

Gang Identification Training for Rural Law Enforcement Agencies in South Carolina

Daniel C. Durham

Arizona State University

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The state of South Carolina generally reflects the same cultural and social trends as those found in other areas of the United States. However, in some respects South Carolina appears to be changing faster than some other states: the violent crime rate is higher than the nation as a whole; median income is below most of the country; recipients of government assistance are increasing; and general economic conditions outside of metropolitan areas continues to decline (Hill, 2011). Accordingly, it should be no surprise that between 1998 and 2007 the rate of gang violence increased 92% and murders attributed to gang members increased from none in 1998 to a total of 21 in 2007 (Rojek, Smith, Kaminski, & Scheer, 2005). An additional issue is that research studies and crime statistics indicate gang activity in South Carolina is now occurring in rural areas of the state (Small, Limber, & Kimbrough-Melton, 2000). While gang activity in any region is a concern to law enforcement, it is this movement of gangs into rural areas of South Carolina that is especially troublesome.

The nature of routine law enforcement patrol activities provides assigned officers with a valuable opportunity to gather gang-related intelligence. Effectively managing this intelligence gathering opportunity is to some degree dependent upon the level of gang-related training provided to patrol officers. In most large cities and metropolitan areas, law enforcement agencies typically have the resources necessary to provide officers with the training needed to address gang-related issues. However, agencies in smaller rural jurisdictions generally do not have the talent or the means available to provide any level of training above mandated minimum requirements. This disparity in the availability of training opportunities between urban and rural law enforcement agencies can have a direct impact upon the effectiveness of law enforcement activities in rural jurisdictions as well as the identification and response to gang-related activity.

This research activity is exploratory in nature and is designed to assess the degree of gang-related training on the part of law enforcement patrol officers in rural jurisdictions. The term “rural” is considered to be an incorporated city or town having a base population of fewer than 10,000 individuals as determined by the 2010 United States Census. Bounding the research to rural areas in this manner provides a degree of consistency in the examination of training provided to patrol officers considering that the Bureau of Justice Statistics indicates nearly 9 in 10 officers are assigned patrol responsibilities in jurisdictions with fewer than 10,000 residents (Reaves, 2010).

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics approximately half of the law enforcement agencies in the United States have fewer than ten officers or less (Reaves, 2010). This relatively equal distribution of officers between urban and rural agencies provides an opportunity to supplement research efforts through a survey of law enforcement officers in South Carolina designed to assess their basic knowledge of gang activity. The knowledge of patrol officers regarding gang activity is directly correlated to law enforcement training efforts, which the Bureau of Justice Statistics identifies has remained relatively stagnant for officers in rural jurisdictions while increasing for officers employed by larger urban agencies (Reeves, 2010).

The purpose of this research activity is to examine the training that has been provided to law enforcement patrol officers in rural jurisdictions regarding the identification of gang activity. By all indications there has not been any significant degree of research completed concerning the need for gang identification training in rural law enforcement agencies. Therefore, this study consists of the following research question: Are law enforcement patrol officers in small rural jurisdictions of South Carolina provided with the training necessary to differentiate gang members from other juvenile offenders?

Literature Review

The importance of personnel development in any organization is to define the type and degree of training needed for effective performance of a given activity. With respect to the law enforcement profession, the training needs of an agency must be routinely reevaluated to disseminate information that is relevant to the issues in contemporary society as well as problems unique to a given community. However, this training needs assessment must also ensure that information is provided in a cost-effective manner that is consistent with adult learning concepts.

The Distinction Between Juvenile Delinquents and Gang Members

An inherent problem with identifying an individual as a gang member is that the term gang continues to be used and applied inconsistently to juvenile delinquents. In the state of South Carolina, a juvenile delinquent is identified as an individual under the age of seventeen who has violated a criminal law (South Carolina Criminal Gang Prevention Act, 2013). To consider a juvenile delinquent as a gang member requires that the individual be an active member of a gang. South Carolina law defines a gang as, “A formal or informal ongoing organization, association, or group that consists of five or more persons who form for the purpose of committing criminal activity and who knowingly and actively participate in a pattern of criminal activity” (South Carolina Criminal Gang Prevention Act, 2013). However, before 2007, a codified definition of the term gang term did not exist in South Carolina. This absence of a legal definition often resulted in law enforcement officers attributing delinquent acts by juveniles to a gang when in reality the juvenile was not associated with a gang in any manner (Small et al., 2000). While historical trends of South Carolina gang activity is difficult to assess, what is important is that law enforcement officers now have a standard method to formally distinguish juvenile delinquents from gang members (Maxson, Hennigan, & Sloane, 2003).

