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Gang Investigators' Perceptions of Military-Trained Gang Members (MTGM)

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Communities everywhere have experienced the negative effects of street gangs. The presence of military-trained gang members (MTGMs) in the community increases the threat of violence to citizens. The problem addressed in this study was the apparently growing presence of military-trained gang members in civilian communities. The purpose of the study was to determine the perceived presence of military-trained gang members and to examine whether there was a relationship between the perceptions of gang investigators regarding the presence and the size of their jurisdictions, the proximity of their jurisdictions to a military installation, and the extent to which investigators participate in anti-gang activities. The statistical analyses used to test the hypotheses in this study were Pearson and Spearman Correlation Coefficients, independent means *t* tests, and Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regression analysis. Respondents reported a mean of 11% of the gang members in their jurisdictions were MTGMs. The Army, Army National Guard, and Army Reserve were identified as the largest sources of MTGMs and the Bloods, Crips, and Gangster Disciples were the gangs most represented. Recommendations included all branches of the military therein should adopt a uniform definition of gangs. Military leaders should acknowledge the increase in gang-related crime affecting the military and address the problems caused for both military and civilian communities without attempting to quantify the threat level. Military leadership should continuously examine the activities of all suspected military gang members to determine active gang affiliation for retention purposes while evaluating any gang affiliation for security clearances. Military Law Enforcement liaison for recruiters should develop effective communication with local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies to assist with information sharing.

Introduction

“The greatest concern is gang members in the military recruiting new members, and using military services (weapons, armor, training material, supplies, access to security levels, and personal access to soldiers private data) to further their roles and purposes. Not only are they being deployed into combat, but they are also learning new tactics and weapons specializations that were unseen in the streets until the last couple of years. Those

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tactics and training are now showing up in home invasions and ambush style shootings.” Tennessee Gang Investigators’ Association member, May 2010.

Communities everywhere have experienced the negative effects of street gangs, with many communities experiencing an increase in the number of gang members. The proliferation of gangs in our society has led to an increase in destructive crimes (Egley & O’Donnell, 2009). Roughly 80% of all crimes in communities throughout the United States were committed by criminal gang members (National Gang Intelligence Center [NGIC], 2009). In 2008, there were roughly one million gang members in the United States (NGIC, 2009). How many of those gang members have had military training?

The number of crimes committed by gang members who were current or former members of the military has increased in the United States (U.S. Army Criminal Investigations Command; CID, 2009). The most common gang-related crimes involved drug trafficking, aggravated assaults, housebreaking and larceny, attempted homicides, and sexual assaults (CID, 2009). Most military and civilian community members are unaware of the existence of Military-trained Gang Members (MTGM) (NGIC, 2007). The threat to communities continues to increase because all MTGMs were or will be discharged from the military at some point, either due to inappropriate activity (e.g. conduct contrary to military discipline, criminal actions) or because their commitment to military service was satisfied. The presence of MTGMs has increased throughout the country while advanced combat tactics and advanced military weapons and equipment have become more available to gang members (NGIC, 2007).

To some extent, the proliferation of MTGMs is associated with military deployments and the transfer of soldiers to geographic areas with no prior MTGM problems (NGIC, 2007). Gang members from the military entered civilian communities and introduced military tactics and training to local gang members (NGIC). The practice created an increase in the level of gang violence within the community. Law enforcement officials with little or no training on countering military tactics are at great risk of harm (NGIC). Leaders of law enforcement agencies need to reassess their response to local gang activity and gang-related crimes committed within their jurisdictions (NGIC, 2009; Witkowski, 2004).

Background

Gang membership in the United States is growing. A 2009 report by the National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC) reported the number of gang members in the United States was conservatively estimated at 1,000,000 as of

September 2008. The 2009 NGIC estimate represented 212,000 more gang members (26% higher) than the 2007 report. The estimate was 215,000 (28%) higher than the number of gang members reported by the National Youth Gang Center in 2006 (Egley & O'Donnell, 2008). The estimate was also 200,000 (25%) higher than the 800,000 gang members reported by the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Deputy Director Pistole (2008) in March of 2008.

Gang membership has historically been treated as a youth problem. Street gangs were often considered youth-oriented, and were seen as distinctly different from adult criminal organizations (Klein, 2005). The traditional parameters for gang membership were between 12 and 30 years old, averaging about 20 years old (Klein, 1995). A recent study found a significant increase in the average age of gang members in Wichita, KS (Etter & Swymeler, 2008). In a comparative study of police-identified active gang members in 1996 and 2006, membership of adults in the Crips, Bloods, Folk (Gangster Disciples) and People (Vice Lords) gangs and each of the independent local gangs studied showed increases in the number of older members. The finding indicated that older members were providing an adult perspective to a traditionally youth-oriented problem (Etter & Swymeler).

