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Anatomy of a Gang Suppression Unit: The Social Construction of an Organizational Response to Gang Problems

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ANATOMY OF A GANG SUPPRESSION UNIT:
The Social Construction of an Organizational Response to
Gang Problems

by

Carol A. Erickson
Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 1995

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

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1997

This thesis, submitted by Carol A. Erickson in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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To my family and Jason Archbold

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the institutional response of a mid-sized, Midwestern police department, to a perceived growing problem with youth gang activity. More specifically, this thesis analyzes both individual and organizational level variables which provide justification for the creation and existence of a Gang Suppression Unit. The evolution of the Gang Suppression Unit is traced from both formal and informal constructions of a gang problem, from the perspective of the police.

Data collection consisted of 250 hours of participant observation with both uniformed patrol officers and members of the Gang Suppression Unit, from the Cedar Springs Police Department, as well as official memos, records and newspaper articles, to illustrate an historical overview of how the Gang Suppression Unit emerged.

CHAPTER ONE

STREET GANGS AND THE POLICE RESPONSE

Responding to youth gang problems has become routine to many law enforcement agencies in cities across the country. Youth gangs and gang activity have been reported in almost all 50 states by law enforcement and media reports (Spergel, Curry, Chance, Kane, Ross, Alexander, Simmons, and Oh, 1990b). Law enforcement officials in large cities, such as Los Angeles and Chicago, have implemented gang intervention strategies, community policing, and suppression units to combat the youth gang problem in their cities. The effectiveness of these gang programs, although limited by tight budgets and understaffed police departments (Spergel, 1995; Jackson and McBride, 1996), are still utilized in many law enforcement agencies throughout the United States.

Today, youth gangs are no longer a social problem exclusive to large cities. Mid-sized, and even small, rural towns are reported to serve as hosts to the growing problem of youth gangs (Barber, 1993; Beyer, 1994; Quinn and Downs, 1993; Spergel, Chance, and Curry, 1990c; Zevitz and Takata,

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1992). The shift of youth gangs from large cities to mid-sized or small cities is a result of displaced urban populations, high unemployment (Owens and Wells, 1993), and other social problems, such as poverty, social isolation (Spergel et al., 1990b), and drug trafficking (Quinn and Downs, 1993; Beyer, 1994; Spergel, 1995).

Research that focuses on mid-sized and small town youth gangs has been sparse, and there is even less literature available for developing law enforcement responses to youth gang programs tailored specifically for mid-sized or small cities. The research that has addressed youth gangs in mid-sized or small cities has been based on, or has been interpreted by, the conditions or indicators of youth gangs in large cities (Maxson, Klein, and Gordon, 1987a; Rosenbaum and Grant, 1983). In the absence of research on youth gangs in mid-sized or small cities, identification of youth gangs drawing on urban indicators can be difficult. Such indicators may not always be applicable to smaller cities (Beyer, 1994; Huff, 1990; Tindle, 1996).

The Youth Gang

Conducting research on youth gangs is also difficult due to the fact that there are so many definitions of what

constitutes a gang. Klein (1995) defines youth gangs as groups whose members meet together with some regularity on the basis of group-defined criteria of membership and group-determined organizational structure with some sense of territoriality. Other definitions of youth gangs place an emphasis on violent behaviors (Sanders, 1994; Jackson and McBride, 1996) and criminal activity (NDIC, 1995; Spergel, Curry, Chance, Kane, Ross, Alexander, Simmons, and Oh, 1994; Conly, Kelly, Mahanna, and Warner, 1993). Spergel (1995) notes that definitions of youth gangs have varied over time according to the perception and interests of the person defining gangs, and the changing social reality of youth gangs.

These varied definitions of youth gangs across communities can lead to difficulty for the police when dealing with youth gangs (Spergel et al., 1994). Strategies for dealing with youth gangs fall into five groups:

(1) Suppression - including prevention, arrest, surveillance, and imprisonment.

(2) Organizational Development - including special police units and special youth agency crisis programs.

(3) <u>Community Mobilization</u> - including improved communication and joint policy and program development among justice, community-based, and grassroots organizations.

(4) <u>Social Opportunities</u> - including the provision of basic and remedial education, training, work incentives, and jobs.

(5) <u>Social Intervention</u> - including crisis intervention, treatment for youths and their families, outreach, and referrals to social services (Spergel et al., 1994, p. 2).

Spergel and Curry (1990a) identify suppression as the most common strategy used in combatting youth gang problems across the country. Several factors play a role in this dominance of suppression (Spergel et al., 1994, p. 7) including: the decline of local community and youth outreach efforts; the insufficiency of opportunity provision approaches to target or modify gang structures; the changing structure of a labor market that can no longer adequately absorb unskilled and poorly educated older youth gang members; and the increased criminality and sophistication of youth gangs.

The majority of research conducted on youth gangs has been in urban areas, as well as research and evaluation of responses to youth gangs by law enforcement agencies (Jackson, 1992; Sanders, 1994; Walker and Schmidt, 1996; Spergel, 1995; Beyer, 1994). Most of the studies focus on

the formation, purpose, and effectiveness of gang

suppression techniques used in larger cities.

Formation of Gang Suppression Units

Implementing a gang suppression unit has been reported

by numerous law enforcement agencies in large cities across

the country. Gang suppression according to Spergel (1995)

includes activities such as street sweeps, saturation

policing, selective enforcement, identification cards in

schools, and physical barriers (gates, fences or guards).

The life span of a gang suppression unit (after it has been

implemented) can vary according to the size of the city, as

well as the severity of youth gang problems. The

determination of the severity of a youth gang problem is

generally based on the judgements and perceptions of gang

control and youth personnel (Jackson, 1992).

Purpose of Gang Suppression Units

The main goal of gang suppression is to repress or do

away with current and future youth gangs and gang activities

within a community. Sanders (1994) notes that the primary

proactive strategy of the gang suppression unit is

intelligence-gathering which includes the identification of

gang members, making contact with gang members, and

acquiring informants. Intelligence gathering produces gang

identifiers, and allows further identification of youth gang members by gang suppression units. Among these gang indicators are gang colors, style of dress, gang hand signals or hand shakes, gang affiliation by word-of-mouth or by police informants (Jackson and McBride, 1996; Evenrud, 1991).

Gang suppression units can be viewed many different ways by law enforcement officials. The views or meanings that law enforcement officials place on gang suppression can influence the manner in which a gang suppression unit functions. The "lock-em-up" (Spergel, 1995) approach that some gang suppression units take seems to be the key action of police departments in larger cities that acknowledge a youth gang problem. This approach focuses on the apprehension and punishment of individuals and groups engaging in crimes (Spergel, 1995, p. 189).

The suppression approach to dealing with youth gangs can also be based upon a "war model" exemplified in several large cities (especially in California) where gang problems plague the community (Spergel, 1995). The "war model" has also been used for drug/narcotics control, drunk drivers, and poverty. The gang suppression unit can also become an object of a moral crusade and a military campaign (Spergel,

1995). In this version, members of a gang suppression unit view the battle against youth gangs as "good versus evil."

Effectiveness of Gang Suppression Units

Sanders (1994) as well as Spergel (1994) state that the success of gang suppression units cannot be easily measured because recorded gang activity fluctuates up and down independent of police efforts. Gang suppression success depends upon the police department's definition of gangs and gang activity, as well as applying gang suppression to the appropriate level of severity of gang existence within a community.

Spergel (1994) also suggests that cities with chronic gang problems (such as Chicago or Los Angeles) should implement multiple strategies including social intervention and suppression, with an emphasis on social opportunities and community mobilization (p. 20). Cities with emerging gang problems should use early intervention programs that are directed toward social education and social control of gang youth (p. 21). Early signs of youth gangs and gang activities should be dealt with by educators, in conjunction with law enforcement officials and juvenile detention workers.

Implementing a gang suppression unit in a community does not guarantee that gangs will completely disappear. Many cities, regardless of the size, are still trying to determine if they have a gang problem and if so, to define the extent of the problem. Identifying and then deciding how to deal with the problem are steps that can delay the response to youth gang problems. Moreover, following the national gang trend is no longer a feasible way of identifying and deterring gang activity because gangs constantly change in structure and in geographic location.

References made to the shift of youth gangs from urban to rural areas do not fully address the response or suppression techniques used in rural areas (Tindle, 1996; Zevitz and Takata, 1992; Quinn and Downs, 1993; Spergel et al., 1990d). There is little known about youth gangs in small or mid-sized cities, and even less is known about the differences between small or mid-sized city gangs compared to big city gangs (Zevitz and Takata, 1992). Most research conducted on youth gangs and gang activity, whether in large urban areas or in rural environments, has focused on gang indicators and suppression techniques adopted from larger cities.

The influence and roles of metropolitan gangs on the
formation of gangs in small cities has been addressed by
Zevitz and Takata (1992). They state that where urban gangs
influence youth gangs in smaller cities through diffusion,
intervention strategies need to be created to combat small
city gangs. This conclusion was based on their study of
gangs in Kenosha, Wisconsin, a city of 77,685 people located
between Chicago, Illinois, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

By using interviews, police and social service records,
and newspaper articles, Zevitz and Takata (1992) concluded
that metropolitan gang diffusion was not the cause of
emerging gang problems in Kenosha, Wisconsin. The gangs
that formed in Kenosha were a result of loosely organized
cliques of age-graded neighborhood adolescents (Zevitz and
Takata, 1992, p. 104). Media sensationalism and the
development of gang suppression unit in Kenosha added to the
belief that youth gangs were a result of diffusing
metropolitan gangs. Also, the police perception of gang
activity in Kenosha resulted in further marginalization of
non-gang related youth groups, as well as minority groups
present in the community (Zevitz and Takata, 1992).

Quinn and Downs (1993) studying the organization and
activities of gangs in small cities analyzed the severity of

the gang problem through noncriminal predictors". The study focused on noncriminal correlates of gang organizational complexity, as well as determinants used by police to estimate the severity of gang problems at a local level in a small jurisdiction (Quinn and Downs, 1993).

They conclude that as gangs grow larger, their level of organizational sophistication increases, and that gang size and organizational level are strong influences on the police perceptions of the severity of gang problems (Quinn and Downs, 1993, p. 221). Quinn and Downs (1993) laid the groundwork for further research on the link between police perceptions and the structural traits of youth gangs in small cities. One factor mentioned in the study was the media attention given to police perceptions of gang problems and how that attention could possibly attract youths to join gangs.

A concern for emerging gang problems in small cities can result when the adoption of "gang fashions" are evident within a community. Gang fashions served as visible indicators to the police and the media that gangs are present in the community. Tindle (1996) discusses the attention drawn to gangs in small cities by the local media

based on his study of Evansville, Indiana (population

127,000).

> The rise and fall of Evansville's gang problem provides
> an example of how the media and primary claimsmakers
> affect the community's perception of youth gangs
> emerging in the community. (Tindle, 1996, p. 15)

Tindle (1996) concludes that the media heavily

influences the community's perception of the severity of

gang activity, by sensationalizing and glamorizing the

presence of "gangster" influenced fashions worn by gang and

non-gang related youth groups. After some time, the media

could no longer produce any evidence that validated the

existence of gangs or gang activity in the town of

Evansville, and the topic eventually disappeared from the

news.

Although a few studies have been conducted on youth

gangs in small or even mid-sized cities, the issue of

responding to the gangs has not been a significant part of

this discussion. If youth gangs are beginning to emerge in

mid-sized or small cities, law enforcement officials need to

understand the dynamics of youth gangs in order to

effectively deal with them. Research conducted on the use

of gang indicators and suppression techniques in mid-sized

or small cities is almost nonexistent. The small amount of

research that does address this issue states that gang

indicators and techniques from urban areas are not always
applicable to mid-sized or small cities (Maxson et al.,
1987b; Beyer, 1994; Owens, 1993).

