



CITIZENS CRIME COMMISSION OF NEW YORK CITY

SOCIAL MEDIA & REAL-WORLD CONSEQUENCES

VOLUME I

FROM VIRTUAL TO VIOLENT

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA FUELS REAL-WORLD VIOLENCE

BY ASHLEY CANNON, ROBERTA LIGGETT, & STEPHANIE UEBERALL



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social media has become a part of everyday life. All types of real-world behavior are now showcased online—including criminal behavior, bullying, threats and the glorification of violence.

Increasingly, youth associated with antisocial peer groups—such as neighborhood-based “crews” engaging in violent rivalries—use social media as a tool to create criminal opportunities and amplify conflicts. Unfortunately, in many cases, this type of social media usage can lead to real-life violence or other serious ramifications, such as arrest.

The Crime Commission is engaged in several initiatives that seek to provide social media users with tools and information to help them stay safe both on- and off-line, including the development of an innovative new program that trains anti-violence professionals as “E-Responders” to intervene and deescalate violence provoked on social media. As part of this work, this series, “Social Media & Real-World Consequences”, provides readers with an overview of the ways youth are communicating on social media, the associated risks of these communications turning into real-world violence, and the range of legal, educational and professional consequences youth may face in the real-world.

High-risk youth engage in numerous types of dangerous communication on social media, including threatening and taunting others (often those from rival crews), promoting their self-image and crew, mobilizing others for disorderly or criminal activity, and recruiting other youth to join their crew. These types of communication are highly visible and exist beyond private messages and chats. Status updates, comments, photos, and videos often contain content prohibited by platform providers; however, they remain on the sites, fueling conflict. Moreover, youth often use social media to acquire weapons for attacks and protection.

These dangerous communications have an extremely high risk of going from virtual to violent, and often result in very serious consequences in the real-world. When these consequences include violence, such as fights and shootings, they are often immediately documented and discussed online, increasing the likelihood of retaliation and further perpetuating the cycle of street violence.

Taunts, threats, and intimidation on social media often lead to in-person fights, which can have deadly consequences. Youth often post continuous information about their ongoing conflicts, including violent intentions prior to carrying out shootings. This was the case in the Bryant Park skating rink shooting in November 2013, as well as in a shooting that occurred at a house party in Brownsville in January 2014, in which a 16-year-old was killed. The Bedford-Stuyvesant bus shooting in March 2014, which led to the death of a straphanger, was instigated by months of taunting on social media between two rival crews.

Beyond violence and victimization, these harmful behaviors can lead to a wide range of legal, educational and professional consequences in the real-world. For example, police use social media to help identify, track, and build cases against individuals, culminating in indictments, such as the June 2014 takedown of 103 youth in West Harlem. Schools, financial aid providers, and employers also use social media profiles as a form of background check when considering an individual for admission, scholarship, or employment, and to inform disciplinary actions—something many people are not aware of when they post recklessly on social media.



Guns Don't Kill People, We Kill People

facebook status update - November 13, 2011

Given the seriousness of the risks and consequences associated with these types of communication, it is critically important to gain an understanding of what creates and amplifies violence, along with what legal, educational, and professional repercussions can occur. From this understanding, stakeholders must work together to develop a comprehensive strategy to promote digital citizenship that seeks to:

RAISE AWARENESS

- Through both online and in-person public awareness initiatives, school curriculum, and employee trainings, social media users must be educated on how to protect themselves and others from violence and other crimes, and of the potential consequences for posting certain types of content.

EMPOWER BYSTANDERS

- Provide tools that foster bystanders' responsibility to respond including:
 - Educate users on the types of harmful communication and the different risk/emergency levels;
 - Encourage users to monitor social media for the identified types of communication to ensure the content gets noticed and responded to appropriately;
 - Promote strategies that support bystanders in feeling competent in their ability to respond and help victims; and
 - Provide users with concrete examples of actions that can be taken for each level of emergency and guidelines that keep bystanders and others safe from harm.

EMPOWER RESPONSIBLE ADULTS

- Provide adults with the tools necessary to identify, assess, and respond to potentially dangerous content, as well as educational resources explaining how to talk to youth about safe social media habits.

