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Knoxville Gang Update

Class of 2016

Sociology 431 – Applied Research Methods

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INTRODUCTION

ROBERT J. DURÁN, PH.D.

During the spring semester of 2016, I had the opportunity to teach my first gang and research course on the University of Tennessee, Knoxville campus. During the 2015-2016-year, Knox County experienced what appeared to be a heightened level of violence and gang activity based on news media reports and district attorney prosecution efforts focused on gang enhancements. Due to these increasing concerns, I became interested in using my scholarly expertise to incorporate my sociology students to examine local gang issues. I previously taught a similar class at New Mexico State University. The course was designed to teach students about the gang literature and to provide the opportunity to learn first-hand research techniques to study local social issues.

The students in the Sociology 431, Applied Research Methods, were split into three teams with three researchers in each team. The participatory action research strategy was highlighted in my second book, *The Gang Paradox: Inequalities and Miracles on the U.S.-Mexico Border* and in subsequent gang updates published online (Durán, 2018). The three teams can be broadly defined as: 1) History of Gangs in Knoxville, 2) Patterns of Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Age, and 3) Responses to Street Gangs. As this was an upper-division undergraduate course, many of the students have since entered graduate programs at both the masters and doctoral level. The final reflections of gangs the students provided were reflective of the information they were able to obtain, mixed with their own standpoint. The students primarily reflected the demographics in terms of age, race, gender, class, etc. of the University of Tennessee, but as you will read, each student provides a unique level of insight.

When this class project began, I had the expectation of living and working in Knoxville, TN for many more years. Yet, that all came to end when I moved almost 1,000 miles away to Bryan, Texas in 2018. My key research strength has always been to have a local setting. The social environment in Tennessee fascinated me in many ways, and I think it is unfortunate that this geographic area couldn't become my third social space to study gangs for a book length project. Nevertheless, I am working on a research article on gang enhancements and police shootings in the area.

For now, I'd like to share the reports of my students who took this upper division research course as they stayed persistent and creative to learn more about gangs in the area and to compare their findings with the gang literature.

History of Knoxville Gangs



Students from the Sociology 431 Course
Left: Charles Walton; Center: Christopher Partee; Right: Robert Cooter

History of Knoxville Gangs by Robert Cooter

In my recent research, my goal was to learn the history of gang emergence in Knoxville, Tennessee. I started this work with a very positive outlook due to a personal relationship I have with a former gang member who goes by the nickname “Beno,” who worked for me a period of time after he was released from prison. Beno transformed his life and became a community leader focusing on showing youth better opportunities than the gang lifestyle. I looked him up late last year and found that he had recently been the keynote speaker at the "Save our Sons" summit held in Knoxville. This event was brought to Knoxville after Mayor Madeline Rogero joined forces with other mayors across the nation in a coalition titled the “Cities United Initiative” to eliminate violence-related deaths among men and youth of color and increase opportunities for their success (Knoxville 2014). This effort was a response to President Obama's “My Brother's Keeper” program which challenges community leaders to execute plans for inner-city youth in order to achieve their full potential regardless of where they come from or circumstances in life.

Another inquiry in which I had a positive outlook on gaining knowledge in regard to gangs in Knoxville was with the volunteer work I do with several local police agencies regarding military veteran initiatives. I had not previously met investigator Jim Quick with the Knoxville Police Department gang task force, but I had spoken to another officer named Pete who worked with gangs. My first contact with investigator Quick was by email and he informed me of his experience with gangs before becoming a police officer in 1994. His first assignment was between the years of 1987 and 1988 while working in the Pleasant Ridge area where he encountered NFL graffiti. The information he provided helped me develop a starting point in my research. Investigator Quick was also a speaker in my Juvenile Delinquency course. He and I spoke before class and his presentation gave me better insight into potential areas I wanted to focus on more. One interesting point in his presentation was that all Knox County middle schools have some level of gang activity, and this includes the affluent areas of Knox County.

As part of my research, I decided to contact Beno and learned he would be attending a “Stop the Violence” forum in response to the murder of Zaveon Dobson. I arrived to the meeting early and spent about half hour interviewing Beno about the startup of gangs in Knoxville and tried to make comparisons to the literature from the *Modern Gang Reader*. Beno mentioned that he joined a gang in the early 90's and was a former member of the Tree Top Piru Bloods gang. He stated that Knoxville was once a Bloods dominated city and after other gangs began to gain momentum, the city became divided where I-275 currently stands. East of I-275 became Blood territory and west of the freeway became Crip dominated. Nonetheless, the tragic death of five year-old Brittany Daniels in 1995 brought the community together for the first time to combat gang violence.

The biggest challenge for gathering data in my research of gangs in Knoxville was getting active members to speak openly. I discussed this with Beno as well, who advised me that the more I was seen around community events, the better my chances would be because I wouldn't be seen as a threat or as someone working with police. The second obstacle I faced was people telling me that gang members in the area were “wannabe's.” (Continued...)

Cooter Continued..

At a community event held at the public defender's office, the Knoxville PD deputy chief mentioned to the panel, as well as the attending community, that gang members in Knoxville were nothing like gang members from Detroit. Beno countered his argument by stating that members living the gang life, facing the violence, and putting friends or loved ones in the ground see things a different way (Miller 2016). I found that many people who weren't directly associated with gangs were the most willing to discuss what they knew about the history of gang emergence. Unfortunately, due to the limitation of resources, much of that information could not be verified.

With the recent murders of Zaveon Dobson and Jajuan Latham, the media and local community have remained on edge. National media coverage has put a spotlight on our local community and the violence. In my assessment of gangs in the city of Knoxville, I would estimate that the seriousness of gangs is a 10 out of 10. However, for those not directly in those gang-ridden neighborhoods or the nearby vicinity, I would rate it a 2 out of 10. Unless your neighborhood is directly affected, then the media is where your information will originate. As you can see in different scholarly readings or across national events, this transmission of information can be beneficial but also negative depending on the way it is depicted.

Several agencies have been actively involved with at-risk youth. Organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club and Emerald Youth Foundation are some examples. There has also been an emergence of new community outreach programs such as Heal the Land, Save our Sons, and other religious entities such as the Overcoming Believers Church in Knoxville. Each of these organizations has produced various responses to help the youth involved in gangs. A possible solution might include pre-criminal and/or post-release services that line up and advance an individual's employment opportunities. Programs like Homeboy Industries, which appears to be having much success for members in the Los Angeles area. The city of Los Angeles has been very supportive of the program, but it is my guess that something similar would thrive here. However, I do think the local unions here as well as many of the larger industrial corporations could provide a certain number of jobs. A criminal conviction does not have to be a permanent exclusion among society. Good people make mistakes and some people take longer to age out of delinquency. A closer look at transformative and restorative justice programs across the nation could provide the answers we need, especially for non-violent offenders.

Knoxville Research by Charles Walton

The foundation of my project was based on the desire to develop a better understanding of the political economy of the Knoxville relative to gangs within the city. In particular, I am interested in the intersection between government and politics, economy, and people, specifically as it relates to class. I used a variety of methods in my research including field interviews, taking fieldnotes at public events, archival data collection, reviewing old research articles (unpublished dissertations and theses), collecting data via online, and public databases. My research this semester can be viewed as the political economy of a city, and in this case Knoxville gangs will be the primary focus. But, this focus must also (Continued...)

Walton Continued..

be seen as a reflection of a modern capitalist society. Thus, the relevancy of the political economy is that the social scientist must situate gangs into their proper context, and understanding the social world which gangs occupy is a prerequisite to understanding gangs themselves.

