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UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO GANGS IN AN EMERGING GANG PROBLEM CONTEXT

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I. INTRODUCTION

The gang crime problem has re-emerged over the last decade in St. Louis. The current state of gangs in the city is characteristic of national trends in the proliferation of youth gangs and provides a localized context for understanding and responding to what has become a national-level problem. Our emphasis is on the role of research in both assessing the nature of gang problems and in developing a systematic community-based response to such problems. The gang problem in St. Louis shares features both unique to the St. Louis community context and characteristic of gang problems in other urban settings. Our task is facilitated by St. Louis having been selected as one of a limited number of sites where a research-based demonstration program is being implemented by a local community with support and direction from federal agencies. This Article tells the story of how research has played a role in planning the St. Louis response and will continue to play a role in the evaluation and refinement of the response process. We begin with a review of what is known about the St. Louis gang problem.

II. THE ST. LOUIS GANG PROBLEM

A. *The History of Gangs in St. Louis*

Urban gangs of European immigrant youths were described at the turn of the century by Riis¹ and Asbury² in New York City and by Thrasher³ in Chicago. These gangs were believed to have emerged as a result of the disruption of population movement associated with rapid industrialization. Rivalries were often enduring and inter-gang violence was common. Decker and Van Winkle note that Thrasher, in his account of Chicago gangs, refers to

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1. JACOB A. RIIS, *THE CHILDREN OF THE POOR* (1892).

2. HERBERT ASBURY, *THE GANGS OF NEW YORK: AN INFORMAL HISTORY OF THE UNDERWORLD* (1928).

3. FREDERIC M. THRASHER, *THE GANG* (1927).

St. Louis gangs.⁴ An even earlier reference to gang activity in St. Louis was made in a journalistic account of warring “tribes” and “clans” of German and Irish youths in the area just north of downtown St. Louis.⁵ The prohibition era increased adult involvement in gangs that had earlier predominantly involved youths and led to greater group organization (including ties to corrupt political officials) and violent conflicts associated with the trade in illegal alcohol. Lower levels of violence characterized the emergence of the first African American gangs in post-World-War-II St. Louis.⁶ The African American gangs followed the patterns common to their European American predecessors. The gangs emerged in the areas just north of downtown and favored the colors blue and red as badges of affiliation. A historical irony is that contemporary African American gangs struggle for some of the same turfs and “claim” the same colors of red and blue as did immigrant gangs earlier in the century.

B. The National Pattern in the 1980s and the Re-Emergence of St. Louis Gangs

There was a period in the late 1970s and early 1980s that researchers spoke of the “end of the youth gang.” In a study of twelve major U.S. cities, Walter Miller found that six of the cities reported youth gang problems.⁷ St. Louis was one of the cities that Miller identified as not having a gang crime problem. By 1988 national-level concern with youth gangs began to increase. From a national survey conducted in that year, Spergel and Curry reported that seventy-four of ninety-eight (75.5%) jurisdictions screened reported the presence of a gang-related crime problem.⁸ Gang problem cities were classified into two categories: “chronic” gang problem cities where the current gang problem was dated as emerging prior to 1980, and “emerging” gang problem cities where the current gang problem was reported to have emerged after 1980.⁹ In chronic gang problem cities, gangs were generally more organized—often spanning more than one generation. In emerging gang problem cities, gangs were generally less organized and perceived to be engaged in less serious levels of crime. In this survey, St. Louis was identified as an emerging gang problem city.¹⁰ For

4. SCOTT H. DECKER & BARRIK VAN WINKLE, *LIFE IN THE GANG: FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND VIOLENCE* 36 (1996).

5. J.A. DACAS & J.W. BUELL, *A TOUR OF ST. LOUIS OR THE INSIDE LIFE OF A GREAT CITY* (1878).

6. DECKER & VAN WINKLE, *supra* note 4, at 37.

7. WALTER B. MILLER, U. S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, *VIOLENCE BY YOUTH GANGS AND YOUTH GROUPS AS A CRIME PROBLEM IN MAJOR AMERICAN CITIES* 7-14 (1975).