Assessing the Need for Gang Identification Training

Although gangs have long been acknowledged as being present in South Carolina for decades, the emergence of gang activity in rural towns was still perceived to be a rare occurrence. Further, when gangs were identified in rural areas, they were often categorized as being more “wannabe” in nature (Small et al., 2000). However, the sad reality is that gangs pose a threat to communities of all sizes and types and gang activity is not just a big city or urban problem (America’s Evolving Gang Threat, 2012). One significant issue in identifying gangs is that rural law enforcement agencies have not always been consistent in reporting data on gang activities. A survey conducted in 2000 as part of an exploratory study of gangs in South Carolina concluded that very few members of the law enforcement community considered themselves to be knowledgeable of gang activity (Small et al., 2000). Those individuals who did respond as being knowledgeable of gang activity were predominantly located in urban areas where a high gang presence had been identified (Small et al., 2000). Accordingly, as gang activity increases in both urban and rural areas of South Carolina, it is imperative that law enforcement administrators recognize the need for additional officer training to effectively respond to the evolving gang issue (Johnson, Webster, Connors, & Saenz, 2000). While not intending to diminish the seriousness of gang activity during the period that it is occurring, a gang in a rural area is often gone almost as quickly as it develops (Hill, Lui, & Hawkins, 2001). This difference in the evolution and life cycle of rural gangs presents an inherent problem in addressing gang activity since many law enforcement response strategies designed for use in large cities are not readily transportable to the rural environment (Evans, 2009). Therefore, the law enforcement response to the rural gang threat requires improved intelligence gathering, information sharing and additional training for all members of the criminal justice community (McCollum, 2011).

The Current State of Law Enforcement Gang Awareness Training

In a 2011 law enforcement survey the International Association of Chiefs of Police identified that one of the more critical issues facing law enforcement was the need for additional gang-related training (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2011). However, the type of training provided to law enforcement officers varies dramatically depending upon the statutory requirements of a given state and ability of an agency to provide training (Connolly, 2013).

Initial Academy Training. In a 2007 study, the initial law enforcement training program in South Carolina was identified as having one of the lowest basic law enforcement certifications in the United States (Kaminski, Smith, Rojek, & Scheer, 2007). While this not a reflection on the quality of training provided by the South Carolina Criminal Justice Academy, it does point to the fact that training requirements mandated by the state legislature continues to be an issue.

According to information provided by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), many agencies do not provide concentrated training on topics relating to gang activity (McDermott, & Hulse, (20113). Notably, in stark contrast to the low state ranking of basic law enforcement training, South Carolina is one of only slightly more than 50% of academies in the United States that provide initial training in gang-related issues and applicable state laws (Kaminski et al., 2007).

In-Service Training. The in-service training philosophy differs among law enforcement agencies in South Carolina. However, this is not always due to the belief that training is not needed. Rather, many larger agencies have the talent and means to provide newly certified officers with in-service training while the majority of smaller agencies simply do not have the available resources (Miller, 2012). A 2007 South Carolina Criminal Justice Academy survey identified that agencies in smaller jurisdictions with fewer than twenty officers were less likely to provide any type of formal in-service training. Unfortunately, this disparity in the training of law

enforcement officers is occurring during a period of increasing gang activity in rural jurisdictions (Small et al., 2000). In the state of South Carolina, a law enforcement officer is required to be recertified every three years by completing forty credit hours of continuing law enforcement education (CLEE). Except for the mandated legal update and domestic violence courses, the CLEE credit hours may be obtained in any topic area (Training Regulations, 2013). A review of the South Carolina Criminal Justice Academy Advanced Training Course Catalog for the 2012 - 2013 training cycle identified seven course offerings that provided officers with an opportunity to enhance their knowledge of gang identification and enforcement (Training Academy Catalog, 2013). However, given that only 20 officers can attend a given course, the question arises as to whether only training 140 officers per year is sufficient given that there are approximately 12,000 sworn law enforcement officers serving in the state of South Carolina (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008). In response to the increased training need the South Carolina Criminal Justice Academy has initiated a program to provide online training that is more focused upon the adult learning concepts of critical thinking and problem-solving techniques (Law Enforcement Training Council, 2011).