Poverty, inequality, and crime must all be factored into the analysis of gangs in Knoxville. The city can be situated into larger national trends that demonstrate how over the past several decades, these social problems have intensified. As Piketty (2014) explains, economic inequality in the United States reached its lowest levels in the middle of the twentieth century, beginning in the 1940s-50s and lasted until the 1970s. This is when the nation began undergoing neoliberal transformation as it cut government expenditures on social welfare policies and enacted a variety of trade agreements that helped pave the way toward a deindustrializing economy. As inequality continued to grow throughout the second half of the century, reaching record highs in the 2010s, incarceration rates also climbed. This placed the United States as the country with the highest incarceration rate in the world (Prisonpolicy). Although no race has been immune to poverty and the threat of incarceration, it has disproportionality affected African Americans and other people of color (Prisonpolicy). It is important to keep in mind that the disappearance of government expenditures on social welfare policies has not resulted in cuts across the board since it costs over \$80 billion a year to maintain the incarceration system (Prisonpolicy). Knoxville's situation has merely been a smaller piece of a larger puzzle, with East Knoxville being the most affected by many of these policies. Higher levels of poverty and unemployment have led to even more intrusive policing in these predominately Black communities, especially in the 2000s (Duncan).

Much of the public information on Knoxville gangs comes from investigator Jim Quick, who is head of the Knoxville Police Department's gang task force. When local media cites gang statistics, it is normally the same data he has made public elsewhere. Given the high level of interaction between local police forces and gangs, his insight provides valuable data into the understanding of the city's gangs, despite the inherent political nature of his work. In a local training workshop, Quick (2016) provides the public with data on his experiences with gangs as well on perceived facts related to specific gang members. He has been with the KPD for 22 years, 20 of which have been spent on gangs and gang repression. According to Quick, much of the gang activity in the city has been a byproduct of migration from gang members from what the gang literature would refer to as traditional gang cities such as Chicago and Los Angeles. He also claims that the entertainment industry, whether it be movies, sports or film, have had a measurable impact on gang life in Knoxville. Without the necessary fieldwork, Quick (2016) provides the public with demographic data on gangs in Knoxville. According to his data, there were approximately 30 active gangs in the city, including groups that were not always considered gangs by researchers such as hate groups and White supremacists. In total, there were under 3000 people in the city who were either direct gang members or gang affiliates. More specifically, he says there were about 1500 gang members and 1300 affiliates. It must be stated that the police criteria to be classified as an affiliate is quite vague and relatively applicable to most people living in a gang-occupied neighborhood.

In addition to the vague criteria scale, it is impossible at this time to tell how accurate Quick's numbers were since he refused to give me specifics on any of (Continued...)

Walton Continued..

the department's data of active gang members. He informed me that he cannot give me any information specifically related to gangs, but said I could find city crime data online. This has led me to question the reliability of his data, especially since he informed another workshop participant that it is nearly impossible for one to be removed from the department's gang list and that he cannot think of many instances in which people have been taken off. Thus, it can be said with confidence that the ~2800-person number always referenced by Quick and the media was quite outdated given this 20-year tenure as a gang investigator.

The unwillingness of law enforcement officials to share data has not only been the biggest challenge in our semester project, but it also causes one to wonder the motives behind their hesitance. In the past year, media attention has placed an emphasis on gangs, especially because of two high profile murders. But new data on gangs and membership were never released; The number of gang members combined with the notion that these members are *never* removed from gang lists are assertions that do not match the gang research literature. According to scholars, the vast majority of gang members are teenagers and only participate in the gang for one to three years before "aging out" (Esbensen and Carson). Alternatively, Quick claims the Knoxville gang problem is an intergenerational one which forces them to interact with young gang members whose parents "we were arresting in the 1990s." Although he openly admits there were White gangs and White gang members, much of his presentation and data focus on Black youth, particularly in "the inner city." He says the gangs that provide law enforcement in Knoxville with the most problems are "the neighborhood Crips, as well as the Bloods that occupy areas of Lonsdale and the Walter P. Taylor homes" (Quick). Regarding the historical origins of Knoxville gangs, Quick suggests the city began developing a gang problem in the 1980s. Although Knoxville law enforcement make little comparisons to issues such as poverty and inequality, we can link this Knoxville gang origin period back to the collapse of the welfare state that was mentioned earlier along with increasing levels of inequality.

Crime data provides another relevant state perspective into gangs. As Quick mentions, the KPD was unwilling to share gang related data despite its constant warning about the dangers of gangs. The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (2001-2015), however, provides data beyond what Quick was willing to share. While researching, I understood that many other classmates would be relying heavily on KPD, thus my reasoning for pulling from TBI. My analysis of the yearly crime report publications aimed to look specifically at types of crime that are often associated with gang members. I limited much of my analysis to the past fifteen years in an attempt to get the best possible understanding of the situation today. The primary types of crime I looked at were drug related crimes, weapons charges, assault and murder. It is impossible to link any of these to gangs with the limited amount of data available. That said, annual murder rates often fluctuate between 2-12 per year and media releases make it clear that these were not often gang related. When they are, such as with the recent Zaezion Dobson murder, the media often turns them into high-profile cases. Assaults over the past fifteen years have steadily decreased as have drug related arrests. The only types of crimes analyzed in this study that have increased over the years were weapons charges, but because of inconsistent data from KPD, it was difficult to connect these arrests to gang activity. TBI's data on gangs, while not comprehensive, tells a different story than Knoxville law enforcement (Continued...)

Walton Continued..

representatives. According to the most recent TBI report (2015), there were three state-led Intelligence Analysts that gather information and intelligence on gangs in Tennessee. Most of the financial resources of these groups were dedicated to West and Middle Tennessee. This contradicts Quick's notion of gangs being a major problem in Knoxville. If the state agreed with Quick's assessment, East Tennessee would be mentioned in the gang section of the TBI reports.

Field interviews can be the most enlightening sources of data. I was fortunate enough to come into contact with a local public defender who agreed to an interview, but wished to remain anonymous. This public defender has worked in Knoxville for a number of years and has, as a result, had experiences with local gang members. My public defender source informed me that their office has only been really discussing the "problem" of gangs for about a year or so, which was likely due to increased media attention on gangs. If gangs were truly a problem, according to my source, they would be coming through the public defender's office for legal defense and that just simply was not the case at the moment, at least not to the degree in which Quick and the media claims. Prior to this year, my source said that the number of memorable gang-relevant criminal cases could probably be counted on one hand. Although unable to speak for everyone in the office, my source noted with confidence that the public defender's office does not see Knoxville as a city with a gang problem. Instead, my source believes that this recent effort to combat the gang problem was one to just further target Black youth and the poor.

