

# Gangs: How large a threat? // Causes of youths' violence are not as clear as the colors they wear

Diaz, Kevin; Peterson, David; Staff Writers<sup>1</sup> Staff Writers . Star Tribune ; Minneapolis, Minn. [Minneapolis, Minn]04 Aug 1991: 01A.

[ProQuest document link](#)

---

## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Several recent, well-publicized killings have set off alarms about gang violence in the Twin Cities. But a close examination shows that most killings classified as gang-related stemmed more from personal feuds than gang rivalry. This photo is from the Plymouth Av. scene last month of what police said was Minneapolis' 15th gang-related homicide of 1991. The victim was identified as a Crips member, but he was shot by a fellow Crip in a dispute over a girl. His own girlfriend prayed for him.

Citizens' fear is magnified by the fact that Minneapolis police publicly describe as gang-related any killing that involves at least one gang member, whether or not the gang itself has anything to do with the crime. Police officials say that's standard practice across the country, but actually it varies from department to department. Los Angeles police use that definition. But Chicago police do not. Nor do St. Paul police, who recorded no gang homicides last year or this year, though one or two are considered possibly gang-related.

The truth, though, is that police rarely encounter them. "I don't say they don't exist, but we've run across one automatic weapon in the three years I've been here," said Lt. Mike Fischer, head of the Minneapolis narcotics unit.

## FULL TEXT

Several recent, well-publicized killings have set off alarms about gang violence in the Twin Cities. But a close examination shows that most killings classified as gang-related stemmed more from personal feuds than gang rivalry. This photo is from the Plymouth Av. scene last month of what police said was Minneapolis' 15th gang-related homicide of 1991. The victim was identified as a Crips member, but he was shot by a fellow Crip in a dispute over a girl. His own girlfriend prayed for him.

In December a party disrupted by gunfire from rival gang members results in a white police officer fatally shooting a black teenager. In May a young man emerging from a nightclub is killed by accident as a dozen reputed gang members shoot at one another.

In July two groups of gang members open fire across a crowded downtown street after a showing of the film "Boyz N the Hood." Six of them are wounded; one, a 17-year-old boy, dies.

These events have sent chills throughout the Twin Cities and focused public attention on what appears to be a growing menace of lawless street gangs.

For the past six months the Star Tribune has been analyzing juvenile crime records and spending time with members of the Disciples street gang in an effort to understand gangs and their connections to violence.

The evidence shows that the link is not at all clear. Much of what is labeled gang crime is actually individual acts by people who happen to run with gangs, and local crime statistics show no clear wave of violent crime coinciding with the late-1980s surge in gang membership. In other cities with much higher violent crime rates, gangs are not a significant presence.

The problem here is not so much gangs as it is a relatively small group of unorganized but violent criminals who are surrounded by a much larger number of hangers-on and braggarts.

These are not Boy Scouts; gangs do attract many youths who are predisposed to committing crimes, and the gang culture may add to criminal activity by glamorizing the lifestyle.

But the newspaper's examination revealed that much of what is believed about street gangs in the Twin Cities is questionable:

The number of killings caused by gangs is being overstated. Almost all killings police classify as gang-related are described that way merely because at least one participant belongs to a gang. Many would better be described as "girlfriend-related."

The notion that Chicago gang lords have opened "branch offices" in the Twin Cities has little basis in fact. Although most local gangs have the same names as those in Chicago or Los Angeles, there is no evidence they are controlled from other cities.

Gangs are not disciplined organizations with clear lines of authority. Up close they look ragtag. They can serve as clustering points for people accustomed to violence and other forms of crime, but those people might well be in trouble even if there were no gangs.

There is little evidence that gangs are major sources of illegal drugs. Individual gang members make small-time money by peddling crack cocaine, but they do not appear to be part of gang-controlled drug rings.

The image of gang arsenals of Uzis and other automatic weapons is a myth. Twin Cities police say they almost never find automatic weapons on gang members or anyone else.

As far as is known, the December party that led to the death of Tycel Nelson was a rare case of young men shooting at one another purely out of gang rivalry, although some witnesses said there was friction over a girl or another previous dispute between two gang members.

In the nightclub shooting, a young man stepped into a fray outside the Mirage that, according to the best police intelligence, was caused by a running feud between two men who happened to hang out with different gangs. In that respect, the case is more representative of the type of gang violence that has beset the Twin Cities since the early 1980s.

Similarly, as far as police can tell, the July 13 shooting outside the Skyway 6 Theatres had less to do with gang rivalries than an individual dispute between two gang members.

The fact that most gang members are delinquent youths in uniform rather than part of a Chicago criminal conspiracy may be small comfort to those who fear for their their own and their children's safety. But it's important to understand the causes of the violence before it can be dealt with effectively.

The Twin Cities area seems to be edging toward a turning point in its approach to gangs, and the experience of other cities suggests that unless the right choices are made in dealing with gangs, they could become far more menacing. Gangs and crime There is a more hard-line view of where gangs are today.