Literature Review Summary

The general concern among members of the South Carolina criminal justice community in 2005 was that there was little or no organized effort to address gang activity (Rojek et al., 2005). Beginning in 2007 with the passage of gang prevention legislation indications are that the law enforcement community has risen to the challenge by providing gang-related law enforcement training opportunities and establishing prevention programs (Lloyd, 2009). Accordingly, while the state of South Carolina may have been slow in awakening to the gang threat, indications are that proactive actions are now being taken to address gang-related issues.

Research Design and Methodology

The primary objective of the survey and face-to-face interviews completed as part of this research activity was to supplement the research question by comparing the basic gang-related knowledge of South Carolina law enforcement officers serving in large urban agencies with officers serving in smaller rural agencies. The intent of the survey and interview process was to obtain data specific to the cognitive awareness of sworn law enforcement officers. Sworn law enforcement officers were specifically chosen based on the inherent challenges associated with differentiating gang activity from juvenile delinquency when conducting gang-related investigations or intelligence gathering activities. Accordingly, correctional officers, private security officers, public officials and other members of the criminal justice profession were not included as participants in the survey or interview process.

Agency Selection

A rural jurisdiction was considered to be a law enforcement agency associated with an incorporated city or town having a base population of fewer than 10,000 individuals as identified in the 2010 United States Census. Conversely, an urban agency was considered to be an incorporated city area having a base population of more than 10,000 individuals. This urban and rural population determination excluded the population of inmates confined to a correctional institution and transient college or university students. Additionally, agencies with county-wide jurisdiction were excluded from the survey and interview process due to the fact that there are no counties in the state of South Carolina with a base population of fewer than 10,000 residents that could be used as a basis for comparison. Likewise, state and federal agencies in the state of South Carolina were also excluded due to the limited number of law enforcement officers assigned to a specific jurisdiction.

Participant Selection

To provide a basis for comparing the gang-related knowledge between officers in the same agency, the survey and interview participants were divided into two categories. The first category (Category 1 Participants) was comprised of law enforcement officers in a senior command level position, detectives, officers assigned gang enforcement responsibilities or school resource officers. The second category (Category 2 Participants) consisted of law enforcement officers assigned routine patrol responsibilities. The rationale for grouping officers in this manner was to provide data necessary to identify a potential gang-related training or information sharing disparity between each category. To substantiate this determination an equal number of participants in each category were used within a given urban and rural agency. **The**

Survey and Interview Process

The survey questionnaire was administered by email to Category 1 Participants selected through a review of a given law enforcement agency's web site to identify and obtain an individual's email address. The subsequent sampling strategy used for these Category 1 Participants involved sending emails to one officer in each upstate South Carolina law enforcement agency where an email address could be obtained. Email surveys were distributed to a total of ten rural agencies and four urban agencies.

Once a completed email survey response was received from a Category 1 Participant attempts to complete a face-to-face interview with a Category 2 Participant from the same agency were then attempted. The strategy for completing the interviews was to randomly locate a patrol officer during their regular work period and request that they participate in the interview process. The total number of interviews conducted with Category 2 Participants was dependent upon the number of surveys returned from Category 1 Participants.

Survey and Interview Limitations

The survey and face-to-face interviews of law enforcement officers used to supplement the research question were significantly impacted the seven-week schedule of the Arizona State University course that was the basis for completion of this research activity. The overall research schedule required that the survey be administered and data analyzed within an approximate two-week period. Accordingly, this compressed schedule did not allow for follow-up requests to be sent to Category 1 Participants who were initially emailed the survey questionnaire. Likewise, the ability to conduct face-to-face interviews with Category 2 Participants was adversely impacted by the timeliness that Category 1 Participants returned their completed survey, as well as the limited time remaining to complete the research activity. Accordingly, a limited amount of data was available for analysis based on the small number of respondents who returned the email survey and the ability to subsequently complete face-to-face interviews. Future research activities should consider expanding the length of time needed to obtain data from a larger number of participants.

The upstate region of South Carolina includes the ten most northwestern counties of the forty-six counties in the state. The ability to complete face-to-face interviews with Category 2 Participants in the entire ten county upstate region of South Carolina was adversely impacted by the short time frame available to administer the survey to Category 1 Participants, analyze the data obtained and subsequently locate Category 2 Participants to interview. Therefore, the survey and interview processes were only completed with agencies in a contiguous four-county area within upstate South Carolina. To provide a more statistically accurate representation of law enforcement officers throughout the state of South Carolina future research activities should consider conducting a statewide survey.

