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July 25, 2005

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Policing Gangs in America

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521851107

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First published 2006

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Katz, Charles M.

Policing gangs in America / Charles M. Katz, Vincent J. Webb.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in criminology)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-85110-7 (hardcover)

ISBN-10: 0-521-85110-6 (hardcover)

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-61654-6 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 0-521-61654-9 (pbk.)

1. Police – United States – Gang units. 2. Gangs – United States.

3. Community policing – United States. I. Webb, Vincent J. II. Title.

III. Series: Cambridge studies in criminology (Cambridge University Press)

HV8080.G35K38 2006

363.2'3 – dc22

2005015711

ISBN-13 978-0-521-85110-7 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-85110-6 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-61654-6 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-61654-9 paperback

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Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this book has been to provide a detailed account of the realities and experiences of the police gang unit, and those who are in them. Furthermore, it was to understand the assumptions, issues, and problems that shape the police gang unit's response to the gang problem. The objective of the book, however, was not to denounce the police gang units under study for their inadequacies, but, to understand how they respond to their community's gang problem, and the factors that might influence their response, with particular emphasis on the problems that may result from the performance of their duties.

This final chapter summarizes and discusses the results from the study. In the first section of the chapter we discuss the five principle findings of our research and their implications for policy makers. In the second section, we present our final thoughts and make recommendations for what we believe a more effective gang unit might look like.

POLICE GANG UNITS AS AN INDIRECT RESPONSE TO AN OBJECTIVE PROBLEM

All four cities had documentable gang problems at the time that their police departments decided to establish gang units. However, that decision in each police department occurred in response to political, public, and media pressure, and not to the objective reality of the gang problem. In other words, the creation of the gang units was an indirect rather than a direct response to local gang problems. In our assessment, a strict constructionist interpretation of the formation of gang units misses the mark, at least for our study sites.

Most earlier researchers examining the creation of police gang units have argued that gang units have not been established in response to an objective threat, but rather to *moral panics* and *social threats* (Archbold and Meyer 1999; McCorkle and Miethe 1998; Zatz 1987). Researchers have also argued that police officials, along with the media, have socially constructed local gang problems, demonizing minority and other marginalized youth, in order to support campaigns for additional resources (McCorkle and Miethe 1998; Zatz 1987). We have no doubt that each of the cities that we studied had very real gang problems with their attendant crime and violence, and none of those gang problems were constructions of the police department for any purpose. We also found no evidence that any of the police departments had created gang units in order to control marginalized populations perceived as threatening; rather, we found evidence to the contrary.

Much of our data suggested that minority communities were playing a major role in shaping the nature of the police organizations' responses to the gang problem. In almost all of the communities studied, we found evidence that as gang violence became a local reality, community members, especially those in minority communities, began publicly criticizing police for lack of action. In a number of cases, widespread rallies, meetings, and protests took place, as the public demanded that police "do something" about the gang problem. Their demands typically motivated local policy makers to inquire into the problem, which in turn resulted in the media focusing more intensely on gangs and gang incidents, public outcry, and policy-makers' actions.

Although in each community a local gang problem had preceded the creation of its police gang unit, in no case was the gang unit a direct response to the problem. In fact, the police departments' responses, at least initially, had little to do with enhancing operational efficiency and effectiveness. Instead, the specialized units were created in response to the institutional environment, in which public pressure to act was being applied. The fact that the specialized gang units were created in response to political-institutional considerations, rather than to purely rational needs, eventually resulted in problems for some of the departments.

In all of the cities, we encountered what appeared to be a growing lack of consensus about the magnitude and nature of the local gang problem, largely with respect to their nature and declining scope. Interestingly, *internal* stakeholders tended to see the problem as diminishing, whereas *external* stakeholders and at least some gang unit officers claimed that the problem continued to be serious. This split was complicated by the

fact that little thoughtful analysis had been conducted to clarify the issue.

The statistical assessment of local gang problems typically consisted of little more than counting the numbers of gangs and gang members. The absence of detailed analysis was surprising, given recent advances in information technology, crime analysis, GIS mapping, and the current emphasis on formal problem solving in policing with models, such as SARA, that emphasize analysis. As a result, the study participants whom we interviewed could provide only subjective evaluations of the local gang problem, which in turn made it difficult for us to objectively assess the goodness of fit of local responses to local problems. More often than not, study participants seemed to have based their appraisals of the situation on dated media accounts of the local gang problem, official reports from years past, and their own gang unit's cultural lore.

We concluded that the police agencies were often not well-positioned to respond efficiently or effectively to their gang problems with their gang units. Once the gang units had been created, abundantly staffed, and given ample resources, their autonomous organizational structures and operational strategies rapidly became entrenched within the agencies. None of the structures or strategies allowed for rational organizational adaptation, should the community's gang problem, albeit still in existence, become less serious.

ABSENCE OF DIRECTION, CONTROLS, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Our examination of the gang units, and of their parent police departments, found few formal mechanisms in place for directing and controlling gang units or for holding the units and their officers accountable. Many units lacked governing policies, procedures, and rules. Most of the departments did not adequately train officers to perform the specialized tasks and activities necessary to fulfill the functions of their gang units. None of them used formal performance measures to examine the effectiveness of their gang units or to hold them accountable for carrying out designated responsibilities.

