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Studying the Police Response to Gangs

That's what they wanted – and that's what they got.
– Former Los Angeles CRASH Unit officer

By the mid-to-late 1980s, Los Angeles, California, had become widely recognized as the epicenter of the nation's growing gang problem. The city had about 280 gangs with 26,000 members who were becoming increasingly involved in violence and narcotics trafficking (Spergel and Curry 1990). Between 1984 and 1992, the number of gang homicides in Los Angeles County skyrocketed from 200 to 800 homicides per year (Maxson 1999). The seriousness of the phenomenon was highlighted in media reporting, both locally and nationally. Local news programs frequently led with gang-related stories in which innocent bystanders had been shot and killed in drive-by shootings. The movie industry was producing popular films such as *Colors* and *American Me*, portraying L.A. gang members as bloodthirsty, minority males who were involved in high-level drug sales (Hagedorn 1998).

As a consequence, a deep fear of gangs gripped parts of the city. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that residents in gang neighborhoods were barring their windows and chaining their doors, sleeping in bathtubs or on the floor, to protect themselves from nighttime drive-by shootings. People avoided wearing clothing in colors associated with gangs to prevent being misidentified by rival gangs (J. Katz 1990). There was talk from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) that the Crips in Los Angeles were well on their way to bringing together all Crip sects across the nation into "one major organization with a chief executive

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officer-style leadership structure" to enhance the gang's ability to traffic drugs (Brantley and DiRosa 1994, 3). In fact, the problem in the city became so bad that some FBI officials publicly announced that gangs represented a serious threat to the national sense of security.

In response, then–Police Chief Daryl Gates declared a war on gangs, claiming that he would "obliterate" violent gangs and "take the little terrorists off the street" (Burrell 1990); he urged President Ronald Reagan to do the same (Los Angeles City News Service 1988). As part of his war, Chief Gates allocated additional officers and staff to the police department's antigang unit, the Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH). Within five years, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) had about 200 sworn officers assigned to the CRASH unit (Spergel 1995).

Once in full swing, the unit reacted decisively and aggressively, sweeping through gang neighborhoods. Take, for example, Operation Hammer, a series of gang sweeps carried out in the worst neighborhoods in Los Angeles. The sweeps were characterized by the unit moving through neighborhoods, arresting gang members for the slightest infractions, including wearing colors, flashing signs, jaywalking, and curfew violations. In fact, the unit was making so many arrests that year – close to 25,000 – that during one weekend LAPD had to create a mobile booking facility at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum to process all of the arrestees (Burrell 1990).

By the late 1990s, LAPD's response to gangs appeared to be working. For example, in the Rampart Area, one of the regions hardest hit, gang crimes dropped from 1,171 in 1991 to 464 in 1999 – a reduction that exceeded the citywide decline for all other violent crime over the same period (Chemerinsky 2000a). As a consequence, Chief Gates and the police department rapidly developed a reputation for being tough on gangs, and the CRASH unit became a national model. Police departments across the country were contacting LAPD for advice on responding to their own gang problems. LAPD began formally training officers from other police departments on LAPD's operational strategies and tactics for policing gangs, gang members, and gang crime.

With the CRASH unit's success, however, came problems. CRASH unit officers in some precincts developed a subculture that embodied the war-on-gangs mentality advocated by their chief. The subculture was characterized by a mindset in which officers saw all young Hispanic and African American males as gang members, believing that any and all efforts to remove them from the community could and should be

used. Under the guise of protecting the community, CRASH officers began resisting supervision, flagrantly ignoring policies and procedures that they believed were inhibiting their ability to respond to the gang problem (Chemerinsky 2000b, 1).

This subculture eventually gave rise to the Rampart Corruption Scandal, in which Rampart CRASH unit officers in Los Angeles were found to be engaging in hard-core criminal activity. Officers admitted to attacking known gang members and falsely accusing them of crimes they had not committed. The officers argued that "if the suspect didn't commit this crime, he did another for which he didn't get caught" (Chemerinsky 2000b, 27).