Survey and Interview Ethical Considerations

The survey and face-to-face interviews were undertaken with the fundamental precept of maintaining the honesty and integrity of the overall evaluation process and to ensure that the completion of the questionnaire did not adversely impact respondents. Additionally, the data gathering and analysis activities were completed in a manner intended to ensure that there were no conflicts of interest on the part of respondents or the evaluator that could discredit the results in any way. However, the data gathering activity was not reviewed by the Arizona State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) before being conducted.

An additional ethical consideration was associated with the face-to-face nature of the interviews conducted with law enforcement officers. Although interviews were performed using a formalized questionnaire further informal discussion was held between the interviewer and interviewee. Accordingly, a degree of caution was exercised during the interview process to ensure that responses were not taken out of context and that personal opinion of the interviewer and interviewee did not bias the data obtained during the discussion.

The Survey Instrument

The survey questionnaire was designed to support the research question regarding the gang-related knowledge of law enforcement officers and is included as an appendix to this research paper. This survey questionnaire was also used to guide the face-to-face interview process. Administration of the survey and completion of the interviews were accomplished during a two-week period in late January and early February of 2013. Except for demographic data the survey and interview questions were open-ended to encourage participants to express their own opinions in responding. As a whole, the survey and interview questions provided sufficient data to analyze the research question.

Key Findings

The question associated with this research activity was whether law enforcement officers in small rural jurisdictions of South Carolina were provided with the training necessary to differentiate gang members from other juvenile offenders. In addition to the literature review conducted for this research effort, a survey was emailed to officers in fourteen law enforcement agencies. A response to the survey was received from officers in four rural agencies and two urban agencies which constitutes an approximate 43% return rate. The survey respondents included two officers identified as a senior level commander, three detectives and one officer having direct responsibilities associated with gang-related activities. After receiving a completed email questionnaire, an interview was conducted with an officer in the same agency who was responsible for performing routine patrol functions. In total, six email surveys were completed, and six face-to-face interviews were conducted.

Identification of Gang Members and Juvenile Delinquents

Two questions were included as part of the survey and interview process to assess an officer's knowledge regarding the nuances associated with the legal distinction between a gang member and juvenile delinquent. While no officer quoted the South Carolina legal definition of a gang member or juvenile delinquent verbatim, each individual did identify the key components of the law. More importantly, each officer clearly articulated the difference between a juvenile delinquent and gang member. To a certain degree, the ability of all officers to identify the difference between a gang member and juvenile delinquent can be attributed to the fact that the South Carolina Criminal Justice Academy is one of only slightly more than 50% of academies in the United States that provide initial training in gang-related issues and applicable state laws (Kaminski et al., 2007).

Knowledge of Gang Activity and Prevention Efforts

The survey and interview process included two questions designed to determine the extent that the officer was confronted with gang-related issues in their jurisdiction and knowledge of prevention initiatives implemented by their respective agency. All officers conveyed a basic working knowledge of gang activity in their respective jurisdiction and identified efforts undertaken by their agency to address gang issues. Officers serving with rural agencies generally identified that they were not directly involved in gang-related issues on a daily basis. Conversely, officers serving with an urban agency identified that they were routinely involved in gang-related issues in some manner. Overall, the officers in both urban and rural agencies were perceived to possess a sufficient degree of knowledge relating to gang-related activities within their jurisdiction and prevention initiatives on the part of their respective agency. While this finding bodes well for the criminal justice system, it is not consistent with the conclusion in a prior study of South Carolina law enforcement which identified that officers in urban jurisdictions had a higher knowledge of gang-related issues (Small et al., 2000).

Information Sharing Efforts

One question was included in the survey and interview process that was designed to identify the degree that gang-related awareness information is shared with all officers within their respective agency. This sharing of information regarding gang-related issues was important for assessing the basis of an officer's knowledge of gang-related issues. All officers indicated that they regularly received information concerning gang activity in their jurisdiction and that information sharing was accomplished between local agencies on a regular basis. This finding is consistent with the identified need for intelligence gathering and information sharing activities to effectively coordinate the law enforcement response to gang activity (McCollum, 2011).

Training Availability and Completion

To assess issues associated with gang-related training the survey and interview process included three questions relating to training that an officer had received and their perceived training needs. All officers identified that the initial academy training program provided a class in gang-related issues and laws of South Carolina that related to gangs, gang members and gang activity. Additionally, all officers identified that they had completed at least one class concerning gang-related issues. However, of the six patrol officers who were interviewed, only the two officers serving with an urban agency stated that they had received in-service training specific to gang-related issues. With regard to the need for additional training, all officers expressed the desire for additional knowledge of gangs, gang members and gang activity.

