escaped from these facilities one or more times. Their average age at the time they joined the gang was 13. All admitted carrying weapons, including knives and handguns, at an early age and quickly learned how to effectively and efficiently use them.

Exposure to Violence

“It’s a pretty violent neighborhood. A lot of drug dealers, gangs. A lot of people getting killed in my neighborhood....” All gang members came from dysfunctional families. Each had experienced some form of verbal or physical abuse within the family setting. Outside this unit, all became the victim of at least one physical assault during their early childhoods. All grew up in neighborhoods controlled by the gang that they eventually joined. Prior to belonging to the gang, all had property taken from them by persons associated with gang activity.

During their childhoods, three gang members were robbed at gunpoint, and all had acquaintances killed in acts of violence on the street. Several members joined the gang for physical protection. “Shoot-outs mostly every day. I mean, it was always somebody got into something with another person or some type of altercation that escalated into a shoot-out.... The guns are the problem solvers.”

GANG MEMBER QUOTE

“I’m a ghetto track star. I’ve been running all my life. [The officer] ain’t gonna catch me. If I wouldn’t have waited on him, he would have never caught me.... I ran around the corner, and I waited on him. He came around the corner; I shot.”

Work Experience

No gang members were employed in a conventional sense at the time they assaulted an officer. In addition, although none had served in the military, they often referred to themselves as a soldier or street soldier. Moreover, their gangs expected them to behave similarly to formally trained U.S. military personnel, particularly when serving as protectors. This street-soldier attitude significantly contributed to the development of the street-gang mentality. Successful service as a street soldier often led to promotions within the gang structure where titles or ranks mirrored those in the armed services as well.

Although unemployed in a traditional sense, all had specific tasks or jobs within their gangs. All participated in some way in the street sale of illicit drugs, as well as engaging in various other low-level crimes. Those who served as gang enforcers always carried weapons and stood ready to protect the drug sellers and the gang’s territory. They also

enforced gang rules and regulations, imposing far more severe penalties for violating these than society would for breaking its laws. For example, society would consider a petty larceny as a minor infraction. The gang, however, would judge the same act perpetrated against another member as a major transgression, which potentially could result in serious bodily injury or death as punishment.

Lieutenants and bosses oversaw the daily operations of the gang, such as the sale of drugs and contraband, and the resolution of minor disputes among members and rival gangs. Original gangsters, founding members of the gang usually vested with overall authority above all other members, generally acted as the final authority in settling major disputes among gang members and rival gangs. Delivery men, mules, and transporters conveyed and distributed wholesale amounts of illicit drugs or other contraband from outside sources into the gang area. Burglars and creepers specialized in committing burglaries usually of commercial establishments, office buildings, and private residences. Creepers often garnered firearms for the gang, typically stealing them during daytime residential burglaries. Drivers possessed a valid driver's license and sufficient driving skills to transport gang members to various locations for criminal activities. Specialists, generally older and more experienced members, conducted specific criminal activities for the greater benefit of the gang, such as bank and commercial robberies, along with robberies of rival gang members. Lookouts monitored the perimeter of the neighborhood and warned gang members when law enforcement or rival gangs approached. Taggers specialized in performing the gang's art work, or graffiti, both inside and outside the gang's area.

Those charged with specific responsibilities considered themselves experts in their assigned gang-related work activities. They discussed their occupations within the gang with a sense of personal pride. A reputation as a diligent worker enhanced their status in the gang and increased the amount of money they received. Bringing in more money further heightened their status, often measured by the material assets they acquired, such as the type of vehicle owned and the kind of jewelry worn. An increase in status usually heightened the level of respect on the street. This lifestyle often resulted in a cycle of continually reinforced antisocial and criminal behavior—more violence achieved more material goods, in developments in the area which, in turn, increased a and claimed no national affiliagang member's street status tions. Regardless of the gang's and appetite for additional possessions.

GANG MEMBER QUOTE

““The police officer don't get as much work as I do. I mean, when it comes to shooting and stuff like that, I do every day, so a police officer cannot intimidate me.... And, here I am a thug on the street been shooting and killing people all my life and why am I gonna let a guy that just went through the police academy and I've been out here in the war zone all my life.... Why am I gonna have respect for him? I'm not gonna have respect for him because he's trying to stop what I'm trying to do.... So, you know, he can go ahead and

do his job, but just don't go overboard. 'Cause if you go overboard, then some bullets are gonna come flying at you."

Names of Members and Their Gangs

Gang members appeared to have more pride in their gang names than in their surnames, especially if they had received them in recognition of criminal deeds or behavior. A gang name tended to increase a member's status and reputation within the group. Some reported that they belonged to a clique, set, or subset of a nationally known gang.⁵ Others stated that they belonged to local neighborhood gangs or drug crews that took their names from the streets or housing developments in the area and claimed no national affiliations. Regardless of the gang's lineage, all of the members took great pride in its name and the reputation it had on the street.

