Chapter 1
Characteristics of Gangs and Gang Members

Learning Objectives

1. Be able to define the context of the terms geographical and fluidity in accordance with gangs.

2. Understand how to speak to a gang member.

3. Be able to discuss the concept of perishable knowledge.
Chapter 1
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Remember, nothing is absolute; street gang activity is geographical and fluid.

A. Geographical in that street gang activities vary from state to state, city to city, and even from neighborhood to neighborhood. In other words, what is in California is not necessarily in New York or Illinois; what is in Los Angeles is not in San Diego or Tucson; and what is in the community of Logan Heights is not necessarily in the community of Denver.

Activity also varies among the numerous ethnic groups which exist within a given community. Activity that black or African American street gangs are involved in is different than that of Latino or Hispanic street gangs. Activity that Latino or Hispanic street-gangs are involved in may be different than that of Filipino, White or Asian gangs...and so on.

B. Fluid in that what was true in 1980, 1990 or 2000 is not necessarily true today. What was true in January is not necessarily true in April, and what was true last week is not necessarily true today. The activity a group is involved in is often dictated by which member or members dominate the group at that time.

One prominent member might like committing drive-by shootings on rival gangs and hanging out at the local park; when he is incarcerated, injured or killed, the next influential member or members may prefer doing supermarket robberies and hanging out at the local video arcade. Hence gangs activities are as fluid as its influential active membership.

1. When dealing with the gang member, understand what is most important to them.

A. Their dignity

B. Their respect

Gang activities are often driven by a group’s machismo. Acts of violence are committed simply because the victim(s) “dissed” the assailant. In plain English, the gang member assaults victims because he is disrespected. This disrespect may be real or imagined. An officer who treats the gang member with a little dignity and respect will gain a greater insight on a gang’s intricate workings. This dignity and respect however, must flow both ways. In other words, an officer should not compromise his/her safety or that of his fellow officer if the gang member begins to verbally or physically challenge him/her. Those issues must be dealt with first and they should be dealt with firmly, but fairly.
**Perishable Knowledge**

In the years developing this manual, gangs have continued to emerge and spread throughout society. Gangs are surfacing in middle and upper-middle class communities and, as is typical, these communities are in absolute denial. Law enforcement is characteristically playing “catch-up” as well.

You will be introduced to interpreting characteristics, dynamics and sociology common to gang culture. These dynamics are distinctive and visible in not only established well-entrenched gangs, but also in emerging or developing gangs as well. The information becomes critical when one wishes to understand what is plainly visible, yet denied by many who want to wish it away.

A defense “expert” called to testify during a murder called these characteristics, “…false positives.” The characteristics exhibited by this newly created gang identified by law enforcement, were not “false positives,” they were typical and consistent with developing gangs throughout society. The defense expert, a retired investigator himself, was ill-informed and articulated a shallow analysis of what law enforcement has been seeing for years. His testimony was representative of one who has simply not stayed abreast of what every gang expert should know—that gangs are geographical and fluid. Being an expert today, doesn’t guarantee that you’ll be an expert tomorrow!

Emerging or developing gangs will embrace and mimic the characteristics and behavior of established gangs in order to demonstrate established notoriety. Typical of affluent communities, families in denial made excuses for these young men not wanting to admit such monsters could have emerged from their high-class world. Well, it does happen and it is an epidemic across the United States.

Law enforcement officers invariably struggle to achieve stature within our communities that is both respected and admired. Each is tasked with the formidable task of protecting the citizen, as well as attending to every social ill in society. Law enforcement professionals often feel more like social workers than police officers, and must approach missions with added tolerance; hence, the unyielding machismo approach is no longer appropriate.

Is an uncompromising approach ever appropriate? In a potentially explosive situation necessitating immediate command, yes; but in day-to-day contact with the average individual, no. Street gang involvement is one of the most pressing issues facing law enforcement. The gang member of today, however, is really no different than that of the past. Better armed yes, but their distorted outlook of society is generally the same. In the past, law enforcement dealt with the gang member by rushing in, throwing him against the wall, demanding answers and expecting respect. The undeniable result was bitterness and outright defiance of law enforcement by gang groups. Not just the officers who treated them with irreverence, but for law enforcement in general.

Today, many officers establish this same, heavy-handed approach to gang members. Not necessarily heavy-handed in physical terms, rather, presumptuous and overbearing. The result again, is a distrust and lack of respect for the police officer on the street. Nicknames for patrol
officers such as Robocop, Batman, Robin and Super Cop are simply an example of the farcical manner in which the gang member exhibits his belligerence. The comical idea of an officer rushing in like a super-hero to deal with the gang is both ludicrous and disturbing.