8. Irving A. Spergel & G. David Curry, *The National Youth Gang Survey: A Research and Development Process*, in *THE GANG INTERVENTION HANDBOOK* 359, 362 (Arnold P. Goldstein & C. Ronald Huff eds., 1993).

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.* at 360.

thirty-five jurisdictions in this study, 1439 gangs and 120,636 gang members were tabulated.¹¹ No gangs or gang members from St. Louis were included in these tabulations.¹² St. Louis was categorized as a city with a gang crime problem but "no organized response" to the problem and no official estimates of the problem's magnitude.¹³

In the year 1991, St. Louis made its first statistical contribution on gang crime problems to a Justice Department survey. Archive data showed St. Louis as reporting thirty-three gangs and eight gang homicides.¹⁴ For 1993 and 1994, the University of Missouri-St. Louis Violence Project tabulated thirty-three and fifty-four gang-related homicides for St. Louis, or respectively, 13.7% and 25.5% of all homicides.¹⁵ The 1994 proportion is comparable to the Chicago statistic of 26.2%.¹⁶ The disproportionate cost of the gang crime problem for St. Louis' African American community is reflected in the overrepresentation of blacks among the victims of gang-related homicides. In 1993, all but one of the victims (97.0%) were African Americans.¹⁷ In 1994, fifty-two of the fifty-four victims (96.3%) were African Americans.¹⁸

C. *The Young Men and Women Behind the Statistics*

A three-year field study sought to extend understanding of the gang problem through seeking out the opinions and perspectives of active gang members and their families.¹⁹ The findings of this study concurred with the suggestions of senior gang researcher Malcolm Klein that the proliferation of gang problems in the U.S. over the last decade had been related to major economic changes and to the diffusion of cultural artifacts associated with gang conflict.²⁰ St. Louis is a city that had been dramatically altered by de-industrialization and the associated transformation of the national economy. Its loss of almost two-thirds of its population over a period of three decades constituted a phenomenal loss

11. Irving Spergel et al., *Survey of Youth Gang Problems and Programs in 45 Cities and 6 Sites* 36 (May, 1990) (unpublished manuscript, on file with the *Valparaiso University Law Review*).

12. Spergel & Curry, *supra* note 8, at 361.

13. *Id.* at 362.

14. G. DAVID CURRY ET AL., U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, *ESTIMATING THE NATIONAL SCOPE OF GANG CRIME FROM LAW ENFORCEMENT DATA* (1996).

15. Computed by authors for *Valparaiso University Law Review* Conference on Teenage Violence & Drug Use from electronic database of St. Louis Homicide Project, University of Missouri-St. Louis component of the National Consortium of Violence Research (Nov. 15, 1996).

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.*

19. DECKER & VAN WINKLE, *supra* note 4, at 38-39.

20. MALCOLM W. KLEIN, *THE AMERICAN STREET GANG: ITS NATURE, PREVALENCE, AND CONTROL* (1995).

in what James S. Coleman labeled "social capital."²¹ Social capital is essentially the existence of the kinds of social networks that make it possible for families to nurture children into adulthood. What William J. Wilson has characterized as the emergence of an "urban underclass" is the clustering of communities of jobless, unskilled persons isolated from previously existing contact with working and middle class members of the society.²²

In St. Louis, the gangs that have emerged in the last decade share names and symbols with gangs in California and Chicago, yet the existence of structural connections between gangs in St. Louis and the gangs in these cities is highly improbable. The gangs in St. Louis are very loosely organized. Decker and Van Winkle found gang cohesion and organization to be governed by recurring cycles of collective violence and individual reactions to the threat of violence.²³ The most common reported reason for joining gangs in St. Louis is a perceived threat and the hope for protection through gang membership. The protection sought through gang membership is, in fact, quite illusory. Gang membership greatly enhances the likelihood of violent victimization. In addition, the increased risk of violence associated with gang involvement accentuates the isolation of gang members from non-gang peer groups, schools, and families.