First, with the exception of Las Vegas, the gang units either did not have special policies, procedures, and rules guiding officer behavior, or those they did have were overly modest in nature and scope. The fact that some units had not so much as a mission statement spoke to the minimal direction that the parent organizations were providing. As a result, unit functions and activities were largely driven by either the

unit supervisor or an officer who had been with the unit for a long period of time. The chief of one police department admitted that he did not know exactly what the gang unit did or how they did it. The unit had been around for a long time, he explained, and he was confident that his officers were doing whatever they were supposed to be doing.

Although we had no reason to think that any individual officer was acting inappropriately in any way, we did believe in general that the lack of formal direction given to the units (and to their supervisors) hampered the departments' effectiveness in developing coherent and well-articulated plans for controlling community gang problems. Since the 1960s, police agencies across the country have sought to control the discretionary behavior of officers.

The gang units that we studied were decoupled, both organizationally and strategically, from the rest of their departments. Given the autonomous nature of their work, decoupling made control and accountability even more elusive, and more critical. Departmental policies, procedures, and rules not only would have helped to guide the activities conducted by gang unit officers, but also would have established behavioral boundaries, so that officers could be held accountable by a clear standard. Instead, the gang unit officers were a force unto themselves, free to engage in whatever activities they wished, with little input from supervisors or administrators.

To be sure, in accord with recently established principles of community and problem-oriented policing, agencies have been encouraged to limit the number of policies and procedures that interfere with the good judgment and discretion of officers. But this recent paradigm shift calls for more educated and better trained officers, with the capacity to move beyond responding to calls for service to solving long-standing problems within the community. The gang unit officers whom we studied were, for the most part, poorly trained by their departments on gang-related matters. Although all of the officers received the generally mandated trainings, most were not required to be trained for their specific positions within the gang unit – at least not beyond such basic elements as an introduction to gang culture, how to document gang members, and how to use the gang information system. As a consequence, officers learned primarily by on-the-job training, a method that was found to have its own problems.

Accountability was further complicated by the fact that officers in three of the gang units were expected to engage in investigative functions. Yet most had never performed any police function other than

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patrol before they were assigned to the unit. Although expected to investigate serious crimes, these officers had received no formal training in how to properly conduct such investigations. Gang unit officers were also responsible for disseminating gang intelligence. Officers in the two largest gang units, however, did not know how to operate their computerized intelligence applications. The officers acknowledged that they had received some training on the system, but with little prior computer experience, they still were not comfortable or proficient with the technology. This left the majority of gang unit officers unable to engage in this part of the very activity for which they were responsible.

Compounding the problem, the gang unit officers were widely recognized by policy makers, the public, and even other police and criminal justice officials as experts on gangs, gang members, and gang activity. Accordingly, they often were called upon to serve as advisors and educators by other community agencies and law enforcement officers, elected officials, and the public. They served as experts and consultants on the gang problem – a problem about which they had not been adequately trained or educated. Serving in these capacities, the officers shared information based on their own deeply held cultural beliefs, not on objective data that had been subjected to rigorous analysis. Important decisions were being based on such information, both within and outside the department.

This problem was even further extirpated with regard to the influence gang unit officers had in the court room. Gang unit officers were often times the only “gang experts” that judges and juries had at their disposal for understanding gang-related incidents and responses to those incidents. Once again, gang unit officers were found to not be adequately trained to be considered gang experts. Furthermore, the fact that we found that gang unit officers frequently engaged in prohibited street enforcement tactics and regularly falsified official reports further lends evidence to the fact that gang unit officer testimony in court is often not only based on lack of formal training and gang unit culture, but may also be based on purposefully misleading information.

Finally, the gang units that we studied lacked adequate performance measures. Measuring police gang unit performance is important for several reasons. First, and perhaps most obvious, evaluation is vital for assessing the fundamental success of the unit. Performance evaluations provide critical feedback to police managers about their organizations’ gang control efforts, informing managers about strengths and weaknesses in their organizational structures and operational activities. The

information from performance evaluations is used to guide decisions about disbursements of limited resources, and to support individual and organizational accountability for specific problems (Bureau of Justice Assistance 1997).

Gang units should be evaluated for other important reasons, as well. Without performance measures, managers are unable to make effective administrative decisions relating to training, officer evaluations, and promotions. Performance measures allow managers to provide feedback and guidance to unit personnel, so they can continue to grow in productivity and effectiveness. Systematic evaluation of the unit and its personnel provides information to managers concerning the means that the unit uses to address gang-related problems. It keeps management up-to-date on the support (i.e., personnel and other resources) needed to address the gang problem (Mastrofski and Wadman 1991; Oettmeier and Wycoff 1998).

Performance evaluations provide a means of formally socializing gang unit officers and holding them accountable. The measures convey agency expectations and inform unit officers, in an official and formal way, about the mission, goals, and priorities of the unit. Performance measures are essentially a detailed list of expectations regarding the types and numbers of activities that are to be performed and their quality. Performance evaluations also socialize officers informally, communicating acceptable styles of policing, and they help to create a shared vision of what constitutes successful gang control. Finally, performance measures facilitate professional development among officers in the unit (Oettmeier and Wycoff 1998).

Not only did we find that these four police departments rarely conducted evaluations of or within their gang units, but even when evaluations did take place, performance and effectiveness were typically judged using global, subjective measures. Many participants in this study were hard-pressed to offer specific *evidence* of gang unit effectiveness, even though they assessed the local gang problem as substantial, and had given us generally positive assessments of their gang units. Interestingly, when we asked stakeholders and police managers about the units' utility, they frequently mentioned the value of gang intelligence, but they seldom addressed the units' impact on the amelioration of the local gang problem. Without objective performance measurements, management decisions about the configuration of the gang unit, or even about whether or not to continue having one, were necessarily premised on something other than hard evidence.

