A Comprehensive Literature Review of
Military-Trained Gang Members

by

Carter F. Smith, JD, Ph.D.,
Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, TN.

Abstract

The U.S. military has seen an increase in crimes committed by gang members within the ranks. Authors of a recent assessment reported an increase in the investigation of gang-related incidents by military investigators in 2006 over previous years. While the presence of gang members in the military is not new, their presence has received increased attention from government leaders. This paper provides a comprehensive review of the literature in order to examine the prevalence of gang members with military training.

The proliferation of gangs in our society has led to an increase in destructive crimes throughout the United States (Egley & O'Donnell, 2009). At present, roughly 80% of all crimes in communities throughout the United States are committed by members of criminal gangs (National Gang Intelligence Center [NGIC], 2009). In 2008, researchers of the NGIC and the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) combined efforts and conducted an assessment of the potential threats criminal gang members pose to communities in the United States.

Those researchers estimated that there were roughly one million gang members in the United States (NGIC, 2009). An increase in gang crime from previous years was observed, as was a spread of gang presence and activity from urban areas into the suburbs. Drug trafficking, armed robbery, extortion, fraud, home invasions, murder, human smuggling, and weapons trafficking were reported to be the most common crimes committed by gang members (NGIC).

Military tactics are being used by gang members. For example, in January 2005, in Ceres, California, a Marine and Norteño gang member used military combat tactics to shoot two police officers, killing one, after the gang member set up an ambush for the police officers at an off-base location. The officers, unaware of the

possibility they would be encountering a military-trained gang member, arrived unprepared. As a result, members of the community suffered the loss of one of their police officers (NGIC, 2007).

Military equipment and weapons are available to gang members (NGIC, 2007). Gang members with access to military weapons and equipment are able to escalate the threat of violence to citizens and the police officers responsible for protecting citizens. For instance, a Staff Sergeant and a Captain from the Illinois Army National Guard tried to sell stolen military-grade body armor, night-vision equipment, Tasers and other military gear in January of 2007 (Mercer, 2007). Even soldiers with no clear ties to gangs are making military assault weapons available to street gang members. In December 2005, a National Guard soldier in Georgia smuggled foreign-made machine guns into the United States and attempted to trade the guns with a gun dealer in exchange for an all-terrain vehicle and a pistol (Kugler, 2006).

Gang members have access to unconventional weapons, too. In 2008 a former soldier in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma admitted to making multiple improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that he intended to sell to gang members (Johnson, 2008). The former soldier made weapons like those used against his fellow soldiers in Iraq and offered them for sale to gang members and other criminals in Oklahoma City for as little as $100.00.

Military-affiliated gang members are not just using access to military weapons and equipment to benefit their street gangs. There is active recruitment among military personnel for gang involvement while actively serving in the military. Four Marines in Columbia, South Carolina were caught recruiting local youth into the Crips street gang per the direction of a gang leader in Florida (WTOC, 2006). This activity resulted in the arrest of numerous Crip gang members as well as the Marines (WLTX, 2006).

In 2007, NGIC analysts distributed an unclassified report addressing gang activity in the Armed Forces. The authors of the report noted that gang-related activity in the Armed Forces posed a threat to both law enforcement officials and national security (NGIC, 2007). The report identified many gang-related crimes committed by gang members in the military such as murder, racketeering, and drug distribution. Accordingly, some gang members enlisted in the military as an alternative to incarceration, and others joined the military to recruit members into their gang, obtain access to weapons, and learn how to respond to hostile gunfire (NGIC). The increase in the number of military-trained gang members could create a level of danger most law enforcement officials are not adequately prepared to combat (NGIC).

The present study will review the literature on the phenomenon of military-trained gang members. Studies on a number of topics will be examined, including the perceptions about military gang members, incarcerated military gang members,

gang crime in the military and military policy regarding gang membership. Recommendations will be made for the future of gang research.

Methods

A systematic and thorough review of the literature was conducted on the topic of military gang members. The review included peer-reviewed journals that addressed the topic more than anecdotally. Newspaper and magazine articles were not included in the search. The review was limited to English publications since 1900.

