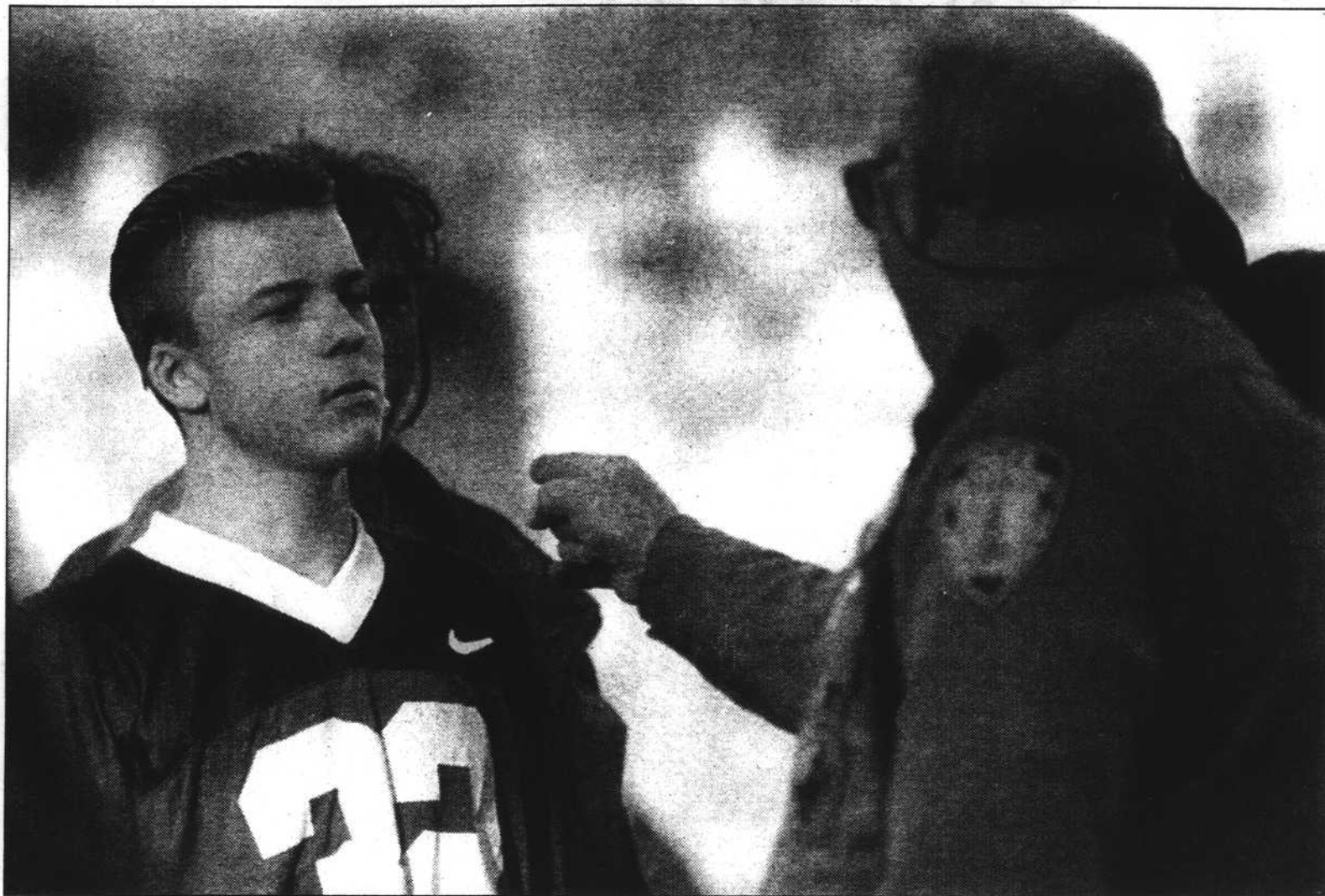


STREET GANGS: *A Growing Dilemma*



A Lincoln police officer breaks up a fight before it happens at Lincoln Northeast High School. The young man involved may not have been a gangster, but was wearing Crip colors and a rag around his hand.

Gangs

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rags. In January 1994, when the Lincoln Police Department began tracking gang activity, 23 "sets" were identified.

Now, more than 300 members have self-reported their affiliation to police. But some law enforcement officials estimate there are at least twice as many 10- to 30-year-olds associated with Lincoln street gangs.

Many residents panic when they see a group of kids wearing baggy clothes and professional team jackets. Tarilyn Haist called police one weekday morning last month when she saw three Asian boys sitting on the sidewalk in front of her two-story home near First and D streets.