Much of the gang discussion, quite problematically due to race implications, was focused on the notion of "the inner city." In Knoxville, this refers to Western Heights, Montgomery Village, Austin Homes, Walter P. Taylor Homes, Christenberry Heights, Lonsdale Homes, and what was once the College Homes in the now semi-mixed income neighborhood of Mechanicsville (Barbrey). These housing communities were affiliated with Knoxville's Community Development Corporation, which manages the city's section 8 and low income housing. In the mid-2000s, 65 percent of these residents were classified as extremely low income, most of which only having incomes between \$5,000-\$10,000. Over 95 percent of tenants received some sort of government assistance and over half were either senior citizens or disabled. About 40 percent were under the age of 18 (Barbrey). These neighborhoods were relatively racially diverse, with 48 percent being Black. However, the gang problem that was painted by police and local media tend to be primarily as Black despite admittance of gangs also being racially diverse. High poverty in these communities give legitimacy to the notion of inequality being a major contributor to "the gang problem." To further expand on the interconnectedness of gangs, race and poverty data maps help highlight the zip codes of Knoxville dealing with the highest levels of poverty (Zipatlas 2016). Zip code 37915, one of the most racially segregated areas of the city consisting of the MLK and Dandridge communities, currently has a population of 68 percent of its residents living below the poverty line. Zip code 37902 - an area very close to downtown - as 39 percent of its population below the poverty line, while the Mechanicsville area of 37921 has 26 percent of its population below the poverty line. In 37917, the zip code that houses Fulton High School (the school attended the recently shot Dobson) has a quarter of its population below the poverty line (Zipatlas, 2016). (Continued...)

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Law enforcement, the media, and certain sectors of the public make it seem as if the city has a gang problem. If I were to rate the city on a scale from 1-10 with 1 being no gang problem and 10 being an extreme problem, I would give the city a 2. My reasoning for this rating is that the city (as in most major cities in the country) has gangs. But, unlike cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and others, gangs in Knoxville do not infiltrate the daily lives of everyone in the city. Little evidence suggests that it would make sense for the average Knoxville citizen to live in fear because of gangs. This, however, does not downplay my thoughts on the desire to eliminate social issues that surround gangs. But in order to do that, we must understand that the problem of gangs is not a problem of broken individuals, but instead a problem of a broken society. Thus, as a society, we solve this social issue by repairing the pieces of society that make youth want to join gangs. We, as a collective, must tackle issues related to racism, inequality, and poverty. Repression and other law enforcement tactics will not eliminate gangs nor the trouble that stem from gangs. Protecting members of society from gangs should not be the solution. Instead, we should work to protect members of society from the things that lead youth to gangs.

Knoxville Research by Chris Partee

Prior to starting my research, I did not think too much about gangs in the Knoxville area. However, I found out that there were in fact multiple gangs that were both big and small in the city. There were separate incidents that took the lives of two people and left others injured. The most recent and widely publicized shooting was the murder of Zaezion Dobson who saved the lives of three girls by covering them with his body as well as his 12-year-old cousin, Jajuan Latham. These shootings were tragic, and have received national media attention. The president released a speech about the shooting that killed Zaezion Dobson. The scope of my research project focused on which gangs were the most prominent and the violence that surrounds them.

It was estimated that there were approximately 30 different gangs in Knoxville area with a membership of somewhere around 1500 members. Some of the well-known gangs in the area were the Walter P Pirus, which live in the Walter P Taylor homes. There was another gang called the Tree Top Pirus and the Walter Money Gang. There are the Rollin' 20s, Rollin' 60s, the Rollin' 40s, Hoover 5 Dueces, Vice Lords, Gangsta' Disciples, Bloods from Austin homes, MS-13, Folk Nation, People Nation, and Imperial Insane Vice Lords. During the gang training seminar, we were informed by Officer Quick that two of these gangs (Rollin 20s and the Imperial Vice Lords) were actually controlled by members in prison. This could mean these two gangs were actually more organized than other street gangs since prison gangs tend to be more structured. Along with the gang training seminar, I gathered information from news articles, a forum on gang violence, talking to group members and email responses. Through the information gathering process, I found there to be two gangs that were most prevalent and tend to be more violent than the others in Knoxville: Walter P Pirus and the Rollin 20s. My colleague, Robert, informed me that the Rollin 20s were seen as one of the most dominant gangs in the Knoxville area, if not the most dominant. However, I was able to find more information about the Walter P Pirus and they seemed covered the most (Continued...)

Partee Continued..

in the media – they came up most in the news and other online readings. The violence that surrounds them seems to be most extreme and have resulted in multiple gang shootings and murders. Much of this is due to the rivalry that exists between the Walter P Pirus and the Rollin 60s.

An example of this rivalry and the violence that surrounds this area occurred when a member of the Rolling 60s, who was 19 years old male, committed a drive-by shooting on the Walter P Taylor homes. The drive-by shooting killed one man and injured another. I did find from an online forum discussion that this is claimed to be the most dangerous area of Knoxville. However, the thread was a few years old. This, along with previous violent acts, show that these gangs have been involved in a series of violent crimes in the past few years. These were not the only gangs involved in such violence. On the Knoxville Police Departments website, I found that there were 6 gang reported shootings from January 1, 2010 to December 18, 2015. This does not involve the multiple gang related shootings we have had since. A few of the instances of violence can be linked to Walter P Taylor area, but articles did not mention which gangs were involved. However, it was probable that the Walter P Pirus gang was in some way involved given the nearby proximity of the events.

Along with these instances of violence, the police have stated that Chattanooga is a major city with a high gang member concentration. This is primarily due to I-75 that connects Chattanooga to Knoxville. Additionally, the fact that other gang members were not really known around the other city allows for easier movement between the two cities. At the gang training seminar, Jim Quick mentioned that gangs in each city will visit the other city to commit violent crimes and other criminal activities. The police departments have very little information on the individuals that come from the other cities to commit these crimes.

The limitations of my research turned out to be quite a barrier for data collection. One primary issue was the police department's unwillingness to share information with our class. I was really hoping to see what the department's opinion was on which gang they considered as most dominant and violent. Although the police are subject to having a biased opinion, their everyday interaction with gangs would have provided great insight due to the information they have collected over the years. There has also been rising tension among the gangs in the Knoxville due to the recent shootings and other violent crimes that have occurred. With this in mind, I decided it was not safe to go to these places to conduct a field study.

In conclusion, there were gangs in the Knoxville area, and violence that surrounds them seems to have increased in the past few years, especially within the past year. There have been multiple shootings and incidents that involve gang members. The gangs with the most dominant role were the Rolling 20's and the Walter P Pirus. They can be found in the media and police reports more than any other gang. The Rolling 60's Crips seem to play a big part in Knoxville as they were one of the major rivals with Walter P Pirus. Gangs were no longer region specific as members have moved to areas that no longer maintain a separation between gangs. East Knoxville seems to be the worst area for the violence. I think it would be very wise to try and get more feedback from law enforcement on the issue. They could provide useful insight on the topic. With all this being said, I would rate the problem of gangs in Knoxville around 6 out of 10. If we compare it to gangs in cities like Chicago or Los Angeles, (Continued...)

Partee Continued..

I would say that Knoxville gangs are around a 2 on a scale of 1 to 10. But, if we only examine gangs in Knoxville, I feel it can be seen as a 6. This was different than what others perceived it to be. For example, if you spoke with Jim Quick and others that were at the gang training seminar, they would most likely argue that gangs are a threat in Knoxville. I would say this because of the media coverage and Jim Quick inflating the issues that surround gangs. I feel that we need to come up with a different approach to combating gangs than what the police are doing now. Instead of using tough policing, I feel that we should get more hands on with gang members and show that they can be productive citizens. A program like Father Greg Boyle's in Los Angeles would be more beneficial than tough policing.



Patterns of Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Age



Students from the Sociology 431 Course
Left: Diego Taboada; Center: Sabiha Mohyuddin; Right: Peyton Burnham

A Man's World: An Overview of Gender and Gangs in Knoxville by Sabiha Mohyuddin

For my research surrounding gangs in Knoxville, I focused on gender and gangs. To provide a better context to gang activity and presence in Knoxville, I examined online news articles. In my cursory research, I paid close attention to the gender of the perpetrators and the crimes described in the articles.

