



Jurisprudence Section – 2008

E2 Towards a Better Understanding of Latino Youth Gang Violence: A Growing Domestic Terrorism Problem for Medical Examiners/Coroners

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The goal of this presentation is to present timely data on Latino youth gangs and to offer strategies on how to recognize and interpret various tattoos and graffiti associated with these gangs, which could assist the medical examiner/coroner and death investigator in the positive identification of the decedent out in the field and/or in the autopsy room.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by assisting the medical examiner/coroner community in understanding the “signs and symptoms” of Latino gangs in order to keep themselves and those around them safe when investigating the deaths of these gang members.

Throughout the country in urban, suburban, and rural communities, medical examiners, coroners, and death investigators are constantly being challenged by intramural shootings between rival gang members admitted to the medical examiner/coroner’s office. As first-hand witnesses of youth gang violence, the medical examiner/coroner’s office, represent a highly skilled community resource in the modern multi-agency approach to help combat this new form of domestic terrorism. Youth gang violence has continued its upward trend nationwide, increasing over 20% according to the Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Furthermore, gangs have been identified in every single state, meaning that gangs are no longer a California problem. Nationwide there are 24,500 gangs with a gang membership of over 750,000, while the ethnic composition of these gangs include 47% Latino, 31% African American, 13% Caucasian, 7% Asian, and 2% Mixed. In particular, youth gang violence in the Latino community has had a dramatic increase in the last few years. In Los Angeles County California alone, there are currently 635 documented Latino gangs with a gang membership of over 83,000. Demographics show a gang member average age of 15 with a range of 8-22 years. Other counties within California and nationwide have also seen increases in Latino gangs. The author interviewed over 300 gang members out in the streets, jails, and juvenile halls, using a target questionnaire; concomitantly went a step further disguised as a gang member out in the streets of Los Angeles to experience the state of mind of having “power.” This study identified 8 distinct manifestations of gang violence and 9 ethnic differences and similarities among Latino gangs. A sample of the findings include: definite cultural differences between Latino gangs and various other ethnic gangs; drugs; weaponry; killing over turf/territory; extortion; defacing property/graffiti; women in gangs.

The purpose of this paper is to present timely data on Latino youth gangs. Most importantly, it is imperative that the medical examiner/coroner community understand the “signs and symptoms” of Latino gangs in order to keep themselves and those around them safe when investigating the deaths of these gang members.

Youth Gangs, Youth Violence, Latino-American