The ensuing investigation revealed that officers were routinely choking and punching gang members for the sole purpose of intimidation. In one case, officers had used a gang member as a human battering ram, forcefully thrusting his face repeatedly against a wall. In several other instances, officers had planted drugs on gang members to make arrests. Corrupt sergeants and lieutenants in the division had promoted these activities, giving awards for misdeeds. One officer had even received an award for what emerged as the shooting of an unarmed, innocent person (CNN.com 2000a). As a consequence, approximately ten years after it had been fully staffed and promoted as the ideal in antigang enforcement, LAPD's gang unit was shut down because of corruption, the use of excessive force, and civil rights violations; and the city had paid out about $70 million to settle lawsuits related to the scandal (Associated Press 2005).

Such happenings were not unique to Los Angeles. Police gang units across the country were coming under close scrutiny for overly aggressive tactics and other police misconduct.

- In Las Vegas, gang unit officers were found guilty of participating in a drive-by shooting. Two officers, one driving and the other hanging outside a van, had driven around a well-known gang neighborhood until they found a group of gang members loitering on a street corner. The officer hanging outside the van shot six times into the crowd, killing a twenty-one-year-old male. The incident sparked an FBI investigation into all unsolved drive-by shootings and gang killings dating back five years, in the belief that some may have been the work of rogue gang unit officers (Hynes 1997).
- In Chicago, gang unit officers were found by federal prosecutors to be working hand-in-hand with four Chicago street gangs to transport

cocaine from Miami to Chicago. The officers were providing gang members with security, pointing out undercover officers, and revealing the names of confidential informants working with the police. Officers were also found to be supplying weapons and mediating disputes between gangs over the street prices that should be charged for drugs (Lightly and Mills 2000).

• In Houston, gang task force officers were discovered to be using unauthorized confidential informants, engaging in warrantless searches and entries, and firing weapons on unarmed and unassaultive citizens. These practices culminated in the death of Pedro Oregon Navarro, who was shot nine times in the back by gang task force officers during a raid, later believed to be guided by misinformation. Subsequent investigations found that such rogue activity in Houston had become common practice (Bardwell 1998; Grazcyk 1998).

The preceding incidents could have occurred in any major U.S. city that had created a specialized police gang unit in response to growing concerns about gangs and gang-related problems. Although questions about how police should respond to gangs, and why they respond in the ways that they do, have been hotly debated in the media and by policy makers and academics (e.g., Burns and Deakin 1989; Huff and McBride 1990; Jackson and McBride 1986; and Weisel and Painter 1997), a number of questions remain unanswered. Why do police agencies organize their responses to gangs in certain ways? Who are the people who choose to police gangs? How do they make sense of gang members – individuals who spark fear in most citizens, and why are they interested in this particular class of offender? What are their jobs really like? What characterizes their working environments? How do their responses to the gang problem fit with other policing strategies, such as community policing?

These questions are especially relevant for police executives who develop and oversee responses to gangs, as well as for academics and policy makers across the country, and they are the focus of this book. Our goal is to provide a detailed description of policing gangs as done by four Southwestern police agencies – Albuquerque, New Mexico; Inglewood, California; Las Vegas, Nevada; and Phoenix, Arizona. Before we turn our attention to these cities, however, we provide an overview of the gang problem and discuss what is currently known about police gang control efforts.

THE CONTEMPORARY GANG PROBLEM

The United States has seen a dramatic resurgence of gangs, gang members, and gang crime over the past twenty years. In the 1970s, one was hard-pressed to find cities with gang problems. In 1976, the National Advisory Committee on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals went so far as to state:

> Youth gangs are not now or (sic) should not become a major obstacle (sic) of concern.... Youth gang violence is not a major crime problem in the United States . . . what gang violence does exist can fairly readily be diverted into "constructive channels" especially through the provision of services by community agencies. (as cited by Spergel 1995, 9)

Today almost every city in the United States with a population of more than 250,000 reports a gang problem. Gangs are prevalent in many small and medium-sized cities as well. For example, 87 percent of cities with populations between 100,000 and 249,999 and 27 percent of cities with populations of 2,500 to 49,000 report having an active youth gang problem (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention 2004). Public concern about the nation's gang problem has escalated substantially. Prior to 1985, national polls examining community problems did not register gangs or gang problems as a major concern. However, by 1994, gang violence ranked as the third most important issue facing America – behind education and drugs and before crime in general (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1995, Table 2.3).