From an interview with Chief David Rausch of the Knoxville Police Department (KPD) by reporter Stephanie Beecken of WATE, I was able to learn who was considered a gang member, as well as general statistics on the number of present gang members. According to Chief Rausch, there were 1,500 gang members and 30 different gangs. A broad range of groups were labeled as “gangs” including typical street gangs but also White supremacist groups, anti-government groups, and motorcycle clubs. With this broadened definition of who is a gang member and what constitutes a gang, I questioned whether the gender composition of gangs would be equally as diverse. However, my findings suggest that gangs in Knoxville were highly male-dominated spaces with a numerically small female presence. According to investigator Jim Quick, who works with the Criminal Intelligence Unit and Gang Task Force in Knoxville, less than 5 percent of gang members were female. By extension, of the nearly 1500 gang members there were about 75 female gang members. Quick noted that the percentage of female gang members has been at an all-time low since 2010. He characterized the female gang members as being active and vicious participants in gangs, rather than passive members. The remaining 95 percent, or 1475 gang members, were all male.

Given the very limited data I was able to obtain, my research focused on three primary data sources: Press releases from the District Attorney's Office, the KPD Homicide Report, and a survey created by my colleague Diego Taboada that was promoted through social media to target high school students in Knoxville. From the press releases and KPD Homicide Report, I examined crimes that involved gang members or were labeled as gang-related. From 2010-2016, there were 21 gang related arrests, convictions, and sentences. It is important to note that while some of these gang related arrests were made prior to the creation of D.A. Allen's Career Gang Unit, which uses the gang enhancement statute on acts committed by gang members, many of the trials, convictions, and sentences occurred after the creation of the unit. The gender breakdown of the 21 gang-related arrests, convictions, and sentences was reflective of the statistics mentioned by Quick. Twenty of the 21, or 95 percent of the gang perpetrators were male. Only one, or 5 percent was female. This data however, does not reflect the total number of arrests, convictions, and sentences. According to Public Information Officer Scott McDermott, others may be involved in plea deals that were not publicized to the media. Due to the lack of a prominent female presence, I decided to examine the crime breakdown of the 21 arrested, convicted, and sentenced who were gang members. Many of the gang members had multiple charges. Consequently, 12 were charged with homicide, 5 charged with drug possession, 7 charged with unlawful firearm possession, 2 were charged with aggravated robbery and burglary, and one was charged with sex trafficking. I also looked at the sentencing of each of the gang members who were sentenced for their charges to find any kind of pattern in terms of harshness of punishment that each charge or a combination of charges carried. Homicide sentencing ranged from lifetime imprisonment to 15 years. Drug (Continued...)

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possession sentencing ranged from 15-40 years in prison. Burglary and aggravated robbery carried 15-25 years in prison, and trafficking carried a 10-year prison sentence. Given the lack of female gang members arrested, convicted, and sentenced on severity of prison sentences, I was unable to gender patterns regarding punishment. To find more information concerning gender and gangs in Knoxville, I examined the breakdown of the gang-related homicide perpetrators and victims by gender. All 12 of the homicide perpetrators were male. Furthermore, of the 12 homicide victims, 11 were male and 1 was female.

The remaining source of data collection I obtained was from a survey to high school students from Fulton, Farragut, and South Doyle. The survey consisted of 17 questions asking about demographic information as well as awareness of social groups, deviant groups, and gangs in their schools. For questions regarding gangs in school, they were asked about their participation in gangs and victimization from gangs. The key questions for my research concerned gender identification, awareness of gangs in school, friends who participate in gangs, self-report participation in gangs, and victimization faced from gangs. A total of 135 students took the survey and about 72 percent were female and 27 percent were male. Of the total 135 participants, 2 percent reported participating in gangs of whom 2 were male and 1 was female. One-hundred-and-thirty-four participants indicated experiences of physical or emotional victimization, but only 7 percent have been victimized by gangs. Of the 9 participants who experienced victimization by gangs, 7 were female. By extension, nearly 7 percent of all female participants have been victimized by gangs. An interesting finding was that the one female who participated in a gang was not among the seven who had been victimized. The remaining two participants who faced victimization were male. Thus, about 5 percent of all male participants have experienced victimization from gangs. Another interesting finding was that one of the two males who have faced victimization from gangs participated in a gang. Of the respondents, 6 percent claimed to have friends who participate in gangs which was comparable for females (6 percent) and males (5 percent). Of the 135 participants, 25 percent were aware of the presence of gangs in their schools, 24 percent answered "no," while 50 percent answered "maybe." Moreover, 26 percent of female participants were aware of gangs in their schools. The same number of female participants answered "no," and 49 percent answered "maybe." Of the 37 male participants, 24 percent were aware of gangs in their schools, 22 percent of male participants answered "no," and 54 percent answered "maybe."

When collecting information about gender and gangs in Knoxville, I encountered some difficulties. Although the KPD collects demographic information of the 1500 gang members they have on file, I was unable to obtain much information. Furthermore, members of the KPD who handle cases involving gangs were unable or unwilling to give information, specifically to our applied research class. I also attempted to reach out to the D. A's office for an interview with D.A Allen. Unfortunately, I was unable to schedule an interview with her due to her busy schedule. Instead, I interviewed Public Information Officer Scott McDermott, who also works with gang-related court cases. Additionally, I faced difficulties in contacting Girl-Talk Inc., an organization that aims to provide girls from the ages of 9 to 18 alternative outlets to negative social outlets, such as gangs. Since I was unable to find a lot of (Continued...)

Mohyuddin Continued..

information concerning female and gangs, an interview with GirlTalk Inc. might have added more insight to female participation in gangs.

From my cursory examination of news articles about gangs, the examination of press releases, the KPD homicide report, and the survey results, I conclude that the threat level that gangs pose in Knoxville to be a 4 out of 10. With about 21 reported gang-related crimes occurring from 2010 to 2016, Knoxville's gang problem is far from an epidemic. Furthermore, even though many of the criminal acts occurred prior to the creation of D.A. Allen's Career Gang Unit, they were prosecuted only after the unit was created. Thus, gang activity was only perceived to be a problem once the unit was created. When interviewing A.D.A McDermott, who works with gang-related cases, he talked in good detail of how the recently created gang unit operated, and how the unit was created to allow the D.A.'s office to handle gang-involved cases more efficiently. McDermott seemed to consider the Career Gang Unit to be a necessary response to gangs in Knoxville. To alleviate the problems associated with gang activity in Knoxville, especially with the recent shootings of Zaezion Dobson and Jajuan Lantham, more focus should be put on providing economic opportunities to citizens in the areas of Knoxville where a number of gang activity has occurred, such as in North Knoxville. To prevent youth from engaging in gang activity, the city should focus on providing schools with resources, such as after-school programs that provide youth with a better outlet to gangs. Additionally, solutions to the gang problem should not focus on sentence enhancement, but rather, should be more focused on preventing at-risk individuals from turning to gangs.