INFORMATION AS THE PRINCIPLE GANG UNIT COMMODITY

Although the gang units placed organizational and cultural emphasis on enforcement activities, one of our principle findings was that they were engaging in a wide variety of activities, with enforcement playing a relatively modest role. Clearly, gang unit officers and some internal stakeholders valued suppression-oriented enforcement activity. Internal stakeholders of the gang units that did not spend much time on enforcement were quick to point that out as a failing. Many gang unit officers argued that enforcement activities gave the gang unit legitimacy. They also argued that prevention activities had no place in a gang unit and should be the responsibility of community relations or another unit. At the same time, however, few internal or external stakeholders commented upon the *value* or *effectiveness* of their gang units' enforcement efforts (e.g., directed patrols, crackdowns, investigations) in reducing the community gang problem or in supporting outside units' or agencies' efforts. Stakeholders seemed to view enforcement as something that gang units ought to do, but almost no one suggested that the gang units' enforcement or suppression strategies were proving effective.

In part, this might have been a recognition of the limited contact that occurred between gang unit officers and gang members. We found that gang unit officers averaged only one to three gang-member contacts per eight-hour shift, depending on the unit. Of those contacts, most resulted in intelligence gathering, not an arrest. As such, stakeholders may have not considered gang unit enforcement activities effective because gang unit officers were not arresting and confining large numbers of gang members, at least not enough of them to have a substantial effect on gang crime. This seems consistent with evidence (see Chapter 7, Table 7.3) that indicates that the "dosage" of gang enforcement is relatively low, and it may not be realistic to expect much of an impact on gang crime.

Actors in the gang units' environments received the most benefit when the units produced and disseminated of gang intelligence. Internal stakeholders frequently commented on the usefulness of such information in solving crimes. External stakeholders often made reference to the importance of intelligence to their agencies' gang suppression, intervention, and prevention efforts. However, few resources in the departments or in the gang units were actually dedicated to producing and disseminating intelligence (with Inglewood being the exception), but from the

perspectives of the stakeholders, this was clearly the gang units' most important contribution.

Incorporating the intelligence function helped the gang units establish and maintain partnerships with other organizations that had a high degree of legitimacy. Intelligence-related activities were often conducted in coordination and cooperation with established institutions such as criminal justice agencies, schools, and formal community groups that could lend organizational support to the gang unit. By associating and aligning themselves with organizations that had achieved high levels of legitimacy, and by making themselves useful to these organizations, the gang units were able to gain and sustain legitimacy from the organizations, as well as from those organizations' constituents and other supporters. As a consequence, although some of the gang units emphasized the enforcement function internally, the intelligence function permitted them to survive because of the technical efficacy that it brought to the unit.

We noted that gang units that prioritized gang intelligence conducted street activities differently than those that did not. In Inglewood, for example, gang unit officers acknowledged that in order to maintain productive relationships with gang members, they could not make arrests unless they had no other choice. Instead, when they observed crimes, they referred them to the department's crime suppression unit. The officers believed that arresting gang members would create mistrust between the gang unit and gang members, hampering intelligence gathering. Similarly, in Albuquerque, gang unit officers placed great importance on treating gang members respectfully, making contacts only when they were certain that an offense had occurred or when they had a strong possibility of gathering useful intelligence. Albuquerque gang unit officers explained that "bogus" stops and disrespectful treatment of gang members could cost the unit the trust of gang members and future opportunities to gather intelligence.

The Las Vegas and Phoenix gang units, which placed more emphasis on enforcement, were less concerned about gang members' perceptions of the unit. For instance, the gang unit officers in Las Vegas often cited the youths for walking the wrong direction down the street, jaywalking, and driving infractions. We observed them frequently stop, frisk, and question youths for no legal reason. In Phoenix, although not as aggressive as in Las Vegas, gang unit officers did frequently stop individuals for minor traffic offenses, hoping to gather intelligence. In both communities, such actions not only caused gang members to share far less intelligence with gang unit officers, but it also resulted in community

dissatisfaction with police conduct, because ordinary citizens in their own neighborhoods frequently were stopped when gang unit officers mistook them for gang members.

STRATEGIC AND STRUCTURAL DECOUPLING OF GANG UNITS

All of the police departments studied had decoupled their gang control units in one or more ways from the parent police organization. Decoupling stands in contrast to the normative theoretical position that structural patterns within an organization should be tightly coupled with activities, so that the structures conform to a consistent and clearly articulated set of expectations (Donaldson and Preston 1995). In contrast, institutional theorists maintain that some organizations function better if structure and activities are decoupled, enabling the organization to carry out core activities while at the same time engaging in activities substantially different from those core activities (Meyer and Rowen 1977).

The gang units' activities occurred well apart from the parent organizations' operational practices and activities. They were not well-integrated or connected with departmental structural patterns or activities. As prescribed by the loose-coupling perspective, we found the gang units we studied to be strategically and structurally decoupled from the larger police organization. In accord with the decoupling, gang unit officers were not held responsible for performing core policing activities. Instead, the gang units that we observed allowed their officers to engage in buffet-style policing, picking and choosing what to do and when to do it.