The finding that all officers had attended at least one class relating to gang issues is attributable to the fact that the South Carolina Criminal Justice Academy is one of only slightly more than 50% of academies in the United States that provide initial training in gang-related issues and applicable state laws (Kaminski et al., 2007). The finding that only the patrol officers serving with an urban agency had received in-service training is consistent with a prior study which identified that South Carolina law enforcement agencies in smaller jurisdictions were less likely to provide any type of formal in-service training (Small et al., 2000). An additional consideration concerning the issue of in-service training is that many larger agencies have the talent and means to provide in-service training, while the majority of smaller agencies simply do not have the available resources (Miller, 2012). Further, the expressed desire of all officers for additional gang-related training is perceived to be directly correlated to an identified need for additional in-service training to be provided by the South Carolina Criminal Justice Academy, as well as all agencies in the state of South Carolina (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008).

Conclusion

With each passing decade issues that confront the law enforcement profession become increasingly more complex. In the absence of corresponding enhancements to academy training curriculums to address these modern-day complexities, society as a whole may very well begin to question whether law enforcement is not more of a vocation than a profession. Accordingly, this research activity was undertaken to examine whether law enforcement officers in small rural jurisdictions of South Carolina were provided with the training necessary to differentiate gang members from other juvenile offenders. Evaluation of this issue was accomplished through a literature review, administration of a survey and completion of face-to-face interviews with South Carolina law enforcement officers. The literature review did not identify any prior studies that had been performed regarding the specific issue of gang-related training for rural law enforcement officers. However, the literature review did identify information associated with law enforcement training activities in general, as well as studies specific to the training of South Carolina law enforcement officers. Both the survey and interview process were designed to gauge an officer's degree of knowledge and level of training regarding gang-related issues.

Based upon the analysis of information obtained through the literature review, survey and interviews, this research effort concludes that that law enforcement officers in rural agencies of South Carolina are being provided with the requisite training necessary to differentiate between gang members and juvenile delinquents. Whether this training is sufficient to address the evolving issue of gang activity in South Carolina and the increasing complexities of the law enforcement profession was not within the scope of this exploratory research activity. Accordingly, it is recommended that consideration be given to the completion of additional studies to examine the gang-related training needs of South Carolina law enforcement officers.

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Gang Related Knowledge Survey

As part of an Arizona State University seminar on gangs and crime, a research project is being accomplished to compare the knowledge of gang related issues on the part of law enforcement officers serving in smaller jurisdictions with their counterparts in larger agencies. I would appreciate it greatly if you could take approximately ten minutes of your time and complete the following survey. Your responses are completely voluntary and will be maintained confidential. All responses will be compiled together for analysis as a group and **your name and agency will NOT be identified in any manner**. If you have any questions concerning this research activity please contact Danny Durham at (123) 456-7890 or dcdurham@asu.edu at any time.

Thank you,

Danny Durham
(123) 456-7890
dcdurham@asu.edu

Survey Questions

Please do not identify your name or agency in any manner

Item #1: In your opinion how do you determine whether an individual is a gang member?

Item #2: What do you consider to be the difference between a juvenile delinquent and a gang member?

Item #3: How are you involved with gang members or gang activity in your routine duties?

Item #4: What type of gang prevention programs or information sharing of gang activities is your agency involved with?

Item #5: Please briefly explain the type of training or awareness information concerning gang related issues that is provided to you by your agency.

Item #6: What type of academy training and in-service training from your agency is available to provide you with information relating to gang issues?

Item #7: What type of gang prevention training and information have you received during your law enforcement career?

Item #8: What additional training or information do you feel is needed for you to better respond to gang related issues?

Item #9: Please identify your primary area of responsibility within your agency below.

Check All That Apply(✓): ☐ Patrol Duties
☐ School Resource Officer
☐ Gang Unit or Lead for Gang Issues
☐ Detective or Investigator
☐ Senior Command Staff (Chief, Captain, etc.)
☐ Other (list) _____

Item #10: Please identify the actual or approximate number of sworn officers in your agency

_____ Number of Sworn Officers

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Please be assured that your name and agency will not be identified in any manner. If you have any questions concerning this survey or research activity please do not hesitate to contact me at any time.

Danny Durham
(123) 456-7890
dcdurham@asu.edu