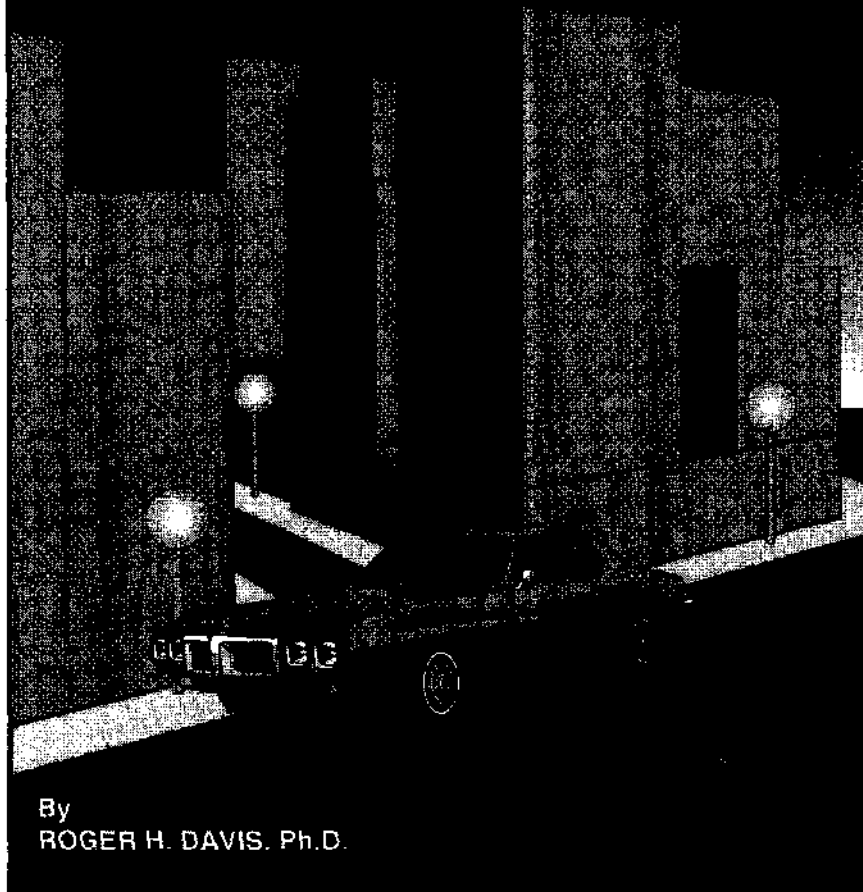


# *Cruising for Trouble* *Gang-Related Drive-By* *Shootings*



By  
ROGER H. DAVIS, Ph.D.

- In San Diego, a 3-year-old child was shot.
- In Miami, it happened to a married couple.
- At Christmas time, even Santa became a victim.<sup>1</sup>

A single factor connects these incidents; each involved a drive-by shooting by a gang member. Across the country, gang-related drive-by shootings are increasing at an alarming rate.<sup>2</sup> Reports of bystanders injured by drive-by shootings

frequently appear in the media, and many victims of these violent outbursts have no connection to gang activity.<sup>3</sup> More frightening is the fact that no community appears to be immune, which leads to some very important questions.

What are the precipitating factors in drive-by shootings? Are they a result solely of drug or turf wars? Even more important, what, if anything, can be done about these incidents?

A recent study examined drive-by shootings and addressed these questions.<sup>4</sup> The study focused on how individual gang members became involved in drive-by shootings, and the findings offer insight into the root causes of these incidents and the chain of events that precipitates such violent acts.

This article describes the patterns found among the three specific shootings studied. It then recommends steps for law enforcement agencies to take in an effort to prevent these violent episodes from happening in their communities.

## THE STUDY

Using case study methodology, three incidents were studied in great detail to identify factors that influenced gang members to participate in drive-by shootings. Case selection included black, Hispanic, and white gang-related, drive-by shootings. In all three cases, researchers documented reports of interactions among all participants and looked for patterns of involvement.

Three court cases in a medium-sized community formed the basis for the study. In each case, the responsible parties had been

identified and charged, and the legal process had been completed. Because the cases were not selected randomly, the findings will not represent all drive-by shootings, but they do reveal the relationship between gang activities and drive-by shootings.

For each case, the research examined written police interview reports, transcripts of court testimony, and all available police audio and video recordings of interviews with the 79 participants. The cases were chosen, in part, because participants (shooters and others present before, during, and after the incidents) gave lengthy statements about their own and others' involvement. Some gave statements and/or testimony as often as six times.