Gang unit officers were generally not responsible, for example, for responding to calls for service or performing other tasks associated with routine patrol activity. The gang unit officers only responded to calls that interested them. For example, if an officer believed that a call for service broadcast over the radio might be gang related, he might back up the dispatched patrol officer. Efforts like this typically were made when an officer suspected that valuable intelligence might come from the contact. Supervisors and officers strongly emphasized that the unit was not required to handle calls for service, however, and that they considered responding to them a distraction from the units' core missions.

Similarly, in most of the gang units that we studied, officers were highly selective when accepting cases for investigation. Gang unit officers were typically only interested in investigating (whether in a primary or auxiliary capacity) gang-involved cases with a high probability of

giving up valuable intelligence and in high-profile cases. As a result, gang unit officers most often investigated crimes such as homicide, drive-by shootings, and aggravated assaults. Even when they were clearly gang related, the gang unit officers did not normally handle less serious crimes.

In most of the gang units, such strategic decisions were not dictated by a superior nor did they emerge from a well-articulated vision of what the gang unit ought to be doing toward achieving its goals. Rather, operational activities in most units tended to arise from the unique work-group subculture that existed within the gang units, reflecting the officers' shared beliefs about the nature of the gang problem and the appropriate response to that problem.

The gang units in Las Vegas, Albuquerque, and Phoenix reflected the pattern of structural decoupling by police organizations in their response to gangs. All of the gang units that we observed exhibited high degrees of autonomy, with several factors contributing to this. Physical location was among the most important, and these three units were all operating from off-site, "secret" facilities. Nearly all other police officers and criminal justice stakeholders were kept in the dark about their locations. Even those select few who may have been told where to find them could not enter unescorted; the facilities were secured, and only gang unit officers had keys and access codes.

Various rationales were offered to justify the secret locations. The principal one was to offer protection from gang retaliation for officers who felt safer working in the secure, off-site facilities. Protection was an issue for the officers; some took further precautions, traveling varied routes from work to avoid being followed home. In a few instances, we thought that the espoused need for secrecy had become cloaked with a cold war, spylike quality, some gang officers asserting that their regular precinct stations or police headquarters had become subject to penetration by gangsters, rendering intelligence files vulnerable to destruction or manipulation.

When the police departments that we studied decided to centralize the responsibility for responding to local gang problems in a specialized unit, that decision meant that the gang units would almost certainly become decoupled from their parent organizations. Police departments have two alternatives for disbursing resources allocated to responding to community problems. Traditionally, police departments have administratively and geographically centralized these resources. More recently, however, with the advent of community-oriented policing, departments

have begun to administratively and geographically decentralize, realigning resources more closely with the neighborhoods and communities they serve and the problems they address. As they configured their responses to gangs, the four departments we studied had to decide whether to disburse their gang-response resources and conduct related activities at the precinct or neighborhood level (decentralization), or to consolidate resources and activities at one location (centralization). Nationwide, gang units had come to represent a form of organizational centralization; true to form, none of the units that we studied were decentralized.

Centralization and autonomy are not necessarily identical, but in these units, it appeared that they went hand-in-hand. The gang unit supervisors and officers we interviewed believed that consolidation and centralization would permit their officers, through training and experience, to develop more highly developed technical skills than otherwise would be possible. Additionally, they pointed out, administratively and geographically centralizing resources allowed more orderly distribution of gang-related work and enabled police departments to coordinate their responses to community gang problems.

Whatever its potential advantages, centralization and the structural decoupling of the gang units had created several problems for their parent departments. First, we found that decoupling had isolated the gang unit officers from the rest of their police organizations. Because the gang units were strategically and structurally removed, gang unit officers interacted infrequently with patrol officers and investigators. They also tended to isolate themselves from the community. Gang units and gang unit officers were found to pick those with whom they would interact. That is, most interactions with outsiders were initiated by the officers for their own purposes, instead of in response to requests for assistance from patrol officers, detectives, or even citizens.

We also found that being decoupled from the larger police organization reduced the gang units' capacity to receive and provide information especially to and from units engaged in core policing activities within the departments, particularly such as patrol and investigations. We noted previously that gang unit stakeholders within police departments considered the information contained in gang intelligence databases to be the most valuable commodity controlled by the gang unit. These stakeholders' overall assessments of their gang units often were directly related to their perceptions of the local unit's performance in developing and providing intelligence. Stakeholders tended to view the gang units

most positively when they perceived the units as proactive in developing and freely disseminating intelligence, and as appreciating the gang-related intelligence contributed by others in the police organization.

Internal stakeholders in the Inglewood police department (the most tightly coupled unit of those we observed) tended to give positive evaluations to their gang unit, largely because they could easily access gang intelligence to use in criminal investigations. On the other hand, in Albuquerque, Phoenix, and Las Vegas – departments more loosely coupled than Inglewood – department stakeholders complained that their gang units failed to provide intelligence and that the officers seemed disinterested in cooperating to generate new intelligence. Stakeholders' overall assessments of the gang units' performance reflected their dissatisfaction in this area. For example in Las Vegas, some supervisors noted that you had to have personal contacts in the gang unit to get information readily, and patrol commanders bemoaned the fact that the gang unit did not take advantage of patrol, the "eyes and ears of the street," an important source of intelligence. The potential for gang units to fail to produce products valued by other police units is a problem often associated with loose coupling, one that affects the support received by gang units from other parts of the organization. When internal stakeholders perceived their gang units not to be taking care of business, they were less likely to view those units as legitimate, and that, in turn, threatened the units' institutional viability.