Knoxville Gangs Through a Racial Lens by Diego Taboada

Gang violence, at least from my perspective, seems to be a novel phenomenon here in Knoxville. Only after the death of Zaezion Dobson did public debate on gang violence emerge in this relatively quiet town. Because tragic events like this one often devastate the collective morale of a community and threaten its sense of safety, many members within that community feel that in order to restore security, swift and immediate actions need to be taken. This was precisely the case in Knoxville. Here, community forums were held, committees met, news reports facetiously tried to raise awareness, and even a specialized gang task force was established all with the purpose of combating the seemingly alarming trend of gang violence. As responsible citizens however, it is important that we parse this information in order to help prevent overreactions. Critically analyzing this issue from different perspectives and conducting research has given us the ability to empirically assess the issue of gangs in Knoxville, and ignore anecdotal, overly dramatized stories about gangs. It is worth mentioning however, that in no way is this research meant to underestimate the issue of gang violence in Knoxville or to trivialize the harm that has befallen the family of Zaezion Dobson or any of the other families who's loved ones lives have been lost to gang violence. It is simply an attempt to unbiasedly interpret and report the findings of our research. (Continued...)

Taboada Continued..

My research broadly focuses on race and its potential correlation to gang involvement. More specifically, I focus on how a broad range of socio-economic disadvantages may serve as reasons for gang involvement among Black youth in Knoxville. I also briefly discuss how racially tinged, overly simplistic stereotypes of Hispanics guide the narrative and fill in the gaps of knowledge that law enforcement officials have of Hispanic gangs in Knoxville. I also look at a South Knoxville hate group and draw some similarities between them and traditional minority gangs. Based on my observations, I argue that they, just like traditional street gangs, are misunderstood. As a result, they too have also received similar institutional overreactions. I also look at the most significant differences between the two groups.

For my research I use informal, semi-structured interviews with people who I felt were knowledgeable about the issue. I also use the content analysis method, as well as media reports, homicide data from the Knoxville police department, data from the Tennessee department of education, data from the US Census Bureau, and data from a survey of about 135 students that I, with the help of administrators, was able to conduct in Fulton and Farragut high schools. While my research is rudimentary and underdeveloped, several important assertions can still be made.

Looking at police homicide data as well as media reports on drug arrests and arrests for other offenses, we see that there are more African American gang members being arrested than there are Whites or Hispanics. KPD data however indicates that between the years 2010 and 2015, gang homicides made up only under 10% of all homicides in Knoxville. In other words, gangs are responsible for a small percentage all homicides in Knoxville. Police data and media reports are often misleading, so we need to focus on self-reports.

Data from a self-report survey of two high schools also suggests that there are more African American gang members than there are White or Hispanic. Only three respondents, two of which were African American and attended Fulton high, and one which was White and attended Farragut high, out of the 135 that were surveyed said that they themselves participated in gangs. The vast majority, or 97% of the self-report surveys, said that they did not participate in gangs. Moreover, 93% reported that they had never been victimized by a gang. This self-report survey seems to corroborate police data on two fronts: It does conclude that gang involvement is more prevalent among Black youth but also that, overall, gang activity is minimal. It corroborates with media reports to a lesser extent but outright contradicts the media's sensationalized portrayals of gang violence. While media reports may suggest that gang violence is abundant, this self-report survey concludes that if and when gangs are present, they tend not to be violent. These findings do suggest that African Americans are more involved in gang activity but as researchers we need to ask why this is. The answer to such a question revolves around the socio-economic disadvantages that African Americans continue to face.

African Americans in Knoxville are more likely to be disadvantaged than Whites and this proves to be the case with the research that I was able to conduct. If we look at graduation rates at both state and county levels between the years 2014 and 2015, we see that Whites graduate at a higher rate than Blacks or Hispanics (TCAP). We also see that (Continued...)

Taboada Continued..

more African American youth perform at a below basic level than do Whites across all academic subjects (TCAP). Looking at US Census data, we also see that African Americans are less likely than Whites to be homeowners, more likely to be unemployed, and more likely to live below poverty levels (US Census). White children are also more likely to live in an in dual-parent household than are Blacks (US Census). These things all play an integral role in the fragmentation and breakdown of institutions that are beneficial for social control. Subsequently, many argue that limited social controls engenders gang activity and gang involvement among youths.

Conducting research on Hispanic gangs was slightly more difficult. Given the fact that law enforcement officials contend that we have very little Hispanic gang activity in Knoxville, there was very little information for me to base my research on. Several weeks ago however, as a class we had the opportunity to attend a gang training seminar held by the Knoxville Police Department. There, I tape recorded the presentation, transcribed it, and then analyzed its content. I was then able to establish a solid foundation for my argument on Hispanic gangs. Of significant importance was that when law enforcement officials *did* acknowledge that there were Hispanic gangs in Knoxville, they often linked them to immigration and jobs, specifically construction jobs. The information they provided was overly simplistic, stereotypical, and contradictory. In looking at data from the US Census Bureau, we do indeed see an increase in the Hispanic population in Knoxville. There has also been a recent boom in the construction industry. But, according to law enforcement accounts, we are yet to see a Hispanic gang presence. If the conditions are there for gang activity to thrive, why is it that we are yet to see them? Again, I argue that this is an over simplification of the issue by law enforcement officials and fear induced tactic on the part of the hegemony. Powerful White men, after enjoying the status of colonizers for hundreds of years, now fear that their lands are being colonized by the ever increasing Hispanic population in Knoxville. To combat this, law enforcement officials incorrectly label a large segment of this population group.

I also had the opportunity to speak to an all-White hate group from south Knoxville, who on the surface display some of the same characteristics as those of traditional street gangs. This group, just like traditional street gangs, is made up of predominantly young men who congregate for protection. They use symbols and have an established territory. The biggest differences between traditional street gangs and this hate group is that they are more politically active and less criminally involved than traditional street gangs. This may be due to the fact that they have more access to political engagement and less need for criminal involvement than other minority gangs. Their success in political engagement is minimal. Perhaps the biggest similarity that I found with this group and traditional street gangs was that they both seem to be misunderstood groups of people whose behaviors often receives an overreaction from institutional powers. . The Southern Poverty Law Center has labeled this group a hate group based on the beliefs that they espouse. Albeit, their views are disagreeable but to label them a hate group is irresponsible. Throughout my interaction with this group, not once did I feel threatened despite the fact that I openly disagreed with them on several of their statements and that one of the members was carrying a gun. (Continued...)

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Basing my ideas strictly on the research that has been conducted, Knoxville's gang problem is a 4 based on a scale from 1 to 10 – a 10 being the most severe. There are some concerning trends revolving gang activity but nothing that warrants the type of overreaction that we have experienced. While overzealous law enforcement officials and the ever opportunistic media focus on gang activity, things like poverty and the lack of educational opportunities often go unnoticed. Again, by no means is this research intended to trivialize the harm that is caused to the victims of gang violence. It is simply an attempt to report the findings of my research.

Gang Research by Peyton Burnham

During my research of the Knoxville County school system, I found that a majority of the students did not associate with a gang, gang activities or claim to be in a gang. When I asked the guidance counselors about their thoughts on Knoxville gang activity, they all claimed that Knoxville has developing gang problem, but do not see gang-like behavior as often in the school district. If they do see gang members, the counselors assume it is related to familial ties, but there was never activity seen at school, or at least none that they reported. They noted that if they were suspicious of gang activity, it would normally be due to the gang members wearing certain colored attire. Knoxville gangs stray away from the norm of the typical stereotype when concerning the age range of an active member.

The Knoxville Gang Task Force was created in January of 2016 by Police Chief David Rausch. It is made up of twenty-six officers, three of which sergeants, and one lieutenant. Fifty arrests have been made since the task force started, most of which include drug or weapon charges. Chief Rausch believes that the original gangs were divided by the subdivisions they resided in. When the public housing system was altered, the gang territories also shifted. The gangs were then a lot closer in proximity to other gangs, which started feuds and deepened the rivalries.