Dealing with the gang member requires nothing more than an understanding of what makes them click. What is it that drives their attitudes, their minds, and the entire gang subculture? What is it that the gang member, any gang member, will kill and even die for? What does the officer need to say or do to get a gang member to cooperate in an investigation or discuss issues in the neighborhood?

One factor generally driving the actions of any gang member is the machismo attitude. A gang member may confront a rival or other individual, simply because of the way the individual is looking at him, a subtle challenge, a tattoo depicting gang affiliation, color of clothing, hand signs, or an innocent glance at the gang member’s female companion. A number of things can create the spark triggering the violent nature of the gang member.

It is this machismo attitude, with a need to impress peers and achieve status within his gang or impress his female companion, which motivates. It is also this disposition which causes the gang member to react vehemently, even when outnumbered, out-gunned, or when being confronted in any public setting. His volatile disposition may even be aimed at the law enforcement officer who displays an overbearing attitude needlessly and causes injury to one’s reputation, especially in front of peers.

The gang member’s reputation is his entire identity. Inflict damage to one’s status within the gang and an unpredictable situation is created. With many gangs, prestige is achieved by the amplification of an already hotheaded nature. One is actually placed in high regard when he exhibits an uncontrolled disposition. An assault on any peace officer likely results in the gang member being honored and admired.

Additionally, there are two critical fundamentals of a gang member’s character, which an officer must understand when dealing with a gang member. These are the cornerstones of his persona and mean more to him than his own freedom, family, and oftentimes more than his own life. The gang member’s violent nature is affected by his misguided views of these components in character; the gang member is willing to escalate his response to the degradation of these elements all the way to deadly force. These elements are his dignity and his respect.

The entire gang subculture thrives on these two issues and its participants react according to how others initiate communication with them or are treated in relation to these characteristics. Their response may depend on whether the approach is positive or negative. Any lack of respect or damage to one’s reputation and honor is reason enough to react in a vindictive and impassioned manner.

The gang member believes respect is earned, not conveyed indiscriminately. Therefore, even the law enforcement officer patrolling the gang’s turf must earn his respect within the gang subculture. A violent response towards the law enforcement officer who comes across in a manner perceived as challenging, unlike a response toward a typical citizen, may be tempered
only by the fact that one is wearing a uniform. However, understand that the uniform is but a very thin veil which could dissipate into nothingness, leaving the officer to be viewed as just another person and therefore, subject to a response fitting the approach.

The officer, who approaches a gang member with respect and allows him to retain his dignity, will find him much more subdued. Simply stated, the officer need only approach the gang member in the same manner he would want to be approached. Unless circumstances dictate otherwise, overtures on a level playing field are much more effective than from a position of superiority. People in general prefer the opportunity to express themselves to others, including law enforcement, on the same plateau. They do not appreciate being talked down to or treated any less than the human beings they are.

On the other hand, an officer should not have to deal with the insolent disposition some gang members exhibit. In other words, dignity and respect must flow both ways. The gang member, who fails to respect the sincere overtures of an officer attempting to deal with him in a professional nature, should be dealt with firmly, but fairly. Gang members understand the officer is a symbol of authority and with that is granted prerogative to do his job. Most will understand any reasoning behind an uncompromising approach as long as it is indifferent and fair. An officer need not insert his personal biases and humiliate the individual. Furthermore, the officer must ensure he is proper in his requirement to have the individual endure the commanding advance.

As noted earlier, a gang member achieves status when he exhibits a fierce posture. He may attempt to elevate his standing within the gang at the expense of an officer. For this reason, the dignity and respect approach will not be effective with every gang member an officer encounters. Some will respond defiantly regardless of the officer’s approach. The key to that retort is not to aggravate an already unpredictable situation by elevating the level of force to meet the challenge. The gang and its members expect that response. It leaves an officer nowhere to go but up in the level of force available. An officer may defuse an individual’s arrogance by first, pulling the person aside and second, explaining his reasons for the contact in a low-key persuasion. There is nothing wrong with explaining your intentions to a group or individual. A few seconds and a little consideration is all the group might need to understand the officer’s point of view.

If the group or individual refuses to communicate with the officer and the officer has no pressing need to continue his efforts, he should terminate the undertaking. Of course, if the officer has a legal obligation to deal with a problem, then he must address the problem with whatever resources are at his disposal, additional officers, appropriate force and the like. The key is not to undermine the long-term possibilities by continuing to press an issue just because the group will not respond as one would want them to.

There will always be another day. Time will give the officer an opportunity to check probation and parole status of the group or review other resources, which may prove beneficial in a later encounter with the group. A subtle “Aren’t you Spooky? and aren’t you on probation with gang conditions?” will cause the individual to regress. Once an individual or group knows the officer has a legal advantage, they are less likely to respond aggressively. His thoughts are, “What else
does he know about me?” or “If I’m cool, he won’t violate my probation or tell my probation officers I’m hanging out.”