Owens (1993) states that the growing influence of the
illegal drug trade has broadened the boundaries of
traditional territories of urban street gangs. Factors that
influence children to join youth gangs (such as structure,
peer pressure, defined rules, and a sense of belonging) are
also discussed by Owens. Traditional techniques used to
deal with youth gangs in large cities (such as the formation
of a special gang unit) can be difficult for police
departments in mid-sized and small cities for two reasons:

(1) Smaller police departments lack the staff
resources needed for the formation of special
units.

(2) After the gang unit is formed the gang problem
becomes a problem exclusive to the gang unit.
Other police officers feel that they are no longer
needed to solve the problem.

Although Owens (1993) addresses the use of gang
suppression in mid-sized or small cities he does not discuss
specific indicators used by the gang suppression unit to
identify youth gangs. The effectiveness of using
suppression techniques in mid-sized or small cities is also
not included. Therefore, Owens contributes to an

understanding of the police response but not of police effectiveness.

In 1987, Maxson and Klein conducted a study to determine if the ability to discriminate between gang-designated and non-gang-designated cases in large jurisdictions can be replicated in a smaller setting, and also if a smaller jurisdiction's gang intervention efforts has an effect on outcomes of gang case clearance rates and prosecutorial charge rates (p. 2.). They discovered that cultural indicators of gang cases found in large cities (such as Los Angeles) are not found in smaller cities. This would make the training of officers in smaller cities difficult because they cannot be taught to identify non-existent discriminators. Maxson and Klein (1987a) conclude that if gang units cannot make a difference in smaller cities, there is little reason to believe that specialized gang training for patrol officers can yield much of practical value to their departments (p. 37).

Maxson and Klein (1987a) warn that gang indicators from large cities cannot be generalized to areas or cities that are mid-sized or small. However, they do not suggest possible outcomes of using urban gang indicators in mid-sized or small cities, or possible options for gang

suppression in small cities. Knowing that the application
of urban gang indicators is not suggested, an alternative
way to deal with youth gangs needs to be created for police
departments in mid-sized or small cities.

Spergel (1995) states that the effectiveness of gang
suppression units in either large or small cities has not
yet been determined. Police departments mistakenly
implement gang suppression units in communities that are not
plagued with youth gang problems. But police officials
typically believe that if they "nip the problem in the bud"
with gang suppression, they can stabilize the problem before
it gets worse (Spergel, 1995). Dealing with the gang
problem in highly specialized terms in a smaller community
where the problem is not yet crystallized has not in fact
been demonstrated to be an efficient police strategy (Maxson
et al., 1987a, pp. 37-38). Spergel (1995) concluded that it
may be possible to identify gang members in small cities in
terms somewhat comparable to those in larger cities, but
there is little reason to believe that implementation of a
gang unit will make a practical difference in the community
(p. 199).

Beyers (1994) notes that gang suppression techniques
have been created and implemented in large cities, but have

not yet been tailored for small or rural communities with emerging gang problems. Gang diversity and naive police departments are two factors that Beyers states are responsible for policing problems when dealing with gang problems in small communities (p. 2). The study blames migration for the invasion of youth gangs in rural areas. Smaller cities are considered to be a safe haven for gangs and gang activities (such as drug trafficking) because police typically view those problems as occurring in large cities. Beyers (1994) states that, "due to fragmented data collection and lack of analysis, no concerted and centralized effort has been made to determine the extent of migratory gang activity in the area" (p. 10). In order to deal with youth gangs effectively in rural areas, identification of gang indicators (such as gang names and affiliations) and migratory patterns or movements need to be discovered in rural settings (Beyer, 1994).

All of the literature that discusses youth gangs in small or mid-sized cities addresses issues such as: using suppression techniques and youth gang indicators adopted from large cities in small cities, the migration of youth gangs from large cities to mid-sized or small cities, and the influence that "gangster fashions" have on the police

and the media's perception of youth gang existence. The
literature does not address how urban gang indicators and
suppression techniques implemented in mid-sized cities
affects the police perception of youth gang existence, or
the results of using urban gang suppression techniques and
indicators in mid-sized or small cities where gang
indicators are not present.

This thesis focuses on the construction and response of
the Cedar Springs[1] Police Department, (located in a town of
50,000), to a youth "gang problem." The study does not
examine the actual existence or severity of youth gangs in
the community, but rather, it focuses on the process in
which youth gangs became defined as a problem in the
community from the police perspective. Based on gang
indicators drawn from urban cities, a youth gang problem was
said to exist by Cedar Springs law enforcement officials.
In response to this perceived gang problem, a Gang
Suppression Unit (GSU) was created.

By using data collected from 250 hours of participant
observation, unstructured interviews while in the field,
official records, memos and newspaper articles, this study

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[1]Cedar Springs, Brooks, Falton, Marshall, and Millbank are

also examines the evolution of this Gang Suppression Unit, and how individual and organizational level variables were used to justify its existence from a social constructionist perspective. Moreover, this case study illustrates the dissonance that is caused when urban gang indicators are discovered not to be present in the community, as well as the justifications given by gang suppression unit members to justify their groups existence.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

One interpretation of emergent gang definitions, and the one analyzed in this study, is grounded in social constructionism. The social constructionist perspective views social problems as an emergent process by which putative conditions are created and defined by individuals or groups in society. The main focus of this perspective is on the definition of the problem from the participant's point of view and the process by which the problem is constructed.

Social construction emphasizes the subjective nature of social problems. A social problem is defined and shaped through a process that attracts public attention and is only said to exist when someone is successful in labeling it so. Constructionists do not assume that a social problem is an objective condition that exists independent of subjective interpretation (Blumer, 1971). Social problems exist only

when someone or some group has been successful in labeling or describing it as so.

Constructionists argue that the focus of sociological study should be on the process in which a putative condition becomes a social problem, not whether the social problem actually exists (Spector and Kitsuse, 1987). Social constructionists examine how and where claims originate, the individuals or groups (claimsmakers) making the claims, and the problem defined by the claimsmakers (Best, 1989). The actual existence of a social problem is irrelevant as this perspective is concerned with the process by which the putative condition becomes defined as a social problem. Constructionists, therefore, treat social constructs as having an independent and subjective existence.

Critics of social constructionism argue that "definitions of social problems are important but there is a reality behind them that is paramount. There is an objective reality to social problems" (Eitzen, 1984, p.10). Constructionists acknowledge that an actual condition may exist, but that it is not necessary nor sufficient. This is why they focus their attention on the process in which the condition becomes a social problem. Thus, Spector and Kitsuse (1987) argue that constructionists are advocates of

a theory of claimsmaking rather than a theory of existing conditions.

Another criticism of social construction is that constructionists have a difficult time keeping their own definitions separate from those made by claimsmakers. This can be avoided by researchers if they only make references to the condition through the claimsmakers' point of view (Schneider, 1985). Just because someone claims that a social problem exists does not necessarily mean that their perceptions are accurate. Nor does it mean that the claim is not motivated by political goals. That is why the constructionist focuses specifically on the process by which a social condition becomes a social problem.

The amount of attention drawn to social problems by claimsmakers is determined by their perception of the severity of the social problem. The claimsmaker first determines the severity of the social condition and then decides how much attention it should receive. Some claimsmakers have personal stakes in drawing public attention to a social condition, which can also affect the amount of attention drawn to the condition (Best 1995).

Social construction provides an interpretive framework for analyzing an emergent social problem because the process

by which a putative condition becomes a social problem can reveal how the problem was defined, who defined the problem, and why it should be brought to public attention. Social constructionism helps explain why some groups are more advantaged than others.

Youth gangs provide an interesting case study from the constructionist perspective. The youth gang phenomenon is brought to public attention by claimsmakers like the media, authority figures like the mayor or the police. When a tragic event like murder occurs, a reason or cause of the event is sought by police, the media, and the public. After the reason or cause is determined by the police, they depend on the media to inform the public about the events that occurred. The media attention facilitates and perpetuates the process through which the social problem is constructed.

Through typification, a claimsmaker, who is usually a person or group with power, prestige, or charisma, characterizes or categorizes a social problem. Typically they do this through the use of examples to help others understand the social problem (Best, 1995). They might, for example, focus on the presence of gang indicators like clothing or gang-related events in the community. Identification of specific characteristics particular to a

social problem gives validation or justification to claims that the social problem exists.

After the social problem is brought to the public's attention, several factors (including the media and validation of the social problem by authority figures) facilitate the construction of the social problem. Surette (1992), states that it is important to understand the role of the media (society's primary information system) and the criminal justice system (the media's primary system for legitimizing values and enforcing norms) in the social construction of crime. People rely upon what they see in the media, as well as what they are told by the police. A tragic event such as murder that draws attention to social problems, like youth gangs is usually passed on to the public through the media, and validated by law enforcement officials.

The police are the primary source of defining crime and its control to the public through the media (Barak, 1994). The police decide what constitutes a crime, when a law is or is not enforced, and who is most likely to commit a crime. The police depend on the media to "sell the police" to the public (Barak, 1994). The media has control over how

information is relayed to the public, and what information
is important enough to be relayed to the public.

The media is sometimes used by the police to accomplish
desired goals of law enforcement either individually or as a
group. Positive or negative coverage by the media affects
public opinion of the police and their function. Barak
(1994) illustrates the process and the factors that
influence how crime is constructed through the efforts of
the criminal justice system and the media in Figure 1.1.
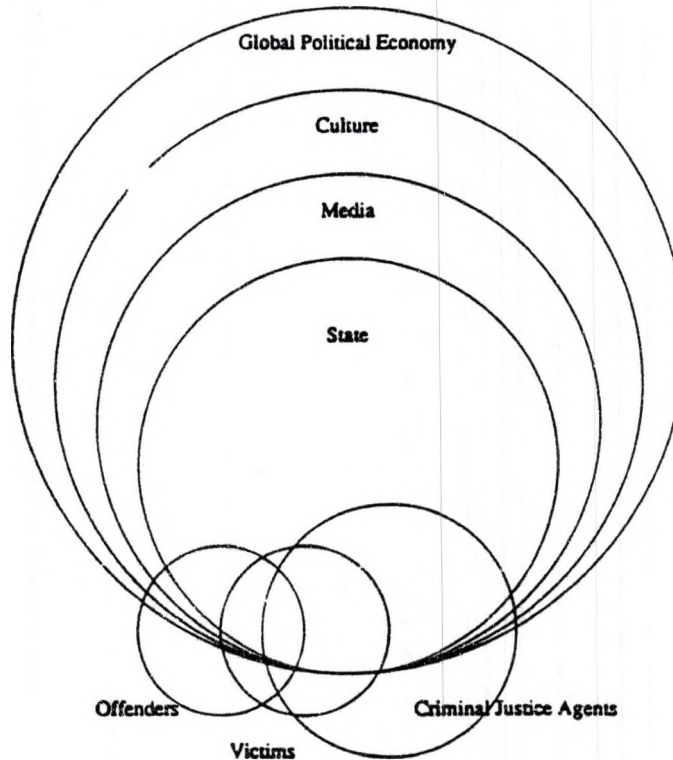
FIGURE 1
Media. Process, and the Perception of Crime

Note. from Media, Process, and the Social Construction of
Crime: Studies in Newsmaking Criminology. (p. 7), G. Barak,
1994, New York, NY: Garland Publishing Inc.

If the police project concern about a specific social problem such as youth gangs through the media, the public will use that concern when they draw conclusions about that social problem for themselves. The police are contacted more than any other agency when gang violence is thought to occur (Sanders, 1994). They are contacted by citizens who are directly or indirectly connected with gangs or gang violence and by medical institutions. The frequent contact between the police and gangs legitimates law enforcement officials' definitions of the existence and severity of gang problems to the public through the media.

