

<h1>Into The Abyss:</h1> <p>A Personal Journey into the World of Street Gangs</p> <p>by <u>Mike Carlie</u>, Ph.D. Copyright © 2002 <u>Michael K. Carlie</u> Continually updated.</p>	<p>~ Table of Contents ~</p> <p>Home Foreword Preface Orientation What I Learned Conclusions End Note Solutions Resources Appendix Site Map / Contents New Research Up-To-Date Gang-Related News</p>
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Part 5: Tactics of a Gang Unit

Field Note: The head of a regional federal gang task force told me about one of his more recent gang-related investigations. "The gang was involved in drug dealing and lived in a number of apartment buildings owned by a landlord who knew what they were doing and accommodated them. Following our investigation of the matter, the building owner and his manager were arrested and convicted along with forty-three gang members.

"We confiscated all nine buildings and, in the end, the owner received a 20 year prison term. One of the most satisfying things that happened on this job was closing down the gang operation on that side of town and taking those apartment buildings away from the owner.

"The people in the neighborhoods that were affected came out to greet us when the case was over because they were so thankful that we had successfully gotten rid of the drug dealers and the gang members who used to hang around and intimidate everyone."

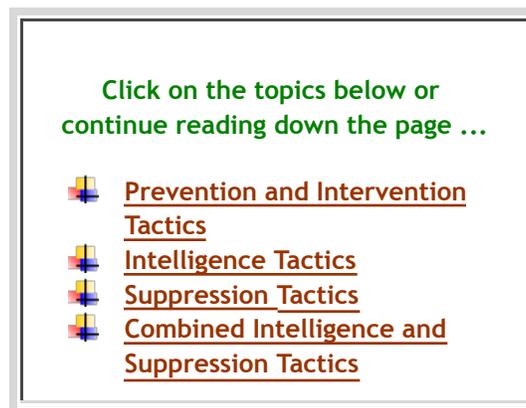
A police gang unit officer told me a story about a gang called the Twenty Sevens. There were originally 27 Asian boys who formed the gang so they gave it a name symbolizing the number of original members. Each member had a pager and all of them shared a secret code on the pagers for sending messages to one other. Using their pagers, three of the members who attended a private school called in the rest of their gang. The three gang members wanted the rest of the gang to come to the school so they could assault two white boys there. When the other gang members arrived they nearly killed both boys.

Local patrol officers investigated and called it a hate crime. They

didn't know a gang was involved. The hate crime investigator was called in and, investigating the incident further, recognized it as a gang-motivated crime. I asked him "Does it matter whether it was a gang crime or not?" I wanted to hear more about what value, if any, there was in treating a crime as gang-related. He replied "It does and it doesn't." Among the reasons why he said it *does* matter were:

-  With a gang, there's often an on-going relationship between the perpetrators and the victim. This aids us in investigating the crime.
-  Intelligence is heightened if it is a gang-motivated crime. It means there may be pictures on file that can be used to identify suspects or their affiliates and girl friends - anyone who could be questioned during the investigation.
-  Most important, it might provide a motive for the crime. And if it is gang-related, the motive may be something that happened recently or a long time ago. Either way, because it's a gang-related crime we may have access to better intelligence concerning the motive.

These reasons for knowing whether a crime was gang related or not introduced me to a variety of tactics used by police gang officers in achieving their mission. I've placed the tactics into four categories: prevention and intervention, intelligence, suppression, and combined intelligence/suppression tactics.



Prevention and Intervention Tactics

While most people I interviewed did not think of police as doing prevention or intervention work related to gangs, they do. **Prevention** efforts are used with individuals who have not yet become involved with a gang. **Intervention** efforts are used with

marginally involved gang youth and with gang members who want to leave a gang. Among the prevention and intervention tactics or techniques I observed in use were:

Education

I observed police in public schools as they presented information to students, teachers, and administrators concerning gangs. One of the prevention programs I saw implemented by police was the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program. We'll look more closely at it in the *Solutions* section of *Into the Abyss*.

I also observed officers in meetings with concerned citizens and community-wide task force groups designed to deal with the gang situation in the local community. The police were typically used as sources of information concerning the gang situation and, as such, served an important role as educators of the community.

To the extent that police are willing to participate in public information programs on television and radio, they can sometimes be found commenting on local, regional, national, and international gang issues.

Offering Direct Prevention and Intervention Services

Because I observed a limited number of police agencies my exposure to direct gang prevention services by them was limited. In a few of the departments, however, it was apparent that individual officers (some of them in a gang unit, some not) cared about at-risk youth and attempted to dissuade them from getting involved in a neighborhood gang.

Some of the officers played games with at-risk youth in local parks while others spent time at the local Boys and Girls Club playing basketball or got involved in some other sport. During my visits with them, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department offered a program called Vital Intervention and Directional Alternatives (VIDA).

VIDA is specifically designed to deal with "at-risk" youth and utilize pro-active, innovative techniques for positive redirection. Overseen by law enforcement personnel, the program offers treatment, prevention and punitive components to alter negative behavior. The most typical scenario would involve referrals from the Juvenile Courts or by parents who petition the court requesting that their children be admitted to the program.

It is essential that law enforcement play a major role in the intervention and overall development of the participants. We are the first to make contact with "at-risk" youths. (VIDA, [page](#) - not the best page, but one of the few still on the web concerning the VIDA program.)

Mediation

In most contacts with suspects, police do not make an arrest. The situation is no different with real or suspected gang members. More often than not, if there is a conflict developing between gang members, police will attempt to mediate the situation rather than wait for it to erupt and be forced into making an arrest. I witnessed this on several occasions over the past three years.