### **SHAREDFACTORS**

Several factors consistently appeared in each drive-by shooting. First, all participants had committed criminal acts previously. Second, the gang's influence was significant in facilitating the incident. And third, the shootings were unplanned crimes of opportunity, although the participants admitted to looking for trouble and went out dressed for action.

### **Personal Background**

In all cases, the shooters identified with a youth gang. They came from dysfunctional families and had limited educational and employment experiences. Eighty-two percent of the participants had a history of involvement in serious crimes.

### **Desire for Excitement**

The gang members convened only to fight and cause trouble, and

the shooters seized the opportunity to create an incident. Desire for excitement played a key role in turning each incident into a violent confrontation in two significant ways.

First, the desire for excitement provided momentum. The exchange of taunts, exaggeration of the threat posed by the rivals, and actual involvement in the incidents made gang members agitated and rowdy.

Second, the search for excitement facilitated arousal and motivated action. The participants who were interviewed explained they became exhilarated when preparing for battle, and this warrior mentality generated aggression. Gang members described the excitement that accompanies being ready to fight, and many saw themselves as soldiers ready to do battle with an adversary.

Alcohol and drug abuse also played a role in the search for excitement. In the cases studied, the individuals involved relied on their

alcohol consumption and the drunken condition it spawned to rationalize their criminal acts.<sup>5</sup>

### **Gang Identity**

Those involved in the shootings dressed in ways that marked them as gang members. In each case, participants signified gang affiliation through their clothing—red or blue baseball caps worn backwards, a blue rag exposed in a pocket, a certain color and type of shirt, or a jacket known as a "derby." Clothing and the exchange of hand signs communicated a challenge to potential rivals.

Shooting participants talked about gang symbols' being provocative and explained how the symbols of a larger gang organization implied power. One shooter admitted the importance of gang symbols when he stated, "We got to protect our colors." Gang members interpreted failure to show deference to the colors as an invitation to do

***Desire for excitement played a key role in turning each incident into a violent confrontation....***

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battle. In fact, any sign of disrespect—the perceived affront from potential rivals or the exchange of stares or gang hand signs—warranted attack.

All gang members accepted the implied responsibility of being willing to commit a violent crime for the organization. When merely told of a conflict, one shooter saw an opportunity to "take care of this." Statements such as being "down to do a drive-by" for the gang implied gang members' sense of responsibility to protect and enhance the gang image as mercenaries in an elite corps. This behavior, which was designed to boost their egos and impress others, played a part in the process leading to violence.

### Roles

The gangs encouraged their most reactive and unpredictable members to take the initiative to shoot. No person acting on his own moved the events to violence. Instead, a combination of factors—including group pressure, certain members' desires to enhance their status, the availability of weapons, and previous confrontations—evoked the shootings.

In one case, the leader and an agitator worked together to build group support for a confrontation. They manipulated the shooter into a role that required him to take action. The shooter believed that the gang would brand him a failure if he did not follow through and a hero if he did. They stroked his ego

when he flashed a gun, and then they pointed out whom to shoot.

Collusion among the shooter, his prime supporter, and other gang members also was evident in the other two cases. The relationships among key gang members placed the shooters in action roles, whereas the drivers and other passengers took passive roles and simply followed orders.

### Group Pressure

Group pressure served as another component of the drive-by

gain support for their behavior. This anticipation of group support influenced their actions, and what started as idle talk among gang members led to violent confrontations. As the incidents unfolded, a group sense of willingness to find trouble also emerged as infectious agitation and excitement spread throughout the group.

### Availability of Weapons

The introduction of a gun served as a catalyst in moving each incident to violence. As the ultimate source of power, the gun provided excitement and gave the shooter a quick route to stature. It was an instrument used to impress others in the gang and the community with the group's ability to act in battle.

### Ancillary Confrontations

The drive-by shootings studied were not isolated events. They occurred as one in a series of crimes. In one case, the confrontation that preceded the shooting was a continuation of a vendetta against minorities. In the others, shootings were a prelude to, or a continuation of, other acts of violence.

### STAGES IN THE SHOOTING EVENTS

News reporters and academicians often associate gang violence with competition over turf or drug markets.<sup>6</sup> The shootings examined here were not about drugs or gang territory. They were about guns, excitement, and an enhanced reputation.



shooting scenarios. The shooters either were asked, encouraged, or ordered to shoot. The group expected the shooters to take action, and the shooters, in all cases, expected to

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The studied shootings started with idle gang members looking for trouble. Several confrontations occurred before shots were fired. Those confrontations generated a commitment to action that culminated in drive-by shootings.