"The city is caving in to gangs," said Minneapolis Police Sgt. Duane Frederickson, who specializes in gang problems. "You just have to look to Chicago to see what's coming here. . . . We lost it at Chapter 1 or 2."

"Minneapolis had better wake up and smell the coffee," said the Rev. Jerry McAfee, pastor of New Salem Baptist Church on Plymouth Av. N. "These are real Vice Lords and Crips. They're real, not just a bunch of kids hanging around. As long as the city is in this continued denial stage, we can't deal with this thing properly."

The hard-line view is compelling. But a lot of evidence that is supposed to show how bad the gang problem has grown is not as straightforward as it seems.

Last year, Minneapolis police recorded 19 killings as gang-related, a rapid increase from previous years. The statistic suggested a growing threat of orchestrated violence, gang-directed rub-outs, or, at the very least, individual acts of aggression motivated by gang rivalries.

Examined one by one, however - as they are in an accompanying article - the gang connection of most of them weakens and falls away. Rarely did anybody kill or die for his "colors." None was a drive-by shooting.

In a few cases it may appear as though, but for membership in a gang, a killing might not have occurred. But if gang membership were eliminated, other factors would remain: disputes among friends, rivalries over girlfriends.

Citizens' fear is magnified by the fact that Minneapolis police publicly describe as gang-related any killing that involves at least one gang member, whether or not the gang itself has anything to do with the crime. Police officials say that's standard practice across the country, but actually it varies from department to department. Los Angeles police use that definition. But Chicago police do not. Nor do St. Paul police, who recorded no gang homicides last year or this year, though one or two are considered possibly gang-related.

Some police officers are also heard complaining that they are up against gang members who are better armed than they are. Gang members, too, boast of their automatic weapons.

The truth, though, is that police rarely encounter them. "I don't say they don't exist, but we've run across one automatic weapon in the three years I've been here," said Lt. Mike Fischer, head of the Minneapolis narcotics unit.

Police have found a few Tech 9s - cheap semiautomatic versions mistakenly called Uzis on the street - that can easily be altered to fire automatic bursts.

In fact, for all the talk of gangs and the spread of guns, the state's Bureau of Criminal Apprehension says that the use of guns in homicides actually has declined over the past 20 years in Minnesota. The percentage of homicides involving firearms is down considerably since the 1970s, and so is the number involving handguns.

Not only that, but the average annual figure for homicides in the 1980s, the decade of gangs, was less than in the '70s. And although gangs are often said to be made up of young black men from Chicago, the average number of black homicide offenders is up only slightly during that period, and down when compared with population

increases.

Police estimate that 200 gang members are arrested monthly in Minneapolis for street crimes. But the Twin Cities' problem with violence is far less severe than in places such as New York City and Washington, D.C., where gangs are not considered a significant social problem.

The relationship between gangs and violence is a tricky one. After huge increases in the early 1980s, arrests for some of the most violent crimes among both adults and juveniles in Hennepin County tailed off in the late 1980s, even as gangs were said to be gaining strength.

Police often assert that gang members make money by selling drugs. And the Star Tribune did observe much street-level drug peddling among gang members. But police also say that about half of the local drug trade is controlled by gangs. Yet few of the major drug rings uncovered in the Twin Cities have been organized around an identifiable street gang.

About half of all Twin Cities gang members are identified with one faction or another of the Disciples or the Vice Lords, the area's predominant gangs. Gang lore holds that the Vice Lords were or still are controlled by Willie Earl Lloyd, now in a Chicago prison on gun convictions.

While Lloyd has been convicted of murder, robbery and drug offenses, police have never produced evidence that his crimes advanced objectives other than his own.

According to Jack Hynes, supervisor of gang prosecutions for the Cook County state's attorney's office, the gang connections between Chicago and the Twin Cities are conjectural, based primarily on people such as Lloyd, reputed gang members who have contacts in both areas. Conflicting claims

There's no real body of expertise on gangs in the Twin Cities.

Estimates of the number of gang members vary hugely. Minneapolis police believe there are at least 24 gangs with about 3,500 members. Some people who work with gangs say the number may be even higher.

Given that there are fewer than 10,000 black males between 12 and 24 years old in Hennepin and Ramsey counties, the current police gang roster, which is overwhelmingly black, would brand as gang members nearly one black youth in three.

Those numbers have been cast in doubt by other police officials, including Minneapolis Police Chief John Laux, who believes many youth have been misidentified by his own gang unit. "We've got to do a better job of sifting out the wanna-bes and the hangers-on from the hard-cores. I'm not convinced we have 3,500 hard-core gang members at all. If you told me 200 or 300, maybe."

Part of the problem is defining gang membership. A law that took effect this month defines a criminal gang as "any ongoing organization, association or group of three or more persons, whether formal or informal, that has, as one of its primary activities, the commission of (criminal offenses), has a common name or common identifying sign or symbol, and includes members who individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal activity."

