Juvenile Justice

CJ 3650

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Week 14
Gangs

• Gangs have existed throughout history.

• Interests in this regard have changed with time.

• The word *gang* is the most commonly used term to label certain groups considered to be major social problems.

• Definitions of gangs vary in terms of their scope, range and complexity.

• Most states have defined gangs within the context of substantive law.
Who join gangs, and why?

- Very few youth are actually hard-core gang members.
- There are obvious problems with clearly identifying gang members considering the problems that exist in defining what a gang is.
- There are the fringe players, the “gonnabes” or “wannabes”
Three prominent reasons youth join gangs

- An opportunity to associate with peers and obtain a sense of belongingness
- Prospect of obtaining material goods and money
- Seeking protection from other youth in the community.
How extensive is the problem?

• It is difficult to accurately estimate the number of gangs and gang members due in large part to the variance in definitions.

• A national survey of LEAs estimate
  – 21,500 gangs
  – 730,000 members

• Types of gangs in the US
  – Hedonistic
  – Instrumental
  – Predatory
Hedonistic Gangs

• Primarily involved in drug use.
  – Considered to have little involvement in delinquency beside drug use.
  – Minor law violations, but seldom involving violence.
Instrumental Gangs

• Primarily involved in property crimes.
  – Burglary
  – Auto theft
  – Theft
Predatory Gangs

- A more serious type of gang actively involved in serious, violent offending.
Characteristics of Gangs

• There are six major characteristics:
  – Age
  – Race
  – Ethnicity
  – Gender
  – Gang migration
  – Communication
Age

- Juveniles first learn about gangs at about age 9.
- By age 10-11 they might become involved in acts of violence.
- By the age of 12 they may enter the realm of gang membership.
Race & Ethnicity

• No racial or ethnic group is excluded from gang participation.
  – African Americans
    • 31%
  – Asians
    • 7%
  – Caucasians
    • 13%
  – Hispanics
    • 47%
Gender

- Until recently, most research has focused on male gang membership.
  - It is estimated that 6% of gang members are females.
  - There are noticeable increases in female delinquency related to gang activity.
Migration

- Gang activity has risen substantially in the past 20 years.
- Gang proliferation is seen as a result of gang migration form larger cities into suburban and rural life.
Communication

• Gang related communication is as much about secrecy as it is about recognition.
• Gangs communicate through various mediums:
  – Graffiti
    • Symbols
  – Sign language
  – Clothing
    • Colors
Controlling Gang Activity

• Law enforcement efforts have primarily been offensive in nature
  – Sweeps
  – Aggressive patrol
  – Intelligence – p. 398
  – Follow-up investigations

• Some agencies have adopted a philosophy of “total suppression.”

• Others use the intelligence function to identify gang members & arresting them.
G.R.E.A.T.

- Gang Resistance Education and Training
  - A preventative, school-based approach intended to keep juveniles from participating in gang-related activities.
  - Designed to help students set goals for themselves, resist pressures, learn how to resolve conflicts without violence, and understand the negative impacts of gang life.
Prosecution Efforts

• The primary mission of prosecution as it relates to gangs is simple:
  – Prosecute
  – Convict
  – Incarcerate

• Significant problems in this regard include
  – Developing cooperating witness
  – Witness and victim intimidation
  – Credibility of players involved

• Initiatives tend to rely on sentence enhancements – RICO & STEP p. 401
Legislative Efforts

- Often viewed as reactive in nature grounded in public outcry.
  - Enhanced penalties
    - Drive-by shootings
  - Incorporating membership as criminal behavior