



INTERVIEW WITH DETECTIVE LEE SMITH

Sacramento Sheriff's Department Gang Unit

by Deputy Nancy Henrickson

The Gang Unit was created to handle the explosive growth of gang activity in the Franklin Boulevard area with Hispanic gangs. I joined the unit in 1982 and have since seen this gang activity spread to black, Asian and white power groups. The major gangs are the Crips and the Bloods. Right now in Sacramento there are more Bloods than Crips — in other parts of California it's the opposite, almost two to one in favor of the Crips.

All black street gangs are aiming at financial wealth, notoriety and power. The main focus is financial power from the sales of drugs. The gangs thrive on notoriety, which explains some of the outlandish events they become involved in. But recently the immense profits from drug sales has changed the scene somewhat. What we are now seeing is that Hispanic and black gangs, existing separately in the same neighborhoods for years, have started to form hybrid groups with the sole aim of making money from selling drugs.

Gang member profiles, whether black, Hispanic or white, share many similar traits. By the time a gang member reaches the tenth grade he's usually been in a lot of trouble or involved in various disciplinary actions. Parents will notice a steady decline in grades, attendance will drop and the kid will start hanging out with the gang more and more. By the time this kid reaches the eleventh grade, if he gets that far, he'll probably be in a continuation school.

Gang members used to wear bandanas and specific colors. Now that has changed somewhat. You can still see the Hispanic members wearing the Pendleton shirts buttoned at the neck, baggy khaki pants, shiny shoes, and of course they all try to stand a certain way. If you wear your pants real big and baggy you can stick

baseball bats and sawed off shotguns in there and no one will notice. The black gangs always used to wear their colors, first as flags or bandanas, then as tennis shoes with colored laces, then certain jogging suits. Now it's Raider's jackets, black because they think that's an intimidating color, and black baseball caps for the various different sports teams. This will probably change too.

As law enforcement officers we have to use our expertise and experience to explain in court what reasons we have to consider a particular person to be gang affiliated. Many of these gang members are in court listening to what we are saying. After they listen to our explanations, they change their attire and the manner in which they can be

reasonably identified as gang members. Black is considered to be a neutral color. Some attire is copied from gang members in the Los Angeles area that have become legitimate rap groups and musicians. That's why we need to be cautious about identifying gang members just by the way they dress. Lots of other kids are wearing this stuff too. By changing their mode of dress the gangs are trying to draw less attention to themselves.

Sacramento is getting an influx of older gang members from the southern counties for two main reasons. First, Sacramento is still in the infant stage of gang development. Second, the California Youth Authority releases many of their offenders to northern California to get them away from associates. They

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think that if they get those gang members away from their buddies they're going to stop bangin'. [Bangin', or gang-banging, refers to involvement in gang activity.] What CYA apparently hasn't figured out or is not aware of is that the more experienced parolees see all these unenlightened youth gangs here just waiting to be organized. The younger guys look up to these older guys, imitate them and try to capture what they think is the mystique of belonging to an intimidating gang.

Sacramento experienced a large increase in drive-by shootings in 1989 and 1990. What people have to realize about these gangs is that the crazier you act the higher your status is in that gang. The more violence you commit the more those younger members look up to you as their leader. You get the first pick of all the ladies, you get the first choice of seating when you go out, and everybody waits for you to sit down first. They think you're the guy with the brains.

But the younger members of black gangs are really more dangerous than the older ones. They're not afraid of the juvenile justice system and they want desperately to "make their bones," or become an established member of the gang. They will do just about anything to achieve that. Because they generally have less of a criminal record they often are released from Juvenile Hall within a few hours of arrest. They tend to be put on home supervision programs and

they're right back out on the streets committing more crimes.

As I have said earlier these gangs are extremely violent. Most members are armed. The weapon of choice in the Sacramento area is the 9 mm semi-automatic. Out on the street it's pretty easy to purchase one of these hand guns with a 16-shot clip for about \$150. This is the same caliber as the Ouzi machine gun and the same as many local law enforcement personnel carry. In the Los Angeles area we find many more Ouzi's, Mac 10s and 11s. Down there they refer to just about any type of machine gun as an Ouzi. AK-47 assault rifles are in a class by themselves.

All these weapons are carried primarily for show, but when it's time to "do business" then everyone is packing — the street terminology for carrying some type of weapon, whether it is a hand gun or something more sophisticated. One of these gang members having an AK-47 would be like one of us having a Mercedes Benz. It gives them a lot of status in the gang.

The vehicle of choice for most gangs is the "mob car": usually a 4-door Chevy Caprice Classic, one of the 1970's models. Six or seven people can pile into them and then they can all jump out and do their shooting. Usually the rear passenger windows are blacked out so you can't see how many people are in there. A "hoopti" is pretty popular too. That's a ratty 1969 Buick 225 with four



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Now I'd like to talk a little about parents. Changes in children's habits can be obvious if you know what you're looking at. Your son or daughter may change from a multi-colored assortment of clothing to a particular brand, color and style of clothing. The colors may all be blue, black or red. They will insist on specific brands of tennis shoes. For a while Crips were wearing British Knight jackets because on the back was a little emblem with the letters B and K. The kids on the street were saying those initials stood for Blood Killer.

Parents will see their kids' school attendance drop. Good students will start getting bad grades and they won't hang around with the same friends. They'll start listening to rap music, especially the anti-authority type of rap. This applies to both black and white gangs. The Skinheads have their own racist type of music too. Parents can watch for secret phone calls, the kind where the kids are talking and whispering real low. And they'll say "Stay out of my room," or "You can't come in my bedroom." It's pretty surprising what some parents have found in their children's rooms.

When parents are suspicious or find out that their youngsters are in a gang they should immediately impose stricter discipline and rules. Go into the kid's room, look around. You might find guns, ammunition and drugs. Almost always what is found if that room has been allowed to remain off limits to parents is that the walls have been filled with gang graffiti, including gang slogans that have been carved into the furniture.

Parents should know their children's friends. If your kid doesn't want to introduce someone to you, be suspicious and don't allow him or her in the house. Utilize disciplinary actions when established rules are broken. Insist that your son or daughter get a job. That's one of the greatest deterrents to gang activity. And talk to the school officials to find out what kind of friends your kid has at school and what his demeanor is when he's there.

My overall assessment of gang activity is that it's gone from a non-existent situation to, in just a very few years, extreme violence and murder. I think we'll see an increase in Asian gangs because they're one of the fastest growing ethnic communities in the United States. We need to be able to deal

with this increase in a better way than we did with the Crips and Bloods. We weren't prepared for them.

We probably won't be ready to deal with the Asian gangs either, mostly because of the language barrier. With the Asians we are dealing with cultural beliefs and practices that are thousands of years old and therefore we are already behind in our understanding of their community as a whole. Also, they are not starting out fresh with this gang problem as did some of the other ethnic gangs in California. Asian gangs have been established and feared by their own people for years. These problems are compounded by the fact that Asians tend to maintain a lower profile than other ethnic gangs. They don't wear colors, they don't flash gang signs and don't write graffiti. Watch out for them in the future. They will be much more influential than they are now. ★

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