Centralization that included off-site and secretive locations (and other organizational characteristics that promoted autonomy) had consequences for both the gang unit and the parent police department. Not only are centralized units more likely to become autonomous, but so are their officers. Both formal, direct line supervision and informal supervision (e.g., officers being observed by supervisors in other units) was often minimal in the gang units that we studied. Autonomy makes it difficult for departments to maintain oversight and hold gang units and their officers accountable for their actions and results. In fact, we found that the police departments that we studied had left the organizational character of the gang unit by default largely to the subculture of the gang units.

A still greater problem with loosely coupled gang units, and related to the preceding, is the potential for them to develop unique internal subcultures that can become at odds with the mission of the parent department, or even with the law. This problem is exemplified by findings from the investigation of corruption in the LAPD's Rampart Command Area.

That investigation included LAPD's own investigation of the Rampart Areas CRASH unit, the department's version of a gang unit. Investigators concluded that the decoupled gang unit had developed a culture that contributed to the corruption scandal that, among other things, involved gang unit officers framing gang members.

The "Rampart Way" mentality was particularly strong with Rampart CRASH. The inquiry uncovered ample evidence that Rampart CRASH had developed its own culture and operated as an entity unto itself. It routinely made up its own rules and, for all intents and purposes, was left to function with little or no oversight. This certainly perpetuated a feeling of cultural elitism and was a significant factor in this corruption incident.

(Los Angeles Police Department 2000, 61)

Interestingly, the LAPD Rampart CRASH unit demonstrated that complete physical isolation is not necessary for decoupling to occur, because the CRASH unit shared facilities with patrol prior to moving into separate quarters. The separation conducive to decoupling was found to be in part social-psychological, and not entirely physical. The following excerpts from the LAPD report illustrate this point:

The CRASH unit developed into an entity unto itself. It maintained its own booking bench and only CRASH supervisors provided booking approval and signed arrest reports. At one point CRASH had its own kit room, separate from the patrol kit room. This became problematic when a watch commander attempted to identify officers involved in a complaint, but could not find a worksheet for the CRASH vehicles.

Separate roll calls from the patrol division, a unique patch and jackets, an emphasis on narcotics enforcement, and an outward appearance of elitism were common CRASH traits that Rampart shared with other CRASH and specialized units. The supervisor who took over Rampart CRASH in 1992 had prioritized making every CRASH officer into a narcotics expert. Although CRASH's primary function was gang intelligence, the supervisor justified the narcotics enforcement emphasis by pointing out the correlation between gangs and narcotics.

A wide chasm developed between patrol supervisors and Rampart CRASH officers. Several supervisors recalled the CRASH practice of specifically requesting a CRASH supervisor at the scene of a crime. If a patrol supervisor showed up instead, CRASH officers would tell him that he was no longer needed, or that a CRASH supervisor was on the way. Similarly, CRASH would often specifically request a CRASH unit when backup was needed. These practices fostered a sense of exclusion

that resulted in other officers and supervisors avoiding CRASH incidents (Los Angeles Police Department 2000, 69).

The Los Angeles Police Department's own findings in this case illustrated some of the consequences of decoupling gang units that we have mentioned in the preceding text. For example, LAPD identified weak supervision as part of the problem: "The apparent lack of supervisory and management control over the CRASH unit was a significant factor identified during this inquiry" (Los Angeles Police Department 2000, 61). The chasm between Rampart CRASH and patrol reflected the decoupling consequence of autonomous units not being responsive to others. The emphasis on narcotics in CRASH, while the principle and formally assigned function of the unit was gang intelligence, reflected the loosely coupled unit's characteristic lack of goal consensus. In addition, throughout the report, evidence demonstrated the lack of information sharing between CRASH and other units involved in the technical core of policing, such as patrol.

GANG UNITS AND COMMUNITY POLICING

In recent decades, police departments across the country have responded to local gang problems by establishing specialized police gang units, coinciding with the nationwide emergence of community-oriented policing. Community-oriented policing emphasizes geographic decentralization and despecialization, but the inherent nature of gang units seems to promote the opposite. The conflict raises several questions that we sought to answer in this report: Do police gang units support and facilitate community-oriented policing? Is the character of police gang units compatible with community-oriented policing philosophy and practice, or conversely, do the units constrain or even undermine development of community-oriented policing within the department? Are the organizational and structural characteristics and practices of gang units consistent with community-oriented policing principles and practice?

In both scholarly and practitioner literature, a good deal of attention has recently been paid to the key features and principles of community-oriented policing (Cordner 1999; Dunworth and Abt Assoc. Inc. et al. 2000; Greene 2000). Police scholars and practitioners have not reached complete consensus on all of the defining characteristics of community policing, but they are in general agreement about the core features that distinguish it from traditional "reactive" policing: citizen input, geographic focus, emphasis on prevention, partnerships, formal problem solving, and management (Dunworth and Abt Assoc. Inc. 2000).

Citizen Input

Community policing seeks direct input from citizens. It then uses that input to identify and prioritize community problems, and to formulate responses. The gang units that we observed had generally made little or no systematic effort to obtain or use direct citizen input, even though the initial formation of the gang units was in response to community pressure to do something about a local gang problem.