Mediation involves getting the aggrieved parties to sit down and communicate with one another through the mediator. There may or may not be a police officer trained in mediation, but attempts at mediation are still made. In two of the departments I observed the mediator was not a law enforcement officer but an adjunct professional mediator.

Divert and Refer

The police I observed knew that if gang suspects were arrested and convicted, some of them would be incarcerated. Many officers believed some gang suspects needed attention, but confinement was not what they needed. They viewed confinement as aggravating the situation - producing a more hardened gang member.

When this was the case, officers attempted to *divert* suspects from the justice system (juvenile or adult/criminal) and *referred* them to a community-based agency or other source of assistance. This was accomplished by working with the suspects' family members or guardians or directly with the youths in question. If a member of the faith community or some other concerned citizen made known their interest in helping these youth, the youth was referred to them.

Field Note: A seasoned gang unit supervisor told me "We realize the need to divert individuals from becoming involved in the formal criminal justice process if there is a tactic, or action that will cause them to change their lives before they become just another statistic in the system."

"Unfortunately we practitioners consider this a success. The system is overburdened and the 'wheels of Justice turn slow.' These individuals are arrested and back on the streets before we can get back to the field. They are back on the streets ready to continue their criminal enterprise. If these individuals go back to school, work, or move (change their environment), local law enforcement feels this is a success.

"The cost of putting these individuals into the system is hard to measure considering the cost of incarceration, probation or parole supervision, continued substance abuse, domestic violence, single-parent homes, and fatherless children living in poverty. However, telling these thrill-seeking, reckless, impulsive personalities not to become involved in criminal activity rarely dissuades them from engaging in these types of activities.

"Dealing with individuals with this predisposition normally requires a significant or traumatic event to alter their life's course. I mean a loss of employment, loss of significant other, or loss of freedom - not by their choice. This tactic will work only for a short period of time during an individual's life - maybe the early teens to early twenties.

"This was the reason we [the gang unit] stayed on these youths to hopefully intervene before they got injured, pregnant, or drug addicted. We would call parents out of their beds to meet us at two or three in the morning to get their child. Hopefully this would stop a small number of potential problem makers. This also created contacts with parents and potential sources of intelligence."

Calling a youth's parents at two or three in the morning to get them to come pick up their errant youth is a form of diversion and referral used by some police gang unit officers. In addition, police sometimes referred youths to informal probation. In these cases a probation officer sought help for the youths without going through juvenile court.

Intelligence Tactics

Field Note: The supervisor of the gang unit told me "Every city's gang problem is a little different and their police department's need to do somewhat different things - their tactics will vary."

While riding with police gang units I noticed what seemed to be a preference for gathering intelligence over making arrests. This impression was further supported by Katz's and Webb's research where they found that "Officers, both within and outside the gang unit, believed that if gang unit officers engaged in suppression activity and arrested gang members, it would be more difficult for them to gather future intelligence." (Katz and Webb, 2004, p. 62) The intelligence gathered was either turned over to other units for action (resulting in, for example, the narcotics unit making an arrest instead of the gang unit), used by the gang unit to further its investigatory function, or both.

Developing Reliable Sources of Intelligence

The primary purpose of a gang unit is to gather and analyze intelligence on gangs, conduct investigations, and to suppress gang activity. Gathering the intelligence needed to effectively respond to a community's gang situation requires reliable sources of intelligence. One of the most significant activities in which gang unit officers participate is developing and cultivating these sources.

Among the primary sources of intelligence are concerned citizens, parents and guardians of gang members, gang members and their associates, girls friends and wives of gang members, delivery people (i.e., food, postal, delivery services), social agency personnel who work with gang neighborhood residents, and detention/jail/prison personnel.

Field Note: On several different occasions police told me "We try to develop a good relationship with the young girls in the gang neighborhoods. They're just like their mothers - concerned about their little brothers and boy friends. If they think they're getting involved in gang activity, they sometimes talk to us about it. They can be a good source of intelligence."

Familiarization Drives

Directed patrol finds police patrolling in specific places at specific times because, in the past, problems have erupted in those locations at similar times. In like fashion, gang unit officers typically drive by suspected gang members' homes, hideouts, hangouts, and drug houses, to familiarize themselves with those properties and their surroundings.

The police I observed were constantly learning their way through the beat neighborhoods - both by car and on foot. Routes of escape had to be learned as well as where suspects lived, the kinds of cars they drove, where they usually parked, and so on. Familiarization drives provided a foundation upon which other tactics were based.

High Visibility Surveillance or Saturation

During a normal shift a patrol car may drive through a given intersection every hour or so. Where high visibility surveillance is being conducted that car may drive through the intersection every 20 minutes, and it will be a marked patrol car. Police on bikes, foot, or riding horseback may be used. Increasing the visibility of the police is intended to deter potential offenders from offending - including gang members.

Field Note: The gang squad leader told me "Zero tolerance is a part of a three pronged approach we use against gangs. We created a policy which consisted of high visibility saturation policing of particularly troubled areas, we carry out continuous intelligence gathering, and enforce a zero tolerance policy."

The squad leader believes the three-pronged approach "is deterrence. It includes psychological warfare - we wear gang members down with our zero tolerance and by continuously telling them 'We know what you're up to and we're watching you.'" This was a policy I observed in many of the gang units I studied.

