



Section 4: Gangs

Gangs gaining power in suburbs

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WHITE PLAINS — A 34-year-old man is stomped in a graphic videotape, suffering a brain injury outside a Spring Valley convenience store because he didn't move his car to make room for a gang member's SUV.

An upstate teenage girl displays gang tattoos on her breasts in a photograph and tells a counselor her initiation involved having sex with seven gang members when she was 11 years old.

Other photos show youngsters whose faces were disfigured by razor blades, knives and even a machete in gang attacks.

The images are from yesterday's first Westchester County Youth Violence Summit, and they highlight what officials call a growing trend in the Lower Hudson Valley — gangs in the suburbs.

"For a long time we said it couldn't come here," county Assistant District Attorney Andy Grascia said at one of 14 seminars at the summit. "But are we immune to these problems?"

"It's a community-based problem," Grascia said. "It's our young kids."

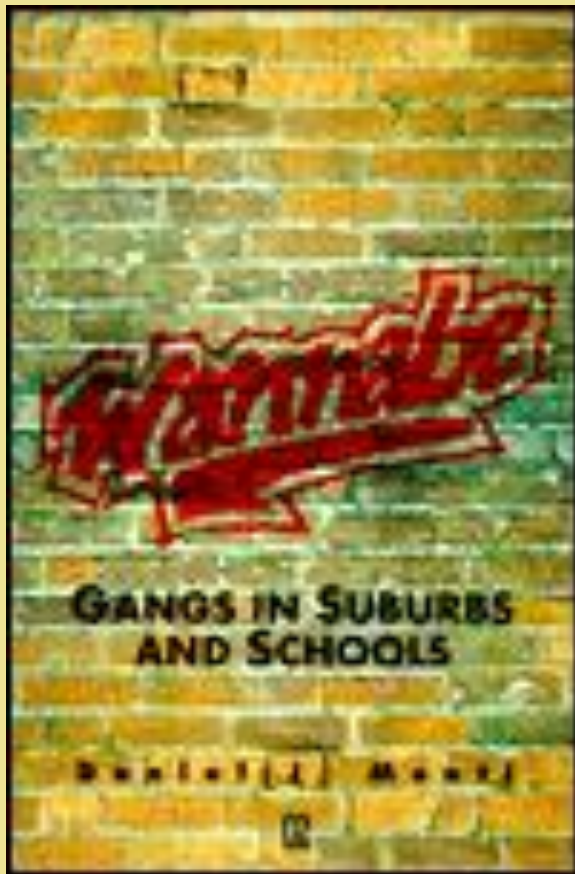
Sponsored by District Attorney Janet DiFiore and County Executive Andrew Spano, the all-day summit drew more than 400 educators, social-service workers and law-enforcement officials from throughout the state to the Westchester County Center.

"We're here because we're hoping to get more information," said Lisa Velazquez, a caseworker at Arms Acres, a Carmel treatment center. "I'd call it an epidemic that's going around."

Since 1998, the Westchester district attorney's office has identified some 30 gangs in the county with about 1,500 members, DiFiore said. She said more than 900 gang-related cases have been referred to her office for prosecution during that time.

"People in Westchester — throughout Westchester County — have to realize this is not a localized problem that affects only urban areas," said Spano. "It affects everybody. The suburbs, rural areas, are not exempt from it."

And the cost of gang activity is staggering, said keynote speaker Greg Owens of the Office of Strategic Planning and Policy Development at the state Office of Children and Family Services. Owens said gang violence costs the nation as much as \$425 billion, including \$90 billion in criminal-justice costs



Wannabe chronicles the way in which suburban youths become involved with gangs, learn about committing crimes and violent acts, and gradually begin to question their loyalty to gang life. Youngsters use gangs to express their disdain for an adult world that provides them with few effective ways to become a conventional person and, at the same time, as a means to negotiate an entrance into that very world. Existing theories and intervention strategies intended to suppress gangs or lure youngsters from gangs are found to be ineffective. Far more important, Monti argues, are explanations of gang behavior that focus on the power of conventional institutions to make human beings that move from gangs into the larger world as the youngsters grow older.