The average age of gang members in the study increased from 20.03 to 26.59 from 1996 to 2006. Along with the age increase, the study revealed that approximately 34.87 % of the gang members remained active in the gang for ten years or more (Etter & Swymeler, 2008). The increased average ages may indicate not only an aging of the gang population, but also an increased emphasis in the recruiting of older gang members.

Military-trained Gang Members

In 1996, members of a Department of the Army investigative task force reported that gang-related activities were pervasive in the Army (U.S. Department of Defense [DoD], 1996). In 1998, DoD leaders directed a follow up study to the task force report. Flacks and Wiskoff (1998) conducted the study and reported that gang members adversely affected the military in a variety of distinct ways. While there was no official accounting of the scope and nature of the problem, leaders of the individual branches of the military thought the problem was significant enough to publish gang identification manuals (Flacks & Wiskoff). Recruiters and other relevant personnel were in need of better guidance on gang identifiers and the policies that guided decisions to allow gang members to enlist. The goal was to eliminate the possibility that gang members can enlist in the military (Flacks & Wiskoff). In addition, due to a decline in optimal quality and quantity of enlistees due to variables that included a decline in entry-level pay, record lows in the unemployment rate, a rise in college

attendance, a rise in family income, recruiters in the military had more of a propensity to recruit from the less-desired population, of which gang members were a part (RAND, 2004).

Flacks and Wiskoff (1999) also recommended that Tierney's (1998) research on gang members and military acculturation be expanded to include non-incarcerated personnel. Tierney examined self-identified gang members in military prisons. The interviews focused on reasons the gang members enlisted in the military and included: truthfulness with recruiters regarding prior arrests and criminal convictions, links to gangs and extremist groups, and reasons for lack of assimilation and acculturation in the military (Tierney, 1998). The top reason (37.1%) given for enlisting in the military was to get a better life or get out of the current environment. Other reasons included avoiding death or jail as a result of the gang lifestyle, providing for family, and getting job experience (Tierney). None of the military gang members seemed to have had patriotism among their reasoning for enlisting in the military.

Regarding their truthfulness with recruiters, many of the interviewees (over 50%) had prior arrests, including those sealed by juvenile courts. Other military gang members reported that their recruiter encouraged them to conceal their arrest record (Tierney, 1998). For those who had criminal records, a moral waiver was sought and granted (Tierney). Many of the interviewees without criminal records admitted to pre-service involvement in criminal activity that was undetected by law enforcement. Most of the interviewees were incarcerated for a crime that was not considered gang-related (Tierney).

Gang activity is still a problem in the military. According to the 2009 Army CID assessment, members of Los Zetas, Sureños, Bloods, Insane Clown Posse, Crips, Latin Kings, Gangster Disciples, and Bloods were identified during inquiries and investigations. Members of nearly every major street gang have been documented on military installations both domestically and internationally (NGIC, 2007). Gang members were present in most branches and across all ranks of the military, but were most common among the junior enlisted ranks. The Army, Army Reserves, and Army National Guard were the most likely to have gang members in their ranks (NGIC).

The authors of the 2006 CID assessment reported an increase in both gang-related investigations and incidents in 2006 over previous years. The most common gang-related crimes involved drug trafficking, with 31% of the gang-related felony offenses reported for the year (CID, 2006). Assaults, homicides, and robberies were also reported as gang-related crimes (CID). In the assessment for 2009, the authors reported the most common gang-related crimes involved drug trafficking, with 33% of the reported felonies that year (CID).

Aggravated assaults, housebreaking and larceny cases, attempted homicides, and sexual assault investigations were also reported (CID).

Agents of the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI) prepared an unclassified report (2007) to document their efforts at intelligence collection to determine if Air Force personnel or resources were adversely affected by gang activity. The agents reported that gang members joining the military were a problem over the previous decade (AFOSI, 2007). The agents reported that gang members were becoming increasingly more sophisticated in their recruitment of young people, including military dependents, using popular hip hop culture, websites, and chat rooms as methods to recruit young military members. Gang members may seek to join the military for weapons training, and use of combat tactics such as evasive skills and cover and concealment techniques (AFOSI, 2007). The training could prove problematic for law enforcement personnel, if the MTGM employed combat tactics in the commission of a crime or passed such training knowledge on to fellow gang members.

The presence of gang members in the military ranks may result in a disruption of command, low morale, disciplinary problems, and a broad range of criminal activity. "Gang-affiliated military personnel . . . facilitate crime on and off military installations, and are at risk of transferring their weapons and combat training back to the community to employ against rival gang members and law enforcement officers" (NGIC, 2007, p. 5). Gang members serving in the military have committed crimes such as murder, racketeering, and drug distribution (NGIC). Gang members have enlisted in the military as an alternative to incarceration. Others joined the military to recruit members into their gang, obtain access to weapons, and learn how to respond to hostile gunfire (NGIC).