In a personal letter, a gang unit supervisor shared his comments regarding high visibility saturation. Here's what he wrote:

This tactic is more significant than it first appears. I will discuss the

premise this is founded upon. Citizens with information or concerned about gangs were directed to me. I often arrived at work and found thirty to forty voice mails on my telephone. I listened to their messages then contacted those with the most promising information.

All the messages with potential gang information were forwarded to our department's Crime Analyst. She sorted through and summarized their content then provided a report with the most significant information underlined.

I distributed the reports to the rest of the gang unit. The officers then starting driving by the locations from which the calls originally came and wrote descriptions of vehicles in the vicinity, their license numbers, etc. I contacted the citizens discretely and provided them with the cellular phone and pager numbers for my unit's officers. That way the citizens would not get the normal run around by calling 911.

The citizens became our eyes and ears. We had so few officers that this was a necessity if we were going to be effective. When citizens called and got immediate service they were happy. Since we started showing up at just the right time (when trouble was brewing), the gang members thought some of their cronies were snitching on them. This sometimes caused distrust and dissention - they never really knew who they could trust.

The citizens loved us, however the problem children did not like the fact that we would show up any time any place. We did not drive up in front of their homes, lights flashing, radios turned up, slamming our car doors. Instead, we came out of nowhere.

When we were alerted that something was going on, we moved into the area wearing our POLICE vests, jackets, and insignia. We stopped cars using our red lights, and talked to interested people in the area. They were possible future information sources.

The troublemakers thought "Holly cow the cops are all over us - they know what we are doing!" Hopefully they would move to another area then it would take a few months for the new neighbors to identify the trouble makers and the process would **start again**. (Personal correspondence, police Lieutenant, department gang unit, November, 2001)

Knock and Search/Talk

In a *knock and search/talk*, gang unit officers approach a residence, knock on the door, talk with the occupant and possibly carry on a rudimentary search of the premises with the consent of the resident. It sounds simple, but the information this tactic produces

makes it particularly useful for gathering intelligence as well as defusing potentially explosive situations.

Field Note: Describing his *knock and search/talk* technique, a gang unit supervisor said "We would show up, tell them we just didn't drive down the street and pick their house at random, which was true, to a point. Usually we had information that suspected criminal activity was going on in the house. We would insinuate that snitches had put us onto these people. Occasionally the residents would tell us they knew who had informed on them and they would retaliate by giving information on the suspected snitch. More intelligence for us!"

This tactic may be used at the homes of suspected gang members as well as non-gang members. Everyone and anyone who is concerned about gangs, or who the police would like to talk to, was a target for this tactic.

Building Databases

Law enforcement agencies across the nation are building databases of gang-related information. Not all jurisdiction have them or even want them. Some of those who have them don't use them.

A new national gang database was designed, and became operational on October 1, 1995. The Violent Gang and Terrorist Organization File (VGTOF) is a component of the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) and is tailored after the NCIC Wanted Persons File records. The system is operated and managed by the FBI with input from an advisory board.

The database provides identifying information about gangs and gang members to law enforcement personnel. This information serves to warn law enforcement personnel of the potential danger posed by violent individuals, and promotes the exchange of information about gangs and their members to facilitate criminal investigations. This pointer system acts as an early warning system in apprising local law enforcement agencies of an emerging gang problem. (Wiley, 1997, [page](#))

Databases are costly to develop and maintain and their content is constantly changing as gang members move, die, get locked up, buy new cars, divorce, remarry, change names, and so on. When used, they can be an effective way of locating suspected gangsters for

whom warrants have been issued and for providing law enforcement agencies with information about migrating gang members.

Confidential Informants

Found in nearly every aspect of policing, confidential informants (CIs) are an important element in the array of tactics employed by police gang units as well as police in all other units. Older gang members who are tired of the gang scene and want to see it come to an end sometimes turn into CIs. They are particularly useful when it comes to impending acts of violence - which they would prefer to see avoided. There are also young gang members who get caught breaking the law whose behavior goes unreported by gang unit officers in exchange for needed information.

The tactics we've discussed so far, and those to follow, are sometimes used in concert with other tactics. In addition, other law enforcement agencies may be engaged to employ them.

A small multi-agency task force successfully dismantled New York City's Puerto Rican Black Park Gang, so named because it shot out lights surrounding its base of operations in a park to avoid police detection. It was a very violent drug gang - believed to be responsible for 15 murders - that trafficked in drugs and used the proceeds to buy legitimate businesses through which it laundered drug profits.

The investigation was led by the homicide investigation unit of the New York County (Manhattan) District Attorney's Office and joined by the New York City Police Department, other New York agencies, and several Federal agencies, including the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration), and ATF (Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms).

Tactics used included intensive study and initial surveillance, infiltration of the gang by undercover officers, cultivation and use of confidential informants, electronic surveillance, cooperation with probation and parole officers, and asset forfeiture. ([Bureau of Justice Statistics](#), 2000, color and italics added for emphasis)

Decoding Communications

Nearly all specialized groups in a society develop a language of their own - certain phrases, sayings, or terms that are peculiar to each group. A specialized language is also referred to as *argot*. Lawyers have their argot (i.e., "party of the third part"), students have an argot (i.e., "carrying a heavy load this semester"), and gang members have their argot.

Police use deciphering as a means of determining what gang members are communicating. Some of the ways in which gang members communicate with each other are more easily deciphered than others.

