



## E70 Breaking the Code to Better Understanding Asian Youth Gangs

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**Learning Overview:** The goals of this presentation are to present timely data on Asian Pacific Islander youth gangs and 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. In addition, this presentation will also discuss some of the recent gang enhancement laws that California, North Carolina, Virginia, and Idaho have in place to help tackle this deadly problem.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** This presentation will impact the forensic science community by offering new strategies to help keep medical examiners/coroners, death investigators, law enforcement officers, and first responders safe when dealing with these gang members so everyone can go home safe at the end of their shift.

Every day we hear of someone who has fallen victim to gang violence. Youth gangs throughout the United States continue to terrorize the neighborhoods they claim as their own, causing citizens in these gang-infested neighborhoods to live in constant fear of their lives. As a result of the recent influx of gang violence and gang-related homicides in all communities, the safety of first responders and investigators at crime scenes are jeopardized. This leaves medical examiners/coroners, death investigators, and detectives as possible targets of intramural shootings because they are at the scene. Crime scene personnel shootings have increased nearly 55% in the past year. Throughout the United States, gang violence has risen over 65% in the past 12 months. Every state has gangs, and the problem is getting much worse in areas that traditionally do not have gang problems. Gangs are not just an urban problem, but a suburban and rural problem as well.

With the population of Asian and Pacific Islander Americans (API) continuing to rise in the United States, so do their needs. Unfortunately, not all Asian Americans are as uniformly educated, acculturated, and financially stable as the myth of the “model minority” suggests. Although adults from the API region have adapted well to life in the United States, serious problems have emerged among Asian American youth. In particular, youth gang violence in the API community has dramatically increased in the past few years by nearly 85% nationwide according to the United States Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. In Los Angeles County, CA, there are currently 275 Asian youth gangs, with a total gang membership of over 12,000. In neighboring Orange County, CA, gang involvement has reached an all-time high with more than 87 documented gangs and a membership of more than 4,000. Demographics show gang members’ (male and female) average age is 15 years 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 18% of all gang members, there are 225 Asian female gang members, up 78% from last year. Other surrounding counties in California and the cities of Philadelphia, PA, Portland, OR, and Fairfax County, VA, have seen similar trends with the rise of Asian youth gangs. For this study, more than 700 gang members were interviewed in the streets, jails, and juvenile halls in California, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. This study identified ten distinct manifestations of gang violence and eight ethnic differences and similarities among Asian gangs (i.e., definite cultural differences between Asian gangs and various other ethnic gangs; drugs; weaponry; killing over turf/territory; extortion; defacing property/graffiti; women in gangs).

This study found ethnic characteristics of the Asian street gang are different from other ethnic street gang (African American or Latino). The primary motivation of the Asian gang is monetary profit. Asian gangs tend to be extremely violent, prey on their own culture, and are extremely mobile, meaning that they move from one geographic area to another to commit crimes or evade law enforcement. What makes this study unique is that this study has identified and categorized Asian gangs as either “traditional” or “non-traditional” in their motivations and crimes that they commit.

One group of Asian gangs is the “Pacific Islander” gangs. The Pacific Islanders are a category comprised of Filipinos, Samoans, and Chamorros, who will often follow the “traditional” patterns of gang behavior. In essence, they are “traditional” in the sense that they model themselves from the Latino and African American gangs.

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### Asian Gangs, Gang Enhancement Laws, Youth Violence