Identification of a social problem by a claimsmaker is usually followed by organizational change. This change occurs in a five step process (Robbins, 1987, p. 308): (1) Change is initiated by certain forces; (2) the forces are acted upon in the organization by a change agent; (3) the change agent chooses the intervention action; (4) the intervention strategy is implemented (what and how things are done); (5) change occurs and is judged as either effective or ineffective.

Organizational change in the Cedar Springs Police Department was observed to follow this process:

(1) Change was initiated by forces including: the creation of a Youth Task Force, the media, and a murder in Brooks.

(2) Forces were acted upon by a few law enforcement officials within the police department.

(3) Law enforcement officials chose gang suppression as the intervention action. Law enforcement officials chose gang suppression to repress or do away with perceived youth gang problems.

(4) A gang suppression unit (GSU) was created and activated by law enforcement officials at the end of May 1996.

(5) Change usually occurs and is judged as either effective or ineffective. In the case of the Cedar Springs GSU, the effectiveness has not yet been evaluated and cannot be determined.

Organizational change is addressed at two levels in this thesis: (1) the police department, and (2) the local government. Law enforcement officials are change agents that serve as one of the forces which initiates change and which also decides on the intervention strategy used to regulate a situation or problem (Robbins, 1987). Change agents usually incorporate their interests in the resolution of a problem (Best, 1995).

To enact their intervention strategy, change agents will sometimes use education and communication to reduce resistance to change (Robbins, 1987). The GSU officers planned to visit local middle and high schools to talk to students about gangs and gang violence. By addressing this

problem in the classroom, the GSU officers hoped to reduce the likelihood of resistance to change, such as preventing the students from joining youth gangs.

By using media attention to highlight a social problem such as youth gangs in a community the police are able to reduce public resistance to change under the existing conditions. The difficulty is that people view the main function of the police as "to protect and serve" the public. Since the police are relied upon so heavily by the public for protection, they tend to take whatever the police say very seriously. Therefore, if law enforcement officials claim that a social problem, like youth gangs exist, the public tends to believe the pronouncement.

The media also play a role in the perceived effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the intervention strategy chosen by the change agent. In Cedar Springs, the media helped shape perceptions of the severity and existence of youth gangs, but did not address the effectiveness of the gang suppression unit. The GSU was never put in the spotlight of the media and was never critiqued by the media. The GSU was not brought to the public's attention as was the existence of youth gangs in the community.

This study focuses on the use of urban gang indicators and suppression techniques in a mid-sized, Midwestern, city as an example of how urban indicators and techniques are ineffective in small or mid-sized cities. As noted by Maxson et al (1987a), the use of urban gang indicators in mid-sized or small cities is not appropriate because the dynamics of youth gangs in small cities is not yet understood.

In the next chapter I discuss the methods used to collect data for this thesis: participant observation, unstructured interviews while in the field, and official records, memos, and newspaper articles. Selecting the research site, gathering the data, and analysis of the data are also discussed.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

This study is based on the triangulation of data drawn
from participant observation with uniformed patrol officers
and Gang Suppression Unit (GSU) members, unstructured
interviews with patrol officers and Gang Suppression Unit
members while in the field, and official records, memos, and
newspaper articles which trace the evolution of the Cedar
Springs Gang Suppression Unit.

Over 250 hours of participant observation were
conducted between June 1996 and October 1996. Ride-alongs
were made with 29 of 34 officers assigned to uniformed
patrol, 11 of 12 patrol officers in their functions as GSU
members, and both of the GSU supervisors, all of whom
voluntarily agreed to participate in this study. Patrol
officers were observed from all three shifts (day,
afternoon, and evening). All but one of the patrol officers
is male. I also observed GSU members while they conducted
surveillance in unmarked vehicles and in a surveillance
house. Observation shifts with patrol officers and Gang

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Suppression Unit members ranged in length from two to ten hours in the field.

Field notes recorded inside the patrol car were written on standard notebook paper. Observations that took place outside of the patrol car were recorded on 3 X 5" memo pad that I carried in my pocket, enabling me to take notes during calls without drawing undue attention to the fact that I was an observer.

My field notes contained thick descriptions of any calls the police officers responded to, conversations I had with the officers, conversations between the officers, the settings, the time, and reactions by anyone (including officers, citizens, and myself) observed while in the field. Gertz (1979) describes thick descriptions as "a rich, detailed description of specifics that capture the sense of what occurred and the drama of the events. Events are placed in a context so that the reader can infer cultural meaning" (p. 334). Detailed personal reactions and analytical notes (in the form of mental and jotted notes) were filled into the full set of field notes the next day when I typed the notes up at home.

Individual and organizational perceptions of gang activity and gang indicators in the community, as well as

general questions about police work, were discussed through
unstructured interviews with both patrol officers and GSU
members. In conversations with uniformed officers who were
not members of the GSU, individual perceptions of the
existence and severity of gang activity in the community
were discussed. GSU members were asked to discuss the
specific indicators that they used to identify gang members,
origins of the gangs, and the goals and activities of the
GSU.

Official documents, including memos, minutes from Youth
Task Force meetings, and local newspaper articles created an
historical overview of how and why the GSU emerged, as well
as the goals and functions of the GSU as a formal group.
The formal functions of the GSU were stated within the
context of gang suppression documents collected by GSU
supervisors from the 1996 Midwest Gang Investigators
Seminar, held in St. Paul, Minnesota, by criminal justice
professionals (Youth Task Force Report, 1996) and also other
gang-related material collected from other police
departments. Each GSU member was given a three-inch binder
of information collected by supervisors at conferences and
this information was used as a major component of the GSU
training.

Selecting a Site

I chose the Cedar Springs Police Department for the site of this study because the issue of youth gangs in the community had become a frequent topic in the local newspaper, on local radio talk shows, and throughout the community. As Neuman (1994) notes that beginning field researchers should choose an unfamiliar setting. It is easier to see cultural events and social relations in a new site. Prior to the research, I had no formal or informal contact with the Cedar Springs Police Department or any other police department. Therefore, the police department and the procedures used by the police officers that were observed in the field were unfamiliar to me.

Gaining Entry

After learning of my interest in studying the police response to gang activity, a fellow graduate student gave me the name and telephone number of a sergeant from the police department that he had met in a class. My colleague said that he had mentioned my research ideas to the sergeant and that the sergeant suggested that I contact him to get the study "off the ground." Beck (1970) has defined a *gatekeeper* as someone with the formal or informal authority to control access to a site. This sergeant became one of my

gatekeepers and would play a key role in the process of gaining entry into the police department.

After conducting an informal interview with the sergeant I had a specific strategy for gaining entry into the police department. The sergeant told me to call the Chief of Police to set up a time to meet and discuss my ideas for conducting the research. A few days later I called the Chief and explained who I was, what I wanted to do, and why I wanted to do the research. The Chief did not seem to be responsive to the research project. Not willing to give up, I discussed the telephone conversation with a professor that I knew had connections at the police department. The professor contacted the Chief and within five days, I had an appointment set up to discuss my research with the Chief.

When I met with the Chief, it was apparent that the decision to allow me to do the research had already been made. Topics of confidentiality, consent forms, and patrol officer participation were briefly discussed. After the Chief finished reviewing the outline that I had prepared for the meeting, he introduced me to the Operations Captain for the department. The Chief said that the Captain would be my primary source of information at the department and that he

would assist me throughout the course of the study. Lastly, the Chief asked me to provide the department with a final copy of the results of my research.

After the meeting, I went to the Captain's office to sign a form that would release the department of liability for injury and to discuss when I would start the field work. After agreeing upon a starting date, the Captain told me that he would make sure that each shift supervisor and patrol officer knew who I was, what I was doing, and when to expect me. Now that I had gained entry into the police station, I could begin my field research.

Entering the Field

When my study began, the Gang Suppression Unit was in its early stages of development. I began my observations in June 1996, when the GSU had only been "on the streets" four times. The Captain informed me that I was more than welcome to ride with them. I decided to alternate observation shifts between uniformed patrol officers and the GSU to get a full understanding of the police perspective on gangs in Cedar Springs.

Neuman (1994) states that a researcher's self-presentation will influence field relations to some degree, so she/he needs to be aware of it.

> A field researcher needs social skills and personal
> charm to build rapport. Trust, friendly feelings, and
> being well-liked facilitates communication and helps
> the researcher to understand the inner-feelings of
> others. Showing a genuine concern for and interest in
> others, being honest, and sharing feelings are good
> strategies for building rapport.(Neuman, 1994, p. 342)

With the suggestion from the Captain I dressed in regular

"street clothes" (jeans, t-shirt or sweatshirt) so that I

would be comfortable while riding in the patrol car for an

extended period of time.

I asked each officer to sign a consent form before the

observation shift began. The consent form gave an

explanation of the study and the confidentiality that went

along with it. I always encouraged the officers to ask me

any questions they had about the research. I knew that the

first ride-along would be one of several factors that would

influence the success of my research, and the willingness of

the other officers to participate. With that in mind, I

entered the field displaying my genuine interest and concern

for police work, as well as being open and honest with the

officers.

Roles in the Field

Each of the officers knew that I was from the

University and that I was conducting research, but they did

not know my "official" title. The issue of a title was very

important to some of the police officers. Because the police are a paramilitary institution, titles play an important part in understanding the roles of the members in the group, as well as how a person is treated by other members of the group. After a few ride-alongs, I found out that I had been given the title of "sociological researcher" by one of the officers. I was told that the title was to set me apart from the interns because I refused to do any of the filing or paperwork that the officers would offer me. After I was given the title of sociological researcher, I felt that the officers accepted me. As described by P.A. Adler and P. Adler (1994, p. 345),

> the researcher with active membership participates in core activities, which produces high levels of trust and acceptance, but the researcher retains a researcher identity and can periodically withdraw from the field.

I had an active relationship with the police officers. I went on any calls that did not involve weapons. I participated in activities such as tracking (on foot) fleeing passengers of an alcohol-related accident, holding flashlights at the car impound lot, writing up accident stickers for the windows of vehicles involved in an accident, assisting people when they filled out insurance information cards, and entertaining children at the scenes where the officers had to deal with the parent(s). I always

retained my role as a researcher, but I was also willing to help the officers out whenever asked. This facilitated my relationship with the officers and allowed my research to continue.

Sustaining Relations in the Field

After a month in the field, I found myself becoming more comfortable in the role as observer. Lofland and Lofland (1984) described two methods of self-presentation that facilitate getting along in the field (p. 38.):

(1) Absence of threat - in most interview and observation situations, the investigator who is supportive, cordial, interested, non-argumentative, courteous, understanding, and even sympathetic, will receive more information than one who acts in an opposite fashion.

(2) Acceptable incompetence - a naturalistic investigator, by definition, is one who does not understand. The investigator who assumes the role of socially acceptable incompetent is likely to be accepted.

Throughout the course of the study I maintained a relationship with the officers by showing continued interest in policing, avoiding department "politics," and assisting the officers. Since they knew that I did not have a strong background in criminal justice, they might have felt less threatened by my presence in the patrol car. Some of the officers gave me detailed explanations of the procedures and guidelines that they have to follow on the job. Being a

"socially acceptable incompetent" (Lofland and Lofland,
1984) may have reassured the police officers that I was not
critiquing or judging their performance as police officers,
and may have also helped them adjust to having me in the
patrol car.

Factions, trade-offs, closed doors, and insider
understandings are situations that naturalistic
investigators might encounter in the field that could
endanger continued access to rich data (Lofland and Lofland,
1984). Also, remaining neutral in departmental "politics"
was something that was crucial in maintaining relations
while in the field. If officers told me about gossip or
rumors that were present in the department I would change
the topic of conversation or simply not respond to the
comments. Over the course of data collection I only
encountered a few "closed doors." There were three officers
who chose not to participate in the study. Two other patrol
officers wanted to participate in the study, but were unable
to do so due to schedule conflicts and vacation time.