While the presence of gang members in the military is not new, their numbers have risen and have recently caught the attention of political leaders. As a result, legislative efforts against those individuals attempting to join the military were recently added to a defense-spending bill (National Defense Authorization Act [NDAA], 2008). The legislation, Public Law 110-181, included the directive that the Secretary of Defense, "prescribe regulations to prohibit the active participation by members of the Armed Forces in a criminal street gang" (NDAA, 2008, Sec. 544). The bill was passed by both houses of Congress and signed by the President in January 2008. Department of Defense (DoD) Instruction 1325.6 was drafted in response, and required military personnel to reject active participation in criminal gangs, apparently attempting to limit the activity of MTGMs by using anti-gang prohibitions. At the time this article was written, no policy had been designed by any of the military branches to address this guidance.

Conflicting Loyalties

Military members with simultaneous membership in a street gang have a dilemma. On the one hand, they are expected to (and swore that they would) support and defend the Constitution of the United States and obey the orders of the President and officers appointed over them (U.S. Department of Defense, 2007). Simultaneously, leaders of their street gang require a sworn oath to the beliefs and laws of the members of their street gang (Knox, 2006). Gang members in the military demonstrated a unique condition of deviance: “someone who literally marches under two sets of colors and to two different drummers, one legitimate (the military) and one illegitimate (the gang)” (Knox, p. 225).

The gang allegiance may include retaliation against members of a rival gang. Many gang members had a dismissive attitude towards authority, and the presence of gangs have affected all branches of the military (Valdez, 2009).

The ability to justify or rationalize conflicting loyalties (membership in both the military and a gang) were explained by the theories of differential identification and organizational commitment. Differential identification allows individuals to model behavior that others expected; rationalizing behavior when role conflicts existed (Glaser, 1956). Organizational commitment examined an individual's dedication to the organization's purposes and values and his role in the organization, and indicated that when a member of an organization had a psychological attachment or otherwise identified with the organization, separation from the organization was difficult (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982).

The authors of the 2009 NGIC report observed “gang members with military training posed a unique threat to law enforcement personnel” (p. 13). The threat posed to law enforcement was even more significant if MTGMs trained other gang members in weapons, tactics, and planning (NGIC, 2009). Whether trained in combat arms, logistics, finance, or other military occupational specialties, the gang member with military experience should be considered more advanced and dangerous than the gang member without military experience, and the potential threat that MTGMs pose to law enforcement is significant (NGIC).

All facets of the criminal justice system throughout the United States (police, courts, and corrections) at the local, state, and federal level have the potential to encounter MTGMs. The military experience added a dangerous dimension to the gang member that was not seen in those without military training.

Research Method and Design

The study was designed to examine a specific type of gang member that had been neglected in gang research: military-trained gang members (MTGMs). The problem the study addressed was the apparently growing presence of

MTGMs in civilian communities. The purpose of the study was to determine the perceived presence of MTGMs and examine whether there was a relationship between the perceptions of gang investigators regarding the presence and the size of their jurisdictions, the proximity of their jurisdictions to a military installation, and the extent to which investigators participate in anti-gang activities.

Because only limited research existed with regard to gang-related variables, the study used the web-based, researcher-developed Military Gang Perception Questionnaire (MGPQ) to collect data. The questionnaire was reviewed by an expert group, pilot tested by gang investigators, and subjected to statistical analysis to confirm validity and reliability (Smith, 2011). The independent variables in the study were the size of the gang investigators' jurisdiction, the extent to which gang investigators participated in anti-gang activities, and the proximity of the gang investigators' jurisdiction to a military installation. The dependent variables were *MTGM Presence Based on Ratings*, the sum of seven of the questions from the MGPQ, and *Percent Presence*, which measured the investigators' perceptions of the percentage of gang members in their jurisdiction who were MTGMs. Other variables (i.e., anti-gang experience, age, race, and military experience) were assessed as control variables.

The MGPQ (Smith, 2011) was used to collect responses from the 260 active members of the Tennessee Gang Investigators Association (TNGIA). Members of the TNGIA primarily included male and female adults who worked in or were affiliated with the State of Tennessee in police, courts, corrections, and related fields who joined the association to address the problems seen with the increased presence of street gangs and other organized criminal operations (TNGIA, 2009).