Gangs, like any other criminal enterprise, or any organization for that matter, need to communicate internally in order to maintain control. The daily activities of a street gang generate a constant stream of information including orders from gang leaders, warnings, tips, threats, gang propaganda and street gossip. As gangs grow in size both numerically and geographically, the need for effective communication becomes both more important and difficult. Add to this the complications caused when senior gang members are incarcerated and the need for secret communication becomes more apparent. (Olson, 2001, Removed from the Internet as of 17 October 2009)

Graffiti, tattoos, newsletters, Web pages, and colors are the more visible and well known means of communication used by gang members to communicate with each other. Ciphers, codes, and concealment are the less detectable methods. As Olson (2001) notes:

Ciphers involve the replacement of true letters or numbers with different characters. Ciphers have been common since ancient times and vary in degree of complexity and sophistication. An example of a simple cipher would be to shift the alphabet one position to the right so that a true A would be replaced with B, B with C and so forth. In this manner the name "FRANK" would be encrypted as "GSBOL."

Unlike ciphers, **codes** may represent words, phrases or ideas instead of individual letters. Codes can be spoken, written or, in the case of pagers, digital. Gang codes, especially those that represent the names of individual gang members, are common in gang graffiti. Code words are often nothing more than street slang but may also include code words specifically created with secrecy in mind.

Foreign languages are common sources of gang code words. Pager codes typically involve the use of numeric sequences to communicate specific messages. For example, a gang member may send a page that reads "876," the gang member's identity code, followed by "999," the code for "I need more drugs to distribute."

Concealment involves hiding the message itself as a form of secrecy. Concealment methods are commonly used by prison gangs to communicate both within and outside the prison walls. Most concealment methods involve hiding a message within the body of a larger text. For example, a concealed message could be recovered by reading every seventh word of an innocent looking letter. (Olson, 2001, Removed from the Internet as of 17 October 2009)

The tactic, then, becomes learning the argot of gangs. This is not an easy task as the argot may differ from one gang to another and from one community to another. It's worth learning, however, because knowing what's being communicated provides officers with intelligence on who's in the neighborhood, who's angry at who, where drug deals are occurring, what's being planned, and more.

Field Interview Reports

A field interview report is completed during and after a discussion with an individual in the "field" (i.e., on the street, in a building). Among other things, the report asks for the name, address, phone number, and place of employment of the individual. It also includes the time and place at which the report was taken and a description of the suspect (height, weight, clothing, scars, tattoos, and other identifiers). These reports are entered into the police department's databank and used whenever needed.

Field Note: Frank is a gang unit officer. When I joined him tonight he said "The heat is on about the current gang situation. We've had three drive by shootings over the last ten days. The third one took place earlier today." I asked him where the "heat" was coming from. "From the top down," he said. "The City Manager called the City Council and someone in the Council called the Chief. The Chief called the Major, the Major called our Lieutenant, and the Lieutenant called our Sergeant. So, the heat is on."

I asked Frank what his objective was tonight, to which he immediately replied "To throw some people in jail!" As we rode around City Park we saw three patrol cars, all with their red and blue lights flashing. Frank parked the car and we walked to the scene. Four well-dressed African-American youths were standing by a car. The patrol officers pulled them over for failing to have a working stop light at the rear of their car.

The officers filled out field interview reports on each suspect then released them. No drugs. No guns. No graffiti or tattoos. No belligerence. Just four more African-American youths pulled over by the police for a minor offense and now

they are on record.

I asked the gang unit officer I was with why these people were handled this way. "Basically, in this neighborhood, every car that's in violation is pulled over," he replied. "We want information on everyone here and want to make the impression that we are here and enforcing the law. It's all about the 'no tolerance' approach to dealing with crime and gangs in the neighborhood."

If a corner liquor store is burglarized, police may query the Field Interview Report databank to find the names and addresses of individuals who are known to hang around that corner. They may have been in the vicinity during the burglary and possess valuable information. Or they may be a suspect.

Developing a Picture Album

Nearly every gang unit I visited had a picture album or a wall or website of pictures displaying the faces of local gang members both known and suspected. In some cases the pictures were categorized by gang. The most organized presentations included a brief biography of each gang member along with their monikers, names of known associates, gang names, pictures of tattoos and other identifiers, phone numbers, address, the make and model of their car, and more.

Field Note: The gang unit officers I was riding with stopped two young men in a downtown alley. One of the officers began to question the men while the other officer reached into the trunk of the patrol car for a Polaroid camera. Pictures were taken of each suspect. One of the men asked "Can we have a picture of both of us?" "Sure," replied the officer. As he took the picture he told the men "Hey, come on, throw some signs or something, make it good!" They did.

The officer then pocketed the picture, sneered at the two men and told me "Now we have a picture to use in court in case the judge asks us how we know either one of the them is in a gang with the other!"

The pictures are used to familiarize officers with what suspects look like should a warrant for their arrest be issued. They are also used to jog memories for specifics when certain gang members' names are mentioned. They also make for interesting wallpaper.

Involvement with Other Community Agencies

By maintaining contact with community members in non-police agencies, gang unit officers continue to gather intelligence and have an opportunity to share what they know. The contacts may be informal or formalized, as they are in a community-wide task force on gangs.

I observed gang unit officers who were involved with school personnel, juvenile/probation/parole officers, members of local faith institutions and business organizations, and a multitude of community-based service agencies ranging from family violence and child abuse centers to Boys and Girls Club. People in each of these agencies have something of value to offer gang unit officers. The reverse is also true. Representatives from the schools, faith institutions, and the business community benefit from hearing about their local gang situation and may, in return, be able to do something to help reduce gang activity.