The boys, who said they were all 13, looked like triplets: They had identical bob haircuts, black baggy jeans with white stitching, white T-shirts and huge blue and black Starter jackets — so large that all three could have climbed into one.

In this day and age, Haist said, you can't take many chances.

"This used to be a really nice neighborhood, but now you have to be afraid for your life," she said, standing on her porch in a bathrobe. "That's why when we see something abnormal, we report it. When you see these kids sitting around with these jackets, it's kind of scary."

The three boys — who later said they had been suspended from Culler Middle School earlier that day — would have made only the first level in the nine-step rating criteria for gang association. They knew gang lingo but said they weren't "claiming" affiliation to a gang.

Their innocent looks and eagerness to play on a swingset in Cooper Park were more telling than their gang-like clothing. The boys talked tough, but when approached by a news reporter they asked if he was with the FBI, then ran away.

"A lot of kids do a lot of chest beating, but when it comes right down to it, there is a definite lack of leadership," said Nelson, a 20-year veteran of the Lincoln Police Department. "There is a lot of talk and a lot of smoke and mirrors, but we don't have the problems that Omaha's got."

What is a gang?

A street gang, according to Lincoln police, is an ongoing group of three or

more people who share a common sense of identity, which exists in part to commit crimes.

Without the criminal element, everyone belongs to one gang or another — fraternities, sororities, clubs and teams. But for many youths, a gang is the only group that readily accepts their membership.

Initiation into a gang is a street kid's baptism. After the painful beating comes immediate family, respect and most important — money.

"I ain't gonna work at no Mickey D's," said "Two-face," a 17-year-old boy who claims he is a member of a Crip gang. Instead, he said, he deals drugs near 24th and W streets.

"You can get rich over there," Two-face said in an interview at the Lincoln Attention Center, the city's only juvenile jail. "A piece of crack in a (large) city would cost \$20. It would sell here for \$60. Those \$60s add up — as many as 20 times a day."

The primary mission for gang members is to hold their territory and protect what is theirs. But in Lincoln, Bloods walk among Crips and Baggy Boys. Gang territories have not been strictly defined, Nelson said.

Many cities would beg for Lincoln's gang condition. No territories mean fewer drive-by retaliation shootings. And fewer shootings mean a faceless problem.

Lincoln police declined to identify the number of gang-related crimes in the past year. But street officers say violent incidents involving potential gangsters are on the rise.

On Aug. 2, a gang-related shooting in Lincoln drew extensive media attention, but not because the incident involved Bloods and Crips. Riley Washington, a wingback on the Nebraska football team, was charged with attempted second-degree murder in the shooting of Jermaine Cole of Lincoln.

Washington told police he is affiliated with a Blood gang in his hometown of Chula Vista, Calif., Nelson said, and Cole is a member of a local Crip gang. During a preliminary hearing in the case, witnesses for both sides used gang words unfamiliar to the court.

The words: "What's up, cuz?" apparently sparked the shooting, which left Cole with minor chest wounds. Those three words mean nothing to most people, but they are the highest form of disrespect to rival gangsters.

Expressions like "cuz," "slob" and "crab" are the driving forces behind the high black youth homicide rate.

Acknowledging the problem

In a one-year period beginning in November 1994, Lincoln police took 170 reports that involved actual or potential gang activity. The youngest known Lincoln gangster is 9, Nelson said, and the oldest is 30.

The colors and names vary. Some sets are affiliated with national gangs, but most are locally named neighborhood groups.

More than 23 different gang affiliations have been recognized in Lincoln: Baggy Boys, Crenshaw Mafia Gangsters, Southside Bloods, Insane Vice Lords, White Kings, Asia Boys, Men of Destruction, Latin Lords, Piru Bloods, Gangster Disciple Nation and Green Bay Mafia.

Gang members identify with colors, jargon and hand signs. When the red from a Blood gang member crosses with the blue of a Crip set, fireworks begin.

The 1994 police document "Gang Activity in the City of Lincoln," talks tough. It admits that gang incidents are on the rise in Lincoln and sketches out a community prevention plan.

"Many of the early signs of gang activity we are witnessing in Lincoln today are hauntingly similar to those observed several years ago in other cities which today are plagued by serious gang problems," the document states.

"In many cases, these problems exploded during a very short time period. The early signs of gang activity in Lincoln may be a harbinger of rapid increases in gang-related crime in the future, or they may be an early warning alarm which mobilizes a community to action."

However, police department officials decline to discuss Lincoln's gang problem on the record with as much candor. The city — with a police force of 276 — has not developed a gang unit.

"I may be terribly gullible, but we haven't seen it with as much sophistication," said Detective Sgt. Jim Breen. "I see gangs as a real serious threat, but I also think it's important not to jump to conclusions."

