



**UNDERSTANDING GANGS:
BEYOND BASIC
IDENTIFICATION**

**A primer for Police
Administrators,
Researchers, and
Government
Agencies**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Like other states, North Carolina has been hampered by not having at its disposal a working definition of what constitutes a “gang”.

The lack of consensus is impeding effective police investigations, prosecutions, and community based prevention efforts.

While other states have adopted generic definitions, this paper cautions against such action as there are many problems associated with this course of action. The purpose of this paper is to outline a *Strategic Gang Assessment Protocol*. The SGAP classification process involves first meeting a threshold definition followed by classification across 3 dimensions of gang activity. The system creates a standardized definition of the gang phenomenon and establishes standardized criteria for the contextualization of gang variation found in society. Although gaining consensus is an important issue, this assessment tool has the capacity to:

- Provide an improved understanding of gang activities;
- Enhance our understanding of gang formation patterns;
- Catalogue gang activities in a threat matrix;
- Align financial and other resources with current data and create projections for future expenditures;
- Eliminate duplication of efforts across agencies;
- Enhance cross-border investigative activities by criminal justice practitioners (police, district attorneys, and researchers).

The gangs of today are not the gangs of yesteryear. Today's gangs barely resemble the entities that much of our enforcement and prevention strategies and research are based on.

“Introduction to the Problem”

Both inner city and suburban locations have experienced a significant increase in gang-related crime. However, there has been a great deal of confusion in attempting to fully comprehend the American gang problem. Moreover, attempting to understand gangs and the culture that surrounds them is made more difficult by the changing nature of gangs in our society.

The lack of a standardized framework not only prevents a comprehensive view of the problem but inhibits an understanding of the phenomenon under conditions of change. It is also more difficult to contextualize gang activities and data which can lead to ever diminishing returns on intervention activities. As the gang phenomenon evolves, strategies that were once effective may also become useless. Because of this, it is impossible to know which interventions are effective at controlling which types of gangs if there are no standardized classifications of the gangs.

Criminological Theory provides no ready made solution as to how to disrupt or diminish the harmful effects of social phenomena such as gangs. The lack of a standardized gang assessment protocol creates theoretical conflict rather than theoretical compliment. What we do know is that theories that adequately explain the structure and function of one type of gang will be completely inadequate in explaining the activities of other types of gangs. The impending confusion created from the lack of standardization leads many Criminal Justice practitioners to simply disregard gang research entirely.

Some of the country's most notorious street gangs have gotten Web-savvy, showcasing illegal exploits, making threats, and honoring killed and jailed members on digital turf.

Washington Post, 2006

In the wake of continuing change to the face of gangs, previous researchers and practitioners have pursued taxonomies of gangs. However, other taxonomies have either been lacking in technical distinction or simply not adopted by Criminal Justice agencies. The goal of this protocol is to create a taxonomy of gangs that uses standardized conceptualizations and technically distinct criteria for the purpose of producing more effective gang classification, research and intervention.

SGAP

“Standardized Gang Assessment Protocol”

Many existing gang classification systems are one dimensional and are not inclusive of the various types of gangs nor do they fully explain the criteria used for differentiating one group from another. This leads to misclassification of groups based on mischaracterized identifiers such as colors or hand signs. This SGAP differs from traditional gang classification protocols by subjecting groups to a multi-stage classification process. The classification process involves first meeting a criterion definition followed by classification across three additional dimensions of gang activity bringing the total classification dimensions to four.

The elements of the SGAP model are not subject to ethnic or demographic classification criteria. Traditional concepts such as Youth Gangs, Drug Gangs, Black Gangs or Hispanic Gangs are merely demographic indicators that obscure the structural and operational elements of gangs. The traditional gang classifications can also be difficult to defend in court. Currently, identifying individual gang members for prosecution is too often a judgment issue as opposed to being evidentiary and objective. For example, a gang that is composed mostly of African-Americans, who engage in street corner drug sales and has members whose age range from 12 years old to 32 years old could be classified in a number of ways.