Community-based agencies may also be able to help prevent children from becoming involved in gangs if they know what's going on - and the gang unit members can help them learn about that. These are the kinds of things that happen when a community task force on gangs and youth violence is created and is working effectively.

Graffiti Intelligence

Field Note: A gang unit officer told me "Graffiti defines turf for the gang and is a warning to others. It also creates fear in neighborhoods. This is the reason we respond aggressively to remove, or abate the graffiti. It should not be taken lightly by communities."

I spent many hours over the past three years observing gang unit officers as they read and interpreted gang graffiti. Sometimes the effort was fruitless, other times it offered useful intelligence. Knowing which gangs are operative at any given time and being able to read this "newspaper for gang members" [aids police gang unit investigations](#).

Suppression Tactics

Sometimes referred to as suppression, these enforcement activities include detaining (holding without arrest) or arresting suspects. Among the tactics used are:

Consent to Search

I accompanied gang unit officers as they approached suspected gang members' residences and asked for permission to enter and look around. It didn't matter whether the person answering the door was a parent, guardian of the gang member, or a gang member him- or herself ... most allowed the officer to enter and search.

One of the benefits of the consent to search tactic is that police are liberated from legal constraints that would normally be imposed if there were no consent. If consent was required, they would have to show probable cause - and that can sometimes be difficult.

The consent to search has become a very effective and important part of legal search and seizures. This investigative tool is a boon to the criminal justice system from the higher courts in that it returns limited power for conducting warrantless searches to patrol officers.

It is more of a gift when one realizes that suspects often grant permission to conduct a search regardless that they are actually concealing culpable evidence. Unlike other aspects of search and seizure, the consent to search is not littered with technicalities that protect criminals. (Fagan, 1997, page)

Consent to search visits produce intelligence about gang members' activities and associates (often found in photographs) and sometimes result in arrests when contraband (i.e., stolen goods, illegal drugs, paraphernalia) is found. This tactic is also used with suspects' vehicles.

Humiliation

It was about two o'clock in the morning and I was riding through a large mid-west city's inner-city area in an unmarked police gang unit car. There were two gang unit members in the front seat, I was sitting in the back seat alone. The officers stopped the car and stared at a group of three African-American males who were leaning against a car while smoking some marijuana.

As we approached, the one with the marijuana threw it under the car. The officers got out, told the suspects to "Just stand there," and looked for and found the marijuana. The suspect who had thrown it down was handcuffed and placed in the back seat with me. For the next 15 minutes we drove around the neighborhood as the police and I questioned this 23 year old suspect. He was not affiliated with a gang, had a job, and was supporting the mother of his child while living with his grandparents.

The officers gathered all the intelligence they were going to get and decided not to arrest him. Instead, they said "That's it. We'll drop you off." "Please don't drop me off in front of my grandparent's home," he said. "I don't want them to know you picked me up." "OK," said the officer, and he proceeded to not only drop the man off in front of his grandparents' home, he honked before he did it.

This subtle form of intimidation was intended to humiliate and embarrass the man and to establish that the cops were what? Tough? Not to be reckoned with? I was somewhat mystified and received no intelligible answer when I asked why they did what they did. In fact, it struck me that they alienated someone who could have been of some use to them at a later date.

Field Note: A gang unit supervisor suggested that "The underlying reason for this activity is not totally humiliation. The reason this is done is to ruin the street reputation of the individual in his neighborhood. If they are seen riding around in a police car, the 'Thugs' are going to suspect he is talking to the police. Why else would be riding with us? He may erroneously be labeled a 'snitch' or not be able to sell or purchase controlled substances until he reaffirms his loyalty to the 'hood.' A name for this tactic could be 'discrediting.'"

Regardless, in one community after another, police harassed, embarrassed, and humiliated gang members without seeming to give what they were doing a second thought. In time, as I was told, it was being done to "prove we (the officers) are in control" and "to get their (gang members') respect." I think it also creates a great deal of anger towards police.

Cuffing

Regardless of whether the suspected gang member we pulled over

or stopped had allegedly committed a violation of the law or not, some gang unit officers cuffed them before doing anything else. As one of them told me, "You have to get their respect. If you don't, the next officer they confront will pay for it."

Once again, as it appeared to me, the tactic alienated and angered suspects as they were rendered helpless without probable cause. It seemed an abuse of power, although some police insisted it made their interaction with gang members safer. That's probably true, in the short run.

Zero Tolerance

This tactic involves stopping vehicles and running the occupants' drivers license numbers through the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) in Washington, D.C., or through some other central database containing information on criminal offenders. The pretext for stopping the vehicle may be a broken tail light or some other minor infraction. Having been found in violation of some ordinance or law, police now have probable cause to hold, question, and search the suspect and certain parts of his or her vehicle.

The purpose of the zero tolerance tactic is to obtain information and make the point that the police are in the area and actively pursuing "the bad guys." In addition, police will attempt to collect whatever other useful information they can by questioning the suspects. It's like "panning for gold," as one interview subject put it.

Field Note: I was interviewing a Lieutenant who had directed the city's gang unit for nearly a decade. The interview took place in a self-serve restaurant and the tray for our food was still sitting on our table. It had a napkin in it which was shaped into a small ball.

"It's like panning for gold," he said. He picked up the tray and began swirling it around as though he were panning for gold. The napkin rolled around on the tray.

Pretending to pick small pieces of something out of the tray and throwing them out he said "It's like this. We go in, chase a few, catch some and, if they're little ones, we move on. The point is to keep panning until we find the big one."