The cyclical nature of gang cohesion and violence in St. Louis has been described by Decker as a growth in cohesion associated with increasing threat.²⁴ Both the cohesion and the level of threat are fed by the visible accouterments of gang culture such as colors, tattoos, jewelry, and symbolic markings. For instance, a persistent source of conflict is the division between Crips and Bloods alliances. Ultimately, when the levels of increased threat and group cohesion result in actual gang violence, a decline in cohesion is the consequence as individual members withdraw from a situation that, at least for the short run, has exceeded tolerable levels of risk.

An idea with currency among the media and the public, and even a few researchers is that a majority of gang violence is drug-related.²⁵ Research in Chicago²⁶ and in Los Angeles²⁷ has failed to support this notion. In Chicago,

21. James S. Coleman, *Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital*, 94 J. Soc. S95 (1988).

22. WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON, *THE TRULY DISADVANTAGED* 6-8 (1987).

23. DECKER & VAN WINKLE, *supra* note 4.

24. *Id.*

25. MARTIN SANCHEZ JANKOWSKI, *ISLANDS IN THE STREET: GANGS AND AMERICAN URBAN SOCIETY* 138 (1991); Jerome Skolnick et al., *The Social Structure of Street Drug Dealing*, in BCS FORUM (Office of the Attorney General ed., 1988).

26. CAROLYN REBECCA BLOCK & RICHARD BLOCK, U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, *STREET GANG CRIME IN CHICAGO* (1993).

gang homicides were shown to be more likely the result of turf disputes than to have been drug-related. In Los Angeles, gang involvement in drug crime was relatively limited and no more violent than other drug-related crime. Decker and Van Winkle found a similar pattern in St. Louis, where individual gang members often use and sell drugs, but collectively, organized drug distribution by gangs is almost non-existent.²⁸ These findings have profound implications for policy and underscore the need for individual-level drug treatment programs as opposed to suppression programs designed to disrupt organized distribution networks, especially at the street level.

III. THE ST. LOUIS RESPONSE

In response to the reported proliferation of gang crime problems over the last decade, the federal government beginning in 1988 launched a number of national-level responses to gangs as a national-level problem. One of the largest was by the Family Youth Services Bureau of the Department of Health and Human Services which funded a wide range of community-based programs up until 1995 when this initiative became an early target of the new Congress. The National Institute of Justice launched a gang research initiative in 1991 that is still producing findings including the survey results from law enforcement quoted above. Perhaps the most far reaching in terms of its ultimate consequences was the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP) establishment of the National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Program at the University of Chicago in 1988. Irving A. Spergel, a social work professor and a veteran of thirty years of research on gangs, was charged with identifying existing promising approaches to gang problems across the nation and from them formulating a model that could serve as the basis for a coordinated national-level response to gang crime problems. The result constituted an effort to integrate research into policy that remains central to current federal programs and that is a philosophical cornerstone of the current response programs in St. Louis.

A. *The Spergel Model*

From responses to the national survey, a series of site visits, and special advisory meetings involving researchers, practitioners from a wide range of agencies, community activists, and former gang influentials, the model sought by the OJJDP emerged.²⁹ Formally it is called the Comprehensive

27. Malcom W. Klein et al., "Crack," *Street Gangs, and Violence*, 29 CRIMINOLOGY 623 (1991).

28. Scott H. Decker & Barrick Van Winkle, "Slinging Dope": *The Role of Gangs and Gang Members in Drug Sales*, 11 JUST. Q. 583 (1994).

29. Spergel & Curry, *supra* note 8, at 359.

Community-Wide Approach to Gangs. More generally and commonly it is identified by policy makers and program practitioners as simply the "Spergel model." As a set of resource materials, the Spergel model is a set of research documents and prototypes. In practice, the Spergel model is an extremely flexible format for responding to gang problems at the community level. It consists of a set of ten components. There is one component for each potential agency partner and separate components on community mobilization and employment programs. Any of the component agencies can be the lead or mobilizing agency. Key agencies that must be involved are the police, grassroots organizations, and some form of jobs program. Otherwise, not all potential components need be involved in every community. The Spergel model is intended to be tailored to the special needs of each individual community, to take advantage of local agency strengths, and provide a framework that facilitates inter-agency cooperation and minimizes inter-agency conflict. Under funding from OJJDP, five demonstration sites are currently attempting to implement the Spergel model in a variety of urban settings with coordinated technical assistance and systematic evaluation.