Five databases were searched: ProQuest ABI/INFORM Global, Criminal Justice Periodicals, ProQuest Psychology Journals, and Sage Criminology. The keywords used included gang AND armed services OR military OR armed forces OR army OR navy OR air force. The search yielded 95 results. Abstracts and titles of each result were reviewed for relevance to the topic and none of the articles were found to meet the criteria. Beyond the above review, the author's personal collection of gang-related literature was examined. This collection was compiled from periodic informal searches of sites that advertise books (e.g. Amazon), the Internet (for open access publications), and referrals from colleagues aware of the author's interest in the subject since approximately 1990. The results are contained in this paper. See Table 1 for a summary of pre-2009 literature.

Table 1:*Summary of pre-2009 Literature*

Study	Sample	Research Method
Knox (2006)	91	Exploratory study
McMaster (1994)	800	Comparative/descriptive
Tierney (1998)	35	Focused interviews
Flacks and Wiskoff (1999)	NA	Literature review
US Army CID (2006)	NA	Data review
US Air Force OSI (2007)	NA	Data review
NGIC (2007)	NA	Intelligence review
Eyler (2009)	NA	Literature review

Background

Knox (2006) noted that much of the literature examining the history of gangs and the military amounted to a cursory examination based on news reports and limited or one-sided interviews. In 1992, Knox conducted an exploratory study of a sample of convenience comprised of 91 members of an Illinois National Guard unit. An incident involving the death of a child had occurred in a large public housing complex that was known for gang violence. The shooter, a gang member, had served in the military, and public officials had suggested the possibility that the National Guard could have been called to assist in suppressing the gang problem (Knox).

Most of the survey respondents (65.2%) were relatively certain of their ability to identify gang members. Respondents estimated that gang membership in the military ranged from a low of zero to a high of 75% with a mean of 21.5%. Only 2.8% of the respondents indicated that there was no gang activity in the U.S. Armed Forces (Knox, 2006). The responses indicated that the Army National Guard was thought to have the highest percentage of former or current gang members in its ranks (a mean of 21.5%). The Coast Guard was thought to have the lowest percentage, with a mean of 6.3%.

Though 91.8% of the respondents reported they had not been approached by a gang member wanting to acquire military weapons or ordnance, 9.2%, indicated that they had been approached. About one-tenth of the respondents (10.2%) reported they had been a victim of gang crime in the previous year (Knox, 2006). The respondents were also asked if the military should recruit gang members in case the military had to be used to suppress a riot where gang members were involved. The majority of respondents (65.5%) rejected the idea. The reasons for their responses were not provided.

Of particular importance to Knox's study was the number of contacts with active gang members that respondents reported. This type of question can be used as a predictor of gang membership of the respondent (Knox, 2006). Over one-fourth (27.9%) reported they had one or more close friends or associates who were gang members (Knox, 2006). More than one-tenth (12.8%) reported having five or more close friends who were gang members.

Perception of the gang problem on and off the installation

McMaster (1994) examined attitudes towards gangs on a military base in Arizona and found there was no significant difference regarding perceptions of the severity of the gang problem between ranks of the respondents, whether living within the boundaries of the military installation (on-base) or not (off-base). A sample of 800 military personnel was surveyed to examine differences in attitudes toward gangs by military personnel on and off base. In the 1993 study, 63.5% of the respondents did not believe that gangs were a serious problem in their on-base or off-base neighborhoods. Few of the respondents reported direct contact with gangs, and

83.59% reported they had never been a target of gang violence (McMaster). Few significant differences were identified in how military personnel living on and off base responded to questions regarding their perceptions of the severity of a gang problem.

McMaster (1994) intended to determine whether the attitudes of on-base residents differed from off-base residents regarding a variety of gang topics. Of note was that 70% of the respondents, living both on base and off base, reported that gangs did not exist in their neighborhoods. Less than 14% of the respondents knew at least one gang member, and less than 10% of the respondents knew that a gang member lived in or near the community where they lived (McMaster). Only 4.2% of the respondents knew of a gang member who lived in base.