Some have argued that public fear has been a consequence of media portrayals of gangs. Between 1983 and 1999, the number of gang stories reported in major newspapers increased from fewer than fifty a year in 1983 to about 900 a year in 1999 (McCorkle and Miethe 2002). Many of the stories reinforced common beliefs about gangs, emphasizing violent behavior associated with gangs and gang members. Television news programs and the front pages of newspapers often showed the outcome of the most recent episode of gang violence, and how it had affected neighborhood residents or resulted in the injury or death of an innocent bystander (Klein 1995a). Media coverage focused on the role of gangs and gang members in the distribution of crack cocaine. News shows broadcast that super gangs such as the Crips and Bloods were migrating to smaller, less urban communities where there was less competition in drug sales and where they could maximize profits in the drug market

(McCorkle and Miethe 2002). Before long, the public began to characterize gang members as violence-prone minority youths – youths who were disinterested in conventional values and morals, and who were willing to kill to protect their drug businesses.

Although many of these images and perceptions were the product of media generalization and sensationalism, most researchers agree that gang behavior had in fact changed over the past two decades, particularly with regard to violence. In the past, gangs had rarely engaged in fights; when they did, the fights hardly ever resulted in serious injury. The use of firearms was an extremely isolated event (Thrasher 1927; Whyte 1943; Miller 1962; Klein 1971). Many academics reported that, prior to the 1970s, the most prevalent offenses committed by gang members involved loitering, theft, truancy, and disturbing the peace (Spergel 1995; Hagedorn 1998).

During the 1980s, however, it became clear to researchers that the level of gang violence was changing for the worse. Gangs were increasingly fighting one another with firearms, and serious injuries were no longer considered isolated events. In Chicago, for example, the number of gang-motivated homicides increased fivefold between 1987 and 1994, from 51 to 240 (*Compiler* 1996). Similarly, from 1984 to 1995, the number of gang-related homicides in Los Angeles County quadrupled, from 212 to 807. The rise in violence was not restricted to large cities, but also affected several smaller communities. In Omaha, Nebraska, for example, between 1986 and 1991, the number of gang-motivated homicides rose from none to twelve (C. Katz 1997).

Over the same time period, researchers began to find consistent evidence that gang members were responsible for a disproportionate amount of crime. Much of this research relied on official data collected by the police. For example, Walter B. Miller (1982) reported that although gang members represented only 6 percent of youths ten to nineteen years old in New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles, they represented 11 percent of all arrests in those cities, 40 percent of arrests for serious crimes, and almost 25 percent of arrests for juvenile homicides. Similarly, Paul Tracy (1978) found that gang members in Philadelphia were arrested at significantly higher rates than non–gang members. He reported that 63 percent of delinquent gang members were chronic recidivists (i.e., had been arrested five or more times), compared with only 27 percent of delinquent non–gang members.

Charles Katz, Vincent Webb, and David Schaefer (2000) examined how offense patterns differed between documented gang members and

delinquent youth with similar characteristics. They found that documented gang members were significantly more likely to have engaged in serious delinquency and were significantly more criminally active than the delinquent comparison group. In particular, they found that documented gang members were about twice as likely to have been arrested for a violent, weapon, drug, or status offense, and they were arrested for these offenses about four times as often as the delinquent youth who were not gang members.

