A Commentary on Adolescent Group Violence

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ABSTRACT: In an effort to understand some of the group dynamic factors inherent in today's unprecedented increase in youth gang violence, the larger, well organized gangs of the 1960's, were compared with the contemporary crowd-like, small packs of street youths. A hypothesis is advanced that the combined processes of de-individuation and of group contagion underlie many of the violent acts, so rampant in inner-city areas.

KEY WORDS: Adolescent gangs; group violence; de-individuation; group contagion.

The unprecedented growth of teenage gang violence in inner-city areas has become the subject of grave concern. Building on my background as group therapist and as small group process practitioner with socially disadvantaged youths, I examined this phenomenon, emerging with an unexpected series of hypotheses.

These hypotheses might serve as helpful data for the many workers who have embarked on varied unresearched experimental intervention efforts aimed at the prevention of violent behavior in their communities.

To begin with, the working definition of a gang is drawn from Campbell's Psychiatric Dictionary and reads: "An intimate social group characterized by a high degree of close personal contact among its members, who share common values or standards of behavior. Largely an urban phenomenon, the gang is a subculture whose interests and attitudes are typically different from, and sometimes even in direct conflict with, those of the larger society. The usual gang comprises male youths . . . delinquents are more often members of gangs.
than are nondelinquents, but not all youth gangs are overly antisocial
by any means."

By way of a general orientation, Taylor distinguished among three
kinds of gangs: 1) The Scavenger Gangs which approximate today's
troubling unorganized youth packs which are the primary concern of
this paper. 2) The Territorial Gangs, not unlike those of the 1960's
and 1970's which were exemplified by the outreach worker's report,
noted later, and 3) The Corporate Gangs, which were really criminal
drug conspiracies of mostly adults with intricate connections between
foreign wholesalers and local distributors and "pushers." In contrast
to the Scavenger and Territorial gangs, violence here is usually a
matter of cold-blooded planning to eliminate competition, rather than
a group's problems in the handling of anger and rage. (In these large
gang formations, the cost of lost innocent lives, as of a beloved
Brooklyn school principal or even of a Mexican Archbishop—is to-
tally ignored.)

Needless to say, given the current lucrative possibilities in drug
marketing coupled with the delinquent orientation of many gang
members, the use and sale of drugs has also become a frequently
encountered occupation of individual youth gang participants. The
Corporate gangs lie outside this paper's consideration. Goldstein and
Huff discussed gang behavior from a social psychological perspective.

The theorizing to follow, was derived from direct contact with the
inner-city youth gangs during the 1960's and 1970's, through some of
the so-called "outreach" worker programs sponsored by social service
agencies in New York. In addition, I came across numerous gang
fights including gang members and their families when I led a technical
assistance enterprise for neighborhood organizations at a mental
health center in the South Bronx, between 1965-1977. More recently
came the stories of uniquely violent youth group escapades, begin-
ning with the "wilding" attack of a New York's Central Park woman
toggler in 1989. I gathered onlooker information about similar acts,
whenever possible, including stories from teenage patients in a large
Bronx, N.Y. hospital, as well as from local schools.

These informal inquiries and experiences led to the firm conclusion
that some of today's youth gang phenomena in New York's inner-city
(i.e., especially the South Bronx) are markedly different from those
which were known three decades ago! The gangs of the 1960's and
1970's comprised tightly-knit and stable youth aggregations which
were frequently engaged in intra- and inter-group conflict. Planned
"rumbles" which entailed hand-to-hand combat to revenge perceived