Recruiting challenges

In 1996, members of a Department of the Army task force evaluated the effects of extremist groups and reported that, "gang-related activities appear to be more pervasive than extremist activities as defined in Army Regulation 600-20" (U.S. Department of Defense [DoD], 1996, para. 16). In 1998, in a DoD directed follow up to the task force report, Flacks and Wiskoff (1998) reported that gang members adversely affected the military in a variety of distinct ways. While there was no official accounting of the scope and nature of the problem, the individual branches of the military thought the problem was significant enough to publish gang identification manuals (Flacks & Wiskoff). Recruiters and other relevant personnel were in need of better guidance on gang identifiers and the policies that guide decisions to allow gang members to enlist. Accordingly, the goal should be to eliminate the possibility that gang members can enlist in the military (Flacks & Wiskoff). In addition, due to a decline in optimal quality and quantity of enlistees, recruiters in the military had more of a propensity to recruit from the less-desired population, of which gang members were often a part.

The three primary areas found to be in need of attention by the Flacks & Wiskoff (1998) study were policies used by recruiters and those processing enlistees, connectivity and coordination with local law enforcement, and access to the juvenile records of potential enlistees. The recruiter policies in need of work include identifying gang membership indicators beyond tattoo inspection (Flacks & Wiskoff). Personality factors, biographical data, and additional screening measures should be added. Coordination with local law enforcement should focus on identifying ways to determine the criminal history of potential enlistees (Flacks & Wiskoff). Database connectivity that would allow recruiters to access law enforcement records appeared to have too many barriers (Flacks & Wiskoff). Liaisons between military and local law enforcement might facilitate these endeavors. Moreover, continued efforts and coordination with legislators should be attempted to prove the need for access to juvenile records for potential enlistees. The

alternative to legislation would be an increase of the creative practice of some recruiters who persuade enlistees to unseal these records (Flacks & Wiskoff).

Incarcerated Military Gang Members

Flacks and Wiskoff (1998) observed that Tierney's (1998) research on gang members and military acculturation should be expanded to include non-incarcerated personnel. Tierney (1998) examined 35 self-identified gang members in military (Navy and Marine) prisons. Interviews focused on reasons for enlisting, truthfulness with recruiters regarding prior arrests and convictions, links to gangs and extremist groups, and reasons for lack of assimilation and acculturation in the military (Tierney). The top reason (37.1%) given for enlisting was to get a better life or get out of the current environment. Other reasons included avoiding death or jail as a result of the gang lifestyle, providing for family, and getting job experience (Tierney). None of the respondents seemed to have had patriotism among their reasoning. This was not compared to a typical member of the military.

As noted by Flacks and Wiskoff (1998), recruiters are often the first to encounter gang members wanting to enlist in the military. Recruiters ask potential enlistees a variety of questions during the initial meetings in order to determine the individual's potential for service and success in the military. At that point in the process, the voracity of responses by potential enlistees is critical in order to provide the recruiter with information on which to build. Regarding their truthfulness with recruiters regarding prior arrests, many of the interviewees (over 50%) had prior arrests, including those sealed by juvenile courts. Some reported that their recruiter encouraged them to conceal their arrest record (Tierney). For those who had criminal records, a moral waiver was sought and granted (Tierney). Many of the interviewees without criminal records admitted to pre-service involvement in criminal activity that was undetected by law enforcement. Most of the interviewees were incarcerated for a crime that was not considered gang-related (Tierney, 1998).

For most of the interviewees, links to gangs began before enlistment. Several of the interviewees reported that family members were extensively involved in gangs, with many of those family members in prison for gang-related crimes (Tierney, 1998). Other interviewees had friends who were gang members. Reasons for lack of assimilation and acculturation in the military were not specifically identified, though many of the interviewees had characteristics that combined to form profiles of military members who had problems adjusting to military life (Tierney). Areas in which Tierney recommended additional focus included access to the juvenile records of potential enlistees, the process used by recruiters to obtain moral waivers, the conscientiousness of recruiters regarding concealment of enlistees' criminal records, screening procedures to identify potential enlistees with gang histories, and clarification of policies regarding active duty gang members serving in the military.