Any disrespectful gesture or verbal abuse by the officer will only intensify and reinforce the hostility toward law enforcement the group or individual may already have. If the individual is an influential member of the gang, the officer has shut the door on any possible avenues of communication between the gang and himself.

Future efforts to approach a group or individual from that particular gang will likely cause them to go the opposite direction. If the officer attempts to get answers regarding a criminal investigation, he will likely encounter opposition. His status as an officer of the law has been compromised as the word of the officer and his authority are worthless in the eyes of the gang because he has failed to earn their respect. How can an officer be effective in combating a gang problem when he can garner no intelligence information about the intricate activities within the gang he intends to target? Unfortunately, certain facts may only be gathered from open communication with the gang or its individual members. These issues regarding the inner workings of a particular gang may be distinctive to that gang and that gang alone. Its rivals, hand signs, tattoos, jargon, hangouts, graffiti, allies, dominant members, followers, and active females all become significant facts when combating a problem or investigating a criminal case.

**Dialogue with a Gang Member**

The gang member is an expert at manipulating his environment. He attempts to portray himself as a soldier within his community, protecting it from encroachment. The officer must understand that he is the outsider in a gang’s turf. He must establish himself as a dominant force which the gang will respect. He does this by learning all there is to know about the gang: who, what, when, where, why and how.

Who seems to be the shot callers dictating what activities the gang is involved in? What drives the gang’s motivations and activities? What gang monikers do they use? When are they most active? Where are they most likely to assemble? Where do they live and where do they go to school? Why are rivalries flaring up and with whom? Lastly, how may an officer impact these activities and how may someone approach them to learn even more?

Answering these questions about the gang and its inner-workings will open paths of communication with members of the gang. Nothing impresses a gang member more than to have an officer come up to him and begin to speak to him in his language. The cop who knows, “what’s up in the hood;” A cop, who understands what it is like to grow up in a barrio and does not pass judgment simply because of one’s affiliation with a gang; A cop who can be trusted and respected.

**Trust and respect**...right back to where we started. The law enforcement officer who has worked hard to establish trust and respect from the community he serves will be far more effective than the “puffy-chested-hard-ass” officer. Displaying a proper attitude and demonstrating respect is not taught in any classroom setting, rather it is forged according to the
officer’s personality and desire to be the very best. He must mold his principles to fit the needs of his task and if that assignment involves dealing with a gang problem, then he must establish a degree of expertise predicated through interrelation with the gang. Therefore, any relationship an officer establishes with a gang and its members should include “just a little respect.”

Actual Gang Dialogue

When dealing with the gang member or group of gang members, a patrol officer is more likely to have a reasonable conversation by simply treating the gang member like he himself would want to be treated. There is nothing wrong with approaching an individual or group with a proper greeting and explaining the reason for the approach or a traffic stop; that is, assuming the officer is not approaching an already developing situation that requires immediate control.

On the other hand, if a patrol officer approaches an individual or group and the officer knows one or more of the group to be suspects in a criminal case, wanted on warrants, or previously known to be armed, wait for appropriate cover units and make contact with overwhelming numbers to lessen the likelihood of resistance. Be decent with companions who are not wanted. Collect an appropriate photograph and field interview and move on. Investigators will want to know the wanted person’s companions and associates.

Below is fictional conversation between a patrol officer and a group of gang members hanging out in front of a local bar or neighborhood store. On first look, no one is known to be, or appears to be, a wanted individual or identified suspect in a criminal case. While each patrol contact may be different depending on circumstances, low-key, respectful contacts without compromising safety are often more effective. These type of contacts may also lessen the likelihood of physical confrontation.

Officer:

    Good morning guys. What’s going on?

Gang member(s):

    Nothing officer. Just kickin’ it.

Officer:

    Don’t we all need to get away from things and “kick it.” Listen, I’m here because we’ve gotten calls and some people don’t feel comfortable coming into the store with a bunch of guys hanging out in front. It might be better if you guys go around the corner and hang out away from the store. That way, people will stop calling us and we don’t have to come around. I do have better things to do, you know.

    You see, there are “no loitering signs” there and there (pointing to signs). If the property owner wanted, you guys could be cited and what a hassle that would be. You’d have to appear in court, maybe get a warrant if you don’t show up and it could likely be worse.
Now, let me get some things done so my bosses know I'm doing my job and then I'll be out of your hair. Is anyone here on probation or parole?

- If you have one or two admit their probation or parole status, inquire why they're on supervised status. This opens the door to initiate pat-downs. These individuals know the routine, so you likely won’t have resistance. If you do, be firm but fair. Don’t overreact. Express a sense of authority, experience and insight. Be decent and your openness will be respected.

