A Tattoo Removal Program

By Cynthia Scanlon

In an effort to curb gang violence and help members remove themselves from gangs, the Tempe, AZ, Police Department developed an unusual program to remove tattoos from gang members. The original proposal was to be funded using a $200,000 federal grant, but public outcry over using tax dollars for gang members was so great that the program has been put on hold until alternate sources of funding can be found.

"Our phones rang off the hook," Patrol Division Commander John Ore said. "Citizens called us saying, `I don't want my tax dollars going to those creeps.'"

Ore added: "Anytime you want to do something like this with tax dollars, you're going to get people who are hostile. But we also got a lot of positive calls. A number of citizens thought it was a very innovative thing to do."

To remove the tattoos, the police department planned on using a relatively new technology involving lasers. Ron Glick, a Mesa, AZ, dermatologist, said that laser technology can be used to remove tattoos, but it is not without risks.

"Laser is a light process that destroys whatever it touches," Glick said. "Some lasers will destroy a particular color sequence. Other lasers destroy everything and actually cause the skin to boil."

"There are many types and depths of tattoos," Glick added. "For a small tattoo, the simplest thing to do would be to cut it out and sew the skin back together. But some tattoos are so large, it doesn't matter what you do, you're going to leave hideous results."

But leaving a bad scar is sometimes better than a tattoo when it comes to dealing with the public, he said.

The decision to undertake such a unique program evolved from the Tempe Police Department's uncommon deployment scheme that keeps police officers assigned to the same area. According to Ore, this policing model is so unusual that when the Institute of Law and Justice in Alexandria, VA, applied for a federal grant to study the effectiveness of geographic deployment of patrol officers, they asked to study Tempe.

"The way we approach problems in Tempe is remarkably different from most police agencies," he said. "As a result of the rapport the officers have developed with a number of these kids, they found out that some wanted to get out of the gang. One of the things that enables a kid to get away from a gang is finding a decent job and getting on with life."

"But when prospective employers see tattoos all over the backs of hands and faces, the chances of getting work are greatly diminished," Ore added.

Martha Burkett, commander of support services and one of the originators of the program, was surprised by the outcry over what she sees as a positive move to save money rather than spend it. "I would rather pay for their tattoo removal than pay for them (gang members) to be unemployed for the rest of their lives because they can't get jobs," she said.

done soon, these problems will get worse." Many of those who spoke were victims of gang activities. Some had been assaulted; others had property destroyed or damaged by graffiti.

Lieutenant Dan Stebbins, Connecticut State Police, warned his state's Task Force on Gangs on September 22, 1993, that Connecticut's gang problem is going to get worse before it gets better. Hartford placed a curfew on youths to forestall violence among gang members. The town of Vernon, with a population of 30,000, considered a parental-responsibility ordinance similar to one in place in Elgin, IL. State representative Edwin E. Garcia proposed legislation that would require Connecticut police departments to report gang activities to the state Department of Public Safety for tracking and intelligence purposes.

Such a law, if enacted, would ascribe a legitimacy to monitoring that would please police officials, because there are problems inherent in monitoring gang activities. For example, there is the constitutionality issue to consider. Even though 72% of the poll respondents indicated that monitoring would not be considered unconstitutional, some people say it is.

Stover pointed out: "As citizens of the United States, we are all entitled to a safe environment in which to raise our children. It has been proven that gangs and their activities jeopardize the safety of our cities. The answer to its being unconstitutional is no, because of the criminal activity gangs engage in. The safety of our country and its citizens should be first and foremost of our concerns."

Consequently, some departments come under fire for their monitoring activities. For example, detractors attacked the El Paso, TX, Police Department in 1992 for being too zealous in monitoring gang activities. At least one lawsuit was filed against the department's Gang Task Force. Yet, such dissatisfaction goes hand in hand with monitoring activities—especially if they are successful and give the departments a better handle on what gangs are doing.

One of the reasons police departments monitor gang activities is to make their jobs easier. As it is, agencies spend inordinate amounts of time dealing with gangs and their activities. Their approaches may differ, but the goal is the same: to prevent problems before they occur.

Sergeant Robert Shoun, Planning and Research, Tucson, AZ, summed up the goal when he said, "Based on known criminal involvement, individuals are targeted for investigation, apprehension, and prosecution." Shoun's statement raised the question of the effectiveness of monitoring in general.

Chief Randall A. Wellington, Youngstown, OH, believes monitoring is helpful. "There is value in monitoring gang members' activities if gangs are a problem," he said. That is the prevailing attitude among police administrators. Ninety percent of the respondents see monitoring as beneficial. The remainder were not sure.

