



E15 Understanding Latino Youth Gang Violence: From the Prison Yard to the Streets

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to explain the organization of Latino prison and street gangs. Understand and interpret common graffiti and tattoos. Discuss some of the recent gang enhancement laws including gang injunctions that several states have in place to help tackle the gang problem.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by informing and educating attendees about youth gangs. Particularly Latino youth gangs in order to keep safe while investigating the deaths of these youths.

One cannot open the newspaper or watch the local news without hearing of another casualty of gang violence. Throughout the country in urban, suburban, and rural communities gang violence has reached epidemic proportions 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 two years. In Los Angeles County, California alone, there are currently 650 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 in California and nationwide have seen increases in Latino gangs, especially in rural communities. The Mara Salvatrucha (MS 13) an El Salvadorian gang originating in the Pico-Union area of Los Angeles, California since 1983, has seen the largest increase in membership nationwide with over 60% in some states. Over 400 gang members out in the streets, jails, and juvenile halls in California and Pennsylvania were interviewed. This study identified eight distinct manifestations of gang violence and nine ethnic differences and similarities among Latino gangs i.e., definite cultural differences between Latino gangs and various other ethnic gangs; drugs; weaponry; killing over turf/territory; extortion; defacing property/graffiti; and, women in gangs).

This study found that Latino gangs are motivated by a state of mind driven by “La Raza” which translated means “for the race.” It is important to note that La Raza is more of a cultural ideology than a gang related motto. Latino gangs are extremely territorial and unlike African American gangs where the individual is important, for Latino gangs it is the gang as a whole that is important and not the individual. To illustrate this point, when Latino gang members go to prison, they are run and controlled by one of two prison gangs depending on the geographic location of the prison: La Eme or Nuestra Familia. La Eme otherwise known as the Mexican Mafia is a prison gang originating in California and considered the leadership arm of all Latino gangs in Southern California. The letter “M” in Spanish is pronounced “eme” and is the 13th letter of the alphabet. Consequently, throughout Southern California, Latino gangs will often call themselves by the City or area that they represent, followed by the number “13” to indicate “La Eme” or “Southern” by giving respect to the Mexican Mafia. In Northern California, the Nuestra Familia which is translated to mean “our family” is the prison gang that controls every Latino gang north of Fresno, California and is often indicated by the number “14” representing the letter “N” for Nuestra and Northern. It is important to remember that Latino gangs are not just a California problem, although California is where these gangs originated. Rural, suburban, and urban communities across the nation are now seeing an increase in Latino gangs which mimic the California based Latino gangs, such as the MS 13.

In direct response to the increase in gangs, the state of California, North Carolina, Virginia, and Idaho have passed gang enhancement laws, which increase the penalty if an individual is found to have committed for the benefit, association, or direction of a criminal street gang a felony. Other states including California have also filed a civil injunction or “gang injunction” against specific gangs, whereby removing the leadership of the gang and disbanding its members.

The purpose of this paper is to present timely data on Latino youth gangs; 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 paper will also discuss some of the recent gang enhancement laws including civil injunctions that California, North Carolina, Virginia, and Idaho have in place to help tackle this deadly problem.

Youth Gangs, Gang Enhancement Laws, Tattoos