ENHANCE ENFORCEMENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM POLICIES

- Advocate for social media platforms to enforce terms of use policies and to deter prohibited behavior by:
 - Hiring culturally competent reviewers who are capable of understanding the risks associated with posted content;
 - Developing strategies to proactively monitor content; and
 - Educating users about why certain content is prohibited.

EXPAND LAW ENFORCEMENT PREVENTION & INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

- Solicit tips from the community about social media intelligence and utilize collected tips to inform responses.
- Utilize information collected via social media to inform resource deployment decisions and partnership-building with stakeholders.
- Create a visible online police presence by implementing an "E-Patrolling" strategy.

By incorporating the above efforts into a comprehensive strategy to promote digital citizenship, we can begin to reverse the troubling trend of social media interactions going from virtual to violent, and prevent devastating consequences in the real-world.

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Social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other new platforms emerging daily) has created a new fighting ground for youth involved in violence and their affiliated crewsⁱ. Conflicts that once took place on the street are now provoked, publicized, and facilitated via Facebook posts, Tweets, and Instagram photos for the world to see.¹

Increasingly, media reports reveal that youth document and discuss their ongoing conflicts—often amplifying them—and even announce their intentions to commit violence on social networking sites prior to shootings:

- The day prior to the November 9, 2013 shooting at the Bryant Park skating rink—which left 14-year-old Adonis Mera paralyzed and 20-year-old Javier Contreras wounded—the 16-year-old alleged shooter posted that he was going to bring his gun to the park.²
- 16-year-old Iquan Williams was killed at a party in Brownsville in January 2014 after the 17-year-old alleged shooter posted that he was going to shoot up the party.³
- Angel Rojas, 39, was killed on the B15 bus in Bedford-Stuyvesant when rival crew members confronted the 14-year-old alleged shooter. A conflict between the rival crew and the shooter had been brewing over Facebook for months prior to the March 2014 shooting.⁴

These troubling findings combined with persistently high rates of violence among youth ages 14 to 25 suggest that we must better understand the ways youth are communicating over social media and the associated risk of these communications turning into real-world violence.

TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

Generally, social media allows individuals to create, share, and interact based on content produced through a variety of forums, such as blogs, social network sites, online gaming, and virtual worlds. It is commonly noted that 90% of teens use social media and 75% have a profile on a social network site.⁵ Gathering, gossiping, competing for social status, collaborating, and sharing information in public spaces are typical aspects of growing up.⁶ However, as youth begin to engage in harmful behavior online, these developmentally appropriate activities can end up enhancing criminal and antisocial norms within a network.

For youth engaged in criminality and antisocial peer groups (e.g., crews), social media offers a forum where they can: *make threats, taunt rivals, intimidate victims and witnesses, promote their image, mobilize, recruit, identify and create criminal opportunities, and acquire weapons.*



i. For the purposes of this report, “crews” are defined as fluid groups of youth formed based on where members live, such as a building or block, creating violent turf rivalries.

THREATS

Crew members make threats of violence over social media by calling out a specific person or crew or by boasting general threats. Examples of threats include posting surveillance photographs of rivals they intend to kill,⁷ posting comments explicitly stating their crew is going to shoot a rival crew member (by name, or any member of the rival crew), or a post with an individual's name or a crew's name followed by the letter "K" (which stands for "kill"). Posts that call out a rival by their real name instead of their street name are meant to be personal threats which signal to the target that their true identity is known and there is nowhere to hide.



WE GUNNA KILL [Rival Crew Member] FAT [**]**

twitter post – January 21, 2011

TAUNTS

Youth use social media to taunt rivals, thus instigating conflicts and provoking violence. The taunts are often targeted against a person's status as a crew member or a taunt against their masculinity. In other words, the purpose is more geared towards disrespecting, shaming, and humiliating the rival. Examples include posting photographs of themselves in front of a rival's apartment building or "turf"⁸, comments calling out rival crews, comments mocking a shooting victim or boasting about a shooting, or posting videos of fights or songs calling out rivals.