Observing and Collecting Data

"In participant observation studies, you get your prime
sources of data (words and actions) through a combination of
looking, listening, and asking questions" (Lofland and

Lofland, 1984, p. 13). Two rounds of field notes were collected between June 1996 and October 1996. Both sets of field notes contained thick descriptions of all of the calls responded to, conversations with the officers, conversations between the officers, the settings, the times, and reactions by anyone (officers, citizens, and myself) observed while in the field. Neuman (1994) notes that:

> the field researcher does not begin with a set of methods to apply or explicit hypotheses to test. In the beginning, she expects little control over data and little focus. Once she is socialized to the setting, she focuses the inquiry and asserts control over the data (p. 336).

My first set of field notes were collected from early June until early August were very descriptive and general as Neuman suggests they should be. Throughout data collection, a continual analysis was performed on the accumulating field notes. This analysis resulted in the emergence of recurring themes and categories from the field notes, which narrowed the focus of the study. The second round of field notes (from early September 1996 through October 1996) helped clarify the emerging themes and categories present in the first set of field notes.

The field notes that I took while in the patrol car were positioned so that the officers could easily read whatever I was writing down. The "openness" of my field

notes contributed to building and maintaining rapport with the officers. When any of the police officers would ask me what I was writing down, I would explain that I was recording everything that I observed around me. This answer seemed to satisfy their curiosity. Detailed personal reactions and analytical notes (in the form of mental and jotted notes) were filled into the "full" set of field notes the next day when I would type them up at home free from the officers scrutiny.

Leaving the Field

Ragin (1994) noted that when many instances of the same thing are studied, researchers may keep adding instances until the investigation reaches a point of saturation. "Saturation occurs when the researcher stops learning new things about the case, and when recently collected data appears repetitious or redundant with previously collected data" (Ragin, 1994, p. 86). The second round of observations was conducted to clarify the themes and categories that emerged in the first round of observations. The second round of observations produced no new or unique categories. Thus, upon reaching saturation during data collection, I prepared to leave the site. I notified the

officers and shift supervisors one week prior to terminating the observational phase of my work.

Upon completion of field work, letters of appreciation were hand-delivered to the police station. Individual thank-you letters were given to the "gatekeepers" (Chief of Police, Captain, and both supervisors of the GSU) and the Communications Department staff. General letters of appreciation to the police officers and shift supervisors were posted downstairs in the briefing room and upstairs on the community bulletin board. A copy of the general letter to the officers and shift supervisors was read aloud to the patrol officers during briefing of the day, afternoon, and night shifts by the shift supervisors, through the efforts of the Captain.

Analyzing the Data

Data analysis was conducted by the use of the "constant comparative method" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This process involves "unitizing" and "categorizing" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) information units from the text of the field notes. First, information units from the text were grouped by general topics, and then specific rules for inclusion were created. The rules served to justify the inclusion of each information unit categorized into a specific group.

The rules or criteria shaped the internal consistency of each group. I used a one-third rule of inclusion, therefore, the identification of the five categories of responses to the absence of gang indicators is based on a criteria that at least five of the fourteen GSU members (including GSU supervisors) were associated with a type of response. The three categories of possible origins of gangs in Cedar Springs were formed when at least four of the fourteen GSU members (including GSU supervisors) were associated with a response. The criteria for all other categories in the study reflect the responses of at least four of the fourteen GSU members.

After several categories were created, I sorted through each category to make sure that each group abided by the rules or criteria set for that particular group. Some of the "catch-all" or miscellaneous categories were discarded because they did not fit into the criteria set for each category.

Validity and Reliability

In analyzing qualitative data the validity and reliability of the data are often of specific concern. Neuman (1994) states that quality field data are detailed descriptions from the researcher's immersion and authentic

experiences in the social world of the members that they are studying. Moreover, Rudestam and Newton (1992) state that internal and external validity is achieved when sufficient time is spent with the subjects of the study, the researcher withdraws from the field for a short time and then returns to the field to cross check the previously collected data, and by using multiple sources of data (triangulation). My field notes contained thick descriptions of settings, times, conversations and interactions among people present in the field during observation. Therefore, validity and reliability of the data was strengthened.

Field researchers rely and depend on what they are told by the people they study. This makes the credibility of members and their statements part of the reliability of the study (Neuman, 1994). All of my field notes were based upon what I observed and what the police officers and GSU members told me. I cross-checked any information that the police officers and GSU members gave me with records, memos, and information from other police officers to insure its accuracy. Moreover, reliability can be achieved only if coding of the data is consistent so that another person could understand the themes and arrive at similar conclusions if they tried to replicate the study.

Internal consistency is achieved when the pieces of the puzzle fit together and make logical sense (Neuman, 1994). To achieve internal consistency Chapter four is organized in a chronological time line to illustrate the creation and evolution of the Gang Suppression Unit. Direct quotes from the field notes and other records help create a mental image of the conditions or situations that occurred while in the field.

After spending 250 hours with both police officers and GSU members I was able to establish a clear account of their perceptions of gangs and gang activity in Cedar Springs, as well as the nature of police work. After the first round of observations were completed in August 1996, I withdrew from the field for four weeks to continue with analysis. I returned to the field for the second round of field notes from September 1996 through October 1996. My research methods assumed a triangulated approach by conducting unstructured interviews while in the field, using official records, memos, and newspaper articles to trace the history and growth of the GSU, and 250 hours of participant observation.

Limitations and Delimitations

Rudestam and Newton (1992) describe limitations as
restrictions in the study that the researcher has no control
over, while delimitations are limitations on the research
design that the researcher has intentionally (or
unintentionally) inflicted upon the study. For example, I
did not use any mechanical recording devices in the field, a
delimitation because I felt that the police officers might
hesitate to talk to me if they knew that they were being
recorded. While a recording device might have enabled me to
get more richly detailed data, the police officers may have
felt less comfortable and edited their comments more
carefully. Therefore, I intentionally traded a few less
details for an abundance of rich data.

One delimitation of this study is that I specifically
chose to observe only patrol grade officers and members of
the GSU and GSU supervisors. I did not include non-GSU
supervisors in my study because I did not feel that they
were directly related to the subject matter of my study. I
observed the GSU supervisors because they were members of
the GSU and because they were responsible for its creation.
However, I focused most of my attention on the patrol grade

officers because they spend the majority of their shift dealing with people outside of the police department.

There were two police officers from the day shift and one officer from the late shift that chose not to participate in the study for unknown reasons. Two officers from the late shift wanted to participate in the study, but could not. One was excluded because of vacation time, and the other was conducting field training and was not available. Although a limitation, the absence of the unobserved police officers was not likely to affect the results of this study as the criteria for each category had been established and the five missing responses did not affect inclusion rules for each category.

A second limitation of this study is the effect that my gender may have had on the way police officers responded to my presence in the field. Golde (1970) and Warren and Rasmussen (1977) state that women (or men) in the field find some doors open more readily than others. But gender can also determine how many doors are closed. For instance, I noticed that some of the police officers would frequently make disclaimers like, "I don't mean to sound sexist.." or "I shouldn't say this in front of a lady but...." Those disclaimers made me wonder if the police officers felt that

they needed to "sugar-coat" their language due to the fact
that I am a woman or whether they were avoiding potentially
offensive topics.

More potentially problematic was that my gender could
have also been a factor that prohibited me from entering
situations that the officers felt might not be suitable for
a female. For instance, I was instructed by a police
officer to stay in the patrol car upon arriving at a
stabbing scene. The officer knew that the person who
committed the crime was not present at the apartment, but
still insisted that I stay in the patrol car until he came
out to get me. My gender could have affected my access to
some crime scenes, but those observations were neither
directly nor indirectly related to gangs or gang suppression
which is the focus of my study. Liability of the police
department could also have contributed to the hesitancy of
police officers to allow me into certain situations. If I
was asked to stay in the patrol car by an officer, I always
asked that the officer park in a spot that I could still see
what was happening at the scene. They usually fulfilled my
request.

There were, however, other officers who would invite me
to come into crime scenes with them so I could get a better

look at what was going on. For example, when an officer and
I arrived at the scene of an alcohol-related car accident,
we discovered that the passengers of the truck had fled the
scene of the accident. Instead of leaving me in the patrol
car, the officer parked the car and said, "Lets go." For
the next forty-five minutes, I trampled through the trees in
the dark following the officer who had the only flashlight.
I was terrified because I had no idea who or what was hiding
in the trees. But I followed the officer up the side of the
dike and down into the trees by the river. I felt that if I
would have chosen to stay in the patrol car, the officer
might have thought that I was incompetent or weak and that
this would have affected future treatment by officers and my
ability to collect data. As I indicated above not all
patrol officers and GSU members restricted my access to
crime scenes because of my gender.

Summary

I took a triangulated approach to the research methods
in this study to strengthen the research. I used multiple
sources of data, and verified the information given to me by
the officers with records and documents, as well as with
information given by other officers. By conducting
participant observation and unstructured interviews while in

the field, I was able to get detailed insight into the officers perceptions of gangs and gang activity, as well as a "hands-on" experience of police work in general. The result of this triangulated approach was the collection of valid and reliable data sources.

In the next chapter I discuss how the problem of youth gangs was brought to public attention by law enforcement officials and the media, and the creation and evolution of the Cedar Springs Gangs Suppression Unit illustrated through direct quotes from both GSU officers and patrol officers, memos and newspaper articles from the local newspaper. Five categories of responses to the absence of youth gang indicators that emerged from the data are discussed, as well as the need for a GSU in Cedar Springs through the perceptions of both GSU and non-GSU officers.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONSTRUCTING AND RESPONDING TO THE PROBLEM

The putative youth violence problem in Cedar Springs,
which lead to the establishment of a gang suppression unit
in the city police department, can be traced back through
local newspaper articles to 1988. The topic of actual
"gangs" or "gang activity" did not emerge in the local
newspaper, however, until August 12, 1995 in an article
titled, "Gangs in the Shadows." The rise in youth violence
also was becoming a concern statewide, but the distinction
between youth violence and gang violence had not yet been
addressed.

On September 15, 1995, the concern over youth violence
in the state became a value judgement reality. A woman was
murdered in Brooks by a male teenager who was identified as
being associated with a local gang. The Brooks police did
not report the crime as a "gang-related crime;" but rather,
as a crime committed by someone who happened to be a member
of a gang. The Johnson murder not only devastated the

citizens of Brooks, but it also shocked citizens statewide. Two other homicides involving juveniles occurred around the same period in two other cities in the state. These crimes also raised concerns about youth violence but did not rise to the same level of concern and influence in the eventual establishment of the gang suppression unit.

After the Johnson murder, gangs and gang activity became a frequent topic in television and newspaper stories in Cedar Springs, which is located about 80 miles north of Brooks. The Johnson murder in Brooks served as a "troubling event," (Best, 1995) which is a link between a problematic pattern (gang activity) and a larger issue (gang existence in Cedar Springs?) in constructing a social problem. Gangs were said to exist prior to the Brooks murder, but claims of gang violence was something new in the media.

In response to the media attention, on November 16, 1995, the Cedar Springs City Council requested the formation of a Youth Task Force to address the issues of youth and gang violence in the Cedar Springs area. The mayor of Cedar Springs appointed the city's Community Relations Officer as the organizer and planner of the Youth Task Force. The 36 members of the Youth Task Force were chosen on a volunteer basis after a town hall meeting of interested citizens on

November 16, 1995. Youth Task Force members represented

concerned citizens, government agencies, social and human

service agencies, churches, and juvenile detention services.

