The New Face Of Chicago Gang Violence

By Matthew Blake
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Chicago Police Superintendent Garry McCarthy has pinned the 2012 rise in the city homicide rate on gangs. McCarthy asserts that gang members commit up to 80 percent of all Chicago murders and shootings, and that the fracturing of gangs has lead to an increase in violence. The police department has worked with not just City Hall on the problem, but also Cook County, the state of Illinois and the Obama administration on new measures to combat gangs.

But like overall city violence, gang violence is on a long-term decline despite the uptick this year. Moreover, there are changes in what constitutes a gang and how gangs use violence. Gangs are not just more splintered, their leadership is increasingly younger and more fluid.

The Changing Nature of Gangs
CPD defines a gang as “an organized group with a recognized leader whose activities are either criminal or, at the very least, threatening to the community.” The definition makes it sound like gang members are readily apparent. “Gangs display their identity and unity in obvious ways such as jewelry, colored clothing, jargon, and signals.”

As the police chief since last year, McCarthy has built on the work of his predecessors and placed identified gang members in the city's CLEARpath data system. McCarthy has won early praise for gathering intelligence on gangs. “I think that the police are doing an excellent job targeting and recognizing gangs,” says Ald. Emma Mitts (34th).

Gang data does provide some unfavorable statistics about the Chicago area. There are estimated to be more gang members in Chicago than any other city, including New York and Los Angeles, and the FBI National Gang Intelligence Center finds that there are more gang members per capita in Illinois than any other state.

But police department knowledge of gangs is imprecise. According to the Chicago Crime Commission, a nonprofit that publishes a yearly overview on street gangs, CPD identified metropolitan area gang population as anywhere between 68,000 and 150,000 members in November 2011, out of the 9.8 million residents in the metropolitan region.

There is also a lack of clarity in saying that a shooting is gang related. It could mean a gang member shooting a non-gang member, shooting a rival gang member, or – increasingly – shooting a member of the same gang. Albert Lurigio, a psychology professor at Loyola University in Chicago who studies crime, says that the “changing nature of gangs” means more homicides stem from “minor conflicts like an insult or sign of disrespect” in small gangs with no clear hierarchy.
Chicago gangs were organized better and prone to greater violence between the 1970s and early 1990s. The Chicago Crime Commission 2012 Gang Book finds that gangs such as the Black P Stone Nation and Black Gangster Disciples fought sustained gang “wars” during this time. Tio Hardiman, director of Cease Fire Illinois, a group that treats violence as a public health issue, refers to these bygone large gangs as “nations” with their own culture and identity. “Homicides were much greater when you had more nations,” Hardiman says.

Since the early 1990s, the criminal justice system apprehended key gang leaders and prevented subsequent leaders from emerging. Federal investigators also started to apply the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) act in prosecutions involving street gangs. The RICO act had typically been used on the mob. “The use of federal RICO laws definitely paid off,” Hardiman says. Also, the Illinois Department of Corrections and Federal Bureau of Prisons grew effective at preventing incarcerated gang leaders from providing orders while in jail.

The result is that more gangs today are closer to fly by night operations than organized criminal enterprises. “Different groups keeping popping up with people just naming gangs after their block or a rap group,” Hardiman says. Also, teenagers increasingly lead these gangs.

Shoshanah Yedhudah, a community organizer at the Southwest Youth Organizing Project, works with Chicago Public School students in neighborhoods such as Chicago Lawn and Gage Park. Yedhudah estimates that 4 in 10 students she works with identify as gang members. “It is literally teenagers that have decided their block has become a gang over something as simple as a dispute over girls,” Yedhudah says.

Yedhudah says that this has lead to an increase in violence, which is borne out by some citywide statistics. Shootings of CPS students were up 22 percent in the 2011-12 school year, though fatal shootings were down to 24 from 28 in 2010-11.

The Chicago Crime Commission Gang Book concludes that, “The disordered hierarchy implicates juveniles who are now increasing their criminal involvement and holding leadership positions within factions.” This “makes the policing of gang activity progressively more complicated, since law enforcement cannot easily cripple the gang from the top, down.”

**The City Reacts**

While the city of Chicago has taken numerous steps to combat gang violence, initial efforts did not address gang splintering. In January, CPD announced that the Englewood and Harrison police districts would work with the federal government to investigate gun-tracking cases. In June, after urging this spring from Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Gov. Pat Quinn signed into law a state RICO measure to target gangs as criminal organizations. These policies may prove effective, but they target gangs that operate as rational criminal enterprises.

The city has also responded to gang violence that stems from irrational, interpersonal conflict. In May, Emanuel announced that Ceasefire would get a grant from the Chicago Department of Health for their work in mediating potentially violent gang conflicts. Ceasefire mediators are largely former gang members. The organization previously feared coordination with the city
could undermine their work. But Hardiman says that Ceasefire is in full cooperation with the city and CPD. “We are one,” Hardiman says.

And in July, CPD started to work with Cook County jail to deny no-cash bonds for identified gangs members released on certain misdemeanor offenses. These suspects must now sit in jail for up to 48 hours instead of being immediately released. McCarthy has explained that the idea is to provide a “cooling off” period before a gang member gets back on the street.

Yehudah applauds the city for partnering with Ceasefire but says that “more is needed.” Specifically, more could be done by CPS. The Chicago Tribune reported in June that the tentative new CPS budget, contingent on a contract with the Chicago Teachers Union, cuts money for mentoring and after school programs. It bears watching what money is available for these programs. “CPS always seems to find money for other priorities,” Yehudah says, citing school turnarounds where the district fires the entire school staff.

CPS traditionally relies on federal and state monies for anti-violence initiatives. The Teen Outreach program run by Southwest Youth Organizing Project, for example, is funded by the state. Hardiman says it is unfair to lay the blame on CPS, and that gang violence should not be yet another issue put on the embattled school system. “It is not their problem,” Hardiman says. “They are supposed to be educating kids.”