Those who live in the midtown neighborhoods don't have to jump to conclusions. One look outside their window indicates a changing city of Lincoln, where walls covered with graffiti and late-night crack deals are becoming increasingly common.

In October, red scrawled images

were discovered on the back of the Disabled American Veteran Thrift Store at 27th and Vine streets. The words "Blood Gang" and "East Side 24 Jackson Avenue Piru" were among the unwanted decorations painted on the store's outside west wall.

The spray-painted scribbles are a clear sign that Shelly Powell's neighborhood is changing.

"I think it's pretty damn stupid," said Powell, who manages the thrift store and lives near 29th and W streets. "It's obvious that you have your Bloods and your Crips. We figure that this is the Bloods."

As Powell stood and surveyed the damage to her store, curiosity momentarily replaced her anger. "It's interesting to know what it means," she said. "They're pretty darn good, don't you think?"

One week later, the thrift store wall was back to its cream-colored concrete. But gangs are not as easy to clean up as the graffiti they produce.

Unorganized streets

Lincoln gangs have not organized, police say. There is little long-term membership that authorities are willing to acknowledge. The members are spread through too many gangs to create a single dominant power on the streets.

However, police intelligence reports show that the local ties of well-known national gangs are growing.

In the past year, the number of identified Crips has doubled to more than 80, while the number of Bloods doubled to about 60. The Baggy Boys, a Vietnamese gang, has about 90 members, which makes it the largest gang known to police.

Even though it has more members, police say the Baggy Boys are not as rigid as other gang-bangers.

"It's a real fluid organization without much classic organization," said Breen, a police detective. "It's a group of guys who all hang around together."

Their crimes are as different as their look, Breen said. Instead of dealing small amounts of drugs on the street, they conduct sophisticated theft rings in the city.

Nelson, of the crime analysis division, called the Boys "outstanding thieves who research targets." They typically steal stereos, cellular phones and other electronics left in cars. Most Baggy Boys are not as violent as other gang members, Nelson said, but many are still armed with 9mm semiautomatic handguns.

They are marked by their new

THE SERIES

Day 1 — The Problem

Fueled in part by fears that gang problems in neighboring Omaha are spinning out of control, Lincoln is taking steps to see that Baggy Boys, Bloods, Crips and Vice Lords don't get a foothold in the community.

"We all better hope it doesn't come here," police say.

Day 2 — Gangster Profile

"Two-face" earned his nickname because of his dual personalities. Around his grandmother, he is a respectful young man. But with his homeboys, he claims he is like a devil.

"One side of me is myself. The other side of me ain't nothing but a monster."

Day 3 — Lincoln's future

More than half of the names in the city's gang database belong to wannabes. What does it take for these poseurs to become full-fledged G's? Simple organization, but police promise to make this difficult.

"We've been moderately successful in making this an uncomfortable place for gangs to be," police say.

Hondas or Nissans with deeply tinted windows. Instead of walking the streets, police say, the kids shoot pool at two billiard halls on 27th Street between Vine and O streets.

Breen, who is a member of the International Association of Asian Crime Investigators, said the Baggy Boys commit their crimes for themselves — not for their gang.

"Their involvement in crime is economically driven," Breen said. "They want just what every other teen-ager wants: a car and a wompin' stereo."

The Baggy Boys are not as proud of their gang, Breen said. Rituals don't run as deep and members usually aren't tattooed or initiated. Because of this low-key bravado, police find it more difficult to investigate the group.

"That's the bad thing about Baggy Boys," Breen said. "I don't even think they view it as organized."

But the gang continues to flourish as Lincoln's Vietnamese population grows. Breen and other police officers frequently work with members of the Asian community to discourage kids from joining gangs.

"We encourage Asian parents not to let their kids get involved with gangs," Breen said. "Sometimes you just have to save them one at a time and do the best you can."

Lincoln police gang criteria

- ASSOCIATE**
- Wears "colors" or used hand signals
 - 1: consistent with suspected gangs.
 - Associates with known gang members,
 - 2: or is observed writing gang-related graffiti.
 - 3: is in photos with known gang members, or has been arrested with known gang members.
- MEMBER**
- 4: Commits criminal act as a gang member.
 - 5: Self admits, has tattoos or is identified by a public source.
 - 6: Identified by a reliable informant and corroborated by a reliable source.
 - 7: Involved in gang retaliations, assaults or drive-by shootings.
 - 8: Past incarceration for gang-related activity, gang status corroborated by law enforcement agency.
- HARDCORE MEMBER**
- 9: Fits criteria listed above, and shows involvement in gang-related felony crimes and the distribution of drugs.