This gang could be considered a ‘drug gang’ because of their illegal drug sales or a ‘street gang’ based on the location of their criminal activity or further as a ‘Black Gang’ due to the ethnicity of most members. However, the gang may also be described as a ‘youth gang’ because of the age of the younger members. In short, the traditional gang classification process is arbitrary and capricious. The central problem is that these definitions are primarily descriptive and do not lend themselves to direct, coordinated, and informed action by law enforcement.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

HOW MUCH OF OUR RESOURCES SHOULD BE ALLOCATED TO ONE GANG VERSUS ANOTHER?

ARE DRUG SALES CENTRAL TO SUSTAINING THE GANG’S ACTIVITY? AND HOW MUCH OF OUR RESOURCES SHOULD BE

DEDICATED TO DISRUPTING THE DRUG COMPONENT?

DOES HAVING A RIGID ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE MAKE A GANG MORE OR LESS DANGEROUS?

OVER TIME, DO GANGS NECESSARILY PROGRESS TOWARD GREATER SOPHISTICATION?

Having the ability to answer each of these questions enhances our ability to understand and ultimately curtail criminal activities. To that end, we propose the use of a multi-dimension classification system featuring a *criterion definition*, *organizational type* classification, identifying a *prime directive* and a *theater of operation*, the SGAP taxonomy 1) assures a more judicious assessment of the group in question; 2) makes it much more difficult to misidentify a target group using multiple criteria than when using only one criterion; and informs our prevention, intervention and suppression efforts.

“Criterion Definition”

The criterion definition functions as a qualifier by which non-criminal groups are excluded. The SGAP model establishes the basic inclusionary criteria as: “*Three or more people, who have a structured alignment and engage, support or condone criminal activity*”. The criterion definition is purposely broad in its scope in order to include the various types of gangs but specific enough to exclude groups that do not cause harm to society through the systematic commission or support of crime. This definition is similar to definitions in the research literature and used in recently introduced legislation by the NC General Assembly. But, it is only the first stage. Alone, this definition applies to offenders like bank robbing crews, groups of scam artists, and credit card fraud teams. The SGAP does not replace this basic definition. It is designed to enhance this basic definition.

What this criterion purposely avoids are identifiers related to the use of gang signs, tattoos, or clothing. Many police departments across the country have definitions that rely on these identifiers. These types of overt identifiers are not possessed by all

gangs and are subject to the constant changes within the gang culture, thus making these identifiers of limited utility. When used judiciously, these identifiers can be helpful to law enforcement efforts; however, in reality tremendous confusion exist regarding exactly what constitutes a gang identifier. To illustrate, among the hand signs listed below are several innocuous gestures that can easily be mistaken for gang signs or closely resemble known gang signs. Figure 1 actually depicts a hand gesture used by a popular music artist (and their young fans) that has no known affiliation with known gangs. In figure 3 we see how these gestures have gained popularity among mainstream teenagers and young adults. While we recognize the importance of using these identifiers for gang intelligence gathering efforts, we urge their judicious use by properly trained personnel and the importance of using multiple

GANG SIGNS?????



Figure 1

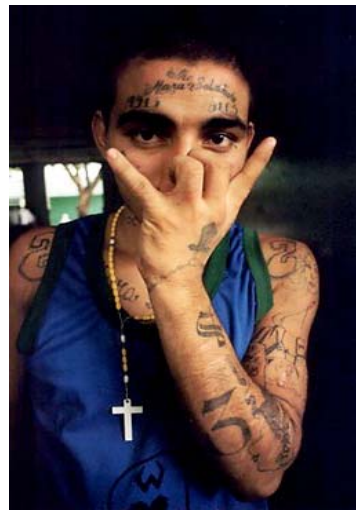


Figure 2



Figure 3

dimensions. Similar confusion surrounds the wearing of colors and clothing styles (e.g., baggy clothing or white tee shirts). Often times, because youth readily adopt clothing styles they see popularized in the media, it is difficult to make distinctions between the styles adopted by gang members and non-gang members. These styles have come to be associated with rap music and popularized by groups like Arista Record's *Franchise Boyz* who have a song titled "White Tee" wherein they promote the wearing of white tee shirts for no apparent reason.