On January 30, 1996, the Youth Task Force held it's

first meeting at the Cedar Springs Council Chambers to

discuss the Youth Task Force's mission statement, goals and

objectives, and activities. The goals of the Youth Task

Force became defined in its mission statement:

> To suppress and deter gang-type activities and other
> high risk behaviors usually associated with gangs. To
> effectuate these activities by mean of public
> information and education; community service/voluntary
> organization networking; establishment of neighborhood
> policing programs; supporting stiffer consequences;
> identifying and networking community resources;
> identification and securing of funding sources for
> activities, leading to a healthier community.(Youth and
> Gang Task Force Report, May, 1996)

Youth and gang related materials from various parts of

the country were presented by the Youth Task Force planner

and law enforcement officials. The materials focused on

youth and gang programs implemented in major cities around

the United States. Two law enforcement officials, who later

became the Gang Suppression Unit supervisors, presented a

report to the Youth Task Force, showing increases in both

juvenile and gang-related activities in Cedar Springs. The

report supported the need for the Cedar Springs area to

address both youth and gang issues assigned to the Youth
Task Force by the mayor.

On February 15, 1996, the same two law enforcement
officials presented a proposal to the Cedar Springs Chief of
Police, requesting support for implementation of a Gang
Suppression Unit in the city. The proposal consisted of
five varied cost plans for implementing a gang suppression
unit, the intended goals and procedures of the gang
suppression unit, and a list of possible benefits of a gang
suppression unit to the community. The officers stated that
they would take on the responsibility of training and
coordinating the activities of the gang suppression unit.
Gang suppression unit activities would include: gathering
gang intelligence on the street; building a computer system
that would network into surrounding communities (in order to
share gang information); and use Internet access to obtain
information on gang suppression tactics used in other cities
around the country.

Although funding was not yet approved, the Chief of
Police agreed to the proposal, and on February 26, 1996, a
memo that requested volunteers for the GSU was presented to
the patrol grade officers of Cedar Springs by the chief.
The memo stated that, "only officers with a sincere interest

in gang suppression should apply, and should be prepared to begin assignment when and if funding is approved by city hall." The deadline for assignment was listed as March 18, 1996. Twelve patrol grade officers responded to the request and all twelve officers were granted assignment.

At the same time, the GSU supervisors were requesting funding for themselves through the Youth Task Force to attend the annual Midwest Gang Investigators seminar scheduled for April 22-24, 1996. By attending the seminar the GSU supervisors would gain knowledge in gang suppression tactics, networking with surrounding law enforcement officials to share knowledge and intelligence on youth gang activity, and dealing with gangs in the Midwest. These supervisors also requested funding for two additional gang training workshops in nearby cities for the twelve GSU members. Funding for the Midwest Gang Investigators seminar was granted as was additional funding for Gang Suppression Unit members to attend gang training workshops in nearby cities.

On April 30, 1996, a statement of goals, solutions, and proposed budget was presented to the Youth Task Force from its Enforcement and Consequences Subcommittee. The Enforcement and Consequences Subcommittee consisted of 10

Youth Task Force members which also included both GSU

supervisors.   Three main goals were stated in the memo:

(1)   Better assessment of the youth/gang problem, and
      intervention programs related to youth/gang
      activities.   Conduct research and a feasibility
      study to organize a Police Youth Bureau. (Cost
      $5,000)

(2)   Gather intelligence on gang activity in the Cedar
      Springs area.   Suppress any gang activity that
      emerges, and prevent it from spreading.   Formation
      of a gang suppression unit is a solution. (Cost
      $20,000 for six months out of a year)

(3)   Better coordination between the Youth Task Force
      and the Mayor's office.   An individual would be
      hired full-time for grant writing and research
      purposes. (Cost $35,000 salary, and $15,000 annual
      budget).

The subcommittee recommended that the Youth Task Force

work to strengthen curfew ordinances and consequences of

youth and gang activity in Cedar Springs.   The subcommittee

also suggested that research into other curfew ordinances

across the country would be helpful in deciding what type of

proposal would be appropriate for the Cedar Springs

community. (Youth and Gang Violence Task Force Report, May

1996).

Official response to the "gang problem" began with the

approval of funding for the GSU in the middle of May, 1996,

by the Finance Committee of the City of Cedar Springs.   All

twelve of the officers that signed up to become members of the GSU were allowed membership in the unit.

The GSU Officers

Members of the Gang Suppression Unit generally had two reasons why they chose to participate in the Gang Suppression Unit: (1) it gave them the chance to do "real" police work, and (2) they had a genuine interest or concern of gang activity in Cedar Springs.

"Real" police work was defined differently by GSU members than by other officers. The idea of police work being "action-packed" or "exciting" was common among GSU members. Police work was described several ways. A GSU officer and I discussed some of the things that he liked the best about his job. He said that, he likes "exciting calls." I asked him what he meant by an exciting call. He said, "you know, shootings, homicides, suicides, car chases, those kind of things that get your adrenaline pumping" (Field notes, September 12, 1996).

I asked another GSU officers what drew him to this profession. He said that he, "did not like the idea of a boring desk job or something like that." He said that he couldn't sit behind a desk all day. He said that he is a real "action junkie", and that this job gives him enough

action to deal with sometimes. "The nastier the call, the better off I am." He then said that he would not want to work the day shift because they do not do real police work. I asked him what he meant by that, and he said, "you know.... the action that I have been talking about." He said that, "bar brawls, and DUI's are things that cops should do. There is a place for the other kind of work too, but I am really happy where I am at right now" (Field notes, September 26, 1996).

Another GSU officer said that the variety and the challenges that every day brings keeps things exciting for him. He said that, "police work gives you an insight on humanity and what it is all about. You see the good and the bad in people" (Field notes, October 1, 1996).

One GSU officer stated that he likes situations where he needs to make quick decisions. He said that he,

> likes being in control of situations. He said that, taking charge comes natural to police officers, and most people would not be able to cope with the situation. It could be traumatic for people. (Field notes, October 3, 1996)

The interpretations of police work by many GSU members could be categorized as a "crime fighter" style of policing. Van Maanen (1996) states that to a patrol officer, "real police work involves the use of certain skills and special

abilities he believes he possesses by virtue of his unique experience and training" (p. 166). Several GSU members who viewed real police work as "exciting" or "action-packed" frequently give examples of their experiences or "war stories" that dealt directly with the GSU or gang suppression. The "war stories" told by the officers seemed to justify the existence of the GSU and the need each officer had for participating in "real police work." The GSU would serve as a link between the "action" oriented police officer and the desire to conduct activities (such as surveillance) that would be viewed as "real police work."

Each time that I was told a "war story" about gangs in Cedar Springs, I found that the officer was usually a GSU member. Only a few of the non-GSU officers shared "war stories," but they were usually stories that they had heard from GSU members. The "war stories" usually entailed activities that would be classified as "exciting" or "action-packed:"

> The first night that the GSU went out we busted four kids with tar heroine in the movie theater parking lot. It was a special showing to celebrate 'Drug Free Week' in town. What a coincidence huh? One of the four kids was from Texas. We ended up confiscating tar heroine, syringes, and marijuana from the car. I asked the officer if any of the kids were affiliated with a gang.

He said, two of the kids may have been, but I do not know for sure. Most of the kids will not admit their affiliation anymore, but they will tell us about their rival gang members. (Field notes, June 29, 1996)

Another GSU officer asked me if I had heard about the gang-bangers that were beating each other up in the parking lot of the swimming pool two weeks ago. I told him that I had not heard about it and then asked him to tell me what happened. He said that he was called over to the parking lot because someone had seen the kids fighting and reported it. He got there and found two kids that had beat the heck out of each other. When he asked them what had happened, they said that they got in a fight because of a girlfriend, and that they were members of the same gang, the Mafia Gangster Disciples. The officer said that he thought that they were just wannabe gang members. I thanked him for telling me about it and we left the area.(Field notes, August 1, 1996)

Another GSU member stated that,

Last year we had a situation where a young lady was 'beat out' of a local female gang called the Rolling 30's. The female wanted out of the gang, so the other members took her out to the park and beat her severely with large sticks and socks with pool balls in them. The young lady's parents took her to the hospital and then to the Cedar Springs Police Department. In the end, we ended up arresting two of the members for assault and that is how we found out about the female gang. And just recently, we confiscated a 9 millimeter hand gun from a male in the parking lot of a local

restaurant. The kid carrying the gun said that he was carrying it for protection against a rival gang called the Mickey Cobras. The male carrying the gun admitted to having gang affiliation with the Latino Kings gang. (Field notes, June 22, 1996)

Other GSU members stated that they became part of the GSU out of the genuine concern of gangs and gang activity in Cedar Springs. The GSU was viewed as a good deterrent of gang activity in Cedar Springs by GSU members whether they felt gangs were a problem or not. I asked a GSU officer if he thought that there was a gang problem in Cedar Springs. He said,

> there are no gangs in Cedar Springs. There are loosely organized kids in Cedar Springs that have the potential of becoming a gang. The GSU is like a preventative measure that the emergence of gangs will not happen. (Field notes, July 20, 1996)

Other GSU members stated that,

> these gangs are loosely organized, but have the potential to become more dangerous. It seems to be a trend up here in the northern region of the country. If we (the GSU) attack the problem now we can prevent it from getting worse. (Field notes, June 22, 1996)

> The GSU is an off-shoot of the Youth Task Force that was created this past year. Basically, it is our job to let the kids out there know that we have a zero-tolerance to any gang activity, smoking, or drinking that they might think about doing. We feel that this will suppress any gang activity in the future, as well as the activity that is happening now. (Field notes, June 21, 1996)

A few of the GSU members admitted that they were drawn to the GSU because of the overtime and extra hours, but then

added that they were also concerned with and interested in gangs in their community. One GSU member stated that he felt that being part of the GSU helped him in his role as a uniformed patrol officer because he could see which kids were dangerous or possibly armed. Other GSU members stated that they had children and that they did not want their kids to grow up in a community that has gangs and gang activity present.

Profile of the GSU

GSU member's years of service in the police department ranged from five to eleven years. Based on observation, the members of the Cedar Springs GSU fit in the interpretive framework of Neiderhoffer. According to Neiderhoffer (1967), police officers tend to show the greatest amount of cynicism between six to ten years of service in the police department. Members of the GSU looked at the GSU as a way to bring job satisfaction back into their careers. These were the same GSU officers that viewed "real police work" as "action-packed" and "exciting." After six to eleven years of service the cynicism kicks in and the job becomes uneventful to the officer. Neiderhoffer's (1967) study also revealed that college educated patrol grade officers tend to have a higher rate of cynicism. Cedar Springs GSU officers

officer stated that, the training session was very
helpful to the Gang Suppression Unit because it gave
them a sense of direction. (Field notes, July 19,
1996)

Other Gang Suppression Unit members stated that,

we learned in our training that there is no such thing
as a wannabe gang. But there is something called a
peripheral gang. This is a loosely organized group
that has the potential of becoming a threat to other
kids and people in the community. The thought of
acting out gang activity is enough to be concerned
with. (Field notes, June 21, 1996)

we learned about some of the symbols (used in graffiti)
in training sessions we had. These gangs are loosely
organized, but have the potential to become more
dangerous. It seems to be a trend up here in the
northern region of the country. If we attack the
problem now, we can prevent it from getting worse.
(Field notes, June 22, 1996)

Doing Gang Suppression

After receiving their training, the Gang Suppression

Unit began operation at the end of May, 1996. For the first

few weeks of patrol, Gang Suppression Unit members were

unsure of what exactly they were supposed to be doing.

(Field notes, June 8, 1996) But after a few weeks, the

surveillance and log book entries became routine over the

course of an eight-hour shift. The GSU shifts were decided

upon by the GSU supervisors. The shifts ran from 8 p.m.

until 2 a.m. every Friday and Saturday night. Sometimes the

Gang Suppression Unit would go out Sunday nights, or in the

event of community social gatherings (such as street dances,

fireworks displays, or fairs) the Gang Suppression Unit
would sometimes have two unmarked cars on patrol in addition
to regular patrol.