Gang Crime in the Military

The authors of the 2006 Gang Activity Threat Assessment (GATA) reported an increase in both gang-related investigations and incidents in 2006 over previous years. The most common gang-related crime was drug trafficking, which encompassed (31%) of the gang-related offenses reported for the year (CID, 2006). Three assaults, two homicides, and two robberies were also reported as gang-related crimes in 2006 (CID). The apparent crime rate reflected in those findings might be considered comparable with the gang crime rate in a city of over 1 million inhabitants because the number of military personnel, though fluctuating, approximates the same number. This comparison would be erroneous, however, as a city neither employs nor conducts pre-employment background checks on its inhabitants, and the military does both (Business.gov, 2009). The rate of gang-related crime in the military could more accurately be compared to the rate of gang-related crime in a large global company like Wal-Mart or McDonalds, where employees are distributed throughout many locations and are expected to favorably represent the company in their communities. It should be noted that the military likely conducts more employee background checks than either Wal-Mart or McDonalds (Ackman, 2005; Streitfeld, 2005).

Agents of the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI) prepared an unclassified report (2007) to document their efforts at intelligence collection to determine if Air Force personnel or resources were adversely affected by gang activity. The agents reported that gang members joining the military were a bigger problem than in the previous decade (AFOSI). The agents reported that gang members were becoming increasingly more sophisticated in their recruitment of young people by focusing on military dependents, using popular hip hop culture, websites and chat rooms. The agents also reported that gang members may seek to join the military for weapons training and use of combat tactics such as evasive skill and cover and concealment (AFOSI). The training could prove problematic for law enforcement personnel if the military-trained gang member employed combat tactics in the commission of a crime or passed such training on to fellow gang members.

The Impact of Gangs in the Military

Authors of the 2007 NGIC report noted that gang members in the military can threaten military operations and gang membership in the military ranks may result in a broad range of criminal activities. Members of nearly every major street gang have been documented within military installations both domestically and internationally (NGIC, 2007). Accordingly, gang members are present in most branches and across all ranks of the military, but are most common among the junior enlisted ranks. The Army, Army Reserves, and Army National Guard are most likely to have gang members in their ranks (NGIC). The presence of gang members can compromise security of military installations both internally and externally. Gang members who

serve in the military can threaten military operations (NGIC).

Military Policy and Response

Eyler (2009) reviewed the threats posed by military gang members, examined military policies regarding gang affiliation, and made recommendations for new regulations. Eyler found that gang members threaten unit order and compromise security and the critical news reports published after reported incidents of military gang activity are a threat to the public perception of the armed services (Eyler, p. 705). Moreover, the military justice system was equipped to prosecute service members who participated in criminal gang activity (Eyler).

According to Eyler, (2009) moral waivers were granted using a holistic concept of review at the recruiting and enlistment stage. Those reviews considered the severity of the offense(s), the applicant's capacity for reform, and the degree to which the applicant meets other Army standards (Eyler). Army policies directed recruiters to balance competing interests, share information, and give discretion to the individuals most familiar with the applicant when determining whether the applicant should be allowed to enlist. Shortcomings in the execution of these policies undermined good intentions and lent support to critics' claims of lowered standards for recruitment (Eyler).

Discussion

The research was limited by the small sample size and the dearth of research examining military-related gang activity. It was hoped that this review will provide more foundation to the literature and that future studies will examine this and related topics in more detail. In the alternative, an expanded focus to find a broader topic should be conducted.

Knox (2006) examined military personnel and their perception regarding gang members in the military. McMaster (1994) examined the perceptions of (presumably) non-gang members of the military community regarding gangs. Tierney (1998) addressed incarcerated gang members in the military and the process by which they entered. Eyler's (2009) study limited to literature review and selective interviews. The other reports examined police perceptions, and did not document their methodology in much detail.

Knox's (2006) study focused on a convenience sample of Illinois Army National Guard members. Data collection was accomplished using a student who was a member of the military unit who sought informal cooperation from fellow unit members (Knox). The unit was located on the south side of Chicago, IL and was predominantly African-American.

McMaster's (1994) research focused on differences in attitudes of residents on-base and off-base, and seemingly ignored otherwise relevant data to include the number of residents who personally knew gang members and who had gang

members living in their neighborhood. Flacks and Wiskoff (1998) were limited to a review of the literature, following an incident that provoked a worldwide evaluation of extremism in the military. Their study and recommendation included responses to both gang activity and extremism, especially in the recruiting process. This dual-pronged focus of different groups may have limited the research and response to the authors' recommendations. Relatively little was observed regarding specific active duty gang members or extremists.