- With a partner or cover officer looking on, initiate field interviews and identify the characters involved. If individuals have tattoos, inquire or comment about them. Many gang members enjoy talking about their ink and will likely want to brag about them.

- Initiate conversation about them as if you’re talking to a regular citizen in the community. Don’t be overly aggressive unless the situation dictates it. Be safety conscious at all times, looking at their hands and keep control. Don’t turn your back and while one officer is doing the talking, the other is simply keeping watch over the other.

- If the individuals comment about the second officer standing aside watching things, simply comment that that’s his nature. He prefers it that way. Continue your business and move on.

- If during your business, you identify an individual with a warrant, on probation or parole, make an arrest if one is warranted. If not, comment that their probation or parole status could be compromised by his "kickin' it" with other gang members.

- If the individual(s) on parole or probation status display a sense of arrogance, resistance or aggressiveness toward you or your partner, seek violations of conditions and remove them from the group immediately. Control is critical when you are outnumbered. When a decent, respectful approach does not work and you have a right to contact and detain the individual or group, do what you must to obtain control and then go about conducting your business. If they are decent, do your job and move on.

There are seasoned gang investigators who do not know how to talk to people without talking down to them; the more effective investigator uses his insights regarding the gang to open lines of communication with gang members. They talk to the gang member, not at them. Knowing everything about a gang’s inner workings helps. Gang members love talking about their world and appreciate a “cop” who understands. An effective investigator learns; a gang’s membership, graffiti, hand signs, tattoos, clothing, rivalries, female associates, hangouts, vehicles and more. When an opportunity to approach a gang member arises, the investigator initiates conversation by discussing recent activities the gang member can relate to.
A recent rival graffiti attack on neighborhood walls, shooting or homicide often catches their attention. When one is able to converse intelligently about the gang member’s world, a gang member will open up to conversation. Albeit reluctantly, but as one feels comfortable with the investigator’s insight and knowledge, the gang member is more likely to open up.

During a violent crime investigation, the seasoned gang investigator will quietly pull witnesses aside, away from anyone’s view and question them regarding the case. One has to consider the witnesses’ reluctance to cooperate in gang cases and provide them with a level of confidentiality.

I recall one homicide incident where the victim lay on an apartment complex walkway. A crowd had gathered only a few feet away and separated by yellow crime scene tape. One Homicide Investigator wanted to show a key witness a photographic line up of a possible suspect he had prepared. The investigator called the witness to a location, only feet from the gathering crowd, placed the line up on the trunk of a parked car and asked, “Do you see the guy that did this here?”

The witness looked up at the crowd, never looked at the line up and said, “Fuck you. I don’t see shit.”

The investigator didn’t know what he had done wrong. The witness went back into his apartment and slammed the door. I picked up the line up and asked the investigator to follow me. We walked over to the witness’ apartment, knocked on the door and after a great deal of apologizing and eating crow, I asked to come inside. The witness looked at the Homicide investigator with utter disrespect. I explained the line up and asked him to look at it carefully. I asked him if he saw anyone familiar in the group of photographs and if he did, he should point them out and tell me why they looked familiar.

The witness looked at the line up, glancing at each photograph and pointed to the suspect. He said this was the individual arguing with the victim and the person who had killed him.

I truly believe I became an effective investigator because of how I treated and spoke to the gang member, whether victim, witness or suspect. I won’t say there weren’t times when the niceties were not appropriate and the respectful approach didn’t work. However, I will say it works on a greater number than not. I recall hanging out at a local gang hangout with a group of gang members who displayed the “Code 4” police hand sign to passing cars. When I asked them what they were doing, they said they were letting my partners know I was “Code 4.” They assumed undercover officers were in cool cars passing by to ensure my safety.

I have had a gang member stand up against one of his own when the individual became arrogant toward me. His homies pushed him into a car and told him, “Hey—chill. That’s Felix. He’s cool.”

The response was, “Fuck, Felix. He’s a cop.”
Weeks later, the arrogant gang member was himself arrested for burglary and called for me to talk to him. I reminded him of his arrogance and told him I had nothing to say to him. He went off for his third strike.

I have been invited to gang members’ weddings and had recently released parolees call and thank me for treating them respectfully and making a difference in their lives. One young lady whose brother was killed in a gang shooting when she was nine years old, promised to take my place as a gang investigator when I retired. She subsequently grew up to become a public speaker, lecturing about the issues involving females in gangs. She is an articulate and passionate speaker and in high demand across the country.

Chapter 1  Discussion Questions

1. Why is location so important to some gangs, but not to others?

2. Is dialogue with a gang member different than a non gang member? How? Why?