B. The Comprehensive Strategy

At the same time that OJJDP was supporting the development of the Spergel model, separate initiatives were underway to identify the causes and correlates of delinquency and to develop systematic program responses to reduce serious, chronic, and violent offending by juveniles. A social development model that incorporated the key influences of family, school, and community which emphasized protective and risk factors emerged.³⁰ If serious, chronic, and violent offending were to be reduced, OJJDP concluded that the juvenile justice system would have to become part of a comprehensive continuum of services and sanctions.³¹ Protective factors would have to be enhanced (not just in the family, but in the womb), and risk factors would have to be diminished or at least mediated. The Comprehensive Strategy as it is generally known became official OJJDP policy. Planning grants and funding for demonstration programs were provided to selected sites.

C. The Safe Futures Program

As the 1990s brought record increases in levels of juvenile violence, national policy makers became more convinced that the problems of serious, violent, and chronic offending and gang-related crime were becoming increasingly intertwined. It was decided that a major effort needed to be

30. DELINQUENCY AND CRIME: CURRENT THEORIES (J. David Hawkins ed., 1996).

31. JAMES C. HOWELL ET AL., SERIOUS, VIOLENT, & CHRONIC JUVENILE OFFENDERS: A SOURCEBOOK 235 (1995).

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undertaken to test both the utility of the Spergel model and the Comprehensive Strategy in specifically targeted geographic settings. The policy result is the Safe Futures Program. With funding from OJJDP, Safe Futures Programs have been established in four urban sites (Boston, Seattle, Contra Costa County (California), and St. Louis), one rural site (Imperial Valley, California), and one Indian Reservation (Fort Belknap, Montana). Funding for Safe Futures Programs is larger and extended over a longer period of time than funding for previous comparable efforts. The St. Louis program is funded for five years at \$1.4 million per year. Each program is required to incorporate a local evaluation and cooperate with a national evaluation.

D. The COPS Anti-Gang Initiative

Community oriented policing represents an even broader federal effort to respond to crime in a way that integrates law enforcement into a cooperative community problem-solving framework. In 1996, the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) office in the Justice Department launched a fifteen-city Anti-Gang Initiative. Instead of being selected through a competitive application process, the fifteen cities were selected on the basis of their consistency in providing gang-related crime statistics to the Justice Department surveys described above. St. Louis is one of the COPS Anti-Gang Initiative sites. Funding is mandated to be spent on community policing efforts to improve data collection, integrate law enforcement agencies into community-wide responses to gangs, and provide a safer setting in which less suppressive response programs can be given a chance to develop. In St. Louis, the COPS initiative provides a fundamental link between law enforcement efforts and the coordinated response to gangs represented by the Safe Futures Program.

E. The Role of Research/Evaluation in the St. Louis Response

In St. Louis, the Safe Futures Program serves as a coordinating center for an array of public and private agencies. The city government is the fiscal administrator of the project. The state juvenile court and the public schools are heavily involved. Law enforcement is represented in both an advisory and an operational capacity. The local evaluation team from the University of Missouri-St. Louis has been involved in program development and planning and has consistently provided technical assistance to the program management team. Three kinds of commitments within the project clearly reflect the link between research and program implementation in the St. Louis Safe Futures Program. These are common definitions, integrated information, and geographic information systems (GIS) analysis.

1. Common Definitions

Decker and Kempf surveyed members of the City's Gang Task Force, the police department's Juvenile Division, and juveniles involved and not involved in gangs.³² On the nature and magnitude of the gang problem in St. Louis, answers varied greatly across the four groups. The answers from the Task Force, the group making policy, were most at odds with those of the other groups who had more direct contact with gangs on a day to day basis. The conclusions of that study confirmed the level of disorganization in defining the problem that prevailed in that early stage of the St. Louis community's effort to respond to the city's gang problem.³³ From its outset, the St. Louis Safe Futures Program has struggled with the issue of systematically defining what it means by "gang problems." In Missouri, there are definitions of a gang and a gang member that are mandated by state law. More important definitions had to be arrived at through collective multiple-agency decision-making, mediation, and compromise.

