

Ken Bell Background Summary

I will preference this article with a quick background summary on me. I am a retired law enforcement officer with thirty six years of experience. I worked 21 years with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and 15 years with the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Bureau of investigation.

25 of those years I was involved in all aspects of street gang investigations and was selected to work on one of the first street gang units in Los Angeles County in the early 1970's. My expertise was gang intelligence gathering, gang suppression, filing and managing cases, gang expert testimony, and community liaison. I have been a trainer in gang subculture and gang investigations nationwide for the past 30 years.

The following will be some aspects of present street gang subculture that I believe will help officers when they deal with gang members during interviews, personal contacts and the overall gang investigations. When officers talk to gang members and they have a hard time understanding why they would kill another person because of an insult or the display of a color of a rag it would be important for the officers to understand some of the following. Gang sub cultural morals and values are deeply entrenched in their cultural mind set.

Street gang mentality has been an influential factor in many of our communities for the past 50 years. For the past 30 years it has become one of the leading peer pressure factors in many of our youth's lives. Violence and death are part of their cultural expectations. You can express to them that gang banging is a sure way to death or incarceration and many might say.

"I know it" or they might say "charge it to the game." Unfortunately, for some young men going to jail is the beginning of them gaining better street credibility? You earn respect and "stripes" from the older established gang members.

The custody experience is often like going to “college” to learn better criminal tactics from the older members. All the above reasons are why it is critical to reach young men and young ladies early enough in life that the gang sub cultural life style does not become their personal selection of how they feel they want to live.

Presently there are a lot of agencies and communities that are using gang suppression methods to address gang violence in their communities. Gang injunctions and multiple agencies gang task forces have been law enforcement tools to make a community impact. For some areas the street gangs have literally taken over locations of some communities and in others the level of death and destruction has gripped the community with a lot of fear.

The thing I want to talk about it that for some hard core gang members an increased law enforcement presence is not a major deterrent to the mind set of these gang members. They are also very aware of a local law enforcement agency deployment patterns and are willing to wait for those agencies to change tactics and strategies. They know when they see a two person unit instead of a normal one person unit, there is a gang/crime suppression movement by the agency and they text, tweet or call the main people to pass the word on and the hard core lay low or get out of the neighborhood.

The older criminal minded gang members also know how many units are usually deployed in a station area and will change some of their locations and tactics based on what they feel law enforcement is doing or responding to. Some of the older gang members have told me that they do surveillances on locations they want to rob and they may chart times of when officers go eat in the areas and where they eat, most frequently. They may also place a false emergency type of a call in an area away from where they may want to hit and see how long it takes the cars to get back to the area where they plan to rob.

Again, gang subculture for many gang members are a way of life and their morals and values are deeply entrenched in their cultural mind set. The other subculture description that I feel is

important for officers to be aware of is the community subculture. Have you ever heard the term, “they won’t talk to us”?

It is a frequent statement made by many officers in some crime impacted areas who are so frustrated that the citizens won’t talk to them at the crime scenes. The officers often go in almost resolved that they will not get any information out of the “hood.” I have a question, have you ever asked your selves the question, why won’t they talk to me?

Have you ever wondered why? Many of the people who live in high crime areas, don’t want you there, many feel like you don’t care about them and you don’t speak their language. Not the dialect necessarily but the language of the community, “we care about each other,” type of communication.

Some officers don’t understand but you have to win the hearts and minds of the people to allow them to open up to you. For many of them the justice system has lost credibility when you hear the threats from gang members causing the witnesses to change their minds or they just don’t show up, causing the criminals to end up back on the streets. That is when the other system kicks in, the “Killing begets killing.

The answer for the community is we will handle these ourselves. The feeling is you can’t protect us anyway so we are going to handle this our way. When violence like this gets so ingrained, you cannot arrest your way out of it.

There is no simplistic answer but this is a plan to at least address community subculture issues. Develop a system of intelligence integration. You need to identify the most violent criminals and then remove them. You then share intelligence with your other officers and adjoining agencies so you have the law enforcement team working together and last but not least, select good understanding prosecution (District Attorney) teams that can be a great asset doing vertical prosecutions.