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## The Structure of Gangs

**Identify the hierarchy of gangs in your jurisdiction to effectively target their weak spots.**

June 27, 2007 | by Richard Valdemar

In the past, Los Angeles brought in Willie Williams from Philadelphia to serve as LAPD Police Chief. Currently, William Bratton, previously of Boston and New York, fills the post. But these men who enjoyed successful reputations as effective anti-gang chiefs in other cities have not been very successful here in Los Angeles.

Why do the otherwise productive anti-gang programs of New York, Chicago, Baltimore, and Philadelphia not work in Los Angeles? Why do these same cities seem overwhelmed by the flood of Southern California gang members?

Gangs act differently in different parts of the country. They are influenced by their environment and culture as they develop their own style, code of conduct, and structure. And when they migrate within the 50 states and internationally, they maintain some of that original structure. For gang programs to be effective, they must be built like "smart bombs" designed tactically to dismantle the structure and hierarchy of particular targets.

In New York and Chicago, gangs developed a clear corporate-style structure in the shape of an Egyptian pyramid. At the bottom are the street soldiers, topped by a hierarchy which is capped by a leadership and, finally, a president or king. For example, Larry Hoover is the King of the Folks Nation. Gangs that utilize this structure sometimes even have written constitutions and bylaws.

### **The Mexican Model**

Not so in Los Angeles. Los Angeles street gangs evolved on the Hispanic or "Mexican Model." The street gangs here are much more democratic, with the ideal that every member has an equal vote. Within this structure are sub-groups or cliques, each with sometimes fiercely independent charismatic de-facto leaders. The L.A. street gang is really a coalition of cliques working as a unit, similar in structure to the cells of a terrorist organization such as al Qaeda.

Under this model, if you destroy a cell or clique or incarcerate a leader, another will just fill the power void. Since there are few lines of command and control, it becomes difficult to effectively impact the hierarchy. Each cell seems to act independently, and yet supports the group in their common goals.

Ask an L.A. gang member who the leader of his gang is, and he will say, "I am!" The structure pyramid formed by Southern California gangs is like an Aztec pyramid. It has a broad base of foot soldiers and new inductees forming large semi-autonomous stones (cliques), narrowing toward the top. This narrowing occurs more because of member attrition through desertion, death, and prison than because of positional appointments.

### **Veteranos and OGs**

At the top of this L.A. gang pyramid are the senior gang members. Although they are not granted the authority to command the gang to do anything, they are given informal figurehead and honorary titles. They are called "Veteranos" (veterans) in a Hispanic street gang and "Original Gangsters" or OGs in an African American gang.

They act like law enforcement senior officers. Although not given the pay, rank, and title of lieutenants or sergeants, they tend (especially on early mornings) to run the shift in the absence of official leadership. This is largely due to their experience, and not to official hierarchy. If a senior officer tells you, "You ought to make this notification" or "write this report," you would be foolish to disregard his or her advice. However, the officer probably would not try to order you to do it. The same is true of Veteranos and OGs.

### **Target the Left Arm**

Despite all of the differences, there are structural similarities among East Coast, West Coast, and also Midwest gangs that can be exploited. All of these gangs have two "arms."

The right arm is the most familiar. It is the war-making militant fighting arm. It is made up of the gang members and the structural hierarchy, of whatever type it might be. This is the arm that gang prevention and suppression programs usually target. But even if you successfully incarcerate and dismantle the members and structure of this militant right arm, new gang members will continue to replace them.

What many often forget is that gangs also have a left "arm." The left arm is the money-making arm of the street gang. Whether it be drugs, extortion, identity theft, murder, or Gangsta Rap, the left arm is the source of money the gang needs to continue financing the war-making arm. This financial arm must be targeted to effectively dismantle forever the gang. The left arm must be tracked to the source of this income and completely cut off. Once this is done, the gang will be weakened and then the right arm can be targeted more effectively.

In Los Angeles, even the gang members themselves have learned to target the Gangsta Rapper from a rival street gang. This is done not only to damage the rival gang's reputation and kill an enemy gang member, but also to dry up the gang's ability to finance continued warfare.

Gang units should work closely with narcotics detectives. This "left-right combination" is very important. But the most critical element in the fight against gang violence is good intelligence. In today's law enforcement agencies I see a low priority given to local criminal intelligence, on the structure and leadership of the target gangs. This is often where budget cuts do even more damage. Ask yourself, What general would dismantle his intelligence unit in the middle of a war?