

Most Gang Members Use Social Media, Study Finds

BY: Tony Rizzo | October 15, 2013

Graffiti -- the traditional "newspaper" of the street gang -- has long been used to mark territory and communicate messages. But these days, gangs also are "all over social media," as one expert says, embracing a more modern way to make their presence felt and, in many cases, further their criminal enterprises.

Whether it is Facebook or YouTube or Twitter or Instagram, gang members are becoming more adept at online communications, experts say. Though much of their communication mirrors the benign activities of their non-gang peers, a darker component exists, too.

"Activities online are sparking violence offline," said David Pyrooz, the co-author of a study of Internet gang activity published earlier this year. "That's when it gets real serious."

Some gang members are using online tools to plan crimes, recruit members or challenge and threaten rivals, said Bruce Ferrell, the president of the Nebraska-based Midwest Gang Investigators Association. Many of those kinds of back-and-forth "dissing" between rival gang members come in the form of rap lyrics that are recorded and posted online, he said.

One such online rap war had a deadly effect in Chicago last fall after someone shot and killed gang-affiliated rapper Joseph Coleman. That prompted several retaliatory killings, police in the city said.

Much of the threatening and harassing words that gang members spew toward one another online may seem trivial, but it can "spark an all-out gang war," said Pyrooz, an assistant professor at Sam Houston State University in Texas.

"What the Internet does is what word of mouth used to do," he said. "It provides them with a wide platform to promote their reputations."

And it is happening in Kansas City, where law enforcement officials have estimated that 2,500 to 3,500 people have been involved in gang activity in recent years.

"They are real savvy with social media," said Ron Hunt, a Kansas City community activist who works with young people seeking to get out of the gang lifestyle.

The study of online gang activity was conducted in five large cities, including St. Louis but not Kansas City. Researchers interviewed nearly 600 people, about two-thirds whom were active or former gang members, Pyrooz said.

Gang members use social media at about an 80 percent rate, which is consistent with the general population, he said.

But gang members engage in "criminal and deviate" behavior online at a higher rate than other people, the study found. Besides the threatening and harassing behavior, the gang members are more likely to do such things as illegally download files, arrange drug sales, sell stolen goods or post and watch videos of street fights.

Nearly 20 percent of the participants in the study said their gangs had their own websites or social media pages. About one-third of those said the pages were password-protected.

One thing that struck Pyrooz was how technically savvy young gang members were. The "digital divide" that once separated residents of large urban areas from those in more affluent communities has disappeared as a result of handheld technology, he said.

On the streets, gang members go online to monitor the movements of police officers and warn one another or give an "all clear" when officers depart, said Ferrell of the gang investigators association.

Ferrell said one social media phenomenon occurring on the West Coast is "flocking." It is a type of flash mob in which gang members text one another to show up all at once at a specific place to commit a crime. It can involve breaking into a home or stealing from a business.

Officer Steve Edwards of the Overland Park Police Department said gang members have a propensity to post pictures of themselves and their friends online. Sometimes they are pictured holding guns, money or drugs.

"That can help us locate where they are and who they are hanging out with," he said.

With the wide use of social media today, it is imperative that police agencies learn how to employ it effectively, said Lauri Stevens of LAWS Communications, which trains law enforcement officers to effectively use social media.

Beyond using social media to track gang members and their criminal activity, police also must learn how to gather evidence so it can be used to successfully prosecute the criminals, she said.

Stevens said there has been very little legal precedent in that area, particularly when it comes to cell phones and other hand-held devices.

State courts have split on whether police can obtain evidence from cellphones without search warrants.

Lawyers for a California man who was linked to a gang-related shooting by photos police obtained from his cellphone have petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court for a hearing on the issue.

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