### Looking for Trouble

All of the gang members involved were drunk or associated with a gathering where alcohol was consumed in large amounts. One participant reported using other drugs as well. Gang members sought action; they dressed for battle and had weapons available. They interpreted glances from potential adversaries as invitations to do battle. In one case, two of the four participants did not even witness the initial encounter; yet, they felt compelled to take action later.

### The Affront

Gang members did not plan the initial encounters. Rather, the incidents evolved as spontaneous reactions to the presence of perceived adversaries—people of a different race and/or people who appeared to identify with a different gang. In all cases, taunts directed at the intended victims characterized the first confrontations.

Interestingly, the initial encounters found the eventual aggressors at a disadvantage because they had not yet decided how to react. Retaliation for failure to show deference to the gang required a group consensus that came later. In two of the cases studied, weapons subsequently used in the drive-by shootings were not readily available during the initial confrontations.

### Commitment to Action

In each case studied, the shooters returned to the scene of the affront only after a period of consensus building and a group decision to act. The commitment phase generated more excitement—a key motivator for action—and served as the

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staging point needed to bring the actual event to fruition. The participants described feeling intense excitement en route to the shooting. In all cases, other gang members encouraged the shooters to fire.

### The Shooting

Each of the above-mentioned factors combined to produce the drive-by shootings. Distinct roles emerged from the incidents. Two of the shooters had held structurally weak positions in the gang and committed the shootings in an attempt to bolster their stature within the group. One shooter sought to maintain his role as a powerful gang member by doing the shooting. All acted to impress others.

The shooting episodes generated their own momentum to produce violent outcomes. The participants'

individual histories, their unique roles within the gangs, their need for esteem, and their desire to hurt others in order to feel good about themselves influenced the development of the shootings. Group pressure and heightened levels of excitement moved the gang to violence.

### The Aftermath

Following the shootings, two typical results emerged—boasting and worrying. In one case, gang members, elated after murdering their victim, bragged to a couple of girls and later displayed news clippings of the incident. Another shooter's boasting continued even in jail, and he viewed time in jail as an opportunity to bolster his image further. He bragged of his status as a killer of rivals, wrote gang graffiti on his jail cell wall, and found the experience to be an enhancement, not a detriment, to his status. The shooter in the third incident tried to brag, but other participants, overcome by fear, discouraged him.

Gang members had not considered the consequences of their actions or worried about the outcome until after the fact—either as soon as the shooting took place or not until the police investigation focused on them. Even the threat of jail did not serve as an effective deterrent. Blind to the consequences, no one thought of getting caught until after the shootings.

### RECOMMENDED PREVENTATIVE ACTIONS

With the dynamics of drive-by shootings in mind, communities and law enforcement agencies can take several precautions. These include understanding the nature of

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gangs and using interactive data to track the development of destructive gang relationships. It also is important to devise an action plan to combat the problem, to share resources and information across jurisdictions, and to offer alternatives to youths susceptible to gang influence.

#### Understand the Nature of Gangs

Gang members link their identity to the group, which constantly reinforces their rebel image. Most gang members tend to have fragile egos and turn to violence as a way to gain status within the gang and to stroke their egos. They often view violence as rewarding because it is a means to impress others in an exciting and deviant way, which carries influence with the gang. Drive-by shootings, therefore, can be an exciting and violent path to higher rank within the gang.

Because gang members believe violent behavior will be rewarded, they tend to rationalize their actions. If they fail to weigh the consequences, which is usually the case, other behavioral controls, such as past values learned or threats of punishment, cannot halt the aggression.

In fact, gangs lure others into joining by providing social and material benefits.<sup>7</sup> They offer an exciting lifestyle that prepares members to commit crimes.

Excitement, identity, power, and the influence of friends are key factors leading to violence. The excitement and group pressure associated with drive-by shootings override the factors that might otherwise discourage gang members from committing violent acts.

#### Apply Crime Analysis

The studied drive-by shootings did not happen in isolation. Tracking past altercations and linking incidents can provide crucial information that may prevent future episodes. A program to reduce the number of drive-by shootings would begin with an analysis of crimes in neighborhoods that are most in need of intervention and with identification of individuals who pose a threat to the community.