The Minneapolis gang unit maintains that all the names on its list meet at least three of eight criteria for gang

membership, including gang members' own admissions, identification by other gang members, tattoos and dress patterns.

Hard-liners in the Police Department sometimes describe gangs as criminal enterprises run by drug lords in other cities. At other times they describe gang members as pathetically ignorant miscreants who can't be counted on to load their stolen guns with the proper ammunition.

Underlying some of the apparent inconsistencies may be the sound of grinding axes, on all sides.

Many police officers are political conservatives who see themselves as toiling under the yoke of a liberal mayor and City Council. Officers see City Hall as being in thrall to supposed gang reformers, whom they suspect of playing up the problem to extract funds from City Hall.

The police have their own axes. A case can be made that the minute you have a gang unit, you have a group with an interest in dramatizing how necessary it is, and why it needs more money. Former Minneapolis Police Chief Tony Bouza said he created the unit in response to public pressure, but he knew that he was creating a "cottage industry" that would promote gang hysteria.

Police perceive the gang problem, for practical purposes, as involving only young black men - an assertion to be examined in more detail in Monday's editions. Whatever the true makeup, racial feelings on all sides add to the difficulty in sorting out the facts.

And because this is one of the nation's whitest metropolitan areas - one that is especially unaccustomed to speaking with candor of racial issues and anxieties - citizens have been forced to try to figure out from bits of clouded information what is going on and why.

In the middle are disaffected young men who alternately boast about and deny gang affiliations, depending on whom they are talking to. From Vice Lords and Disciples, Bloods and Crips, you get to individual gang members, who by all accounts are a lot less menacing up close. You find individual stories and predicaments, most of them sad ones.

Tomorrow

Does it really matter whether violent street crime in the Twin Cities is a result of organized gangs or of disorganized individual misfits? This series continues with a look at the causes of violent crime and why it's important to understand who's doing it and why before it can be dealt with effectively.

Other articles will examine the black nationalism aspects of street gangs, and the activities of other ethnic gangs in the Twin Cities: Asians, whites and Indians.

Homicides are on the rise; Few killings are by strangers

As gangs took root in Minnesota during the mid-1980s, the number of killings increase. The annual average for the 1980s, though - 95 - was still lower than that of the 1970s, which was 97. And although there have been cases in which non-gang members were caught in gang violence, the statistics show no increase overall in the number of Minnesotans killed by strangers. Most killings involve acquaintances and family members.

## Rapid jump was mainly among whites

The steep and rapid rise in killings between 1983 and 1988 occurred at the same time that gangs were gaining strength. But the increase was almost identical to that of the early 1970s. And it occurred mainly among whites rather than among the minorities who are associated with gangs.

Note: figures are for victims's race; nearly all homicides are intraracial.

## Killings involving guns decrease

Gangs have been blamed for introducing a new intensity of violence during the 1980s, with more handguns on the streets. In fact, the percentage of all killing in Minnesota involving firearms has declined, and so has the number of killings committed with handguns.

## Juvenile arrests show no clear gang connection

There was no steady upward trend in arrests of urban juveniles for serious violent crimes for most of the mid- to late 1980s, as gangs grew. When an increase among blacks did occur, it was mirrored by one among whites.

Note: Other races are not listed separately in both counties, but the figures for them are small.

Sources: Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension; Minnesota Department of Health; Hennepin County; State Planning Agency.

(The complete charts for this article were unavailable electronically - please refer to the microfilm.)

## Illustration

PHOTO;CHART

## DETAILS

<b>Publication title:</b>	Star Tribune; Minneapolis, Minn.
<b>Pages:</b>	01A
<b>Number of pages:</b>	0
<b>Publication year:</b>	1991
<b>Publication date:</b>	Aug 4, 1991
<b>column:</b>	BEYOND THE COLORS // Understanding gangs
<b>Section:</b>	NEWS
<b>Publisher:</b>	Star Tribune Media Company LLC

<b>Place of publication:</b>	Minneapolis, Minn.
<b>Country of publication:</b>	United States, Minneapolis, Minn.
<b>Publication subject:</b>	General Interest Periodicals--United States
<b>ISSN:</b>	08952825
<b>Source type:</b>	Newspapers
<b>Language of publication:</b>	English
<b>Document type:</b>	NEWSPAPER
<b>ProQuest document ID:</b>	418286267
<b>Document URL:</b>	<a href="http://mtrproxy.mnpals.net/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/418286267?accountid=12415">http://mtrproxy.mnpals.net/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/418286267?accountid=12415</a>
<b>Copyright:</b>	Copyright Star Tribune Newspaper of the Twin Cities Aug 4, 1991
<b>Last updated:</b>	2017-11-14
<b>Database:</b>	Global Newsstream

## LINKS

[Find Full Text](#), [Check Primo for Availability](#)

---

Database copyright © 2020 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)