“Organizational Type”

The greatest strength of the SGAP is that it does not rely on only one dimension. The second taxum in the SGAP is the group's classification. Gang Classification is defined as: “The primary group category influenced by temporal and organizational dynamics”. Gangs are classified into five categories: traditional gangs, non-traditional gangs, criminal enterprise gangs, vandal gangs and pseudo-traditional gangs. Once again, the SGAP model is a stair-step process; in order to be classified into one of the above categories a group must first meet all of the elements of the first dimension (criterion definition).

	TRADITIONAL	NON-TRADITIONAL	CRIMINAL ENTERPRISE	PSEUDO TRADITIONAL	TAGGERS
GOVERNANCE	Lateral rank structure	flat structure	strict hierarchical	Membership Fluctuates	Loose membership or informal rank structure
AGE COMPOSITION	Varied Age Structure	High Juvenile Population	Historically Composed of More Adults	High Juvenile Population	High juvenile population or exclusively juvenile
GROUP MAINTENANCE	Often Very Ritualistic	Lack of Intricate Rules & Rituals	Bureaucratic Resemblance	Lack of Intricate Rules & Rituals Ruled by Consensus	Lack internal controls
COHESION	Moderately Strong Internal Controls & Strict Rules	Little Organization Loose internal controls Ruled by consensus	High Cohesion High Internal Controls	Loose internal controls	Low cohesion
LIFE SPAN	Existed at least 2+ generations	Short Existence >1generation	Historically Multi-generational	Short Existence >1generation	
AFFILIATIONS	Possible National Alliances	Usually no national alliances or affiliations	Can be national and even global	Usually no national alliances or affiliations	May be affiliated with other gangs for protection
MARKERS & IDENTIFIERS	More likely to have codified and extensive identifiers/markers: colors, hand signs, symbols	Often no markers or very little investment in them	usually no typical markers	Often no markers or very little investment in them	Graffiti/Tags are identifiers
ACTIVITIES	Archetypical gang.	Commonly found to engage in spontaneous criminal activity. Activities may resemble those of a traditional gang.	Typically restrict activities to specific monetary related offenses.	Resembles a Non-traditional that takes the name of a traditional. Recreates most brutal and violent aspects of gang life in absence of legitimate/first-hand transmission of knowledge.	Primarily Vandalize structures with spray paint. May employ violence against rival taggers. Can be involved in other deviant activities.

The table shows the prototypical characteristics associated with each of these groups. Each category is best viewed as an “ideal type” as no group will conform exactly to these characteristics. For instance, a group may exhibit all of the characteristics of a traditional gang but have a flat structure – a structure typically found in non-traditional gangs. We situate groups in this framework along a continuum emphasizing the degree to which a group resembles one or the other category. Using this framework provides a

reference point that focuses on criteria that can be understood across organizations and fields and also shared by newly trained personnel. Most importantly, this framework allows us to plot the development of gangs across time as they transition from one type to another. While gangs may begin as a street-level, some eventually develop the capacity to become highly sophisticated entities.

“Some of our local street gangs have morphed into international crime syndicates using the latest technology. They have become sophisticated in communications and travel, and have set-up networks to carry out their criminal enterprises.
Los Angeles County Sheriff, Lee Baca

In addition to understanding the various structures of gangs, it is also necessary to understand the various functions of those gangs. Gangs are multi-dimensional entities. As such, they not only exist in an organizational state but also serve an underlying function. The gang’s function and structure are inextricably intertwined. In the SGAP, the various functions exhibited by the gangs are referred to as the gang’s Prime Directive.