I found that the areas of highest gang concentration and activity were the Walter P Taylor Homes, Danny Mayfield Park in Mechanicsville, Dandridge Avenue, and some areas that are East Knoxville. I conducted two surveys to expand my research on gang activity to try and narrow down the ages to a specific range. The first survey was given to Knoxville County school guidance counselors. Twenty-nine percent of teachers who took the first survey said they witnessed gang activity in people ranging from the ages of 16-25. The second survey was given to Knoxville students via Facebook. Approximately eleven percent said that they have witnessed gang activity in the schools they attended, whereas almost eighty-four percent of students reported not seeing any gang activity. This data is rather surprising considering all of the school administrators and students in Knoxville previously reporting that they believe Knoxville has a gang problem. After putting this data together, I was interested in seeing why these people had assumed Knoxville has a gang issue when the majority later reported not having seen gang activity. A question in the survey asked participants where they get their information about gangs from. They all reported to be informed from the media. (Continued...)

Burnham Continued..

To get a more in-depth idea of the age range of gang membership in Knoxville, I examined the arrest roster and searched for mugshots with visible gang tattoos from the neck up. Clearly, this is a very specific search, and does not leave a lot of room to fully know if those arrested were active gang members. This search also doesn't factor in all the people with gang tattoos that are below the neck. From the data I collected, the majority of the people arrested with visible gang tattoos in their mugshots were arrested on drug possession, vandalism, or possession of weapons charges. The people detained also varied in ages ranging from twenty to twenty-five years of age with a few outliers being a bit older.

Some of the challenges I faced conducting this research was not knowing where to gather information from. I had assumed the information gathered from school district would be more beneficial than what it turned out to be. The data I gathered ended up being inconclusive. People claim there is a gang problem, yet, they later report to not seeing any gang activity. Also, trying to narrow down my search for a certain age range presented another challenge. The hostility from Knoxville Police Department, and Inspector Jim Quick, also did not turn out in my favor. Based off my group's research, I do not believe Knoxville's gang problem is severe. I believe the media portrays a gang problem to be more severe than what it actually is. On a scale of one to ten, I would rate the Knoxville gang issue a four. A solution to the gangs in the area of Knoxville would be to work with the police department and the media to find a middle ground, and not have them focus on solely all negative issues involving gangs. Fixing a social problem involves a lot of reform, and I don't think Knoxville holds such interests or sufficient funds to try and eliminate the problem. Hence, they would rather put people in jail to avoid having to deal with it.



Responses to Street Gangs



Students from the Sociology 431 Course
Left: Veronica Nelson; Center: Jackson Lanier; Right: Hannah Summers

Responses to Street Gangs by Jackson Lanier

Based on my exploratory research, I feel that I have learned a decent amount about the seriousness of gangs in Knoxville along with how the community feels about this topic. I concluded that attempting to research the community's perspective on the issue of gangs would be best for bringing together the class's research as a whole. My research findings demonstrate a general concern for the gang issue from the entire community with some neighborhoods showing higher levels of concern. I began by examining the media, specifically media shared through social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook. I relied heavily on public comments to gauge community perceptions. This served two useful purposes. First, I was able to confirm that the comments were made by individuals whose personal accounts reflect their presence in Knoxville (i.e. a Facebook account often has information regarding the area of residence of the user). Second, each comment made by the community member(s) served as a direct reflection of their view on gangs. I compiled comments I felt reflected any standpoint on the issue of gangs in the community. Using Twitter, I compiled tweets made in response to news posts and occasionally other posts made by the Knoxville Police Department. The tweets also reflected the standpoints on gangs in the Knoxville area.

Reviewing the compiled information, it became clear that the community, at least those who commented, were in general agreement that there was a significant presence of gangs in Knoxville. Many of what I refer to as "standpoint comments" reflected a strong support for law enforcement, either stating that their efforts in combating gangs should be continued before the issue gets worse or those efforts should be increased in hopes of eradicating gang membership and its issues completely. In contrast, other commenters criticized law enforcement for a variety of reasons: some believed that there was a gang issue but law enforcement was not the answer. Other extreme comments called for the execution of gang members or the enforcement of segregation within neighborhoods. My analysis determined that the community was collectively concerned with many of the citizens looking to law enforcement as the solution to the gang issue. A small number of community members in online comments pointed towards other concerns: parenting problems, and the moral decay of society as the sole reason for the issue. Many hope that a solution outside of law enforcement can be found.

Another component to my collection of data involved the distribution of a survey to participants within the community. The survey consisted of five simple questions regarding gang activity in the community, with one question focused on control variables. I visited five locations in the community. In total, 47 surveys were completed. The overwhelming majority of respondents reported they believe gangs were present in the Knoxville. Additionally, more than half of the respondents agreed gangs had affected their everyday lives, while nearly the same amount agreed that the Knoxville community tries to prevent gang activity. Other responses reported that segregated communities were the number one cause for gangs. The majority of respondents were White males and the average age was 37 years old.

A final component of my data collection involved three anonymous interviews with members of the community. In my attempt to broaden this form of data collection to other parts of the community, I contacted two additional community members who I felt comfortable asking personal questions. The interviewees were all between the ages (Continued ...)

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of 21 and 29, with one living in west Knoxville, another in the south of Knoxville, and one having recently lived in different locations within the community. Of all these interviewees, the person who had lived in several areas reported to having the highest interaction with gang members, and claimed to have been a witness to unreported gang violence in the Western Heights area from newly developed gangs that go by “Detroit Boys” and the “Jamaicans”. This interviewee claims that the intersection of I-75 and I-40 in the Knoxville area is the most influential due to the recent rise in gang activity. The individual who was living in west Knoxville (west of Bearden) reported witnessing several incidents of gang activity throughout their neighborhood in the past several years and most recently at Bearden High School. One incident involved the football coach kicking one of the alleged gang members off of the school’s football team, and the students’ older brother fighting other gang members who go by the name “Looney Toons.” The community member living south of Knoxville - near the Blunt County area - reported the least amount of gang activity with no direct incidents within the community but one report of a fight between Maryville High School students and another unknown gang. All of the respondents indicated that they feel Knoxville has a growing gang problem, although only the interviewee who had moved around in Knoxville felt that gangs had regularly affected their life.

Gathering data for my research included several challenges, mostly when attempting to distribute the surveys. Initially, I planned to have a high response rate where I could analyze the survey data based on the area of response. A handful of obstacles prevented me from gathering the number of responses I desired, including a Walmart employee who asked me to leave, an intense storm during my time at a Walmart, and a lack of participation at two other Walmart stores. Surely, with more time and opportunity, the survey questions could have been reassessed and more responses could have been gathered. Some other obstacles included attempts at retrieving information from the Knoxville Police Department and the City of Knoxville Corrections Department, who were both unwilling to put forth time and effort to offer assistance, which was foreseen considering the nature of their bureaucracy. As previously mentioned, time was an obviously one of the biggest challenges that prevented me from gathering as much data as I could.