Although the gang units rarely sought citizen input, we did observe some exceptions. For example, in Albuquerque, the gang unit was working closely with a neighborhood organization to reduce local gang-related crime. Likewise, in Phoenix, at the request of several neighborhood associations, the police department had allocated additional personnel to the gang unit to devote more attention to the north side of the city. Overall, however, we found little evidence of regular dialogue between citizens and gang units, and even less evidence of gang units systematically pursuing citizen input to identify and solve neighborhood problems. The lack of communication between citizens and the gang unit became particularly problematic when the unit attempted to carry out enforcement operations. We found that enforcement operations conducted without prior citizen input or awareness – not to mention without the input and awareness of other police units – were creating serious community-relations problems. For example, during one unannounced gang unit action in a Las Vegas neighborhood, a district commander recalled getting calls from the neighborhood's residents describing an invasion of officers in ninjalike uniforms. Not only were the residents upset, but the area commander was unhappy, as well, that an action had been carried out in his community policing area without prior consultation or warning. Such occurrences distanced the gang unit from the community, and especially from minority communities because most gang unit operations were conducted in nonwhite neighborhoods.

Geographic Focus

Unlike traditional reactive policing, community policing designates geographic areas, such as neighborhoods and police beats, as the basis for assigning accountability, as well as for assessing performance in managing crime levels and community problems. Police gang units have often had a geographical focus, because in the past gangs were turf-based. The common measure of success, at least from the public's perspective, has usually been areawide reduction in gang-related crime and activity.

Sustaining that geographical focus had become challenging for nearly all the gang units that we observed, however. In their view, local gangs were becoming less territorial. In Las Vegas, gang unit officers maintained that destruction of public housing had displaced and dispersed gang members formerly based in those complexes. As a result, they argued, gangs were no longer associated with specific neighborhoods; members of a given gang were likely to be scattered, living in several different neighborhoods.

The Phoenix gang unit was the exception. Here, gang unit squads were assigned to carry out operations in specific precincts, and individual officers were responsible for particular gangs in their precincts. The Phoenix officers argued that this configuration increased their familiarity with assigned neighborhoods and their knowledge about particular gangs, which in turn had been helpful in investigations of gang-related crimes. Still, we found no evidence that officers or squads were being held accountable for gang control efforts in particular geographic areas.¹

Prevention

Community policing emphasizes prevention as a key tactic for managing crime and disorder. Officers are to be proactive, addressing potential problems before they materialize. As Klein (1995a) pointed out, however, only about 8 percent of gang units carry out prevention-related activities. Klein's finding proved to be the case for the four gang units that we observed. Officers in all of these units believed their responsibilities did not include addressing underlying problems related to gang crime. They argued that the nature of the job was essentially reactive; they were to respond to real problems, after they occurred. Some officers counted directed patrols in gang areas and investigation of gang crimes as prevention, because the activities deterred future crimes.

Generally, the few activities with prevention potential that were carried out by the gang units took the form of educational presentations at schools, community groups, and other law enforcement agencies. These typically covered topics such as the gang unit's mission, the history of the local gang problem, and typical gang member beliefs and behaviors.

¹ With the exception of Phoenix, the gang units that we observed were not held accountable for long-term reductions in gang-related problems. Only process indicators were measured, such as the number of arrests or the number of individuals documented, to assess gang control efforts – not outcome measures.

We found these were not given for the purpose of addressing or reducing underlying gang-related problems, however. Instead, as the officers explained, the presentations were part of a public service campaign to educate audiences about the role of the gang unit and the nature of the local gang problem and were meant to increase public support. In sum, we found few gang unit activities undertaken with prevention in mind.

Partnerships

An important theme in community policing has been that police can form productive problem-solving partnerships when they coordinate and collaborate with community groups, other government agencies, the private sector, and nonprofit agencies that share their objectives. This could apply to gang control activities, but the number of such partnerships varied in our study sample, with some units having formalized partnerships and others lacking partnerships entirely.

We were somewhat surprised to find that the Inglewood gang unit was functioning nearly completely without partnerships. The Inglewood unit's claim that information and intelligence was its primary commodity would lead one to think that formal and informal networks would be developed to gather and distribute that intelligence; this was largely not the case. Similarly, Albuquerque's gang unit was in the midst of an organizational transformation, and it was not formally partnering with others in the community or with other criminal justice agencies.

Las Vegas and Phoenix gang units had established informal partnerships with several criminal justice agencies. For example, Las Vegas engaged in weekly "Rock Pile" intelligence exchange sessions with department officers and probation, parole, and corrections criminal justice officials. The Phoenix gang unit had a similar arrangement, albeit slightly more organized, with criminal justice agencies in its metropolitan area.

Phoenix's gang unit had initiated a gang liaison program, formalizing its partnership with patrol officers with an interest in gangs, to train them to identify and document gang members. The program was intended to strengthen the relationship between the units. Many participants believed that the program's significance was that it put gang unit officers in closer contact with patrol officers, who had more contact with gang members. Gang unit officers believed that the liaison program increased their intelligence capabilities.

A similar program had been established in Albuquerque. However in that community, specific gang unit officers were assigned as liaisons to each of the area commands. Area command personnel indicated that these officers were spending time at the commands on a regular basis.