He picked up the balled napkin and continued "The one with the gun, or the drugs, or with the information we're looking for. We know where the hot spots are - where they party or meet, where certain gangsters live or stay. We target those areas and start panning."

Not all police like to use zero tolerance in their dealings with gang members. As with each tactic, there is a potential for the tactic to backfire.

Field Note: The gang unit supervisor said "If we practiced zero tolerance, it would create a 'siege mentality' among the gang members. Individually they would be pissed and it would give members from different gangs something in common to complain about. It would have the potential of creating solidarity among different gangs and may have greater potential for problems than for any meaningful and long-lasting solutions."

Since most people violate one law or another, a zero tolerance policy has the potential of pulling everyone into the purview of the police and does so legally. This gives the police a powerful tool in gathering intelligence about gang members and may produce an arrest of someone who had an outstanding warrant.

Field Note: Another gang unit officer told me "We can't do zero tolerance because we are an intelligence unit. It would take time away from what we need to do. And if we jack the gang members around we wouldn't have as good a line of communication with them as we do now. They wouldn't help us get the kind of intel we really want.

We want the large deals, lots of guns, drugs and cash. When we do move on someone or on a gang, we do it well. We get convictions. And that's a result of the intel work we do, and getting intel from gang members is part of that. That's why we don't have a zero tolerance policy. Besides, if we tried a zero tolerance approach, the courts wouldn't back us up. This is a very tolerant city. The courts are very lenient."

In addition to determining if any of the occupants have warrants out for their arrest, gang unit officers learn whether the car the suspect is driving is the car associated with the driver's license, and who's riding around or associating with who. A visual search of the car may take place and, if the officer feels like it, he may ask for the driver's consent to search the entire car.

One of the Caucasian gang members I interviewed, a man who has since turned his life around and is living a legitimate existence, told me "A police policy of zero tolerance is good and bad. If they hadn't used zero tolerance on me I'd probably either be in prison or dead by now. Some people - like me - need to be arrested to have a chance to change."

Street- or Gang Sweeps

With sufficient intelligence about gang members in a given neighborhood or on a specific street, officers may sweep into the area and make several arrests at the same time. Police know that "Long-term proactive investigations of entire gangs are more effective than short-term investigations of individual gang members." (Jackson and McBride, 1985, p. 28) Long-term proactive investigations result in more arrests and increase the likelihood of conviction as a result of better investigations with more evidence and witness testimony.

According to Wilson (2000)

The most notorious gang sweep, Operation Hammer, was an LAPD CRASH operation launched in South Central Los Angeles in 1988. One thousand police officers swept through the area on a Friday night and again on Saturday, arresting likely gang members for a wide variety of offenses, including already-existing warrants, new traffic citations, curfew violations, gang-related behaviors, and observed criminal activities.

All of those arrested (1,453 persons) were taken to a mobile booking operation adjacent to Memorial Coliseum. Most of the arrested youth were released without charges. Slightly more than half were gang members. There were only 60 felony arrests, and charges were filed in only 32 instances. "This remarkably inefficient process was repeated many times, although with smaller forces—more typically one hundred or two hundred officers." (Howell, 2000, page)

A practice somewhat akin to a sweep is called "**jamming**" whereby gang unit officers identify and stop gang members on the street (in

their cars, on their motorcycles, etc.) in hopes of finding them in possession of drugs, weapons, contraband, or someone for whom there is an outstanding warrant. ([Katz and Webb](#), 2004, p. 103)

Sting

A law enforcement "sting" is typically a planned event wherein law enforcement authorities entice suspects to attend or otherwise participate in an activity at which, unbeknownst to the suspects', the police will issue warrants or make arrests. This may be used with suspected or known gang members and other types of offenders.

Targeting Hotspots

Using this tactic police apply pressure on gangs. They target areas of the community (usually particular neighborhoods, parks, or gang hangouts) and conduct continuing surveillance, [saturation policing](#), and [sweeps](#).

Cutting off the Head of the Serpent

The tactic of pursuing and arresting the leader, more dominant, or core members of a gang is referred to as "cutting off the head of the serpent." In some instances this produces a reduction in gang activity and may even foretell the end of the gang. It is estimated that only 10% or less of the known gang population in the United States is made up of core members. Core members (usually the more violent members of the gang) are the primary targets of police gang units especially where gang activity has escalated to dangerous levels.

Combined Intelligence and Suppression Tactics

Psychological Warfare

This tactic may be exemplified by a police car stopping in front of a group of suspected gang members or associates and finds the police in a staring match with them. The purpose of this tactic is to instill fear and keep suspected gang members off balance.

Field Note: A veteran gang unit commander told me "When we pull up and look them over, the kids who aren't doing anything wrong just wonder 'What are you doing here?' The one that's standing in

the group and has a bag of dope in his pocket is thinking 'Oh, crap! I got to get out of here!' and he runs. Maybe he tosses the dope. We get him."

When I asked a veteran gang unit commander what he'd call this tactic he said "That's a sort of psychological warfare." Among other things, police use this tactic in hopes of learning who's in the neighborhood, who's associating with who, who's wearing what, and driving which car. "The purpose for doing this," I was told, "is to gather intelligence." I was also told "We do this to intimidate suspects and let them know they're being watched and that the police are in the neighborhood. That's the primary reason for doing it."

Field Note: We paid a visit to one of the town's high school's today. It is directly across from a middle school and both schools are known to be the most ethnically and racially mixed in the city. Three Asian groups are represented in the student body (Cambodians, Laotians and Vietnamese) as are several of the African-American gangs.