Similar patterns have emerged when comparing self-report data from non–gang members and from gang members in the general population. Much of this research has been conducted through longitudinal studies of delinquent behavior, such as the Seattle Social Development Project and the Rochester Youth Development Study. Both studies gathered self-report data from randomly selected youth in local schools (Battin-Pearson et al. 1998). For example, in Seattle, researchers examined differences among gang members, nongang delinquent peers, and nongang, nondelinquent peers. The data showed that gang members were about twice as likely to self-report both violent and nonviolent offenses, and about ten times more likely to self-report violent and nonviolent offenses, when compared with their nongang, nondelinquent peers.

The Rochester study yielded similar results with a slightly different methodology. The researchers first divided their sample into two groups: gang members and non–gang members. Next, the researchers divided those in the nongang group into four subgroups, based on the extent of their self-reported contact with delinquent peers. Analysis of the data indicated that although increased association with delinquent peers was related to offense rates, "being a member of a gang facilitates delinquency over and above that effect" (Battin-Pearson et al. 1998, 5–6; also see Thornberry et al. 2003).

Similarly, policy makers, media officials, and academics have seen an increase in drug trafficking among gang members, an increase that they argue has fueled violence among gangs. Two explanations have been suggested for increasing gang involvement in drug sales (Fagan 1996). First, in the early 1980s, crack cocaine use escalated dramatically, and a new drug market emerged. Because the new market had not yet stabilized, violence was often used as a regulatory mechanism. Second, at about the same time, the economic infrastructure of many inner cities collapsed. Manufacturing jobs declined, and service and technology jobs, which began to drive the new economy, were being created

in suburban communities (Howell and Decker 1999). The economic restructuring of the nation left unqualified and geographically isolated urban minority youth without the means or opportunity for employment. The new crack cocaine market provided opportunities for inner-city youth to make money. It also led to the transition of many youth groups into gangs with the organizational capacity to control local drug markets (Fagan 1996; Howell and Decker 1999).

The extent to which gangs are organized for the purpose of drug trafficking is not clear. On one hand, a number of researchers have argued that gangs are organizationally structured, engaging in operational strategies that enhance their potential for profiting from drug sales. For example, Taylor (1990), Sanchez-Jankowski (1991), and Venkatesh (1997) in their observational studies of gang members in Detroit, Boston, New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago found that gangs are highly rational and organizationally sophisticated. Similar to any other capitalist enterprise, they have an established leadership hierarchy and formal rules and goals that guide their actions. These authors have maintained that membership in gangs is motivated by a common interest in profiting from criminal activity, and that the corporate-like structure of gangs provides an ideal and highly effective organization for the distribution of drugs.

Jerome Skolnick (1990) examined this issue at length in his study of gang members in California. He found that gang members often were driven to outside drug markets in an effort to enhance profitability in the drug trade, and that this resulted in frequent violent conflicts between gangs over the control of territory. Because of the violent nature of the drug trade, Skolnick argued, gang membership offers advantages to those interested in selling drugs – protection, a controlled drug market, and a stable source of products to sell in the retail market.

An alternative perspective is offered by Malcolm Klein (1995a) and others, who have argued that although gang members are intimately involved in the drug market, they do not have the organizational capacity to control and manage drug trafficking. For example, Fagan (1989) and Decker, Bynum & Weisel (1998), who interviewed gang members in Los Angeles, San Diego, Chicago, and St. Louis, found that although many gang members sold drugs, most did not join a gang expressly for this purpose. Instead, they joined for social interaction and neighborhood identification. Additionally, the researchers reported that gangs in these communities were not well-organized for the distribution of drugs,

most members were unable to identify occupational roles in the selling of drugs, and many did not know who supplied drugs. Similar findings were reported by Hagedorn (1988), who interviewed forty-seven gang members in Milwaukee. Of the gang members interviewed, only a few were identified as actual drug dealers. The majority, Hagedorn argued, sold drugs periodically, along with other income-producing activities, simply as a means of survival. Furthermore, he claimed that gang members lacked the needed resources, skills, and commitment to form a corporate-like organization for the purpose of profiting from the drug market. Hagedorn reported that gang members felt that it was "too much of a hassle" to be strongly committed to an organizational goal (1988, 105).