Prime Directive

A gang’s Prime Directive is defined as: “The governing dynamic that facilitates the gang members’ attitudes, behaviors and actions”. All gangs possess a prime directive. Prime directive should not be confused with the idea that all members of a gang will share a common purpose. In reality, individual gang members join gangs for vastly different reasons. Prime directive is a structural

measure and is associated with an overall aggregate pattern of behavior comprised from the individual actions of the gang members. The concept of the prime directive is also not new to gang research. Some researchers in the past (Yablonsky, 1959) classified gangs by their primary behaviors rather than constructed classifications. The SGAP model moves a step further in classifying gang behavior as a separate dimension of the phenomenon. The Gang Prime Directive is determined through a number of investigative methods, including but not limited to: law enforcement conspiracy investigations, reliable informant testimony and arrest patterns of known members. There are three prime directives in the SGAP Model: *Identity Prime Directive*, *Monetary Prime Directive* and *Political Prime Directive*.

Identity Prime Directive. A gang that possesses an identity prime directive is basically concerned with being a gang. They engage in crimes and other behaviors primarily in the name of the gang. These crimes may be turf-related assaults or other conflict with rival gangs in the name of neighborhood protection. This prime directive is usually associated with traditional, non-traditional and pseudo-traditional gangs but can be a motivating factor for a gang at any classification level. Members who belong to identity prime directive gangs are often volatile and violent. Conflict with these groups can be sparked by the most innocuous situations.

Monetary Prime Directive. Traditionally, monetary prime directive gangs pursue economic gain through the manufacture, sale and delivery of illegal drugs. Although they concentrate on financial gain, monetary prime directive gangs may commit a substantial

amount of violent crimes. Violence is a regulatory method by which these gangs can ensure the continued operation and growth of illicit businesses. Drugs remain a mainstay of gang revenue; however, there are new, more lucrative criminal markets for gang members to explore. Gangs that operate under a monetary prime directive can also embrace any endeavor that has been shown to possess a positive cost-benefit ratio such as stolen automobiles, extortion and prostitution.

Political Prime Directive. There are increasing numbers of gangs that are concerned with affecting the socio-political dynamics of communities. The political prime directive is usually associated with large criminal enterprises and national gangs that have been in existence for longer periods of time. Political prime directive gangs are often involved in both legal and illegal endeavors. These gangs have members who are aware of contemporary social control methods and routinely invest illegal revenue into philanthropic causes, a concept known as ‘corporatization’ (Taylor, 1990). Gangs that possess a political prime directive will commonly do what is called ‘controlling the equation’. This term means that the gang attempts to exert influence in both the illegal and legal aspects of a jurisdiction.

“Theater of Operations”

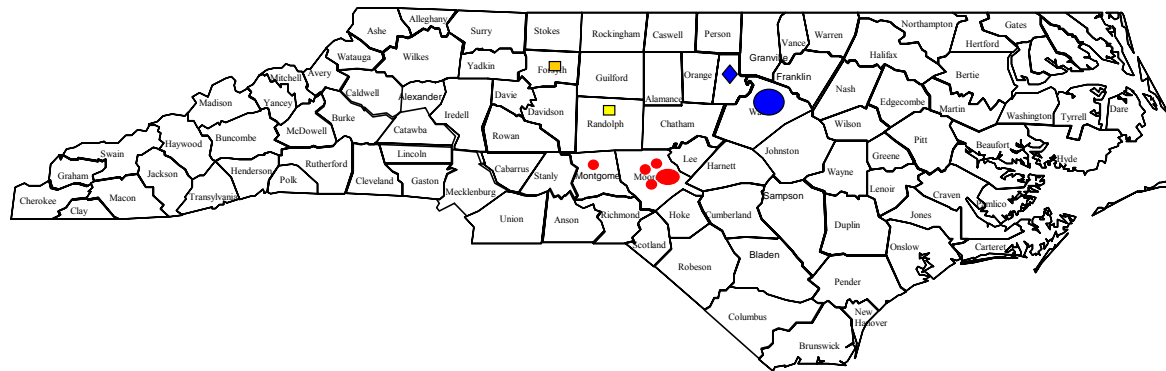
A Theater of Operation is a specific parameter in which the gang conducts its illegal enterprises. The conceptualization of turf is much narrower than that of the Theater of Operation. Turf implies that the activities are confined to a more localized area. There are