The survey instrument contained indicators that demonstrated investigator perceptions of MTGM presence within their jurisdictions. The survey questions specifically referred to the use of military weapons, equipment, and tactics used by gang members in the respondents' jurisdictions. The respondents were also asked about the unexplained appearance of new gang members or gangs that may indicate a military-assisted migration, and their knowledge and sources of knowledge regarding MTGMs in their jurisdictions. Data were sought from the population of 260 members of the TNGIA. The final sample consisted of $N = 119$ participants who answered all or almost all of the questions on the survey. The survey for the research study was developed for online distribution.

A power analysis was conducted to estimate the sample size needed. Using an online sample size calculator (Creative Research Systems, 2009), a confidence level of 95%, and a desired precision of $\pm 5\%$ for a population of 260 gang investigators in the TNGIA, the required sample was 155. An additional

sample size calculation was computed for a multiple regression analysis involving seven predictors, a significance level of .05, a power of 80%, and a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$). That power analysis indicated that $N = 103$ was sufficient to detect the size of effect.

MTGM presence based on ratings. The first measure of MTGM presence was *MTGM Presence Based on Ratings*, a dependent variable. The answers provided in questions 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12, and 13 were summed into an interval-level index score that was used to measure the perceptions of MTGM presence. Those seven items were chosen because (a) they all assessed MTGM presence, (b) when factor analysis was applied across the Likert items using the pilot study data, those items formed one factor on which they all displayed factor loadings greater than .50, and (c) they demonstrated a very good internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .88).

Percent presence. The second measure of MTGM presence was *Percent Presence*, a dependent variable. This second dependent variable measured the investigators' perceptions of the percentage of gang members in their jurisdiction who were MTGMs. That was measured by question number 24 on the survey and consisted of a ratio-level measurement ranging from 0 – 100%. Because the area of research was new and the survey was being developed by the researcher, using two different operationalizations of the dependent variable allowed for a more thorough exploration of MTGM presence, validity of measures, and assessment of the variables related to the dependent variables.

The statistical analyses used to test the hypotheses were Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients, independent means *t* tests, or Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis. Those approaches assumed a normal distribution of the variables, linear relationships between the variables, no multicollinearity between independent variables, and no heteroskedasticity. Tests were undertaken to assure that all of those assumptions were met by the data. Pearson Correlation Coefficients allowed the researcher to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables, and whether the relationship was statistically significant. Pearson Correlation Coefficients were measured on a scale of -1 to +1, such that scores with absolute values closest to 1 indicated the strongest relationship. Independent samples *t* tests were appropriate for comparing the means between two independent groups of subjects. Additionally, multicollinearity was assessed since there may be collinearity between variables included in the analysis, particularly between age, anti-gang experience, and anti-gang activities.

Study Respondents

The majority of the respondents were Police (61.5%), followed by Corrections (21.4%). Social work, Courts, and Fire investigation had the fewest respondents. Each of those categories had 0.9%. The majority of respondents (72 out of 116) did not have a working relationship with military investigators (62.1%). Most of the respondents were Caucasian (78.6%), followed by African-American (12.0%), Hispanic (7.7%), and Asian (.9%). A minority of respondents had served in the military (35.9%). Additionally, of those reporting prior military service, the branch most represented was the Army (32.6%), followed by the Marine Corps (23.3%), the Navy (14.0%), and the Air Force (11.6%). The majority of respondents worked for city or town police agencies (33.9%). County Sheriff's Departments (24.6%) and State corrections (15.3%), followed. Federal law enforcement was the employing agency for 7.5% of respondents.

Study Findings and Discussion

The Army (43%), Army National Guard (38%), and Army Reserve (32%) were identified as the largest sources of MTGMs in Tennessee communities. The finding was similar to observations by Knox (2006) and the NGIC (2007) authors. The Bloods, Crips, and Gangster Disciples were the gangs most represented by MTGMs in Tennessee. The finding was similar to the representation of subjects in gang-related felony investigations in the Army since 2006 (CID, 2007; CID, 2008; CID, 2009). Drugs (40%), Robberies (38%), and Assaults (34%) were the crimes most often committed by MTGMs in Tennessee. The finding was also similar to the recent data from Army CID investigators (2009). It was estimated that more than 1 in 10 (11.10%) of the gang members in the respondents jurisdictions were MTGMs.

Descriptive Statistics. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the MTGM presence sum score as well as all other continuously measured variables assessed in the study. To assess the normality of each measure in Table 1, measures of skewness and kurtosis were computed for each measurement. Five out of the nine variables presented in Table 1 had skewness, kurtosis, or both skewness and kurtosis scores that fell outside of the acceptable range for normality. Those variables consisted of MTGM presence percent score, proximity to closest military installation (from survey), distance from closest military installation (computed), age, and number of employed officers. Those measures showed deviations from normality and were thus not appropriate for the application of parametric statistics. Solutions to the issue will be discussed in turn.