The reality of gangs in 2006

- They're not only in big cities – gang activity may be present in smaller cities, suburbs, and even rural areas today
- The northeastern U.S. has seen the largest growth in gang activity in recent years
- 40% of gang members are under 18
- Girls are also involved in gangs today

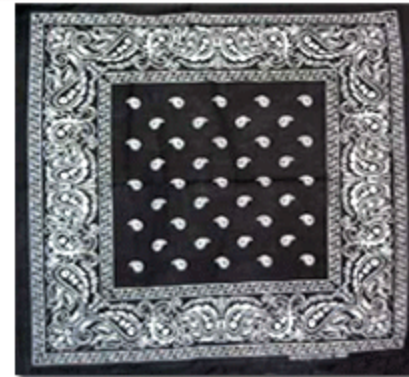
Special dangers of gang activity in school settings

- Gang violence often involves a larger number of individuals than other types of disputes among students
- Gang violence often involves more lethal types of weapons
- Gang violence is often retaliatory in nature – one act of violence is seldom the end of the story

Possible indicators that students are involved in gang activity

- “Colors” – distinctive type or color of clothing, shoes, belt buckle, jewelry, bandanas worn by several students
- Strange terminology or slang
- “Lit” – unusual signs, symbols, or graffiti on notebooks, walls, or bus seats
- “Initiation” - suspicious bruises and injuries resulting from a “jumping in” to a gang

Colors



Possible indicators of gang activity, cont.

- Handsigns – unusual hand signals or handshakes to communicate with friends
- Showing off expensive, unexplained cash or goods
- “Turf” - groups of youth loitering at the same location every day



GANGSTER CLOTHING



- Fashion trends come and go; what is considered a fad one day may be seen as the norm months later. A youth who dresses in this fashion may be--mistakenly--identified by gang members as a possible rival, thus putting himself in danger.
- The traditional big-shirt-and-baggy-pants look started decades ago when Hispanic gang members would wear the oversized and baggy pants more for economic necessity than style.
- Clothing items that have been altered with ink letters or symbols, or with additional embroidery may indicate gang involvement.
- Bandannas of all colors can be gang-related. Traditionally bandannas are worn hanging from a pocket or tied around the head. Some gangsters are more cautious about wearing these obvious identifiers, especially around police officers or in the schools.
- Likewise, baseball hats are also often banned in schools and even in some recreation centers. Hats that have been altered are suspect.
- Gang members sometimes wear professional or college sports clothing items. However, always keep in mind that some youths are genuine fans of the teams whose clothing they wear. This clothing by itself does not indicate gang association.
- Wearing the military style, web belts is catching on in this area. These belts consist of a web material that is available in a variety of colors and a metal belt buckle. The buckle has a letter cut into it, and often more than one buckle is threaded onto the belt. Usually the belt is quite a bit too long and the tail of the belt is worn hanging down.
- Athletic shoes with the brand name British Knights ("BK") or Columbia Knights ("CK") should be viewed with suspicion. Parents should weigh carefully possible ramifications in allowing their youngsters to wear this apparel.
- Shirts or other items with the Calvin Klein logo, "CK," are suspect if there are additional indicators that a youth is gang-involved. Flannel shirts, especially those in red or blue may indicate gang affiliation. And, custom-made shirts which commemorate the death of a gang member (usually with a slogan such as, "In memory of") can precipitate gang confrontations.



Warning

- Wannabes and Goth
- Like it or not, many “normal” teenagers who are not involved in gangs are influenced by “gangster” clothing and music
- Stereotyping of children from certain neighborhoods or certain ethnic, racial, or class backgrounds as probable gang members should be avoided
- Rap doesn’t mean gangs/violence

If you suspect gang activity...

- Don't confront the student directly – if you're right, it could be dangerous for you or them
- Stay away from possible gang disputes at or near a bus stop – radio base for instructions
- Report your observations to a school administrator, your Supervisor, an SBDI, or law enforcement