The gang units that we studied rarely formed intentional partnerships with community groups, local businesses, or state and other local agencies. When they did, the partnerships typically were with criminal justice personnel for the purpose of exchanging gang-related intelligence. For example, the Inglewood unit liaisoned with a gang intelligence officer at a state prison who advised the unit when gang members were going to be released back into the community. Or, that unit's liaison with the manager of operations at a local cemetery who contacted the unit to determine if a burial service involved a gang member. However these partnerships were few, and we found no evidence of working relationships with community organizations or neighborhood groups. Nowhere did gang unit officers appear to value information from non-criminal justice agencies, and few of them seemed to recognize the potential value in sharing their own information and knowledge with non-criminal justice personnel. Those attitudes clearly made it more difficult for the gang unit to collaborate with the community in their gang control efforts.

Formal Problem Solving

Formal problem solving using a standardized methodology, such as the SARA model, is a defining element of community policing. Typically, formal problem solving begins with a process to identify crime and community problems, working at the level of a specific police beat, neighborhood, or address. To be successful, problem solving relies upon having certain community policing prerequisites already in place. For instance, close connections with the community are needed to assure that the problems addressed are, in fact, relevant and important in the minds of the community members. Both problem analysis and responses developed as part of the problem-solving process require participants with an interest in the problem or in contributing to its solution, from the community, other police units, and other organizational stakeholder groups.

We observed little evidence of police gang units initiating or participating in this kind of formal problem solving. There appeared to be three principle reasons. First, gang units were decoupled from their parent organizations, and connections with community and other key

stakeholders that could have facilitated formal problem solving were generally missing. Second, most gang unit officers were untrained or were only vaguely familiar with SARA or other formal problem-solving models. Third, we found that the gang units simply did not routinely consider formal problem solving as a strategy for addressing local gang problems.

Interestingly, we found none of the police departments engaging in any form of analysis to better understand their cities' gang problems. Community gang control activities most often were planned and implemented in accord with popular beliefs about problems, rather than being grounded in thoughtful analysis. It appears, then, that if gang units are to engage in any formal problem-solving efforts, they should begin at this point – collecting and carefully analyzing available data about their particular gang problems.

Management Tactics

Community policing calls upon managers to rely less upon formal rules and policies to guide organizational decision making and employee behavior, and more on intentionally developing an organizational culture and values. This is typically done by creating and communicating mission statements, participatory strategic planning, and coaching and mentoring. The objective is to empower officers to take reasoned risks as they respond to problems, but at the same time, to provide enough organizational direction to ensure that officers work toward common goals (Cordner 1999).

Two of the four gang units studied (Phoenix and Las Vegas) had mission statements, broadly articulating that the units were to engage in gang control and setting out the primary functions of the units (enforcement and intelligence). Two units did not have written mission statements, and were given no other verbal guidance pertaining to their goals and functions. In both Inglewood and Albuquerque, senior gang officers, one a sergeant and the other an officer with twenty-five years of experience, had essentially determined an implied mission and set of functions, simply in the way that they conducted business. In those units, police executives relied heavily upon these officers' expertise and knowledge to focus their units' efforts on "what really mattered."

Only the Phoenix unit had engaged in a formal strategic-planning process. Gang unit supervisors there had worked with the city council to develop a long-term strategic plan to address the community's gang

problems. Afterward, they met with city council members each quarter to discuss trends in gang-related activity and gang unit performance (e.g., number of arrests, amount of drugs confiscated, number of guns taken off the street, number of gang members documented). Based on this information, the city council would redistribute resources.

For the most part, gang unit officers worked with little or no supervision. When officers worked the streets, they might go weeks or longer without a sergeant observing them. When asked, officers and supervisors in all gang units agreed that the autonomous nature of gang work was not conducive to field supervision. Only the best officers were selected for the gang unit, they argued, so the independence afforded by the job would be unlikely to lead to problems. In addition, written guidance (e.g., a mission statement, policies and procedures) was unavailable in two of the sites studied, and oral guidance (e.g., supervision, coaching) was lacking or rarely occurred for gang units at all four sites. This accounted for the fact that the practical mission and functions of each gang unit had evolved by the time of this study to reflect the units' subcultures and strong individual interests.

In sum, the police gang units that we studied were generally poorly designed to engage in or support community policing efforts. The units tended to be geographically centralized, while community policing emphasizes decentralization. Frequently they were geographically isolated from the communities and neighborhoods they served. Community partnerships were largely absent, and when they existed, they tended to be entered into solely for the purpose of increasing the unit's access to information, and not for the coproduction of public safety. Although gang unit members and gang unit stakeholders saw gangs and gang crime as a problem, there was little evidence of the "problem orientation" that characterizes community policing and its variants. The gang units that we studied were barely familiar with community policing problem-solving strategies, much less engaging in them.

We concluded that the gang unit officers in these units were free to undertake any activity that interested them, had few expectations to meet, and had virtually no policies or training to guide their decision making. Gang unit officers were also rarely under the control or supervision of police management. They were physically and operationally isolated from the rest of the police department, and typically had little contact with "regular" police officers, criminal justice officials, the public, or community groups. In short, these gang unit officers were on their own.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Our observations of the workings of police gang units led us to several conclusions and recommendations. The gang units that we observed could be placed in two different categories that have some features in common, but that are really very different. Inglewood's gang unit was in a category of its own, as a single-function intelligence unit tasked with developing information on gangs and gang members and disseminating that information to other units in the police department. The other three gang units (Albuquerque, Las Vegas, and Phoenix) were multifunctional gang units or comprehensive units tasked with various functions – intelligence, enforcement, and prevention.