The police department could compile incidents reported to police and supplement it with a community crime survey to help capture information about unreported incidents. Measuring the extent of the problem may help build community support for action and serve as a basis for designing an effective prevention strategy.

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*Tracking past altercations and linking incidents can provide crucial information that may prevent future\* episodes.*  
**”**

Initial measures may include a means to identify gang participants and the extent of their access to illegal guns. Further, community members can be enlisted to help track interactive relationships that emerge in gangs. Analyzing the links among gang members and

monitoring their vehicle and foot traffic in the community can help law enforcement agencies devise plans to dismantle destructive gang relationships.<sup>8</sup>

#### Design an Action Plan

Among the cases in this study, no key individual drove the gang to violence. Rather, the interaction of a leader, an agitator, and other gang members precipitated the shootings. This observation suggests that less effort should be expended in identifying a leader so as to apply the guillotine theory of suppression. This tactic assumes that eliminating the leader will cause the violent group to fold, which was proven not to be the case. Instead, law enforcement should analyze potentially violent coalitions among key members and focus on dissolving the entire collusive network.

In addition, communities need to be aware of youth gangs cruising for trouble. Gatherings of drunken youths preceded each shooting in this study. Youths assembled in alleys, homes, and parking lots and then went looking for action. Residents were aware of the presence of troublemakers but did nothing. Citizen awareness and a timely police and community response might have prevented violence by defusing the agitation. An action plan may include an effort to monitor automobile and foot traffic within selected neighborhoods and to deal with the "dangerous traffic," i.e., gang youths who appear to be searching aimlessly for excitement.

Some community residents report that the sounds of gunshots form a normal part of neighborhood life. In this study, the introduction

of a weapon into the hands of volatile and irresponsible youths had enormous consequences. The weapon was both a powerful influence and a novelty. It became a focus of attention and a tool to achieve status.

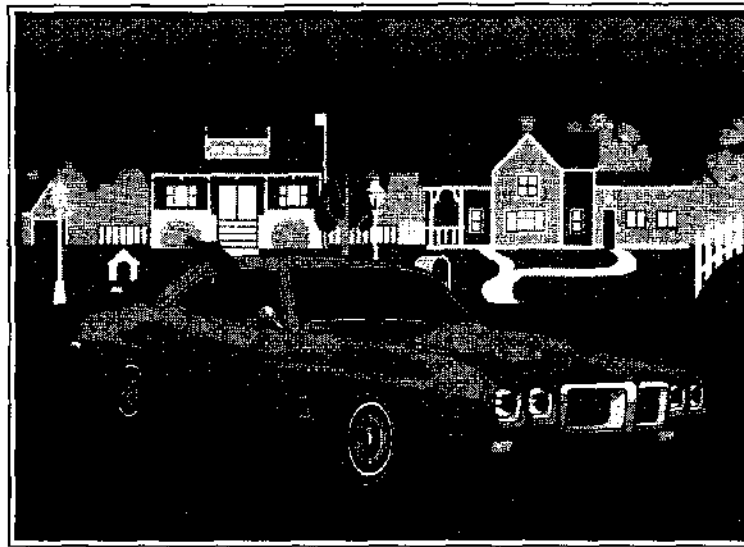
If a community's problem is identified as youths with access to illegal guns, an aggressive program should be devised to take their guns and to provide alternatives for the excitement they seek. Such a program may include aggressive field stops and focused vehicle and residence searches to reduce the risk of shooting incidents.

One police department used roadblocks similar to sobriety checkpoints against gangs to check for weapons.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the California legislature introduced bills in 1989 and 1994 to allow firearms checkpoints. The most recent bill sought to establish "firearms emergency areas" based on reasonable suspicion.<sup>10</sup> Mobile roadblocks might be used to identify groups of young males cruising neighborhoods.

Several other approaches merit consideration. Community hot lines have been effective in some areas to facilitate the flow of information to authorities. "Knock and talk" residence searches, based upon reasonable suspicion, also may be effective in locating illegal weapons.

Some experts have suggested that high-tech metal detectors be

developed to help police detect weapons from a distance.<sup>11</sup> Until that technology is available, selective use of hand-held metal detectors may be useful for locating hidden weapons among some gatherings of potentially volatile youth. It should be made clear, however, that while community participation



is critical, community action should be a guided, cooperative effort, not vigilante justice.

