

A Media Analysis of Gang-related Homicides in British Columbia from 2003 to 2013

by

Samuel Jingfors, Gloria Lazzano, and Keiron McConnell

Abstract

Numerous research studies conducted in the past decade have focused on gangs and gang violence. The results from these studies have assisted law enforcement agencies in developing policies and practices to address gang-related homicides in the community. However, academics and police agencies have failed to establish a universal definition for identifying a gang, and distinguish gang-related homicides from non-gang-related homicides. Research has focused primarily on the criteria of location, risk factors and the crime patterns of gangs, but failed to explore the lesser-evaluated criteria of the stressors, motivation and intent involved with joining gangs. In some cases, the absence of concrete definitions or classifications has had a negative impact on reducing the presence of gangs and in preventing gang violence in particular geographic areas. In British Columbia, created programs have forced some gang members to move their operations into the province's interior (MacQueen & Treble, 2011). The authors propose that there should be a universal system for defining and classifying gangs and gang-related homicides in Canada, and that police in British Columbia should reconsider their current deployment strategies to ensure they are aligned to the demonstrated violence in which gangs are involved

Introduction

Most police agencies rely on several key factors to determine their success in solving gang-related homicides. While these factors vary among agencies, some are more commonly utilized than others. Common factors used to define gang-related homicides include the type of weapon used, the victim's relationship to the offender, and any link involving the victim or family members to an organized crime group or street gang. In some cases, the testimony of witnesses can play a vital role in determining the successful resolution of a gang-related homicide. If there is a lack of cooperation between witnesses and police, then the task of identifying a suspect becomes difficult in comparison to non-gang-related homicides (Litwin, 2004; Mahony, 2011; Roberts, 2007; Silverman & Kennedy, 1997; Trussler, 2010). Gang-related homicides are higher in the western regions of Canada (Boyce & Cotter, 2013), and limited research has been conducted on British Columbia

specifically

The objective of this research is to explore the patterns and demographics of gang-related homicides in British Columbia with the intent to inform policy makers, educators, police and the community on appropriate responses, and to ensure that these stakeholders are aware of the realities of this phenomenon. The proposed research questions are: 1) Are gang-related homicides more prevalent during evening hours? 2) Are gang-related homicides more common on specific days of the week? 3) Do gang-related homicides occur more frequently in public rather than in private venues? 4) Are knives or guns the preferred weapon in gang-related homicides?

Literature Review

Despite the continued research on gang violence, there is still much debate among gang researchers about what defines a 'gang'. At what stage does a social group transform into a gang? This question is absent an adequate sociological analysis due to the existing fragmented definitions regarding gang classification. Some argue that the presence of violence should be used to formulate a definition of gangs. Sanders (1994), argued that "if a group is willing to use enough violence to kill others, whether in defense or in aggression, then it should be considered a gang" (p. 16). In other countries, the term "gang" conjures up images of impoverished and marginalized individuals living in squalor and engaging in community turf wars. However, in British Columbia the dynamic is one of affluence and status. Instead of referring to gatherings of people as a 'gang', analysts and policy makers can use the term to explore similarities between groups of friends in social settings and organized criminal groups in an effort to capture the phenomenon (Gordon, 1998).

Arguably, police investigations of gang-related homicides are affected by the apparent absence of a concrete definition of the terms 'gang' and 'gang-related homicide'. Without a suggested universal definition, the phenomenon of gangs may be reported inaccurately due to the absence of unified guidelines for the study, description, and regulation of gang behavior (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993). In addition, the public perceives and understands gang-related homicide in the community based on the inadequate information obtained from media reports. Decker and Kempf-Leonard (1995) claimed that, "This is significant, especially if a substantial portion of the knowledge policy makers use as a basis for action comes from media sources. In a very real sense, the response of policy makers to gangs defines them as a social problem" (p.14).

Researchers Maxson and Klein (2006) combined various studies into their research model to examine the criteria of location, risk factors and crime patterns of gangs. However, their quantifiable data only examined gangs from a large-scale perspective and did not adequately account for the current gang-related problem in British Columbia. Some researchers argue that there should be more focus on the less evaluated criteria like the stressors, motivation and intent involved with joining gangs. For instance, sociologist Walter Miller (1980) defined gangs as a "self-formed association of peers, bound together by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership, well-developed lines of authority, and other

organizational features, who act in concert to achieve a specific purpose or purposes, which generally include the conduct of illegal activity and control over a particular territory, facility or type of enterprise” (Egley Jr. et al, 2006, p. 7). Miller’s definition encompasses some of the lesser-evaluated criteria that researchers need to focus on in their efforts to analyze the gang violence phenomenon.