The scheduling for the Gang Suppression Unit was not
always consistent. If no one signed up for a shift, the
Gang Suppression Unit would not go out. Scheduling
conflicts with the patrol officer's regular schedule was a
major reason that Gang Suppression Unit shifts were
sporadic. Since all of the Gang Suppression Unit members
were also full-time patrol officers, there were times when
no officers were available to work GSU.

Over the course of the summer the GSU participated in a
variety of activities. The GSU started with conducting
surveillance while patrolling the streets of Cedar Springs
in an unmarked car. Drawing on gang indicators, GSU members
would record (either verbally into a tape recorder or
written in a memo pad) any contacts made over the course of
the evening that would be transcribed into the official Gang
Suppression Unit log book at a later time. Names, social
security numbers, license plate numbers, and gang
affiliation were some of the items recorded during the Gang
Suppression Unit shifts.

Some of the youth gang indicators that were used by Gang Suppression Unit members included "gangster" attitude, dress/tattoos, hand signals, graffiti, self-reported, and word-of-mouth gang affiliation. The gang indicators used by the Cedar Springs Gang Suppression Unit to identify youth gang members and activity were similar to gang indicators listed in literature used by law enforcement officials in large cities (ex., Evenrud, 1991, Jackson and McBride 1996). These gang indicators aided in the construction of the problem by the Cedar Springs Police Department by illustrating a problem through the use of examples or typification (Best, 1995).

Personal testimony by law enforcement officials describing gang indicators (including style of dress, tattoos, graffiti, and hand signals) further strengthened the construction of the problem as they could be easily identified by GSU members:

> Last year you could go by the colors or clothes they wore, or the fact that they would flash you a 'sign' when you would pass by. (Field notes, June 26, 1996)

> We (the patrol officers) started to see kids dressed in a certain way (like wearing baggy pants, STARTER jackets and certain gang colors) and those same kids could be seen throwing 'signs' around in parking lots downtown. The 'signing' they (gang members)do represents their gang affiliation, and warns other rival gangs of their membership. (Field notes, June 21, 1996)

Last year the gangs started forming and were visible
with their 'flags' and signing in the parking lots, but
now they have stopped making it so obvious. (Field
notes, July 19, 1996)

Other gang indicators used by the Cedar Springs Gang

Suppression Unit, such as "gangster" attitudes, self-

reported gang affiliation, and gang affiliation by other

sources, were not as easily identified by some GSU members,

but were relied upon just ɑ   ɩeavily as the visible gang

indicators. Distinguishing ɑ "wannabe" or non-gang member

from a gang member was easy for some GSU members, but

difficult for others:

It is hard to ID people (gang members). For a while,
gang members would wear colored hankeys (like red,
blue, green, or black) and dress like a gangster. You
know, the baggy pants and shorts, hats, etc... (Field
notes, June 8, 1996)

The 'hard core' gang members have an empty, cold stare,
and seem to act like they don't care if you are the
police. They just don't care who you are. There is no
humanity in their eyes. (Field notes, July 4, 1996)

Most of the gangsters around here dress a certain way,
and they will sometimes brag of their affiliation with
a gang. But now the trend is not saying anything about
affiliation, because it could get you in trouble with
the police. (Field notes, June 28, 1996)

Also of interest is accounts of the origins of gang

problems by Cedar Springs Gang Suppression Unit members.

Three areas of possible origins were identified: (1)

children of migrant workers that moved to the Midwest from

Texas, (2) kids from Marshall (located across the river from Cedar Springs in another state), and (3) a military base located outside of Cedar Springs.

Each of these three areas were described as possible origins of gangs by the Gang Suppression Unit and serve as a source of ethnic and cultural diversity in the Cedar Springs area. A majority of the migrant workers in the area are from Texas, and most are Hispanic. Migrant families that have settled in Marshall, add to the ethnic diversity of the region. The military base brings in many different races/ethnic groups and subcultures from across the country. Whether it was directly stated or implied, race and ethnicity were also indicators of gang affiliation to members of the GSU:

> We have also found that a majority of the gangs cross the river to Cedar Springs from Marshall. They are typically Hispanic, and are usually in the age range of 13-19 years old. (Field notes, June 7, 1996)

> They (gang members) are usually from broken homes, or single parent homes. It also has to do with social status. These are usually kids from lower class homes. But sometimes we will run into the situation where the single parent is working two or three jobs just to get by, and they tend to lose track of their kids. That is why a lot of these kids join these gangs. They want to feel accepted and they want to feel like they belong. A lot of the kids we run into are from Marshall, and are usually Hispanic. (Field notes, June 21, 1996)

When I asked a GSU supervisor where the gang problem stemmed from, he said,

> when I was organizing pictures of the kids that were gang affiliated, and that had been in trouble with the police in the past, the stack of "non-white" kids was much higher than the stack of white kids. (Field notes, June 29, 1996)

Several GSU members (including supervisors) mentioned the Johnson murder in Brooks, as well as the emerging gang problem in Millbank and Falton, when discussing gang activity in Cedar Springs. A comparison was made between the gang problems in Millbank and Falton and the gang activity in Cedar Springs and Marshall. Millbank has a high migrant population, similar to that of Marshall. The Johnson murder was significant as it drew more attention to gang activity in Millbank and Falton, as well as gang activity in Cedar Springs:

> I think that we (Cedar Springs) are similar to Falton. The shooting incident a few months ago in Brooks, could have just as easily happened here. The gangs from Millbank come over to Falton, and that is when the trouble starts. The two communities (Falton and Cedar Springs) are very similar in that sense. (Field notes, June 7, 1996)

> Some of the gangs in Cedar Springs claim to be connected to the gangs in Falton and Millbank. The potential for danger is just as likely here (Cedar Springs), as it is in Falton or Millbank. The Johnson case in Brooks woke a lot of people up, because it could have happened in Cedar Springs just as easy. (Field notes, June 8, 1996)

Other surveillance techniques were used throughout the summer by the GSU in addition to conducting surveillance in an unmarked car. At the end of July, 1996, surveillance was conducted from an empty house located across the street from an area suspected of gang activity and drug dealing. A high powered scope was set up near the front window, and a pair of night vision binoculars were used in surveillance from the house. Hand-held radios were carried with each GSU member into the surveillance house in case any additional back-up was needed. Unmarked cars were parked a few blocks away from the surveillance house, and GSU members would walk down alleys to the back door of the house. Surveillance from the house was difficult because of the high traffic on the street that divided the surveillance house from the targeted house. License plate numbers and details on people's faces or clothing were difficult to see because the scope was not powerful enough.

During the first couple weeks in August 1996, surveillance was also conducted from a surveillance van rented from the state. The van was fully equipped with tinted windows, an audio, television, and radio monitoring system, and a video recording camera. The van was well-equipped, but setting up the equipment was time consuming.

The first night that I rode in the van with the Gang
Suppression Unit they spent forty-five minutes setting up
the camera to the tripod and then attaching the scope to the
camera. It took another hour to get the camera and scope
hooked up to the night scope and to "fine tune" the picture
from the scope onto the television screen (Field notes,
August 2, 1996). The GSU officers said that they had not
been trained to set up the surveillance equipment.

The surveillance van was used to patrol around town
(like the unmarked cars) and it could be parked closer to
houses that were being targeted by the Gang Suppression
Unit. Observing from the van was comfortable for about two
hours, and then it would get unbearably hot and humid. The
uncomfortable conditions made it difficult to stay in the
van for a long period of time. During the times that I rode
with the GSU in the van and watched from the surveillance
house, I did not observe any gang indicators that were
previously described to me by the GSU.

The observation of gang indicators was the objective of
all of the surveillance. And any gang activity or contact
that was seen was recorded into the Gang Suppression Unit
log book. This information was mostly car license plate

numbers and interactions between people that were being
watched by the GSU.

When school resumed at the end of August, the GSU
started patrolling the middle and high school grounds when
school was let out for the day. Between the hours of 3:00
and 5:00 p.m. two GSU members would patrol around the middle
schools and high school grounds recording any activity that
they observed. Gang Suppression Unit members enforced a
zero-tolerance policy on underage drinking, smoking, and
curfew.

If a GSU member spotted someone smoking who appeared to
be underage, they would confiscate the cigarettes, ask the
person if they were in a gang or knew about any gangs, and
then would run their name and social security number through
dispatch. If the person had no prior offenses and they were
not on probation they would be free to go with a verbal
warning. A GSU member said that this activity only lasted a
few weeks because, "the kids figured out who they were and
which cars they were driving" (Field notes, September 19,
1996). The GSU continued surveillance in unmarked cars
until the middle of October, 1996.

Upon asking Gang Suppression Unit members and
supervisors why the Gang Suppression Unit was not going out

anymore, I received several answers. I asked a GSU

member how things were going. He said that, "it sounds like

they are thinking of ending the Gang Suppression Unit for a

while." I asked him why, and he said, "there is not that

much activity because school is back in session" (Field

notes, October 3, 1996).

Another GSU member stated that,

the Gang Suppression Unit is winding down, due to
school starting. He said that, the activity is
winding down too. Summertime gets busier for the gang
activity, and when school starts, they (the gangs) shut
down their operations. (Field notes, October 4, 1996)

I asked a GSU supervisor what the Gang Suppression Unit

has been up to lately. He said that,

the GSU is basically done for right now. They hope to
have funding for the program next year. They are
going to try and get the GSU guys into the grade
schools to give lectures to the kids. But the GSU will
not be out patrolling in the unmarked cars anymore this
year. The sources that we use to find out information
about the local gangs have told us that the gangs are
still around, but are trying to keep things 'hush-hush'
because gangs are getting such a bad wrap after the
murder of the woman in a neighboring town (Brooks).
(Field notes, October 23, 1996)

When I completed my last day of field work on October

25, 1996, the Cedar Springs Gang Suppression Unit was still

an organized group, but was no longer actively involved in

surveillance, patrol, or other gang suppression activities.

Are there Gangs?

In the previous sections the creation and evolution of the Gang Suppression Unit was examined. The Johnson murder in Brooks, as well as the concern of the rise in youth violence statewide, served as justifications to create a Gang Suppression Unit to evaluate the extent of youth and gang problems as it was understood in Cedar Springs. After the GSU was formed and was functioning as an organized unit continued justifications for it's existence were also needed. By using gang indicators learned in training, GSU members were instructed to record any contact or gang activity in the Gang Suppression Unit log book. The presence of gang indicators was an important justification for the claims about the existence of gangs, and the existence and sustaining of the Gang Suppression Unit. However, the reliance on these indicators could also prove to be problematic, and this did, in fact, become the case. The absence of the gang indicators undermined justifications and put the GSU at risk of being disbanded.

In the early days of the GSU, many of the indicators that the GSU relied upon were either not present or could be attributed to non-gang related youths in Cedar Springs. As a consequence, many officers seemed to face a level of

dissonance (Festinger, 1962). When a resolution of the
dissonance was sought by GSU members, five distinct
categories of responses emerged from my observations.

The identification of five distinct categories of
responses to the absence of gang indicators is based on a
criteria that at least five of the 14 Gang Suppression Unit
members (including supervisors), were associated with a type
of response. The dissonance resulting from the absence of
gang indicators were sought to be reduced or eliminated by
GSU members in three ways: (1) behavior and feelings of GSU
members were modified in accordance with new information,
(2) new cognitive elements were added to redefine the
problem, and (3) the social environment was changed
cognitively to reduce dissonance. "In general, if
dissonance exists between two elements, this dissonance can
be eliminated by changing one of those elements" (Festinger,
1962, p. 18).

(1) Gang violence could get worse in Cedar Springs.