Based upon the data I collected, I would rate the severity of gangs in Knoxville a 4, with 0 being the least and 10 to be the highest level. I am confident to say that gang activity occurs somewhat regularly in the Knoxville community, as determined through my research with social media responses, informal interviews, and survey responses. However, the gang activity mentioned here could be categorized as low-intensity and unorganized compared to the gang activity that was reviewed throughout the course. As a former resident of the Nashville area, I am used to seeing gang graffiti and groups dressed in gang attire in many areas of the city. Though Knoxville is a smaller compared to Nashville, I expected to see either of these more often than I have, which is almost never. All three of the interviewees expressed concern for gang activity in the community, but none felt threatened by gangs or expressed that gangs were “out of control.” The interviewee who had moved around the Knoxville area indicated that drug-related crimes influences gang activity, which leads others to believe that gangs might pose a more serious threat than perceived. I do not feel that Knoxville has a serious threat of gangs, but merely a concerning presence. Based on the level of (Continued ...)

Lanier Continued..

seriousness, I would recommend the community of Knoxville to focus on alleviating the conditions of poverty that force people into segregated areas such as Western Heights, which is a landmark location for the drug market and heavy gang activity. Breaking down the barriers of racism is also key to allowing all community members access to similar economic and lifestyle opportunities that could steer them away from increased gang activity.

Knoxville Gangs: The Search for Law Enforcement Perspective and Possible Alternatives by Hannah Summers

My individual research question this semester was formed around law enforcement's perspective of gangs in Knoxville. Unfortunately, this was not as simple as I had originally expected. I have a close family friend who works for the gang task unit for KPD (Knoxville Police Department) and I thought this would be the perfect angle to begin of my research, but this idea was quickly shot down once I realized that [name omitted] was ignoring my phone calls despite previous promises to support my research. This sudden change in cooperation made more sense once I realized my classmates were struggling to receive any communication from all law enforcement officials. Through deep searching and collaboration, I was able to obtain a small amount of information from accessible law enforcement data, media reports, and fellow community members. Considering these sources along with information provided by fellow students, I have a final conclusion concerning the scale of significance gangs have in the Knoxville area

Not only was I unable to make contact with a KPD official, it was also a challenge to find any significant data on gangs in Knoxville or even crime more broadly. After a visit to the county building, which resulted in the apparent refusal of cooperation from all levels of law enforcement, I took it upon myself to search for answers. A TBI publication regarding juvenile crime and court practices titled, "1999: An analysis of Juvenile Court Practices in Selected Counties," only mentions gangs once as an example of vandalism where a house had been vandalized with the painting of a gang sign (1999, 21). In the entire thirty-eight pages of this report, this was the only mention of gangs. In the year 2000, the "Crime and Justice Survey Results for Tennessee" there was no mention of gangs in the 38 pages of the report. According to the report titled, "2002: Crime and Justice Survey Results for Tennessee," gangs were mentioned once as a public opinion question. The survey asked, "Are there youth gangs in your community?" It is not indicated that a definition of "youth gang" was provided. To this question, 0.5 percent gave no response, 21 percent said yes, 38 percent said no, and 41 percent "don't know" (2002, 18). The posted publications from the year 2002 to 2012 mention nothing about gangs in all ten articles.

In 2011, "participants in Upper East, East, and Middle Tennessee mentioned gang activity in their cities as a driver of violent activity" (2013, 8). In the same article, shootings against police officers were broken into type. Out of the group of shooters, "ten (4%) (Continued ...)

Summers Continued..

primary suspects were reported to be gang members, whereas 188 (79%) respondents reported no threat group affiliation” (2013, 30). To summarize this article, Director Mark Gwyn of the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation stated :

“[the] study also reveals factors contributing to the use of deadly force incidents including mentally ill subjects, drugs, gangs, the disposal of seized weapons, and training. A common theme throughout the study is the importance of firearms training and judgmental training to the law enforcement community as a whole. The value of this type of training cannot be emphasized enough” (2013, 5).

These examples show the transition from early years of having little to no visibility of gangs in Knoxville to increased attention provided by law enforcement over the last decade and especially in more recent years.

Director Gwyn concludes with an emphasis on the significance of danger in the law enforcement role by stating, “[to] the officers who put on a gun and badge every day and risk their lives to protect the citizens of Tennessee, the deepest gratitude cannot be thanks enough. Your dedication and service to the state is vital to keeping our streets safe” (2013, 5). This quote exemplifies the way in which law enforcement is portrayed versus the way in which gang members are portrayed. A *Knox Sentinel* article in 2003 called the tension between the two parties a “war without an end” illustrating the existing tension between the two parties. KPD is often warning citizens of the dangers of particular gangs or specific areas and neighborhoods. District attorney Charme Allen states that “[every] single public middle school and high school in our county has a gang member” (Nauta 2015). Investigator Jim Quick warns parents about all behaviors from dressing down to homework: “[if] you see letters crossed out, letters upside down, backwards or broken up, or even symbols on there the same way, once again there should be red lights popping off” (Burian 2016). In another media report, “Knoxville Police have a warning for gang members. The chief says his officers are on the streets looking for them” and continues to discuss how increased suppression methods will be applied to gang territories and neighborhoods (WVLT 8 News 2016). DA Allen stated in another source that “there have been cases where innocent people have died from gang violence in Knoxville” (Taylor 2015). All of these examples provide an understanding of the support that law enforcement agencies are using to broadcast the danger of gangs. While the worst of the worst are used to explain these groups in media articles, it becomes apparent that their focal point is to instill fear. As a sociologist, we must now obtain an understanding of why this fear production is an important method for policing in Knoxville.

Throughout my search, I found an individual who maintains close ties to various gangs and gang members. Although his insight is more qualitative and cannot be measured through data and numbers, we find his perspective important to the overall understanding of gangs in Knoxville. From this individual, who wishes to remain anonymous, gang activity is very much relevant in the Knoxville area. He did not clarify the specific name of the gang, due to the desire to remain secretive, but he asserted the Crips in the Lonsdale and Mechanicsville areas are possibly the most dangerous gang. He stated his perspective is due to the “OG” (original gangster) and his “lower-rank” were imprisoned (one for burglary and one (Continued ...)

Summers Continued..

for assault) and have partnered together to run the gang from behind prison walls. The structure and organization created unbreakable bonds of commanding and remaining loyal to the gang. My contact explained that this is not always voluntary and that a particular friend of his is desiring to leave the gang. While this friend served time in prison, he claims he was jumped out of the gang and fulfilled the exit requirement. However, the “OG” in charge refused to recognize this and has had other members of the gang force this individual to sell cocaine and commit crimes and shootings as commanded of him. They explained to my contact that regardless of his desire, the consequences would be worse, so he must continue with his gang activities while continuing to seek a way out.

During my interview, this individual clarified to me that most of this gang violence and activity revolves around public housing areas. He said, “You cannot go into these neighborhoods or anywhere near them without seeing cops. The police are everywhere over there.” This led me to question his opinion on the nature of policing of gangs. To which he responded:

“It all depends on human nature. Some people are good, some people are bad. The cops could really make a difference if they wanted to, and I guess I have seen some good ones. But for the most part, it seems like a pride thing. Most cops have a mentality of getting people and making themselves look good. Like this one cop told me one time, ‘Man I just love shooting niggers.’ These cops are the ones that make all of the others useless. They can’t do much good when other cops are policing with ideas like that!”