WHY [**] VIOLATING MY SET LIKE WE DONT GIVE IT UP [****]
SEE US ALL THE TIME AND DONT SAY NUFFIN [****] LIL HOMIES
ND FOR THE LEADERS OF YOUR CREW BRING YOURSELF CAUSE
YOUR LIL MAN DONT NOE HOW TO FINISH A GROWN MAN JOB LIL
RIDERS [****] [Rival Crew] KILLA**

facebook status update – November 20, 2011

INTIMIDATION

The "stop snitching" culture is promoted over social media via group pages (e.g., "Snitches Get Stitches", "Snitches R US") and posts that seek to intimidate victims and witnesses. Crew members do this by posting photos of victims and witnesses and their personal information, general and specific threats and warnings, videos of attacks on "snitches," and music videos about the consequences of "snitching."⁹ They also post court documents that identify complainants and witnesses including photos of orders of protection¹⁰ and videos of Grand Jury minutes of witness testimony being read aloud.¹¹



THY SHOOT AT US N BRAG WE SHOOT BACK N [**] SNITCHIN**

facebook status update – June 22, 2011

SELF- & GROUP-PROMOTION

The desire for respect and acceptance by others and engagement in self- and group-promotion are natural parts of the developmental process.¹² With the advent of social media, however, youth no longer need to rely on word of mouth to promote their reputations and publicize their activities as a means to gain respect and validation.¹³ In fact, youth can post pictures, videos, comments, and statuses that have immediate effects and infinite life spans, allowing them to endlessly promote themselves and their affiliations in order to show or gain respect. Social media is used to enhance the status of the individual or group or used to respond to status threats.¹⁴ Examples of self- and group-promotion include: posts identifying as affiliated with a crew (e.g., photos of themselves making crew signs or showing off tattoos; posts with an individual's name or a crew's name followed by “^” or “up”); threats, taunts, and intimidations (see above); photos of themselves posing with firearms, drugs and/or money¹⁵ or at crime scenes¹⁶; posting photos of the entire crew to project their strength, size, toughness and power¹⁷; or videos of criminal activities (e.g., fights, shootings, mobbing¹⁸).

Youth achieve a sense of respect, acceptance and validation when users “like,” “share” their posts, or respond with encouraging comments. Some youth even solicit “likes” by including “LMS” (“like my status”) in their posts or will preview a fight video by posting a still image of the fight with the caption “300 Likes to see this fight;” once that number is reached, the user will then post the video. This in turn provides positive reinforcement of this behavior, encouraging youth to continue posting certain types of content.



MY NAME [Crew Member] AND I SHOOT YOU WITH THE HAMMER

facebook status update – May 21, 2012

MOBILIZING

Adolescents who engage in criminal activity often do so in groups.¹⁸ Social media offers an easy and quick way to organize others for specific purposes. Youth communicate with their peers over social media to plan attacks, retaliations, or other criminal activities. These posts include messages among peers, or they may post photos of injuries from an attack to spark a response. They also mobilize others to the scene of a fight or to go mobbing by posting their location. Mobilization also occurs when youth respond to a post about a conflict with “WYA” (where you at?) with intent to meet the person. Thus if a youth is not involved in the fight but wants to be, they are now aware of where and when it will happen.



Everybody PullUp To Tompkins Pzz An Sumner Today It's Gonna Be So Litt Bring The Drama To !!!

facebook status update – April 1, 2015

ii. For the purposes of this report, “mobbing” is defined as when a group of youth is mobilized to a specific location and they travel together down a street, through a park, subway station, or store. Mobbing is a way for crews to promote their image by projecting their strength, size, toughness and power, and a means to intimidate others. Videos of youth mobbing often exhibit them engaging in criminal activities such as theft, vandalism, weapons possession, harassment, and assault, among others.

RECRUITMENT

Social media provides a forum for crews to reach a broad audience, including peers who they may not have otherwise been able to reach in school or in the community.¹⁹ This forum offers an easy way to communicate and build relationships with others who have similar interests. In fact, many social media users report that it was easier to make friends online than in the real-world.²⁰ Crews use social media to recruit members via both active and passive efforts. Active recruitment efforts include using social media to identify recruits, posts soliciting new members to join, or reaching out to individuals directly and promising social and economic benefits – as well as encouraging them to participate in violent attacks on rivals.²¹ Passive recruitment includes all types of communications that publicize crew culture (e.g., music videos, self-promotion, stop snitching).²² Once a wannabe crew member has been recruited, they are typically required to “put in work” which involves providing or making money for the crew or committing criminal or violent acts. For example, a Bronx crew member rapped on social media about rivalries that spurred shootings in the borough, resulting in a wannabe crew member from Queens reaching out to him to enlist.²³ The messages read:²⁴