It was clear that GSU members and supervisors felt that
gang conditions in Cedar Springs could get worse. But it
was also clear that each of the GSU members (including
supervisors), had a different sense of the severity of or
the existence of the gang problem. When discussing the

absence of gang activity with GSU members and supervisors

some common responses were:

> These gangs are loosely organized, but have the
> potential to become more dangerous. It seems to be a
> trend up here in the northern region of the country.
> If we attack the problem now, we can prevent it from
> getting worse. (Field notes, June 22, 1996)

> Some people might not believe it, but there are gangs
> here. I am originally from the Twin Cities and I
> worked there for a year. There is no difference
> between the Twin Cities and what is happening here.
> Except we (Cedar Springs) are about 10-15 years behind
> what is happening there now. I have received
> information from cities that are geographically similar
> to Cedar Springs, and they said that their problem just
> kind of exploded over night. It had been building over
> time, and then one day it turned into the dangerous
> place that it is today. There were 'wannabe' gangs in
> the Twin Cities too, and now those gangs are the ones
> that are causing the trouble there today. This is
> serious business. (Field notes, June 28, 1996)

> There are 10-20 known members of this gang today in
> Cedar Springs and in Marshall. We are at the same
> degree of problems that Falton was at three to four
> years ago. (Field notes, June 29, 1996)

> The GSU is like a preventative measure that the
> emergence of gangs will not happen. (Field notes, July
> 20, 1996)

The unclear definition of "gangs" and "gang activity,"

and the use of gang indicators from large cities like Los

Angeles or Chicago, would make the task of the Gang

Suppression Unit in Cedar Springs very difficult and create

dissonance for the officers. To deal with this, GSU members

modified their behavior and feelings (severity of gang

problems in Cedar Springs) in accordance with the new

information (absence of gang indicators) (Festinger, 1962).

(2) Incorporate drug violations into gang surveillance.

Drugs became a main focus in the surveillance that the

Gang Suppression Unit conducted throughout the course of the

summer. It was never really explained to me why drugs

played such a large role in the GSU when there was a

separate Narcotics Drug Task Force in the police department.

When I asked GSU members how drugs played a part in the Gang

Suppression Unit I received a variety of explanations:

> The GSU received permission to use an empty house that
> was across the street from a house that is known for a
> lot of drug trafficking. The GSU members used this
> house to start doing surveillance. This way they can
> gather information on who is coming or going, and if
> there are any visible signs of gangs around the house.
> I asked the GSU supervisor why he chose that specific
> house. He said that there are a few houses that they
> are going to be targeting. He also mentioned that the
> Narcotics Drug Task Force will be working in
> conjunction with the GSU since some of these people are
> known drug dealers. (Field notes, July 19, 1996)

> A lot of the gang activity flowed over into the drug
> problems in Cedar Springs. He (GSU member) felt that
> doing the surveillance on those specific houses would
> be a good idea, because a lot of the people coming and
> going were people that had been in trouble with the law
> before for drugs or gang activity. (Field notes, July
> 19, 1996)

> The kids that live in this house are known for drug
> dealing and also for being gang-bangers. The high
> traffic in and out of that house, and how frequent

these people are coming and going, usually can lead us to believe that there are drugs involved. (Field notes, August 3, 1996)

Thus, the attempt to reduce the dissonance created by the absence of gang indicators also resulted in 'drugs' being incorporated into the list of gang indicators that GSU members focused on in order to redefine the gang problem in Cedar Springs (Festinger, 1962). If GSU members had no contacts or activities to record in the Gang Suppression Unit log book the need for the existence of the GSU could be questioned.

(3) Gang members went "underground" because of gang laws.

Several GSU members and supervisors stated that they felt the new gang laws created in the state had affected visible gang indicators and gang activity in Cedar Springs. Even though a few of the GSU members seemed skeptical, none of the GSU members mentioned the idea that the absence of gang indicators could be due to the fact that gangs do not exist in Cedar Springs. The variety of responses in this category revolved around issues including media coverage, the Johnson murder in Brooks, and negative connotations that go along with being a gang member in this state. One GSU member stated that,

>Last year, yes, there were gangs in Cedar Springs.
>This summer seems to have slowed down a bit. They have
>went underground. I asked him why he thought that they
>went underground, and he said that the whole gang issue
>has been so publicized, and these kids are seeing that
>it can get them in trouble so they are laying low with
>their affiliation. (Field notes, July 19, 1996)

Another GSU member stated that,

>I have noticed a decline in the admission of gang
>affiliation since they enacted that new gang law. It
>states that anyone caught committing a crime, and that
>can be linked to a gang, gets a severe sentence. (Field
>notes, June 8, 1996)

I asked another GSU member why he thought that the gang

activity had slowed down this summer. He said,

>it could be a number of things. It could be because of
>the gang laws that have been implemented in the state
>(the law states that if a person who commits a crime is
>affiliated with a gang, the penalty is much more
>severe). He also said that since the gang problem was
>emerging, it could be starting to diminish due to the
>GSU, lack of interest, or because it carries negative
>connotations with it. (Field notes, July 19, 1996)

Gang Suppression Unit members thought that since the

social environment (Cedar Springs) had been changed for gang

members due to the new gang laws, the gang member's behavior

would change to adjust to their new social environment.

Because the social environment was changed, GSU dissonance

could also be reduced or eliminated (Festinger, 1962).

(4) The Gang Suppression Unit must be doing it's job.

Several GSU members also felt that the gangs had
disappeared because they had simply done their job. There
is no easy way to measure the effectiveness of the Cedar
Springs Gang Suppression Unit, but a few of the GSU members
(including supervisors) felt that the GSU was serving its
purpose:

> The gang activity has gone down in the past few months.
> The little scum bags must have figured out that we are
> not going to put up with their shit anymore and decided
> to be secretive about it. I asked him if he felt that
> gangs were a real threat to the community. He said
> that they (gang members) think they are tougher than
> they really are, but some of the little assholes mean
> business. (Field notes, July 20, 1996)

One of the GSU supervisors stated that he

> thought the GSU was effective so far because the news
> of the GSU spread very quickly among the kids. He said
> that he found this out by talking to some kids and also
> from the intelligence agents they have. (Field notes,
> July 17, 1996)

A GSU supervisor mentioned that the gang activity has
slowed down this summer in comparison to last summer. I
asked him why he thought that was the case, and he said
that,

> it could be a number of things. It could be because of
> the gang laws that have been implemented in the state
> the law states that if a person who commits a crime is
> affiliated with a gang, the penalty is much more
> severe. He also said that since the gang

problem was emerging, it could be starting to diminish
due to the GSU, lack of interest, or because it carries
negative connotations with it. (Field notes, July 19,
1996)

The presence of the Gang Suppression Unit patrolling

the streets of Cedar Springs, and making contact with the

youth, changed the social environment of the gangs,

resulting in changed behavior of the gangs (Festinger,

1962). Several of the GSU members viewed the absence of

gang indicators as an accomplishment of the GSU, thus

providing justification for both its past and future

existence.

(5) Gangs are "seasonal" in Cedar Springs.

Several GSU members also thought that the weather and

school changed the social environment (Cedar Springs), which

resulted in a change in the behavior of gang members

(Festinger, 1962). The average high and low temperatures in

Cedar Springs for the months of September through April are:

	High	Low		High	Low
September	68°	44°	January	12°	-7°
October	56°	34°	February	19°	-1°
November	35°	18°	March	32°	13°
December	19°	-2°	April	50°	31°

(National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 1978)

Since gangs in Cedar Springs are "seasonal", there is
no reason to have a Gang Suppression Unit during the school
year, or more specifically, in the winter months. "Mother
Nature" takes the Gang Suppression Unit's place as a gang
deterrent from September through April in Cedar Springs:

> We run into kids on the weekends, and whenever it is
> nice enough outside for them to get out and about. No
> one in their right mind would walk around outside when
> it is 40 degrees below zero! Shit, I don't walk around
> outside when it is 40 degrees below zero! I do notice
> an increase when the weather gets nicer, and when
> school is out. Now is the prime time for things to
> start happening. (Field notes, June 7, 1996)

> The GSU is winding down due to school starting. He
> said that the activity is winding down too. Summertime
> gets busier for the gang activity, and when school
> starts, they shut down their operations. (Field notes,
> October 4, 1996)

Another GSU member mentioned that he was surprised that
the GSU had not run into as much gang activity this summer
as they had anticipated. There were a few gang-related
incidents, but the GSU had anticipated that this summer
would be pretty wild since last summer and the end of the
school year was "just nuts." He said that, "it seemed
like they were seeing the same kids over and over again but
for different gang related stuff (like vandalism, theft and
assault on other kids)" (Field notes, July 13, 1996).

The five categories of GSU responses to the absence of
gang indicators described in this section illustrate how

difficult gang suppression can be when using indicators from a large city, in a mid-sized city. But, as we saw, the absence of gang indicators were always justified by some response by GSU members. Although not all justifications could be categorized by the commonalities above, the possibility of gangs being non-existent in Cedar Springs was never mentioned as an alternative definition of the problem.

Is the GSU needed in Cedar Springs?

The GSU was viewed as being important in Cedar Springs by six of the seventeen police officers who were not members of the GSU. Four of the six non-GSU police officers that thought the GSU was a good idea had also stated, however, that they had never seen any gang activity in Cedar Springs. These six non-GSU officers all thought that the GSU was needed in Cedar Springs, but had a variety of suggestions for the focus of GSU activities.

Two of the six non-GSU officers felt that the GSU would deter the gang problem from spreading or getting worse, but offered no potential solutions or strategies. The other four non-GSU officers supporting the GSU felt that the GSU was a good idea, but that they should focus their attention on more gang-related activities in the community. I asked an officer what he thought about the GSU. He said that he,

thinks it (the GSU) is a good idea for deterrent
purposes but he also said that they had better be
focused on gang activity and not underage smokers. The
officer said that they should hire a few more officers
with that GSU money so there would be enough officers
on the streets in the first place. He said that, there
should at least be enough people on the street to help
cover the car accidents. (Field notes, October 21,
1996)

Another officer stated that the department is being

proactive to deter problems, and he doesn't want Cedar

Springs to end up like neighboring towns. He said that,

the GSU is beneficial in preventing problems, but they
should really have officers doing it full-time and not
just whenever they want extra hours. The money should
be used to hire a few more officers or someone to deal
with the delinquents. (Field notes, October 22, 1996)

Another patrol officer said,

The task force can try to keep the gang activity under
control, but there is not much else we can do with it.
The problem (gangs) goes deeper than that. It has to
be dealt with at the family level, in the schools, in
the legal system, and in society in general. We can
only stop them from stealing, dealing drugs, fighting
with each other, or hurting innocent citizens. (Field
notes, June 7, 1996)

Four of the other eleven officers that were not members

of the GSU did not have an opinion about the Cedar Springs

Gang Suppression Unit, but there were seven non-GSU police

officers that felt very strongly that the GSU was not needed

in Cedar Springs. These seven police officers gave a

variety of reasons why the GSU was not needed. Two of the

officers stated that since they believed that there are no

gangs in Cedar Springs, there was no need to have a GSU. They both also added that, they did not have a personal interest in gangs anyway. The GSU was viewed as "just another task force" by two other non-GSU police officers. They viewed the GSU as a temporary unit, and predicted that the GSU would "fizzle-out" very soon.

Most of the police officers that were not part of the GSU viewed the activities of the GSU as being focused on non-gang related activities. Three of the eleven non-GSU police officers that felt that the GSU was not needed based their opinions on the activities of the GSU. These officers felt that the Gang Suppression Unit's focus on underage smoking, drugs, and using "big city" gang indicators to identify gang activity, were not appropriate for the community of Cedar Springs. I asked an officer what he thought about the GSU that was recently formed in the department. He said that,

> the GSU is a joke. He said that after the city council got excited about gangs in the city, they gave the department money to deal with the problems and it was wasted on the GSU. He also said that the GSU is just a bunch of guys that are looking for some extra hours and overtime. I asked him why he would say that. He said that it was the truth and that he was sure it would fizzle out really soon, because the GSU now says that the gang problem is "toning down" from where it was this last summer. (I thought this was odd since the GSU had only been out for a few months.) The officer then stated that the big cocaine bust a few weeks ago

was not even really a bust at all. He said that the
GSU did not actually make the drug bust they just took
the call about the person finding the drugs. The GSU
accomplished something that the drug task unit should
have done. The GSU is suppose to be out looking for
gang stuff, not drug busts in the front yard of
someone's house. (Field notes, September 26, 1996)

The officer also said that, "most of the so-called

gangs are just wannabes and that most of the GSU guys are

getting overtime and nothing is getting accomplished" (Field

notes, September 26, 1996).