certainly gangs that fit into this narrow classification; however, contemporary gangs do not limit themselves to one or even two neighborhoods, especially if the gang is operating under monetary or political prime directives. Contemporary gangs can realize global aspirations of illegal activity by using the vast array of technological tools at their disposal. These tools include the use of websites to promote gangs, gang activities, showcase illegal exploits, make threats, and honoring killed and jailed members.

Including theater of operations as a dimension allows for police to better coordinate inter-agency activities and determine if the actions of groups like the notorious MS13 are linked to national, state or cross-county activities. The efforts of the Department of Corrections can also be enhanced if we can successfully link this information to geographic maps. Release plans for known gang members can take this information into consideration and facilitate locating suitable locales for prisoner re-entry.

From a geographic perspective, it is useful to examine the phenomenon from multiple perspectives including but not limited to: the Global/International, National, State, and local. In addition to these geographic spaces, understanding cross-border activities (whether physical or virtual) is an important necessity. These activities involve the range of trans-border configurations such as: Inter-county, Municipality-County, Inter-state, Cross-border Municipal-County, etc... (see diagram). Combining the 3 other SGAP dimensions to this dimension provides us with the ability to catalog an organization that may be operating under different names in separate jurisdictions, employing different identifiers, operating with a different organization structure, but nonetheless embodying essentially the same organization.

- ◇ The blue symbols represent a hypothetical example of two gangs operating with the same name but with different organizational structures.
- ■ The yellow and gold symbols represent a hypothetical example of two gangs with identical organizational structures, but with different names and prime directives.
- The red symbols represent a hypothetical example of the diffusion of the same gang across geographic barriers.



“Conclusion”

The SGAP Model provides not only a standardized method for examining research findings but it also provides a framework for gang intervention. Before proceeding with gang analysis or intervention programs, it is necessary to fully understand the dynamic nature of the gang phenomenon. Using the traditional conceptualization of gangs as a group delinquency is less helpful for gang research and intervention primarily because of the inordinate amount of importance placed on formal membership. The fundamental

shift toward networked criminal endeavors makes gang membership much more transient. By assessing gangs according to a criterion definition, Gang Classification, Prime Directive and Theater of Operations, it is possible to accurately situate a criminal organization in a holistic framework. There can be substantive differences between gangs that exist in the same jurisdiction. Criminal Justice practitioners have long since realized that not all gangs are the same. Unfortunately, this realization has not generated practical applications.

The chart below combines the former information along with a hypothetical crime severity index to create a threat matrix. We caution against using an arbitrary designation of values to different crimes because of the interrelated nature of crimes (e.g. drugs and violence) and the difficulty in assessing the impact different crimes have on a community (financial, well being, safety, etc..). Such a designation would make the endeavor arbitrary and capricious. Ideally, such a matrix should be created in conjunction with law enforcement as opposed to being an academic exercise with no value to police. This research based index should include such factors as the frequency, type, and prevalence of criminal activity. Examining table 2, we can see a hypothetical example of how using the SGAP with such a measure could help address such critical questions such as:

<p>WHAT MAKES ONE TYPE OF GANG MORE HARMFUL TO SOCIETY THAN ANOTHER?</p> <p>AGAINST WHICH GANGS ARE THE GREATEST PROPORTION OF OUR RESOURCES BEING EXPENDED AND</p> <p>HOW CAN BE BETTER EXPEND OUR RESOURCES?</p> <p>ARE WE OVERLOOKING THE CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES OF SOME GANGS IN ORDER TO FOCUS ON OTHERS?</p>