#### Share Resources and Information

Gangs are mobile, and gang altercations arise with some spontaneity. Sharing information across agency jurisdictions and community boundaries may be critical to combat the violence. Community facilitators could help by coordinating with both police and community crime prevention efforts. These facilitators, knowledgeable about services and resources available, would direct efforts

toward identifying problems and developing support for community action.

#### Offer Alternatives

Although the drive-by shooting participants studied here belonged to gangs, the influence of the gang organization, as a whole, on the shooting was subtle. This observation suggests that gang conflicts may be less of a problem than anticipated in causing some drive-by shootings. In the study, the elements that led to violence included identification with a gang, but a history of criminality, a background of alcohol and substance abuse, and the quest for excitement and esteem held equal importance.

Suppression efforts by law enforcement to make gang life difficult should be combined with programs that make it possible for young people to select educational, recreational, and employment options over gang-sponsored activities. After identifying those individuals posing a threat, a coalition of community resources must be brought to bear to influence the potential for developing destructive gang members into productive citizens. A community action plan should consider how to offer skills training for willing gang participants and how to attract industries that can use those skills.

The youths interviewed in the study lacked family guidance. They

had little sense of self-worth and a total disregard for human life. Esteem building in the form of productive involvement in legitimate entrepreneurial endeavors and through better family and community guidance is important.

In addition, a response to violence must consider ways to teach and apply responsibility, to improve moral reasoning skills, and to develop programs to build esteem.<sup>12</sup> Community programs to support children in dysfunctional families and to assist parents without parenting skills would help by reinforcing the individual controls that encourage people to behave responsibly, even in the face of peer pressure to deviate.

## CONCLUSION

Contrary to the researcher's expectations, the study revealed that organized gang activities, such as drug and turf wars, did not have a strong relationship to the drive-by shootings studied. Rather, gang members viewed such shootings as a means to provide excitement and to improve their status within the gang's hierarchy.

The shooters in the cases examined were young people seeking excitement and trying to build a reputation. The victims died from a lethal combination of the shooters' thoughtless reaction to provocation, the encouragement of the group, and the presence of a gun.

Law enforcement agencies need to document the extent of the problem and to enlist the community in planned actions to confront the violence. Both police and citizens can be more proactive in locating and reporting youths with illegal

guns. By developing a community-based plan, the only drive-by associated with Santa should be led by reindeer, not gun-toting gang members. •

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "3-Year-Old Wounded in Drive-by Shooting," *Sacramento Bee*, May 31, 1990; Ricci Graham and Diana Sugg, "Man, Wife Hit in Drive-by Shooting," *Sacramento Bee*, December 21, 1993; and Mareva Brown, "Santa Shot in a Drive-by—How Depraved Can You Get?" *Sacramento Bee*, December 22, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., reports in the *Sacramento Bee* and the *Los Angeles Times* newspapers from 1987 to 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Daryl F. Gates, "Gang Violence in L.A.," *The Police Chief* (November 1990): 20-21; see also, "The Slaughter of Innocents," *U.S. News and World Report*, July 10, 1988, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Roger H. Davis, "Recruitment to Violence: The Process of Involvement in Gang-Related Drive-by Shootings" (Ph.D. diss., The Fielding Institute, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> The author does not view the drunkenness of the shooters or, in one case, the influence of drugs as a causative factor. However, in the eyes of the participants, it did have influence. It is mentioned consistently across cases and appears correlated with shooting incidents. The presence of alcohol is viewed less as a factor in causing the shooting than as an attribute later used by the shooters to mitigate the violence.

<sup>6</sup> Arnold P. Goldstein, *Delinquent Gangs: A Psychological Perspective* (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1991), 34.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Sanchez Jankowski, "Situations in Gang Violence," February 28, 1992, presentation before the 168th session of the FBI National Academy, Quantico, Virginia.

<sup>8</sup> For more information about techniques of linking interactive data, see Roger H. Davis, "Social Network Analysis: An Aid in Conspiracy Investigations," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, December 1981.

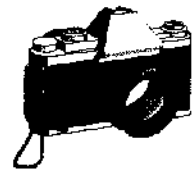
<sup>9</sup> Rick Holguin, "Roadblocks to Curb Gangs to Be Set Up in Paramount," *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> California AB3789.

<sup>11</sup> James Q. Wilson, "Just Take Away Their Weapons: A Gun Control Plan for Bad Guys Only," *Sacramento Bee*, April 3, 1994.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold P. Goldstein and C. Ronald Huff, *The Gang Intervention Handbook* (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1993).

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