

STREET GANGS: *A Growing Dilemma*



Students hang out at Lincoln Northeast High School shortly before being dispersed by the police. Authorities recognize "saggin'," or wearing baggy pants low on the hips, as a possible sign of gang association.

Gangs

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thought we would be the only city in the United States that resisted a cultural trend."

Police have made no arrests in the November shooting. The teen-age victim, who was not struck, said a gang member fired the shots.

In 1994, Lincoln police began investigating the link between crimes and gangs. Since then, more than 23 different gangs — and 300 members — are estimated to be active in Nebraska's Capital City. However, law enforcement sources say at least twice as many youth could be involved in gangs.

The nationwide gang epidemic affects more than metropolitan cities with squalid ghettos. It affects medium- and small-town cities alike.

The National Drug Intelligence Center in Johnston, Pa., which tracks gang activity, says small cities are prime targets for gang organization. By the time many communities admit they have a gang problem, the situation may be out of control.

The intelligence center, a branch of the U.S. Department of Justice, says smaller communities — similar to Lincoln — are attractive locations for street gang members because:

- Families can relocate without great expense.

- Gang members can avoid apprehension and prosecution from their own cities.

- They escape retaliation from rival gang members.

- The cities offer new criminal markets with higher illegal profits and less gang rivalry and competition.

Local police don't deny that Lincoln fits many lines of that description. Interstate 80 and nearby Omaha and Kansas City also could feed gang activity here.

But Casady says Lincoln has many qualities that gangs would find unattractive, including:

- No public housing projects. All government-subsidized housing is done through rent vouchers all across the city.

- No suburbs. The city is self-contained and not designed for higher or lower rents in suburban areas.

- Low employment rate.
- A healthy and stable economy.
- A high number of people who

own homes.

"Lincoln is a different community," the police chief said, "but I'm unclear in my own mind why we haven't been targeted as a good place to practice crime."

Gs or wannabes

More than half of the self-admitted gang members in Lincoln are classified as "wannabes." They wear the same colors and flash the same signs, but don't commit serious crimes. Nationally, police departments don't take poseurs lightly, and are encouraged not to use the misleading "wannabe" term.

"Some people seem to think that our gang problem here is minor because most of the people think our gangs are wannabes," Casady said.

"I'm not particularly comfortable with that. If junior high kids start identifying with gang behavior and gang dress, then I think we have a problem."

"Curtis," a 16-year-old Crip, said Lincoln streets are filled with wannabes. They claim blue one day and red the next. These kids aren't dangerous, he said.

"There are some that act hard, but they are soft as medicated cotton," Curtis said in an interview at the Attention Center, the city's only juvenile jail. "They just let their strap do the talking."

A strap — or gat — is a gangster's weapon. A semiautomatic pistol, usually a 9mm, is the gun of choice. Most gang members don't regularly use assault-style weapons, according to the drug intelligence center. But if a fight breaks out, a tougher armory is only a short drive away.

"I ain't scared of shooting someone at all," Curtis said. "Period."

It's hard to distinguish reality from the talk on the street. There were about 10 drive-by shootings reported to police within the last year. Police suspect there are more, because drive-by shootings are not uniformly classified.

The majority of gang-related crimes come from thefts of parked cars. During summer months, thugs go from neighborhood to neighborhood.

"We don't want to have people getting shot," said Sgt. Larry Nelson, who tracks the city's gang activity.

"The loss of a loved one is much harder to deal with than losing a stereo."

A different gang

"Gang" has become a four-letter buzz word.

Through violent television documentaries, rap music and movies, the popular media has absorbed itself in this culture. However, all gangs are not as similar as they appear on MTV.

One gang that looks different, acts different and has deep-rooted national ties concerns one veteran Lincoln police detective more than the traditional street gangs.

Sgt. Jim Breen, who has worked on the force 24 years, said Lincoln is an open target for the Big Circle Boys, an organized crime gang from Orange County, California. The nationally known Asian crime gang has already struck at least once in Lincoln, Breen said.

Lincoln police and federal authorities broke a Big Circle Boys crime ring in the summer of 1994. The gang selects local residents looking for money, and has them purchase merchandise with fake or stolen credit cards.

"It's money that can be made more easily than selling drugs," Breen said.

Authorities in bordering states electronically tracked a California couple across the country into Nebraska. As the man and woman came into Nebraska, they pulled out bogus credit cards and went shopping.

"We assumed they were moving east on I-80," Breen said, because fake cards were used for major purchases in Lexington and North Platte. The pair was tracked to Lincoln by their credit card transactions.

In shopping sprees in Utah, Colorado and Nebraska, the couple bought laptop computers, a Nintendo Game Boy and an electric razor. The merchandise — \$60,000 worth — was illegally sold for a large profit, Breen said.

The Orange County pair were arrested with 30 fake credit cards, after Lincoln police followed the two to Omaha and California.

"Do you call these people members of street gangs or do you call them members of organized crimes?" Breen said. "The lines are beginning to blur."

This organized crime scares Breen more than Lincoln's leaderless street gang dilemma. Economically, organized Asian crime is much more serious.

"I'd be a lot more concerned about the Big Circle Boys getting a foothold here than any street gang," Breen said. "The problems associated with that would put us on a par with Omaha."

Most police officials are candid about Lincoln's emerging gang problem. They can educate students and parents, but the community also must recognize and understand the problem.

"Anyone who expects that the po-

lice can control gang activity is wrong," the police chief said. "There's a limited amount in what we can do, and we can't do it alone. We have a role to play, churches have a role to play and families have a role to play."

There are no poster cities for gang prevention. The key, experts say, is recognizing that gangs exist. No cities are exempt.

Police can police, teachers can teach and preachers can preach — but it does no good if no one is listening.

"It's like any other social problem, we see the scab," said detective Breen, "but what causes the injury we often don't have as much control over."

Gang signs

Why people join gangs

- ☞ To get a sense of belonging, friendship, attention and love.
- ☞ To feel self control.
- ☞ To get a sense of direction and purpose is given to their lives.
- ☞ To fulfill feelings of self worth, status, success, respect, recognition and identity are fulfilled.
- ☞ To gain a sense of protection.
- ☞ To gain material things: money, guns, women, expensive jewelry, and nice clothes.

Gang members' mentality

- ☞ The highest honor that can be given to their gang is death.
- ☞ The only people who really love them are members of their gang.
- ☞ They must always strike back at those who harm them.
- ☞ They never show:
 - Remorse.
 - A sense of right and wrong.
 - Interest in other people.
 - Compassion for others.

Warning signs for parents

- ☞ Notice if your child is draped in expensive jewelry.
- ☞ If their pants are sagging on or below their hips.
- ☞ Withdraw from their family members.
- ☞ Using a new street nickname.
- ☞ Having tattoos of gang names or insignias.
- ☞ Graffiti on their clothes, notebooks or other items.

Source: Omaha Police Department

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