Tierney's (1998) convenience sample included 35 of the 460 prisoners in Navy prisons that admitted to gang membership. The total number of naval inmates at the time was 4,824 (Tierney). Her relatively small study focused only on incarcerated Navy and Marine Corps members, not gang members acculturated in the Army or Air Force outside of prison. Her objective was to examine the potential effects of gang membership or extremist affiliation on an individual's acculturation and assimilation in the military community (Tierney).

The CID (2006) report and the AFOSI (2007) report depended on data submitted from agents in the field who, prior to the inquiry from which the report was generated, were not actively looking for gang members in the military. Though a clear finding of an increased number of gang-related incidents was identified in the CID report, the authors limited their attempt to explain the increase to a change in the definition of gangs and gang members. No attempt was made to explain the unusual behavior found in individuals who claim allegiance in a gang while claiming simultaneous membership in the military.

McMaster (1994) recommended a replication of her study involving other military bases to analyze perceptions of military family member children about gangs, and to determine whether association with the military affects perceptions and/or gang membership. Flacks and Wiskoff (1998) recommended standardization between the services and research on the effectiveness if the enlistee screening process, and how many recruits drop out of the enlistment process due to their involvement in gangs and extremist groups. The authors also recommended a coordinated effort by all military branches to determine the scope and nature of the gang and extremist group problem and a comprehensive database of gang and extremist group indicators (Flacks and Wiskoff). Tierney (1998), as well as Flacks and Wiskoff (1998), recommended an expanded study of the connections between gang membership and military acculturation and an effort to determine the impact of gangs and extremist groups on the military.

Neither the CID nor AFOSI reports nor the NGIC (2007) Assessment contained recommendations for the future. The NGIC did, however, identify the following intelligence gaps:

■   How many gang members are serving in each branch of the military, to include National Guard and reserve components?

■   How many military service dependents are gang members?

■   Are certain street gangs more likely to have members serving in the military?

■   Which military installations have the most gang members or experience the most gang activity?

■   How many incidences of criminal activity committed by gang-affiliated service members have been identified?

■   How many incidences of law enforcement officers on the street encountering military-trained gang members have been identified?

■   What is the extent of theft of military weapons and equipment by gang members?

■   Have gang members serving in the military compromised national security or engaged in domestic terrorism?

(NGIC, 2007, p. 17-18)

The NGIC (2007) summary was compiled from interviews and communication with a sampling of law enforcement representatives across the country. The focus of Eyler's analysis was on encouraging the military to adopt a policy to prohibit active gang membership, following legislation passed by Congress in 2008. Eyler (2009) recommended compliance with the instruction by Congress to the Secretary of Defense to prohibit members of the Armed Forces to actively participate in criminal street gangs. He suggested a unified definition of gangs and gang members, along with a listing of groups that were considered gangs and their symbols (Eyler, 2009). He also suggested a more concerted focus in the recruiting stages in order to more effectively detect gang members attempting to enter the military. Finally, Eyler recommended effective communication with local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies to assist with information sharing. In addition to the recommendations for the future addressed by the authors of the reviewed literature, an examination of the effect of military-trained gang members on the community is recommended. That type of study would shift the focus from the recruiting from the community phase to the returning to the community phase.

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About the Author

Carter F. Smith, J. D., Ph.D. specializes in gangs and other organizations and has been involved in military and federal law enforcement in the United States and overseas for over twenty-two years, and was the team chief for the Army's first gang and hate crime (Security Threat Groups) investigations team. He has provided training on Gangs to many gatherings and conferences in the Florida, Georgia, Northwest, Oklahoma, and Tennessee Gang Investigators Associations, the Regional Organized Crime Information Center, the National Gang Crime Research Center, the Southern Criminal Justice Association, the Department of Justice, and the U.S. Army. He was a founding (Executive) board member of the Tennessee Gang Investigators Association and is a member of the Speaker's Bureau for the National Alliance of Gang Investigator Associations. He is a member of the CID Special Agents' Association, the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS), the Southern Criminal Justice Association (SCJA), and the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP).