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Portland's Street Gangs: Born of Poverty—Nourished on Vendetta

by Leon Harris

Last July 4th was a festive day for Portlanders. Backyard barbequeing, neighborly socializing, family gatherings, etc. For most neighborhoods it was a day of peace and tranquillity—mixed with fun and games—children and adults alike . . . almost.

For residents of the 5300 block of N.E. 10th in Portland, the day's activities were abruptly curtailed by an incident which left them horrified, frightened, and skeptical about future outdoor activities out of fear for their families' safety as well as their own.

Shortly before dusk (though still somewhat daylight), a volley of gunfire erupted in front of one of the homes in the block. Adults and children scampered to avoid the line of fire as bullets whistled through the area aimlessly. The exact number of shots fired is anyone's guess. The police recovered 13 empty shell casings. No description of those involved was obtained due to the confusion of people ducking and dodging bullets.

While residents of the N.E. 10th neighborhood will record this as an incident not easily forgotten, the Portland Police Department has recorded the incident as case No. 66768—GANG RELATED!

The July 4th incident is but one of 43 youth gang-related cases docu-

The relationship between these five "sets" is unknown, as well as unpredictable, as they often fight amongst themselves for control of the sole purpose of their migration from California: Drugs and Crack houses.

Lucrative Drug trafficking in Portland, as opposed to a saturated Californian market, has helped the CRIPS gain notoriety as major dealers in cocaine and operators of crack houses.

According to Los Angeles police, a sizeable "rock" (crack) can be purchased for as little as five dollars in that city, while the same size "rock" may cost twenty dollars in Portland; one gram of cocaine in Portland averages eighty dollars—L.A., thirty dollars; one ounce of cocaine in L.A. sells for four hundred, while in Portland an ounce sells for \$1,200 dollars. This three-fold mark-up attracts CRIPS drug traffickers not only to Portland, but Denver, Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Seattle, as well.

According to the California Department of Justice, which tracks gang activity, the following information is on record:

- Denver: up to 400 CRIPS gang members have been recruited; in June 1986, a police officer was shot in the arm; a raid on a rock house uncovered two members of the Bloods, arc rivals of the CRIPS.



Graffiti at 15th & Alberta in N.E. Portland indicates presence of CRIPS and Bloods.

Photo by Richard J. Brown

mented by the North Portland Police Precinct since May 7, 1987. How many occurred prior to that date is anyone's guess.

But the arrival of Capt. John Potter as North Precinct Commander last spring signaled more than just a changing of the guard in St. Johns. Twenty-one years of police work has alerted him to pick out certain peculiarities in crime trends.

As the former Commander of Central Precinct, he noticed shortly after his arrival a vast difference in the types of crimes being committed between the two areas. There was a definite pattern of more violence and drugs in Northeast Portland involving a disproportionate number of youth. Information obtained from precinct officers provided few answers—some thought gang activity might be involved.

The Capt. assigned an officer full-time to tracking youth criminal activities and compiling intelligence information to determine if there were youth gangs operating within the precinct's boundaries, and the scope of their involvement.

After two months of extensive research by Patrolman Neil Crannell, who was assigned to study youth gangs in North/Northeast Portland, the Capt. was thoroughly convinced that there was a definite linkage between youth gangs and the increase in violent crimes and drugs in the area.

Intelligence gathered also clearly showed that not only were violent crimes and drugs on the increase, but so were the gangs and gangs' membership. Not only does Portland have a youth gang problem, but, as a new element of crime in the area, it drains resources from an already over-taxed Police Bureau and diminishes any realistic hope for a decline in this City's crime statistics.

According to police intelligence, there are currently seven youth gangs operating in the City of Portland. They are identified as: three Black gangs: CRIPS, Bloods, BGDN (Black Gangster Disciple Nation); one white group: PUSH (Portland Unified Skin Heads); two Vietnamese gangs: New Wave, and the other yet unknown; and one Loatian gang: Portland Sex Killers.