Queens Wannabe Crew Member

I'm from Queens but I watch all ya videos,
Imma trying be down with the [Crew] Move

facebook message – May 10, 2012

Bronx Crew Member

if yuk an western union me 125 right now you
can be [Crew] under me and b official

facebook message – May 10, 2012

If new members are reluctant to “put in work,” crew members use social media to threaten and intimidate them into committing criminal or violent acts. The combination of peer pressure and desire to feel part of the group typically produces action.

IDENTIFYING & CREATING CRIMINAL OPPORTUNITIES

This forum allows youth with harmful and anti-social tendencies to identify and create opportunities for criminal activity. This can take many forms, including using social media to identify and locate targets, coordinate drug sales, or facilitate a robbery (e.g., a youth advertises that they want to sell a desirable piece of clothing, the seller and “buyer” arrange a time to meet, the “buyer” then uses the meeting as an opportunity to rob the seller).



Studio Beats Need Gone ASAP \$70 CASH ONLY

facebook post – May 7, 2015

ACQUIRING WEAPONS

Youth involved in gun violence use social media to sell and purchase weapons, as well as coordinate access to weapons that are shared among crew members (these weapons are often stashed in a public area for easy access in the event of a conflict, and only designated members know the location). A crew member may post or send private messages stating that s/he is in the market for a firearm or that s/he has a gun for sale to solicit sellers and buyers. Given that crew members are often “friends” with members of other crews on social media, they have access to a broad market that allows guns to be easily circulated throughout the city moving between and among crews.



I'LL GIVE U AIPHONE JAILBROKEN FOR ANY GRIP...
SEND ME A PIC OF IT HOW MANY BULLETS

facebook message – August 7, 2013

RISKS OF REAL-WORLD VIOLENCE

The length of time between when content is posted on social media and when a violent incident occurs varies greatly. One former gang leader turned anti-violence advocate noted that “as little as 5 to 10 seconds can pass between the time a picture is posted online to when someone is killed.”²⁵ In other cases, threats and taunts may be exchanged for days, weeks, months, or even years before they escalate to violence. For this reason it is important to understand the risks associated with the types of communications discussed above and the circumstances that increase the likelihood of violence.

ADOPTION OF ANTI-SOCIAL NORMS

Peers play a significant role in the socialization of youth. Researchers have found that youth who perceive that many of their friends engage in willful and repeated harmful behaviors online are more likely to report engaging in these behaviors themselves.²⁶ Moreover, studies show that group pressures may be stronger online than in-person,²⁷ and emotions expressed by others on social media can influence a user’s emotions.²⁸ For example, one study showed that users are less likely to share their views when they perceive that their views differ from those of their “friends;” however, if the user shares the same views as their “friends,” they are much more likely to speak up.²⁹ This suggests that group pressures online stifle debate and discussion and thus limits exposure to alternative viewpoints which can cause anti-social norms to proliferate. Given that social media provides an often unmonitored and uncensored forum to promote crew culture and for individuals with shared interests to convene and communicate, it is easy for anti-social norms to spread online. These norms are then positively reinforced when others “like” or “share” their posts or respond with encouraging comments, further perpetuating these behaviors, which can lead to new or sustained crew involvement and increased risks of violence.

NEW OR SUSTAINED CREW INVOLVEMENT

As noted above, the desire to be respected and belong to a group is an inherent human need³⁰, and research shows that vulnerable youth gravitate towards crews to satisfy these needs when other modes fail.³¹ As crews use social media to broadcast their activities and affiliations, and in return garner respect and validation, other youth may view this behavior online and be influenced to join a crew to achieve these needs, commonly known as behavior modeling. This might start out as “liking” a few pictures or commenting on a status, and then gradually asking to meet up or be a part of an event. The relationship progresses as “new” youths’ needs of respect and belonging are satisfied. Moreover, when “new” youth form relationships with already established crew members, they are putting themselves at higher-risk for sustained crew involvement, because “new” youth will naturally increase their interactions with anti-social peers as they become more involved in the crew, and have less contact with pro-social peers.³² This speaks to the formation of anti-social norms; “new” youth will not garner respect or validation from pro-social peers for their anti-social or violent behavior and will move away from this peer group (if it existed in the first place). Therefore, through social media, crews are able to advertise their activity, belonging, and consequential respect through a variety of communication styles, modeling anti-social behavior for a broader audience of youth. These new and sustained relationships can increase the risks of violence among crew-involved youth, as new and prolonged involvement in crews requires increased engagement in criminal activity, including violent attacks.³³