The COPS initiative facilitated the development of a systematic definition of what constituted a gang-related offense. The local St. Louis Gang Unit definition incorporates key criteria that have plagued inter city comparisons of gang-related crime statistics. The greatest division has been between member-based definitions and motivation-based definitions.³⁴ In a member-based definition, law enforcement agencies identify gang members, and when a "known" gang member commits any crime, that crime is identified as gang-related. In a motivation-based definition, specific crimes that serve the interests of the gang in some way such as expanding territory or reputation or protecting a criminal enterprise are identified as "gang-motivated." Los Angeles has historically used a member-based definition, while Chicago has used a motivation-based definition. What this means for gang-related crime statistics was best illustrated when Cheryl Maxson and Malcolm Klein applied Chicago's motivation-based definition to the Los Angeles gang homicide statistics.³⁵ They found that under the Chicago definition, Los Angeles had half as many gang homicides as the Los Angeles definition produced.³⁶ In St. Louis, the gang unit has developed a prototype multi-level classification that counts both crimes involving gang members as offenders and victims and the subcategory of "gang-motivated" crimes.

32. Scott Decker & Kimberly Kempf-Leonard, *Constructing Gangs: The Social Definition Of Youth Activities*, 5 CRIM. JUST. POL'Y REV. 271 (1991).

33. *Id.* at 275.

34. Cheryl L. Maxson & Malcolm W. Klein, *Street Gang Violence: Twice As Great, or Half As Great?*, in GANGS IN AMERICA 80-85 (C. Ronald Huff ed., 1990).

35. *Id.* at 83.

36. *Id.*

Under the Spergel model and the Comprehensive Strategy, OJJDP requires courts and social service providers to expend extra resources in bringing drug treatment, job preparation, support in school, and family services to gang-involved youths and serious, violent, and chronic juvenile offenders. Identifying offenders in gang-related crimes and serious, violent, and chronic offenders is a matter of law. More troublesome, particularly for social service providers and school officials, was the issue of systematically identifying gang-involved youths. For program purposes, it was resolved through much negotiation to base the delivery of social services on a three-tiered classification of youths. Gang offenders were youths identified by the juvenile justice system as offenders in gang-related crime or delinquency. Gang-involved youths were identified using a set of research-based measures of gang-involvement that include such behaviors as intentionally wearing gang colors or symbols, flashing hand signs, and having gang member friends or siblings.³⁷ Since these gang-involved youths (who with the offenders are targeted for the majority of Safe Futures resources) are not themselves offenders, the gang-involvement classification is used only for the provision of social services and is not shared with the law enforcement partners in the overall program.

2. Integrated Record-Keeping and Information-Sharing

The 1995 Justice Improvement Act provides evaluators and program personnel greater access to what had previously been restricted juvenile justice records. The Act also protects the juveniles with stiff penalties for violations of confidentiality by information users. As a consequence, centralized computerized information systems are being constructed. To release funds, the City of St. Louis requires specific identification of each child served by each agency receiving funds. The evaluation team has been constructing data bases for each kind of agency contact. Records on individual youths are being collected from schools, the courts, and the social service agencies. The sharing of limited information across agencies is a process that is moving slowly to fruition with continuous monitoring from OJJDP and collaboration and negotiation among local partners. At the same time, the local evaluators will have access to one of the most comprehensive data bases ever developed on a population of juveniles. Continuous reporting and feedback among service providers, program administrators, and the evaluation team is being developed to insure a comparably comprehensive evaluation of the functioning and impact of the St. Louis Safe Futures Program as it develops over time.

37. G. David Curry & Irving A. Spergel, *Gang Involvement and Delinquency Among Hispanic and African-American Adolescent Males*, 29 J. RES. CRIME DELINQ. 275 (1992).