The Neighborhood

The neighborhood where the gang members grew up comprised a large part of their lives. It was where they had their first interactions with people outside the family setting and where they felt safe at an early age. When questioned as to the importance of the neighborhood, some responded—

- "My territory, my domain; I would die for it."
- "It was all I had, like family, you know." "It's home, nobody can violate that space."
- "It meant a lot; I felt like I was responsible, a lot of people died."
- "People I loved lived and grew up there. It meant a lot."

These statements demonstrated how important the idea of neighborhood had become for the gang members. It was their home. The authors visited some of the neighborhoods and found them run-down and heavily littered with few commercial establishments, forcing residents to travel long distances to shop for food and other necessities. While these locations did not resemble areas that most people would consider desirable, all of the gang members professed extreme pride in their individual neighborhoods. When asked what they had contributed to their neighborhoods, some replied—

- "Put us on the map and on the street. I wanted to try to keep our money in the neighborhood."
- "Schooled the kids on everything, how to steal, break in cars, and steal cars."
- "Take care of relatives and friends in time of need."
- "Go to the grocery store for the elderly. We protected everyone in our neighborhood."
- "Buy kids food and stuff, I would protect my neighborhood."

Teaching younger members of the neighborhood better ways to steal and break into cars acted as both a recruiting tool and a way to help the neighborhood residents become thieves. Protecting the neighborhood to these gang members meant keeping outsiders (rival gangs) away from the area.

All stated that rival gang members would enter their neighborhoods and show disrespect. Some defined these acts as—

- “Other drug crews tried to move in on my turf.”
- “They’d come through shooting.”
- “Could get killed, disrespected by attempting to sell drugs in the hood.”
- “They would send people in who would tag us” (i.e., spray paint over the gang’s graffiti, replacing it with some representing the rival gang).
- “They’d come through with rags hanging out of cars or even shooting. We would always retaliate.” always retaliate.”

Retaliation to the acts of disrespect helped the individual members develop a reputation as tough, both within their gang and by rival ones. Eliminating competing drug dealers from the neighborhood helped keep the local drug market open, ensuring profits for the neighborhood gang.

Often, a strange mix occurred in the gang members’ responses that reflected a bizarre and fractured Robin Hood fantasy. They reported a love for their neighborhoods, a respect for the elderly who lived there, and a responsibility for the youth. Yet, they incorporated children into a gang that lived by theft and deception; they abused drugs and alcohol, rather than dealing with personal or social issues; and they employed the ultimate amount of force and violence to achieve personal gratification.

GANG MEMBER QUOTE

“We used to enjoy watching the news to see the work that we put in it. But, it got to the point we were putting in so much work, shooting so many people, I mean, we ain’t even watched the news no more. The stuff didn’t even matter anymore. We were just out there.”

Conclusion

Gang members stated that they learned violent gang values at an early age and had them strongly and regularly reinforced. Rather than the prosocial behaviors taught in most well-adjusted families, the gangs instilled and reinforced antisocial ones that protected them from outsiders, which included the law enforcement community. In fact, the gangs not only regarded law enforcement officers as outsiders but as a threat to their survival.

The goal of every gang member was to achieve status and respect within their gangs. Respected only when feared, gang members achieved this through repeated acts of physical violence against others, who they usually viewed as outsiders. Once perceived as willing to use violence without conscience, especially when directed toward law enforcement officers, gang members obtained status.

With such a mind-set, gang members can represent a grave danger to all Americans who value a safe and productive life. They also pose an even greater threat to members of the law enforcement profession because of their lack of remorse for destroying lives and their relentless loyalty to the groups that spawned their vicious behavior.

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Endnotes

¹ For additional information on this concept, see Anthony J. Pinizzotto, Edward F. Davis, and Charles E. Miller III, U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *In the Line of Fire* (Washington, DC, 1997).

² The FBI’s National Crime Information Center defines a gang as a group that “must be an ongoing organization or association of three or more persons. The group must have a common interest or activity characterized by the commission or involvement in a pattern of criminal or delinquent conduct.”

³ All gang members were males with an average age of 20 at the time of the assault incident. However, two were over 30 and the only married gang members in the study. Eight were black, and five were white. Ten had children but never had married. The physical appearance of gang members did not differ significantly from nongang members at the time of the interviews primarily because all were incarcerated and, thus, required to maintain uniform grooming and dress standards.

⁴ All gang member statements are excerpted from Anthony J. Pinizzotto, Edward F. Davis, and Charles E. Miller III, U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Violent Encounters: A Study of Felonious Assaults on Our Nation’s Law Enforcement Officers* (Washington, DC, 2006), available from the UCR Program Office, FBI Complex, 1000 Custer Hollow Road, Clarksburg, WV 26306-0150 or by calling 888-827-6427.

⁵ The authors made no attempt to confirm or disprove the gang members’ self-proclaimed affiliations.