But, they are leaving nothing to chance. Departments utilize a variety of approaches to keep in touch with gangs, ranging from cooperation with

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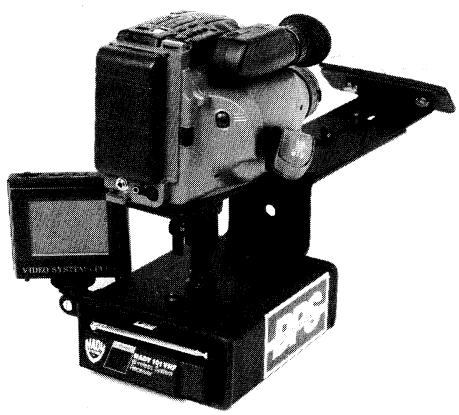

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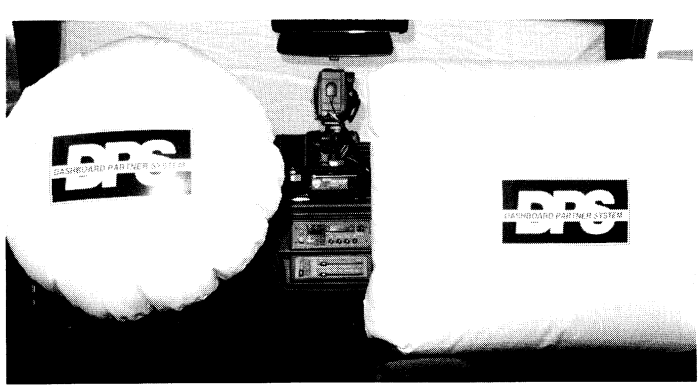

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John Ore agreed. "We saw the program as spending a couple hundred dollars to take off a tattoo, rather than spending fifty-thousand dollars a year warehousing someone in prison. If we save one, that will pay for a lot of tattoo removal."

The cost to remove a tattoo can run a few hundred to thousands of dollars depending on how extensive the work is, the number of tattoos to be removed, and the location.

Despite the funding glitch, the Tempe Police Department feels there is a demand for the program and is looking for alternative funding sources. "Quite a few people wanted their tattoos removed," Burkett said. "Since there's a stiffer criminal penalty for being a gang member, some of the calls were motivated by kids who were in trouble and thought if they went to court without their tattoos, things wouldn't be so tough."

Burkett added, "Overall, I think it's a good idea, but there's going to have to be some requirements to the program." These may include completing a course on how to get a job, avoiding arrest for certain periods of time, and the willingness to sign a waiver promising not to get tattooed again.

"We won't open the program free to just anyone," she said, "because some people will turn around and get another tattoo tomorrow." L&O

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adult vs. juvenile members, gender of members, number of crimes attributed to criminal street gangs...in short, it is a compendium of gang-related activities. The report is produced based on statistics generated by a new computerized gang crime reporting/tracking system implemented to "capture those reported crimes which were committed by, committed against or in any way involved gangs or gang members."

Significantly, it is available to gang members if they want to pay the price of $6.85 per copy. They will no doubt find out more about their activities than they knew before they read the report.

Large departments have an advantage over smaller communities in that they have more experience monitoring gang activities and more personnel to do the tracking. These departments also have more sophisticated techniques and equipment. But, occasionally they still use methods that can hardly be described as state-of-the-art. For example, St. Louis uses computer tracking and flagging to monitor gang activities. However, the department still uses a personal notification procedure to keep the parents of current or potential gang members apprised of their children's status.

Monitoring involves a wide range of overt and covert techniques, which vary from department to department. Methods vary but the most frequently used is personal contact. Word of mouth is second. Then, in order of importance, come neighborhood watches, undercover operations, written lists, and camera surveillance.

There is a big drop to the lesser used methods, which include membership in nationwide and regional gang tracking information exchange networks, computer tracking and planning, and multi-agency gang task force clearinghouse computers. There appears to be less emphasis on cooperative efforts, although some departments such as Maryland Heights, MO, participate in regional task forces.

The emphasis in monitoring is on overt activities. That may change with time, though. Chief Bob Stover, Albuquerque, NM, noted, "A large part of our day-to-day operation is in an overt capacity. However, as the gangs' methods of operation change, so must ours. This would mean that we attempt to monitor gangs covertly, using all the methods at our disposal."

Albuquerque is one of the more active departments in monitoring gang activities. Stover stated, "We are responding to the problem head on." Departments just beginning to deal with gangs could use Albuquerque as a model.

A department new to gang problems is Sarasota, FL. Captain David E. Blough noted "our gang problems started one year ago. We have assigned one officer from each squad to collect information on gang activities." Currently, the department tries to have line officers handle any problems that arise. But, as Blough concluded, "Since our problems are so new, we are not sure if our method is effective or not."

Likewise, Pocatello, ID, is seeing a rise in gang activities. Chief V. Lynn Harris said, "Pocatello is experiencing an emerging gang presence. Gang related graffiti is the most prevalent activity, even though graffiti incidents occur infrequently."

He added that violence among youths is increasing. "Not all incidents are attributed to gangs," he acknowledged. However, Harris warned that the police are not waiting for the problems to grow. "We are involved in an effort to establish a community-based effort to seek solutions to the issue," he said.

The department is identifying and tracking known or suspected gang members. That is a first step more and more departments are taking, but they need help in their efforts. Agencies like Sarasota and Pocatello can use the aid of departments that have years of experience dealing with gang problems. Experience, however, does not make gang-related problems any easier to handle.

Regardless of size or experience, most respondents indicated a high level of concern over the growth of gangs in recent years and supported the need for monitoring their activities. The names and sizes of some of the locations would surprise people who believe that gang activity is restricted to large cities. For example, residents in the Salt Lake City, UT, suburbs of Magna and West Valley City met to discuss gang problems in their towns.

According to an article in the April 23, 1993, *Moab Times-Independent,* more than 200 residents of the two communities who attended the meeting agreed that "if something is not