



E20 Breaking the Silence of Asian Youth Gangs: A Rising Epidemic Confronting Medical Examiners/Coroners From California to Pennsylvania

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This presentation will provide timely data on Asian and Pacific Islander Americans (API) youth gangs and offer strategies on how to recognize and interpret various behavior, tattoos, and graffiti associated with these gangs, which could assist the medical examiner/coroner and death investigator in the positive identification of the decedent in the field and/or in the autopsy room. Most importantly, it is imperative that the medical examiner/coroner community understand the “signs and symptoms” of API gangs in order to keep themselves and those around them safe when investigating the deaths of gang members.

With the population of API continuing to rise in the United States, so do their healthcare needs. Unfortunately, not all Asian Americans are as uniformly educated, acculturated, and financially stable, as the myth of the “model minority” would have us suggest. Although adults from many nationality groups between Asian and Pacific Islanders have adapted well to life in the United States, serious problems have emerged among Asian American youth. In particular, youth gang violence in the Asian and Pacific Islander community has dramatically increased in the last few years by nearly 20% nationwide according to the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. In Los Angeles County California alone, there are currently 155 Asian youth gangs, with a total gang membership of over 6,000. In neighboring Orange County California, gang involvement has reached an all time high with over 65 documented gangs and a membership of 2,000. Demographics show gang member (male and female) age average of 15 with a range of 8-22 years. Even more disturbing is the increase of Asian females involved in gang activity. In Orange County, where the Asian gang population makes up 12%, there are 140 Asian female gang members, up 60% from last year. Other surrounding counties in California and the cities of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Fairfax County Virginia, and Portland Oregon have seen similar trends in the rise of Asian youth gangs. The author interviewed over 400 gang members in the streets, the jails, and the juvenile halls, using a target questionnaire; concomitantly went a step further disguised as a gang member. This study identified a distinct difference between Southeast Asian gangs and Pacific Islander gangs. Southeast Asian gangs were often seen as “non-traditional” gangs by the author, whereas Pacific Islander gangs (i.e. Filipino, Samoan, and Chamorro) were considered more “traditional.” Moreover, the author identified seven contributing factors, which lead to involvement in both male and female Asian gangs (i.e. substance abuse, lack of adult supervision, breakdown of the family, victimization due to racism, culture shock, need for survival, and monetary profit).

Juvenile Offenders (Youth Gangs), Asian American, Violence Prevention