THREAT & FUNDING MATRIX

ORGANIZATION TYPE	GANG CRIME LEVEL	THEATER OF OPERATIONS
CRIMINAL ENTERPRISE	HIGH	ESTABLISHED CROSS BORDER GEOG
CRIMINAL ENTERPRISE	HIGH	ESTABLISHED CONCENTRATED GEOG
TRADITIONAL GANG	HIGH	ESTABLISHED CROSS BORDER GEOG
TRADITIONAL GANG	HIGH	ESTABLISHED CONCENTRATED GEOG
CRIMINAL ENTERPRISE	MODERATE	ESTABLISHED CROSS BORDER GEOG
CRIMINAL ENTERPRISE	LOW	CONCENTRATED OR CROSS BORDER
TRADITIONAL GANG	MODERATE	CONCENTRATED OR CROSS BORDER
TRADITIONAL GANG	LOW	CONCENTRATED OR CROSS BORDER
NON & PSEUDO GANG	HIGH	ESTABLISHED CROSS BORDER GEOG
NON & PSEUDO GANG	HIGH	ESTABLISHED CONCENTRATED GEOG
NON & PSEUDO GANG	MODERATE	ESTABLISHED CROSS BORDER GEOG
TRADITIONAL GANG	LOW	UNDEFINED OPERATIONS AREA
NON & PSEUDO GANG	LOW	CONCENTRATED OR CROSS BORDER
TRADITIONAL GANG	HIGH	UNDEFINED OPERATIONS AREA
NON & PSEUDO	LOW	UNDEFINED OPERATIONS AREA
VANDALS	HIGH/LOW	OPEN



ORDER OF PRIORITIES: SUPPRESSION, INTERVENTION, PREVENTION
 ORDER OF PRIORITIES: INTERVENTION, PREVENTION, SUPPRESSION
 ORDER OF PRIORITEIS: PREVENTION, INTERVENTION, SUPPRESSION

These are questions that must be answered in deliberate ways if the Criminal Justice system is to make any significant inroads in combating the gang problem. Gang researchers and criminal justice practitioners can begin to enhance their work by referring to gangs by classification, prime directive, and theater of operation. This protocol allows others to understand the issue being studied within a larger context. When the standardized framework identifies areas lacking scientific attention researchers can shift their focus

to emerging hot spots. Researchers may then target those deficiencies in order to develop a more complete picture of the gang phenomenon as it evolves in a given area.