The more prominent of the seven are the CRIPS, who boast of five different "families" or "sets": 1) .357 from Pomona, California; 2) Watts Vario Grape Street set, L.A., California; 3) a "family" from Fresno, California; 4) Kitchen set and Rolling 60's set, L.A., California; and 5) 629, of unknown origin.

- Phoenix: Two shootings last December involved gang members trying to expand narcotics markets; in October, police identified about 100 gang members flying or driving into Phoenix looking for new drug markets.

- Las Vegas: Gang members from Inglewood, California, have helped to establish rock houses.

- Seattle: Police claim approximately 50 full-fledged members of California's two major Black street gangs are in the area and are recruiting "hangers-on" and "wannabes" to run errands.

The California Department of Justice also points out that gang activities are not confined to the West Coast or the Pacific Northwest. Tulsa; Oklahoma City; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Pensacola, Florida; and Shreveport, LA, are also experiencing problems.

While the CRIPS may be more well-known, another L.A.-based gang is equally as violent and is known to have established territorial rights on a rival gang's turf because of lucrative drug markets. Called the Bloods, their bitter rivalry with the CRIPS has targeted schools, parks, neighborhoods and the streets of Watts for violent confrontations and shoot-outs, which more than once have resulted in killing innocent bystanders.

The latest shooting of an innocent victim was 9-year-old Deandra Brown, who was killed in cross-fire between the two rival gangs while playing in a park on June 24th, 1987. A 17-year-old has been arrested on suspicion of murder in connection with the case. Los Angeles police estimate there are 15,000 CRIPS and Bloods (about 3-to-1 CRIPS) gang members who were involved in 325 killings last year, and L.A. prosecutors say they expect more than 600 gang homicides this year.

According to police, the exact number of Bloods in Portland is unknown, as with all gangs in the area.

The BGDN, or Black Gangster Disciple Nation, originates out of Chicago, but little is known about the gang's activities. Denver, Colorado, police report their city was visited by BGDN, and they may be more violent than the CRIPS and Bloods. They publicize their arrival with graffiti symbols (pitchforks and the Star of David).

The Portland Unified Skin Heads (PUSH), identified by police as a "white supremacist" gang, is believed to have migrated from out of town. Sporting shaven heads and all-black leather attire, their base of operations

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Photo by Richard J. Brown

Reverend John Jackson's Farewell Statement

Thank you for coming today. Although I have announced my retirement, I am proud to leave behind a legacy of people and programs who will continue to address many of the issues and concerns I fought for in my twenty-three (23) years of service in Portland.

In the area of child care the Albina Ministerial Alliance Family Day and Night Care has assisted thousands of families with their child care needs as well as provide managerial support for child care providers. Mrs. Corneta Smith, Director, A.M.A. Family Day and Night Care Program, will announce our latest component.

In education, the Desegregation and Monitoring Committee has been instrumental in dismantling an unfair desegregation plan, which arbitrarily bused our children. Our problem now is to close the achievement gap between Black and White students.

I encourage Portlanders to volunteer with their neighborhood associations, local organizations and continue to help low-income families, the unemployed and the uneducated. We should assault apathy at every turn to keep the thorns away from the City of Roses.

Teen Parents and Families Wanted For Teen Parents Support Group

Albina Ministerial Alliance (A.M.A.) Teen Parent Program is currently recruiting teen parents and their families for support, advocacy and advisory groups.

These groups will address and provide parental education, pregnancy intervention, prevention education, positive self-enhancement education, community education regarding responsible sexuality and outreach to youth at risk of early pregnancy.

"The overall goal of the project is threefold", said Cardella Hopson, Information and Referral Coordinator for the Teen Parent Program. "We want to reduce the number of teen-age pregnancies, provide parent education and support services to teen parents and assist parents of the teen parent in order to maintain a strong family relationship and stable foundation for the teen parent and their children," Hopson explained.

For more information, call Cardella Hopson at 285-0493.