In addition to formulating a definition for the term gang, another must also be chosen for the definition of gang-related homicides. Distinguishing between a gang-related and non-gang-related homicide is also a convoluted subject among researchers. Therefore, it is helpful in this analysis to look at the definition Statistics Canada uses in determining whether an incident is gang-related. According to Statistics Canada, incidents are “classified as “gang-related” when police believe the homicide occurred as a consequence of activities involving an organized crime group or street gang. Homicides of innocent bystanders who are killed as a result of gang-related activity are also considered gang-related” (Mahony, 2011, p. 8). Using this definition, police agencies throughout Canada reported 95 gang-related homicides countrywide in 2012, with rates remaining stable at 0.27 victims per 100,000 population (Boyce & Cotter, 2013, p. 14).

Each year, Statistics Canada publishes an annual report on *Homicide in Canada*. This report is a key component of this paper. In 2012, there were 543 homicides in Canada, 55 homicides less than the previous year (Boyce & Cotter, 2013, p. 4). Moreover, this resulted in a homicide rate of 1.56 per 100,000 population, which is a 10% decrease from 2011 and the lowest rate for homicides since 1966 (Ibid). Despite this, Canada’s homicide rate in 2012 still ranked fifth highest among 17 countries determined to be most comparable to Canada. However, Canada’s homicide rate remains considerably lower than the rate of its Southern neighbors: the United States at 4.67 per 100,000 population (Boyce & Cotter, 2013, p. 7), and Mexico at 18.2 per 100,000 population (Fraser, 2012, p. 8). This comparison is relevant as one of the key factors of violence in British Columbia is the eight billion dollar drug trade, whereby British Columbia-grown marijuana is exported to the United States and traded for Mexican cocaine (Pearce, 2009, p. 18).

Furthermore, the research also highlights the discrepancies among police agencies when it comes to evaluating a gang-related homicide. It might be argued that if a murder is motivated by a gang purpose, then it is gang-related. However, other agencies use a more inclusive approach claiming that murders are gang-related when any of the participants have some form of gang affiliation (Decker & Pyrooz, 2010). Understandably, the violence between gangs stands from someone having some connection to an organized group or street gang.

Methodology

The authors examined, through open source research (media reports), the number of homicides determined to be gang-related. In British Columbia, a large percentage of the drug trade is controlled by organized crime, which leads to violence among rival gangs. The following parameters were used to determine which homicides were considered “gang-

related.” Based on the media reports, a homicide was reported as being “gang-related” if: the report explicitly stated it was gang-related (efforts were taken to verify multiple sources); the victim was targeted; it involved organized crime; it was related to trafficking or producing drugs; and, the victim, suspect, associate or any family member thereof, was linked to a gang or organized crime. In addition to the parameters, the authors included innocent people killed in circumstances that were related to gangs. However, the criteria did not include homicidal circumstances that involved street-level drug trade (e.g, drug deal disagreements), domestic disputes and conflicts, or circumstances that were not gang-related. The sample population for this study was collected using a nonrandom purposive sampling technique. Some critics may view this definition as overly inclusive, but given the research aim to inform the police, communities and policy makers in their gang suppression efforts, such an inclusive definition was deemed optimal.

Data were sourced from the ProQuest Main Menu database and collected from five linking databases: Canadian Newsstand Major Dailies, Canadian Newsstand Pacific, CBCA – Canadian Business and Current Affairs, CBCA Reference and Current Events, and ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Globe and Mail. In addition to these primary resources, Prime Time Crime, which reports violent homicides in British Columbia’s lower mainland, Kim Bolan’s blog, a crime blogger for the Vancouver Sun, and media releases from the Vancouver Police Department, Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and the Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit (CFSEU) websites were used as points of reference for verifying homicides deemed gang-related. The total number of gang homicides obtained through data collection was (n=256).

The keywords selected from the primary and secondary sources were: gang; gang-related; targeted; organized crime; grow-rip; grow-op; drugs; drug-trade; killed; murder; and, homicide. The data collection was carried out in two phases, the first phase covered the period from 2003 to 2011 while the second phase covered years 2012 and 2013. The data were verified for their relevance and credibility to this research by using two sources and multiple media reports.