Either way, as gangs, gang members, and gang crime increasingly were perceived as a public safety threat, policy makers and researchers began to call for gang control strategies. Since the early 1990s, a massive mobilization of personnel and resources has been directed at controlling the nation's gang problem. County attorneys' offices have created vertical prosecutorial gang units to increase conviction rates and sentence lengths in cases involving gang members (Johnson et al. 1995); state legislatures have enacted criminal statutes to enhance penalties for gang members who are convicted of gang offenses (McCorkle and Miethe 1998); and city councils have passed antigang loitering laws prohibiting gang members from coming into contact with one another on the streets (Maxson, Hennigan, and Sloane 2003). Some communities have called out the National Guard to patrol streets and to work with police to round up criminally active gang members (Brokaw, Ewing, and Greenburg 1989).

Of all of the responses devised by local communities to control gangs, the establishment of specialized police gang units has become the most common suppression strategy. Although substantial research has examined gangs, gang members, and gang crime, unfortunately, little of it has addressed police gang-control efforts. The paucity of research in this area is surprising, given the central role that police in general, and specialized police gang units in particular, must play in community gang-reduction efforts. In the section that follows, we discuss what is currently known about the police response to gangs. In particular, we discuss the rationale of police gang units, the growth and development of police gang units, and the limitations of prior research that has examined the police response to gangs.

POLICE RESPONSE TO GANGS: THEORETICAL, POLICY,
AND ORGANIZATIONAL RATIONALES

Historically, the police response to gangs and gang-related problems has
been to assign responsibility for control to existing units such as patrol,
juvenile bureaus, community relations, investigations, and crime pre-
vention (Needle and Stapleton 1983; Huff 1993). In the 1980s, however,
many police departments began to establish specialized units for gang
control, including what is commonly referred to as the *police gang unit*.
A police gang unit is a secondary or tertiary functional division within
a police organization, with at least one sworn officer whose sole func-
tion is to engage in gang control efforts (Katz, Maguire, and Roncek
2002).

In 1999, the Law Enforcement and Management Administrative
Statistics (LEMAS) survey reported that among large agencies with 100
or more sworn officers, special gang units existed in 56 percent of all
municipal police departments, 50 percent of all sheriff's departments,
43 percent of all county police agencies, and 20 percent of all state law
enforcement agencies (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2001, Table C). These
findings led to an estimate of approximately 360 police gang units in
the country. As see in Figure 1.1 The recency of this phenomenon is
illustrated by the fact that more than 85 percent of the specialized gang
units were established within the past ten years (Katz, Maguire, and
Roncek 2002).

The creation of police gang units has been one part of the national
response to the gang problem. In 1988, Irving Spergel and David Curry
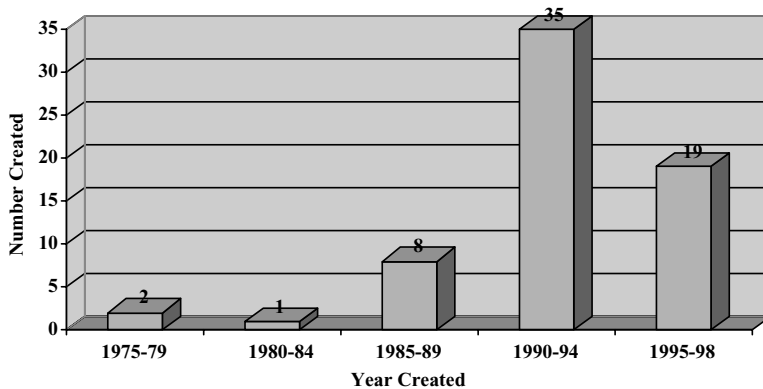(1990) surveyed 254 professionals in 45 cities to assess the response at

FIGURE 1.1. Establishment of police gang units.