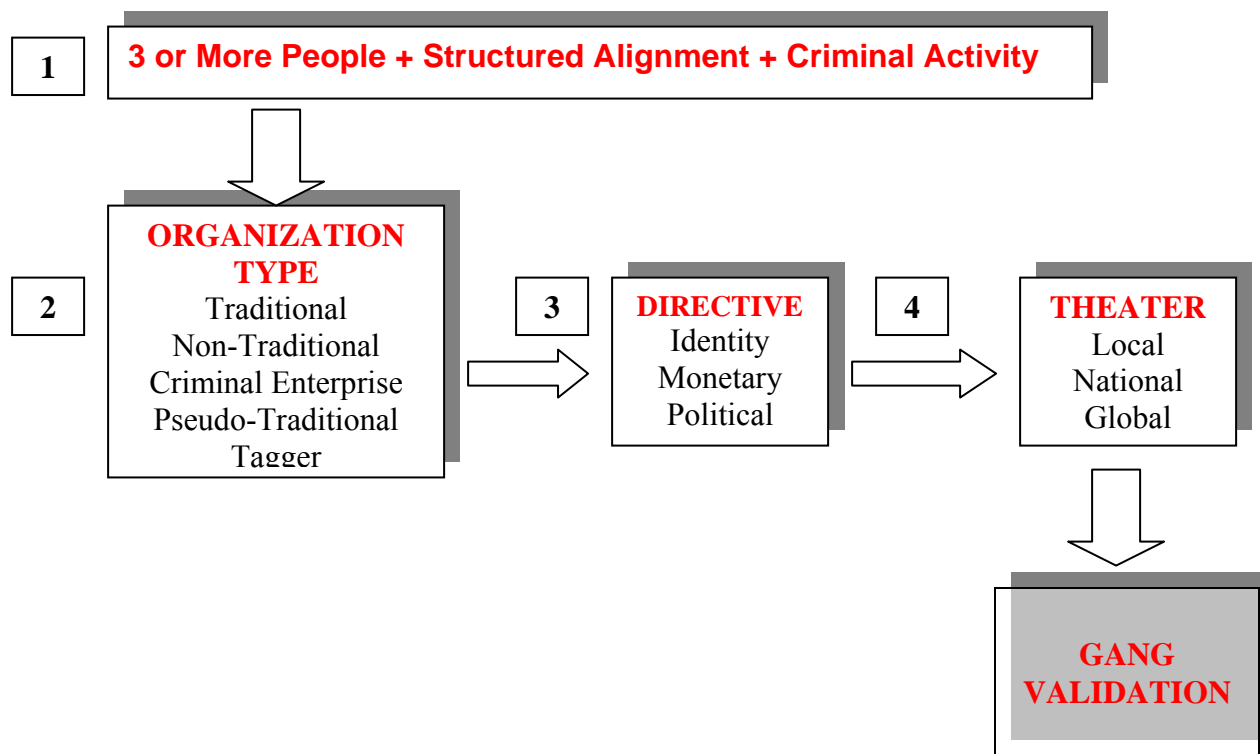
The SGAP allows researchers and practitioners to operate under a common discord or language. The SGAP is not designed to render previous gang research invalid but rather to aggregate, classify and standardize findings. Attempting to understand the gang phenomenon under conditions of change is like the proverbial committee of blind men attempting to describe an elephant that they have never seen.

Each person describes the elephant from his own vantage point; without the benefit of concurrent input from others. Some describe the elephant as large or small; while others describe it as wrinkled or smooth, soft or hard. Some members of the blind committee refuse to validate the explanation of others because they have empirical evidence that is antithetical to every other interpretation of the elephant. Now imagine that the elephant changed into a giraffe. How much confusion would exist during and after the change? The lack of a standardized discourse not only prevents a comprehensive view of the problem but inhibits an understanding of the phenomenon under conditions of change. This lack of an accepted framework in which to contextualize gang research leads to three substantial problems: 1) intervention stagnation, 2) theory stagnation, and 3) research nullification in combating gangs. The blind committee can attempt to describe the elephant without making any meaningful progress or, the committee can progress when the members work together.

As more law enforcement agencies come on line with tools like Gangnet, we advocate for the use of a matrix such as the one outlined herein. GangNet has demonstrated utility in cataloging and tracking gang members. Coupled with the structural measures of the Strategic Gang Assessment Protocol, law enforcement can generate comprehensive actionable threat assessments. These assessments can be useful across jurisdictions and statewide.

However, if we fail to generate a common framework, then we run the risk of expending precious public resources on what is truly an unknown phenomenon – Gangs in North Carolina. From the funding agency perspective, making funding decisions contingent upon use of a standard matrix or framework will go a long way toward increasing the use of common metrics and identifiers, which in turn will enhance information sharing. Once the state can truly understand the phenomenon, it will then be possible to effectively combat gang activity with the broad array of tools at our disposal.

Standardized Gang Assessment Protocol



Note:

In order for a group to be classified as a gang using the Standardized Gang Assessment Protocol, the group must contain one element from each of the preceding taxum. The group in question must first meet the criterion definition: having 3 or more people in a structured alignment and commit, promote or condone criminal behavior. Next the groups must display a general classification (Taxum-2). In addition to the criterion definition and general classification, the group should display a prime directive around which the group functions (Taxum-3). There should also be a geographic locale in which the group commits crime (Taxum-4). Research and intervention should also follow a similar process when contextualizing projects. The SGAP contextualization would ideally occur during the planning phase of the project.