We arrived just before school let out and within minutes members of the police gang unit were asking youths to get out of their cars, took their pictures, frisked them, and tried to determine if they were up to no good.

No guns, drugs, or other contraband were found on the youths nor in their cars. A total of three people were arrested on outstanding warrants - all of them for traffic violations that had not been taken care of in court in the required amount of time.

The three arrests took a total of 2 hours and 5 minutes and tied up seven officers in the gang squad, five officers from the SWAT team and several patrol officers. Two sergeants were in the crowd.

In reference to the pulling over of the cars and a truck, the gang unit supervisor told me "This whole thing is just to let them know that we're still here - that we might pop up anywhere. You know, it's the start of a new school year!"

Some gang unit officers attempt to instill paranoia in gang members'

minds in hopes of turning gang members against one another. A gang supervisor told me "Sometimes I get information about gang activity from local residents. I may use that information and, if it leads to arresting a gang member, he'll say 'How'd you know about that? Who's been talkin' to you?' Then I tell him 'I have snitches. You know that. Do you really know your friends?' Then he starts getting paranoid and starts wondering which one of his own are talking to the police. It works. We keep them off balance like that." That's a form of psychological warfare.

Field Note: A gang unit member said "Sometimes I get dropped off in an alley, behind some gangster's house or where there's some gang activity taking place. The other officers drive up in front of the house, maybe slam on the brakes and make a little noise. Then they throw the car door open, I run from behind the house and jump into the car and we take off. Scares the hell out of 'em! They get paranoid thinking that cops are hiding everywhere. 'Hey, look up there. Inside that street light! I see a camera. They're watchin' us from everywhere!'"

Working Cooperatively with Other Units in the Police Department

Although one might take inner-department cooperation for granted, I learned many years ago that would be a mistake. Inner-departmental jealousies and misunderstandings are rampant in American law enforcement as they are in many other bureaucracies. With limited resources and badly deteriorating communication, cooperation between gang units and the rest of their departments was an exception rather than the rule in the departments I visited.

Where cooperation existed I found patrol officers asking questions of their suspects which they could only have learned to ask if the patrol officers had spoken with the gang unit officers. Gang-related cases that fell into the hands of the patrol- or narcotics units usually found their way to the gang unit in departments where cooperation between the units was found. Where there was a lack of cooperation, the patrol- or narcotics unit handled the case without informing the gang unit. Little, if any, information was exchanged.

Field Note: The sergeant of the gang unit told me "The newest information on gang members is coming to my office from the Assaults Unit in

another part of the department. As they investigate assault cases they sometimes find the suspect or victim to have gang-related tattoos, or paraphernalia typical of gang members, or they find graffiti at the scene of a crime. This information is passed on to my unit.

"There are several reasons why assaults may sometimes be associated with gang activity. Gang members are involved in assaults as a consequence of drug deals gone bad. Assaults are also associated with arguments between gang members over girls or women or they are related to invasions of turf or territory." The sergeant suggested "They sometimes have to do with racial hatred."

Working with officers in other units in a police department is enhanced when the gang unit is involved in the academy training through which all new recruits must pass. It is even more effective in departments which require seasoned officers to take on-going training in the academy throughout their career in the department.

Field Note: Dale, a four-year veteran of the gang squad, said he would like to get involved in the police training academy so new recruits would learn about gangs and how to respond to them and to their members. He told me about a police officer who approached a Hispanic gang member.

"It's common for the members of [this] gang to wear a red rosary around their neck with a red cross dangling from it. Our officer approached him, stuck his finger out and flipped the cross saying 'So you're a [member of that gang], huh?'" Dale was stunned.

"Not only did the officer show disrespect for the gang member, he destroyed our ability to gain further intelligence and, worse, he gave away the fact that we knew that youths wearing red rosaries and red crosses were gang members! Now none of them wear the rosary or red cross! I'd like to do something to prevent such things from happening in the future."

Networking with Other Law Enforcement Agencies

In many communities the city police department's gang unit meets with members of other area law enforcement agencies. County sheriffs, state police, and federal law enforcement agents are typically a part of this specialized task force. In the worst circumstances, some of the representatives fail to come to meetings or arrests become a matter of competition rather than cooperation. In the best of circumstances, they share intelligence and cooperate in sharing intelligence and making arrests.

Field Note: Explaining how the representative from the FBI dealt with gangs, the director of one of its gang investigation units said "Like with the Chicago Boys (a gang which had migrated from Chicago to his community), we worked with other area police and sheriffs in building the case against them. The FBI Special Agents in Chicago made the arrests there while we arrested other suspects here. What we bring to the team is the advantage of being able to operate anywhere in the country, and that helps when dealing with gangs and gang members who are mobile."

He also said "We sometimes create our own task force groups, on an *ad hoc* basis, to deal with special situations when they arise. We have limited manpower, so the task force approach is an especially good way to utilize our agents and enhance their impact. We are dedicated to working with local law enforcement, and that increases our effectiveness - everyone's effectiveness."

Interagency Affiliation

Some police gang units employ the talents of people who are not employees of the police agency. Included are Special Agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. Other agencies may be represented or, as in England and the Netherlands, professional researchers and social scientists may be affiliated with the gang unit.

I visited with several of these gang units and was told by one

commander that, "Since there's a tie between drugs and guns and between gangs and drugs, we needed an ATF (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms) agent to track down illegally possessed guns, and things like that. And, when a case can be made a Federal case, he can facilitate moving it to the United States Attorney General's office and on."