CLAIMING CREW AFFILIATION

As expected, younger youth often model the behavior of older youth. This includes posting content that appears to be crew-related, such as a video of 8-year-olds screaming a crew’s name or throwing up crew signs. Other youth claim affiliation as a means to protect themselves from crew members who live in their apartment building and from other rivals. By and large, these youth are not actively engaged in crews or criminal activity. While this act of behavior modeling is developmentally appropriate, engaging in these behaviors can put these youths at risk of victimization by members of the crew they are claiming affiliation with and/or by members of rival crews who believe they are truly affiliated.³⁴ These youth risk increased danger if they are unaware of turf boundaries and are caught alone in a rival crew’s territory. Moreover, comments posted by these individuals may be taken out of context or perceived as a threat or a sign of disrespect, which can lead to larger conflicts among crews putting real members at risk.³⁵

RETALIATION

Crew members commonly “friend” rivals on social media, providing 24-hour access to fueling rivalries by instigating new conflicts and exacerbating existing ones.³⁶ This constant access creates an on-going cycle of violence as youth provoke, react, and retaliate to content posted on social media.

The convergence of rival crews on social media creates a forum where taunts can escalate to real-world violent retaliation. Taunts in the form of videos or pictures of past fights seek to shame and humiliate targets, threaten the crew member’s status, and provoke the rival crew. These types of posts are serious acts of disrespect that place the target in a position where retaliation is seen as the only way to keep his/her status or self-respect. Because these videos and photos can remain on social media sites forever, past altercations can live on beyond their normal life span, stoking resentments and sparking retaliation weeks, months or years later.

Taunting posts often lead to arguments over social media among multiple parties, as rivals and fellow crew members’ reply to the posted content and ensuing responses. This can amount to hundreds of comments back and forth. Taunts can evolve into mobilizing posts which can increase the risk of violence because they bring many crew members together where they can ruminate, reinforce each others’ anti-social behavior, and escalate the situation.

The likelihood of violence increases when targets are easily located. When youth “check-in,” posting their location or that of a party taking place at a known spot, rivals are alerted to where (and likely when) the target can be found, providing the opportunity for rivals to carry out acts of violence.

GUN CARRYING

Research has shown that youth carry guns for protection against other youth who they believe carry guns.³⁷ Social media can amplify this fear as youth self- and group-promote by posting photos of themselves with guns, and post threats and taunts about shootings. Moreover, researchers have found that youth who experience harassment online are more likely to report carrying a weapon.³⁸ Given that social media is also a forum where youth can acquire weapons, the risks for violence increase, especially when youth feel like they must act out violently before someone commits violence against them.

CONCLUSION

Every day, thousands of users witness potentially dangerous posts and often fail to intervene to prevent violence from occurring. Although many of these communications violate the social media platforms’ terms of use agreements, they still remain on the sites. Moreover, youth are frequently unaware of the consequences of their social media content and continue to use social media in ways that increase their risks of physical violence and a range of legal, educational and professional consequences.ⁱⁱⁱ

The troubling rise in violence provoked, publicized, and facilitated over social media suggests that anti-violence organizations, law enforcement, social media platforms, community members, and other stakeholders must work together to proactively respond to social media posts in order to prevent these communications from escalating into tragic acts of violence and deaths.

iii. See volume II of series “Social Media & Real-World Consequences: Responding to Social Media Norms - Developing a Comprehensive Strategy to Promote Digital Citizenship”

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CITIZENS CRIME COMMISSION
OF NEW YORK CITY

SOCIAL MEDIA & REAL-WORLD CONSEQUENCES

VOLUME I

FROM VIRTUAL TO VIOLENT

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA FUELS REAL-WORLD VIOLENCE

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