Another officer said that he thinks that some of the

people in the department and in the community are jumping on

the "gang band wagon" and making it more of an issue than it

really is. He then started to talk about how the GSU

doesn't do anything besides busting kids for smoking, and

that is not gang-related stuff. He said that he,

> remembered a few weeks ago when he saw the GSU
> patrolling around the schools after the school kids
> were let out. They (the GSU) stopped two females, that
> appeared to be about 15 years old, for smoking. He
> said that he does not consider the two young girls to
> be gang-related in any way at all. He said that he,
> thinks they stop kids for smoking just to say that the
> GSU is doing something when they are out. (Field notes,
> October 18, 1996)

Another police officer went on to say that if the

police department is going to have a GSU they should at

least be trying to suppress whatever gang activity they

think is out there, and not doing other things like busting

kids for smoking. He then stated that,

> it is hard to do the preventative kind of things on the
> day shift because there are so many other things that
> you are doing. So, the GSU would be good for that
> preventative part, but they are not actually
> suppressing anything right now. It is all about
> prevention. So if the GSU is training for the kind of
> gangs found in Los Angeles they are wasting their time
> and the department's money. (Field notes, October 25,
> 1996)

The difference in GSU police officers' perceptions

about the need for the Gang Suppression Unit, as well as the

existence of gangs in Cedar Springs, would make gang

suppression difficult for the Gang Suppression Unit. The

approach taken to deal with gang problems in Cedar Springs

is not consistent with recommendations given in the

literature on this topic. The literature suggests that

using gang indicators and suppression techniques adopted

from large cities is not always applicable to small or mid-

sized cities (Spergel, 1994; Maxson et al., 1987a; Beyer,

1994; Owens, 1993). But if there are no other alternatives

available that give other suggestions for dealing with gangs

in small or mid-sized cities the police department is forced

to use gang-related materials and techniques from larger

settings.

In the final chapter I describe outcomes of using urban gang indicators and techniques in small or mid-sized cities. I describe the difficulties associated with varying definitions of gangs and gang activity, and the functions and formation of a gang suppression unit. Suggestions for future research on the use of gang indicators, and the implementation of gang suppression units in small or mid-sized cities are also offered.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

This case study illustrates some of the problems that
result from using gang indicators from large cities to
suppress putative gang activity in a mid-sized, Midwestern,
city. More importantly, it illustrates the application of
the constructionist perspective and how different actors
hold different definitions of the situation affecting
responses to the "problem."

The social construction paradigm can be applied to the
process of the creation and response of the Cedar Springs
Gang Suppression Unit to perceived youth gang activities.
It clarifies how youth gangs became a "problem" in the
community, who brought the issue of youth gangs to the
public's attention, how youth gangs are defined by the
claimsmakers and who stood to gain by having these claims
defined as real. This study was not concerned with the
actual existence of gangs in Cedar Springs; therefore, it

focuses on how various claimsmakers defined and shaped the
social problem of gang activity.

In assisting this discussion I draw upon the four stage
model developed by Spector and Kitsuse (1987) describing the
process that a social problem goes through before the
problem is considered to actually exist, and also what takes
place once policy has been implemented. This thesis is not
a test of the model. Rather, the model is used as an
outline of the process that the Cedar Springs GSU went
through during it's creation of the social problem of gangs.
Stages one through three set up the back drop of the study,
and illustrate how gangs became defined as a problem. By
the fourth stage, the preconditions were set or defined, and
the GSU was created as a response to the constructed
problem.

Stage One

According to Spector and Kitsuse (1987), in the first
stage groups

> attempt to assert the existence of some condition,
> define it as offensive, harmful, or other wise
> undesirable, publicize these assertions, stimulate
> controversy, and create a public or political issue
> over the matter. (p. 142)

The idea of youth violence had frequently been
discussed in the Cedar Springs newspaper, but the topics of

gangs and gang activity did not emerge in the local
newspaper until August 12, 1995. The article was titled,
"Gangs in the Shadows." The Johnson murder on September 15,
1995 drew further attention to youth violence, but somehow
the shift of concern went to youth gangs instead of youth
violence. According to Cedar Springs law enforcement
officials, people in the community were concerned about the
rise of youth gangs before the Johnson murder took place.
The media attention to the Johnson murder furthered claims
about the dangers of gangs.

Stage Two

The second stage is marked by the

recognition of the legitimacy of these groups by some
official organization, agency, or institution. This
may lead to an official investigation, proposals for
reform, and the establishment of an agency to respond
to those claims and demands. (Spector and Kitsuse,
1987, p. 142)

After the Johnson murder in Brooks, the Cedar Springs
city council directed the creation of a Youth Task Force to
deal with youth gang problems in Cedar Springs. Creating
the Youth Task Force legitimatized the claims that this was
a youth gang problem. Members of the Youth Task Force
consisted of concerned citizens, juvenile and detention
workers, educators, city officials, and law enforcement
officials. The Youth Task Force's mission was to assess the

severity of the youth gang problem, and determine the appropriate response to the problem. Media attention also confirmed or legitimized the youth gang problem in Cedar Springs.

When police become concerned about emerging gangs in a community, media attention is likely to accentuate the concern. "The gang issue is one that makes for good social problems coverage" (Tindle, 1996, p. 5). After members of a community see the rising concern over gangs in the media on a regular basis they tend to believe that what the media says is true (Jenkins, 1992). The reinforcement of the public's concerns about gang problems by the media as understood by the police could result in the fear of a non-existent problem. When the Cedar Springs law enforcement community discussed gang activity in the local newspaper, the construction of the problem (youth gangs) was expanded and given legitimacy because the claims came from a legitimate source.

Stage Three

Reemergence of claims and demands by the original group; or by others, expressing dissatisfaction with the established procedures for dealing with the imputed conditions, the bureaucratic handling of complaints, the failure to generate a condition of trust and confidence in the procedures and the lack of sympathy for the complaints. (Spector and Kitsuse, 1987, p. 142)

At a Youth Task Force meeting on February 13, 1995 (Larson, 1995), a presentation was made by law enforcement officials on existing problem of youth gangs in Cedar Springs from their perspective. Classification, identification, and visibility of youth gangs in Cedar Springs were the topic of the presentation. Personal testimony about the existence of youth gangs from the law enforcement officials, as well as statistics on the rise in youth activity ended the presentation.

Next, a ten minute interview with a 15 year old female who claimed to be involved with gang activity was played for the Youth Task Force. She stated that the gangs in Cedar Springs are currently using knives and that knives will soon change to guns. After the video, a representative of the Parents Taking Charge group gave personal testimony that her child (and others in the same school) are joining youth gangs in the community. The personal testimony from law enforcement officials, as well as the representative from the Parents Taking Charge group supported the claims originally made by the local newspaper after the Johnson murder took place. By the end of Stage three in the Cedar Springs case study the problem of youth gangs had already

been defined and accepted. No assessment of the problem was
done, but a solution to the problem became proposed.

Stage Four

Stage four deals with the

> rejection by complainant groups of the agency's or
> institution's response, or lack of response to their
> claims and demands, or lack of response to their claims
> and demands, and the development of activities to
> create alternative, parallel, or counter-instituticns
> as responses to the established procedures. (Spector
> and Kitsuse, 1987, p. 142)

To respond to the putative youth gang problem and the
dissatisfaction with the efforts made to curb gangs, members
of the Youth Task Force (law enforcement officials) proposed
that a Gang Suppression Unit (GSU) be created and
implemented in Cedar Springs. The GSU would perform
intelligence gathering and surveillance, as well as combat
youth gang problems present in the community. The GSU would
rely upon gang techniques and indicators adopted from large
cities.

Two problems resulting from the use of large city gang
indicators in this environment were: (1) marginalization of
non-gang related youth groups, and (2) a heightened sense of
fear in the community when gang indicators are mis-
identified or over emphasized. Non-gang youth groups or
"problematic groups" (Quinn and Downs, 1993) are at high

risk of being labeled a gang if police rely solely on physical indicators (such as style of dress, graffiti, or "signing")and/or ethnic background. Garrett and Short (1975) state that police beliefs about the causes of delinquency are often dictated by the child's social class and ethnicity, but do not have significant relationship with the actual behavior of the suspects. GSU officers stated that gang members were typically of Hispanic origin and usually came from broken homes. The Cedar Springs GSU relied heavily upon the physical gang indicators when they identified gang members, even though the indicators could be associated with non-gang related youth groups as well. Therefore, misidentification of youth gang members in the case study of Cedar Springs was likely.

Reliance on gang indicators, such as "style of dress" could lead to unnecessary labeling of non-gang related youth groups. Some youth groups in mid-sized cities adopt fashions that are influenced by their perception of gangs, leading to the potential of gang identification by police. "The adoption of the gang 'look' offers identifiable proof for those seeking evidence of a gang presence in their neighborhood or city, and concern over gangs begins to rise." (Tindle, 1996, p. 14) After the police begin to

acknowledge and verify the possibility of gang problems in a

community, "police are more likely to identify problematic

groups as 'gangs'." (Quinn and Downs, 1993, p. 221)

Therefore, non-gang related youth groups end up being

marginalized. The youth gang indicators (including style of

dress) used in Cedar Springs to identify gang members could

have easily been associated with youth groups that were not

gang-related. The indicators were not used to determine the

extent of the problem, they were used to target groups that

were potentially gang-related.

One of the biggest difficulties in dealing with youth

gangs in large and small cities is the variation in the

definitions of what constitutes youth gangs and gang

activity (Spergel et al., 1994). In the case study of Cedar

Springs, the definitions held by GSU members toward youth

gangs and gang activities varied dramatically. Some GSU

officers defined gangs as a loosely organized group of kids,

while others viewed them as being more violent and troubled.

The variation in perceptions affected the way that the GSU

members viewed the functions and purpose of the gang

suppression unit. When GSU members followed the urban gang

indicators presented in their training they also had to deal

with the dissonance that they experienced from the absence of the gang indicators.

Differentiating between gang and non-gang youth groups is made even more difficult when the problem is redefined by adding new indicators to the problem. In the case of Cedar Springs, incorporating drug violations into surveillance and enforcing a zero-tolerance for underage smoking interrupted the focus of the GSU on gangs and gang activity. Drugs are often part of gang activities, but non-gang youth can also be involved with illegal drug activity so it would be difficult to differentiate between the two groups. When gang indicators were not found in the community in Cedar Springs, the GSU needed some kind of activity to record in the GSU log book to justify the group's existence.

The case study of Cedar Springs presented in this thesis illustrates some of the problems that a gang suppression unit in a mid-sized city deals with when attempting to address gang problems by using indicators and suppression techniques adopted from large cities. Other mid-sized cities across the country similar to Cedar Springs are likely using the same techniques, and could be producing the same results. If this is the case, the issue of gangs and gang activity specific to these communities are not

being addressed and could possibly worsen relationships with disaffected youth.

Further research is needed on the nature of differences between youth gangs in small cities and those of large cities. Assessments of the severity of youth problems in small cities need to be carefully conducted and official responses need to follow from the unique characteristics of the problem, as derived from these assessments. Conducting gang suppression before gang intelligence is gathered and assessed is not a necessarily appropriate police response.

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