Our general conclusion is that for Inglewood, in the context of that community and police department, a relatively small gang unit (three sworn officers) focusing entirely on intelligence made sense. The Inglewood Police Department and the city of Inglewood had faced one financial crisis after another, and it was extremely important for the police response to gangs to be as cost-effective as possible. Although we had no hard measure of this, we suspected that the level of Inglewood's financial investment in the small single-function gang unit was appropriate, especially in comparison with the cost of multifunction or comprehensive gang units. As we noted previously, stakeholders in the Inglewood Police Department greatly valued the intelligence function of their gang unit, and were able to provide fairly dramatic examples of its utility in solving crimes.

Interestingly, external stakeholders also valued the Inglewood unit's intelligence function. For example, the director of a large Inglewood cemetery, the largest single industry in Inglewood, pointed to occasions when gang unit intelligence had enabled him to take special precautions in conducting funerals involving the victims of intergang shootings so that conflicts would not flare up at the funeral ceremony.

Inglewood's gang unit was not located off-site, but was in the central police facility in close proximity to the criminal investigation bureau. Colocation facilitated the sharing of information, the gang unit's principle commodity, and generally kept the unit's "customers" satisfied. However, this is not to imply that the gang unit's customers were completely satisfied, or that the unit was completely integrated into the larger police organization. In the view of some internal stakeholders, over time the gang unit had become less proactive in developing new intelligence. They were seen as spending too much time in the office and

not enough in the field, where they needed to be if they were to identify new gangs and gang members and track changes in patterns of gang activity.

In contrast to Inglewood, the other gang units that we observed seemed to share common patterns of development that reflected increasing decoupling. They also exhibited similar consequences; as a rule, they were isolated from core policing technology units, lacked supervision and accountability, were inaccessible to the community, lacked strategic vision, and had developed a separate gang unit subculture. The gang units' inability or reluctance to share information with others in their police organizations caused their internal stakeholders to devalue the units. Furthermore, if these units seemed isolated from mainstream policing in their respective departments, they were even more isolated from community policing activities. Occasional exceptions were found, illustrating the potential for gang units to play a stronger role in both traditional and community policing activities.

We also noted that at least two departments were searching for ways to reduce the effects of decoupling and to reconnect their gang units with core policing units. We have concluded that the recoupling of gang units should be a high priority for police departments throughout the country, as they continue to seek more effective responses to local gang problems, and at the same time, to more fully implement community policing. High-profile incidents, such as the Los Angeles CRASH unit's framing of gang members, or more recently in Chicago where gang unit personnel are alleged to have participated in drug trafficking, are dramatic reflections of the consequences of decoupling gang units from the larger police organization. These two examples are the exception, not the rule, but the need to recouple gang units with their parent organizations also stems from needing to find more cost-effective responses to the gang problem, while concurrently implementing community-oriented policing more fully.

Our observations convinced us that police organizations need to reassess the organizational configurations of their responses to gangs, and the investment of resources in those responses. The starting point is a careful and thoughtful assessment of the local gang problem to learn whether or not it is presently of sufficient magnitude to warrant a specialized unit. To be sure, the gang units that we observed had been established in communities with substantial gang problems, and the specialized gang units were a reasonable response. However, we suspect that a substantial number of gang units developed in the last decade were

not in response to local gang problems, but were the result of mimetic processes (DiMaggio and Powell 1991).

Mimetic processes are a consequence of organizations modeling themselves after other organizations. DiMaggio and Powell (1991, 67–8) explain that mimetic processes may occur when 1) little consensus exists as to which organizational structures and operational activities are most efficient and effective, 2) organizational goals are unclear, or 3) the “environment creates symbolic uncertainty” (e.g., is there or is there not a gang problem in our community).

The authors argue that organizations mimic others in response to uncertainty. By adopting the same organizational structures and operational activities that are used by organizations considered to be successful, an agency can gain legitimacy. If anything, the authors argue, such a move illustrates to the institutional environment that the organization is acting to improve the (albeit ambiguous) situation.

We suspect that many police departments created gang units for reasons related to institutional legitimacy rather than to actual environmental contingencies. Klein (1995a) alludes to this point in his discussion of Sergeant Wes McBride of the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department (LASD). Many departments across the nation have adopted the structures and strategies recommended by McBride and the LASD because of its national reputation, rather than because the model is necessarily appropriate for their own jurisdiction's gang problem.

We suspect that given the value that internal and external stakeholders place on gang-related intelligence and information, and on information sharing and dissemination, that all police gang units would do well to learn from Inglewood and to place greater emphasis on the intelligence function in support of other core police functions, such as investigation. Additionally, police departments need to develop strategies and tactics to bring their gang units into synch with community policing principles and practices. In large cities gang units are tremendously outnumbered by gangs and gang members and typical suppression strategies have limited potential as the principle police response to gangs. Gang units, like other police units, need to become “smarter,” and one way to do this is to emphasize formal problem solving carried out by gang units in collaboration with other core police units, especially patrol.

There is evidence that some police departments are disbanding gang units (Katz, Maguire, and Roncek 2002), but it is unclear whether this is in response to a diminished local gang problem, a growing awareness

of problems stemming from decoupled gang units, or other issues. One would hope that these decisions are being made following careful assessment of local gang problems. However, gangs do remain a problem in jurisdictions throughout the country, and therefore they warrant a continued response on the part of police. The challenge becomes one of reassessing present patterns of response and adjusting them to attain the highest possible level of effectiveness.