Other tactics for dealing with gang members include:

-  knowing that a little discretion (letting someone off) on minor offenses can go a long way in building trust and, in the long run, obtaining intelligence.
-  never speaking with the public or the press without the approval of one's supervisor. Controlling the flow of information is important.
-  getting gang members to brag about their activities and the activities of other gang members as well as rivals. If this can be captured on videotape, all the better. It all adds to the intelligence the gang unit officer is able to acquire.
-  gaining an understanding of the culture of the gang members and their slang. This aids in understanding their motivations and in communicating with them.
-  whenever possible, looking through suspected or known gang members' wallets, purses, vehicles, residences, notebooks and other property. Taking photographs of gang members (especially in groups), observing their tattoos, jewelry, and the clothing they are wearing, the words they use, learning their monikers, check their surroundings, and generally familiarizing oneself with each suspect adds significantly to the officer's stockpile of intelligence.
-  remembering that "respect" is very important to gang members. Police who recognize this are likely to reduce confrontations with gang members and obtain better intelligence from them. Gang members are more willing to talk with officers who show respect than with those who are disrespectful.

It is in the best interests of the patrol officer - and everybody in the community - for him or her to relate as positively as possible with street gangs, without compromising the dignity and integrity of the badge one wears. (Jackson and McBride, 2000, p. 107)



showing respect to the family and friends of gang members increases the amount of intelligence which may be gathered from them concerning the gang member in question. Females, if shown respect, are more likely to reveal information about gang members than are the males in the family.



making positive contact with gangsters where no legal action need be taken. Examples include stopping them just to talk and ask how they are doing, what's going on, etc. Whenever possible, do not develop an antagonistic, "we-them" relationship with gangsters. It will create a barrier to gathering intelligence.



not using the word "intelligence" when speaking with gang members, their friends, or relatives. "Information" is less loaded and a more civilianized term which may be used in its place.



recognizing that the officers who work in detention or the jail are in a good position for obtaining information from incarcerated gang members. They may be included in gang-related training offered by the department or other area agencies so they can discern when important information is coming their way, how to disseminate it properly, and how they should present themselves with gangsters who are in confinement.



being aware of community-based programs which offer prevention and/or intervention services so certain at-risk youth and less-committed gang members may be diverted from the justice system (when appropriate) and referred for help. Keeping a list of contacts and phone numbers which may be shared with those youths and their families is a related tactic.

All the tactics discussed above are ones I saw in operation. I'm sure there are others. For example, while I never saw or interviewed an undercover gang member, I know they exist and have been effective.

Before leaving this topic I should add that beyond suppression is treatment. That is, once an offender (a gang member for our purposes) is arrested and convicted, what good is it all if the offender is eventually returned to society without treatment? Later in *Into the Abyss* you'll find information on what can be done for or with gang members who want to change their ways while they are incarcerated (if you want to read that, go to the Site Map: Chapter 25, Part 3, Topic 6).

As police work with gangs and their members they develop a wide range of perceptions about them. That's our next topic of discussion.

Next

Additional Resources: You can learn more about the [Vital Intervention and Directional Alternatives \(VIDA\)](#) program begun in Los Angeles. Visit the site of the [Boys and Girls Club of America, San Francisco](#), [East Valley](#) (Arizona), [Whittier](#) (CA), [Petaluma](#) (CA) or the [Boys and Girls Club of Canada](#).

You can read more about [The Violent Gang and Terrorist Organizations File](#) and the [National Crime Information Center \(NCIC\)](#). The Mid-States Organized Crime Information Center (MOCIC) is one of several [regional information/intelligence centers](#), several of which have databases on gangs. [GangNet](#) provides tracking information on gang-related activities, gang members, associates and criminal organizations, to name just a few.

You can read story about [Ohio's database](#) and the legislative act that created the [Illinois Statewide Organized Gang Database Act](#). The United States Bureau of Justice Assistance sponsored a series

of studies which identified the most promising strategies for dealing with urban street gangs. It focuses exclusively on [enforcement and prosecution strategies](#). The Center for Problem-Oriented Policing provides a nice overview of the [SARA Model - Scanning, Analysis, Response, Assessment](#).

While not about gangs, the *Charleston Gazette* has an informative three-part series on "[Confidential Informants in the Local Drug War](#)." Some of the problems associated with using confidential informants are discussed and are applicable to using confidential gang informants.

Robert Walker has an interesting list of [words/expressions used by gang members](#) as part of their argot.

[Urban Street Gang Enforcement](#), published by the U.S. Department of Justice, provides some insights on how gang informants may be used within the context of information or intelligence gathering. You can also read about the requirements for developing and using confidential informants as outlined in the [Los Angeles Police Department's policies](#) (scroll down to item "V. Confidential Informants").

For examples of community task force groups dealing with gangs and youth violence you can visit the [Task Force on Gangs and Youth Violence](#), the [Aurora \(CO\) Gang Task Force](#), and The [Mayor's \(Houston, TX\) Gang Task Force](#) (a "best practices" program).

If you're curious about how to interpret graffiti, take a look at Steve [Nawojczyk's site](#) or visit StreetGangs' site and click on the [Crip](#), [Blood](#), or [Hispanic](#) graffiti you'd like to have interpreted.

Examples of interagency law enforcement task forces dealing with gangs include the [Metropolitan \(Indianapolis, IN\) Gang Safe Street Task Force](#), the [Dane County \(WI\) Narcotics and Gang Task Force](#), and the [New Haven \(CT\) Gang Task Force](#), to mention only a few.

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