3. Geographic Information Systems

The focus on a specific geographic population of youths at-risk for gang involvement and serious, violent, and chronic offending is central to Safe Futures policy and design. This focus makes maps an invaluable tool in program planning and implementation. The use of computerized mapping (GIS) facilitates the routinized and systematic integration of spatial and social science information. As the Figure shows, the Safe Futures target area was selected to encompass sections of the city where these risks are greatest.³⁸ The distribution of gang homicides is just one of the important indicators available. Another statistic for one of the schools where a family support program is being set up under the auspices of Safe Futures is that 47% of attending students have had at least one parent incarcerated in the past year. (The gang homicide ellipses in the figure were constructed by a computer algorithm distributed by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority). In order to gauge the impact of the program, the evaluation team is also monitoring the social development, delinquency, and gang involvement of youths outside the Safe Futures program area. Each social service agency receives monthly maps of the residences of youths served by their particular program. Law enforcement agencies receive maps reflecting the distribution of incident and operational information provided to the evaluation team. Program administrators have access to the entire range of maps often showing geographic overlaps of the services and sanctions. It is their five-year mission to integrate these maps into a continuum of sanctions and services that will insure safer futures for all of the children in the target area.

IV. CONCLUSIONS: CHALLENGE AND PROMISE

Two messages continually re-emerge as unifying themes when one studies juvenile crime. The first is that the youth of this nation are facing a problem of tragic proportions. The problem is complex, and among its components are guns, gangs, and drugs. The problem is having a differential impact on selected portions of the national community. In St. Louis, those most affected are African Americans, though in other communities Asian Americans, Native Americans, Americans of Latin ancestry, and European Americans also endure their share of suffering. Everywhere the major sufferers are the young, the children and adolescents who are our nation's most valuable resource.

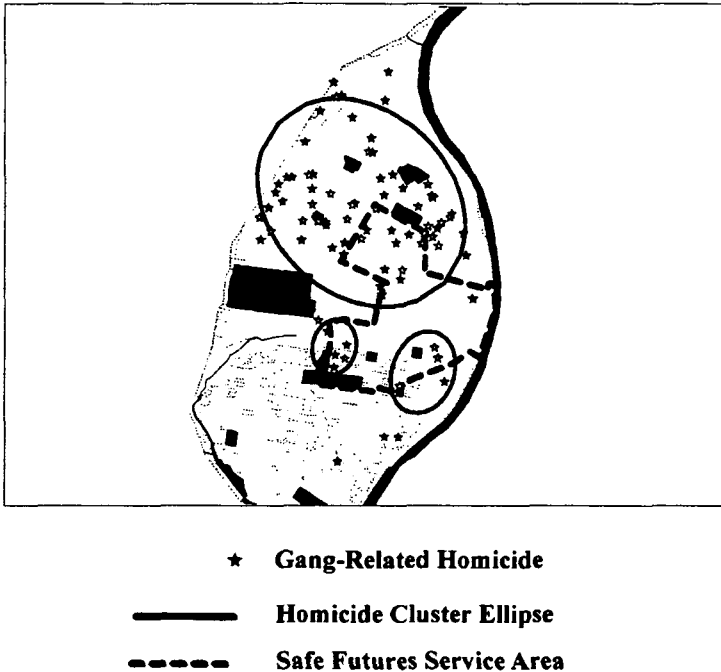
The second recurrent theme involved in this study is hope, and the need and possibility for overcoming the problems of teenage drug use and violence. We feel that the problem in St. Louis is a microcosm of the problem that faces the

38. See *infra* Figure.

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nation. We believe that the community response in St. Louis is a model worthy of attention. It represents a major focusing of federal resources and what has already been learned about the nature of the problem. The St. Louis response is a coordinated, community-based effort that involves grass roots organizations, government, the juvenile justice system, and law enforcement. As researchers, we feel fortunate to have been given a share in the process. The challenge is now for us, the researchers, and all of the agency partners to overcome our differences and prejudices and work to enable the families and youths of St. Louis to make these efforts successful.

Figure. Safe Futures Program Service Area & 1993/94 Gang Homicide Distribution.



Source: Computed by authors for *Valparaiso University Law Review* Conference on Teenage Violence & Drug Use from electronic database of St. Louis Homicide Project, University of Missouri-St. Louis component of the National Consortium of Violence Research (Nov. 15, 1996).