This conversation led me to think about possible alternatives to gangs in Knoxville. Law enforcement’s main objective for dealing with gang activity was suppression by policing and sentencing, which does not appear to be working if (from their perspective based on reports) gang activity and violence has increased. From my research, I personally feel that gangs in Knoxville pose a threat of two on a scale of one to ten. The reason I feel two is an appropriate number is because Knoxville has structural issues that lead to inequality, segregation, and lack of employment opportunities that create perfect conditions for gangs to flourish. Also, I believe that gang activity is not due to “dangerous” neighborhoods, but instead on increased attention to gangs in Knoxville and heightened law enforcement suppression methods which make these inequalities worse and more prevalent. Although law enforcement agencies may view gangs as a significant threat, there is no data or transparency from these agencies to back up their claims. My conclusion leads me to believe that the funding of law enforcement and their growth were the driving factors for these scare tactics. The more serious threat lies in stereotyping and inequality rather than inherent violence in our city. Instead of suppression by law enforcement, Knoxville should focus on community building by providing inclusion and opportunity, both economically and socially in these struggling communities.

Knoxville Gang Bulletin

by Ronni Nelson

My research topic for this past semester has been on the training response to gangs in Knoxville, specifically within the Knoxville Police Department (KPD) and Knox County Schools (KCS). Some of my specific goals were to discover who the considered gang experts are, where the local training model developed, identifying statewide gang conferences, and distinguishing between the police and school training models. My data gathering efforts began with a broad search through recent news articles about gangs in Knoxville to become more acquainted with what was being said about gangs and who was making the statements. In several articles, I found statements being made about Knoxville's gangs by Officer Jim Quick, Chief David Rausch, and Chief of Security for Knoxville County Schools (Gus Paidousis). All three were officers with KPD so I focused my next data gathering efforts on Knoxville's law enforcement, and then reached out to guidance counselors and principals at schools in Knox County. I experienced a great amount of challenge trying to gather information from law enforcement about their training methods. They were not inclined to give out this information. Fortunately, I was able to obtain a good amount of information from KCS faculty. My data gathering methods were all qualitative. There are no records that can be obtained regarding gang training and information sources so I needed to reach out to members of the community. I also chose to ask open-ended questions of all participants because I was more interested in getting their perspectives and insights than quantifiable numbers, especially since I knew my number of responses would likely be quite low and not generalizable.

Knoxville Police Department

I was able to acquire a sit-down interview at the office of Jim Quick, who has served over 20 years as an investigator for KPD and serves on their Gang and Intelligence Unit. I had many open-ended questions prepared for him, all focused on insights into how KPD officers are being trained, especially those on the newly created Gang Task Force, and where the information for this training is coming from. Unfortunately, Quick became uncomfortable with providing me any information once he learned what class this project is for due to ongoing gang enhancement court cases that Dr. Durán is involved. He would not provide answers to many of my questions and those that he did respond to were mostly 'yes' or 'no' answers. He did confirm that he teaches "basic gangs 101" educational training to the community, which several news articles discussed. He mentioned that KPD uses the state's definition of a gang, as well as the state's point scale in order to label someone as a gang member. Quick told me that KPD's officers are not involved in any preventative measures and are instead focused primarily on putting them in jail. When asked if there were any particular schools in Knox County that had more gang problems than others, he at first answered that gangs are in every school. However, he then went on to suggest that there are more in the inner city schools, saying "everyone knows that; that's just the way it is unfortunately." He also told me that KPD officers attend gang conferences but would not provide any additional information about ones that they attend. I found some gang conferences that are held annually by the Tennessee Gang Investigators Association and the Regional Organized Crime Information Center. The people that appear to speak at these conferences seem to primarily be other law enforcement officers. (Continued...)

Nelson Continued..

Based on this, it appears that most of the information for their training model seems to come from law enforcement's personal experience and not from any gang researchers. Aside from this meeting with Quick, I attended the 'Training on Gang Culture' forum conducted by Jim Quick on April 12. This training focused on providing information on known gangs in this area, gang graffiti, hand signs, tattoos, symbols, and colors. The way in which some of the information was presented seemed to be racialized, such as showing a picture of a group of young, White girls showing hand signs as an example that not all hand signs are gang related. The images shown of Black men with hand signs did not receive the same treatment, even when they were of known celebrities such as Jay Z. These images were depicted with some amount of doubt, suggesting that there was a potential these hand signs could be gang related. Quick mentioned that he gets a lot of information from the schools and went so far as to say "there's not a middle or high school (in Knox County) that has not been touched" by gangs. He went on to explain that there is gang activity within private schools as well, not just in the inner city schools; although, he then went on to say that inner city schools have higher concentrations of it. He said that he doesn't have an answer for why this is but suggested that it likely has something to do with gangs being tied to drug dealing and the inner city being the place where drugs are sold. Quick referenced a rise in gangs at schools in West Knoxville, away from the inner city, and pondered if this could be a result of kids from the inner cities being bussed in from the No Child Left Behind program and bringing gangs with them. All of these references to gangs in Knox County Schools made me excited about uncovering the KCS training model so I turned my attention to the schools next.

Knox County Schools

I selected a total of 42 elementary, middle, and high schools throughout Knox County and made sure to contact schools in North, South, East, and West Knoxville in order to be representative of the whole county. After having my research approved by the KCS Accountability Department, I sent email with open-ended questions to the guidance counselors and principals at each of these schools. I received a total of eighteen responses from a total of 10 of the schools: three high school, two middle schools, and five elementary schools. These schools are located in North, South and West Knoxville. I never received a response from the schools that I reached out to in East Knoxville. I will not be identifying the particular schools or the faculty members who provided information as I agreed to anonymity while having my research approved. My questions regarded any gang training that have been given to the faculty in their school, educational strategies or prevention efforts that have been directed towards their students, and their perception of the prevalence of gang activity within their school. Six schools stated that their faculty had not received any gang training, although one of these schools stated that they have a School Resource Officer who they believe has received that same type of gang training as KPD officers. The remaining four schools all referenced optional gang trainings that have been held by Quick during the past several years for counselors, social workers, and school faculty. This training seems to have been fairly similar to the training that our class attended. Respondents mentioned topics such as local gang information, gang signs, colors, symbols, graffiti, and areas of town that gang members can usually be found hanging out. (Continued...)

Nelson Continued..

A respondent from one of the South Knoxville schools was particularly enthusiastic about helping with this project, as he had just organized a gang awareness training session at his school. He said that this optional training was open to all KCS employees and that they specifically invited all other South Knoxville schools. This training was once again conducted by Jim Quick and seemed to involve all previously mentioned topics. This respondent also informed me that schools have KPD officers in the building and that they have been told to take any concerns regarding gang activity to them. He said that there have not been any gang reported issues this past school year and that he believes it has been several years since there has been one. Five schools specifically stated not having gang related issues or a need for gang prevention efforts, although none of the other schools claimed to have a gang problem. Only one respondent suggested providing positive opportunities for a student should any gang activity be observed. She explained several engagement opportunities that her school already offers that could serve as alternatives to joining a gang. A quote that I obtained from a North Knoxville school summarizes my own feelings about gang problem in Knoxville. This respondent said, "There is a lot of noise about gangs in the Knoxville area but to this point we have not seen it trickle down to the high schools." While I cannot claim that there are no problems with gangs in any of the schools, especially since I am lacking any information from East Knoxville schools, I do agree that there is much more "noise" about gangs than actual gang threats. Based on the information that I have obtained, I do not consider gangs to be a serious threat to Knoxville. I will Knoxville an overall rating of 4. This rating based on the information that I gathered is fairly close to my own perceived level of threat in Knoxville. I would recommend less emphasis being placed by law enforcement on prosecution and imprisonment and instead suggest that more efforts be placed on preventative measures, focusing on marginality, social structures, and providing more positive, engagement opportunities for youth that are at risk of joining a gang.



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