As the data collection process was carried out in two phases, the two datasets were obtained in a similar manner. ProQuest Main Menu database served as the primary hub for both datasets, with researchers using the same keywords in their investigation. One discrepancy the researchers encountered during phase two was that Royal Roads University does not subscribe to the same linking databases as Simon Fraser University. As a result, the dataset compiled in phase one linked to the five aforementioned databases within the ProQuest Main Menu database, while the dataset from phase two linked to three databases – Canadian Newsstand Pacific, CBCA Reference and Current events, and ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Globe and Mail. However, the authors concluded that despite the absence of all five linking databases during phase two, most homicides were captured through Canadian Newsstand Pacific, which was utilized by both researchers.

Early Homicides in British Columbia

Although homicide only accounts for less than 1 percent of all violent crimes in Canada, it is still the most devastating criminal offence that negatively affects victim's families and puts a strain on the resources of the Canadian criminal justice system (Boyce & Cotter, 2013, p.4).

A large number of the high profile murders that occurred in British Columbia in recent history involved male victims of East Indian descent. This is a major concern for policing agencies in the province as Indo-Canadians (East Indians) represent approximately 7.4% of the population of British Columbia (Statistics Canada, 2013, p.4). According to a report prepared by Toni Hemmati (2007, p.17) for the Department of Justice Canada,

Of the different ethnic categories of urban gangs in Vancouver, the Indo gangs appear to engage in violent crime more frequently than the other urban gangs particularly in regard to shootings. Offences, insults, and disrespect toward an Indo gang can elicit a violent response in retaliation, and can result in violence between gangs. Typical offences committed by these gangs are drug distribution, fraud and assault. While criminal activity involves economic gain, the predominance of violent crime is committed between Indo gangs of different cultural backgrounds.

For example, in 1991 the police discovered that Jimsher Dosanjh had murdered an associate of the Columbian Cartel in Vancouver – Teodoro Salcedo; the discovery was made as they worked on a multi-ethnic street gang in East Vancouver known as the Los Diablos (Edwards & Auger, 2004). As Dosanjh awaited trial, Bindy Johal, an aspiring and ambitious drug dealer, overtook his drug operation. However, a lack of witnesses meant that Dosanjh was released from criminal charges, and he immediately sought to regain control of his empire. Unfortunately, Johal was not willing to relinquish his position so Dosanjh took out a hit on Johal's life, thus creating the first of many deaths over the next decade.

After Jimsher Dosanjh was fatally shot in front of his residence in February 1994, his brother Ranjit Dosanjh immediately declared war. He acknowledged to a local reporter that he intended to shoot Bindy Johal in the head. However, before Ranjit could execute his plans, he was killed in what was considered to be a bold act of daytime violence in Vancouver (Edwards & Auger, 2004). His assassins pulled up next to him at an intersection during rush hour and fired upon his vehicle with an AK47 assault rifle. Ranjit Dosanjh was instantly killed and pronounced dead at the scene (Bell & Fayerman, 1994).

Results of the Last Ten-Years

When graphed out, the researchers' collected data presented displayed a roller coaster trend line (Figure 1). Summarily, the number of gang-related homicides between 2003 and 2005 remained relatively stable before experiencing a sharp decline in 2006. Following the decline, there was a steady increase in the number of gang-related homicides over the next three years. Fortunately, the trend didn't continue as 2010 saw a decline in the number of these homicides, which continued into 2011. However, the rising trend returned with gang-related homicides beginning to increase over the next two years. Some experts believe that the recent increase in gang-related homicides is the result of the continued expansion of drug gangs across the province of British Columbia (Rainbow, 2010).

According to prior research, violent crimes in Canada resulting from the use of firearms are extremely rare. The research pointed to firearms being the weapon of choice in only 2.4 percent of all violent crimes (Dauvergne & Socio, 2008, p.2). Firearm regulations in Canada are very strict, but with the United States border so close, the smuggling of Canadian drugs in trade for illegal United States firearms is a very active criminal endeavor (MacQueen, 2005). The research conducted in this study illustrated firearms were the weapons of choice in 73 percent of gang-related homicides in British Columbia. Based on the data in Figure 2, it can be concluded that police should direct their efforts towards reducing gang member accessibility to firearms, particularly as Canada's overall rate of violent crime related to firearms is not significant.

Another area of concern to both citizens of British Columbia and the police was the location of gang-related homicides. Figure 3 illustrates that the majority of gang-related homicides occurred in public venues in comparison to private areas. This presents a serious problem because the threat to innocent bystanders is greatly increased, as indicated in Figure 2 where firearms were used in the majority of gang-related homicides. British Columbia has already witnessed these kinds of events where innocent people were injured or killed in areas where gang members were at war with each other¹ (Bellett, 2007; Bolan, 2010; Kerr, 2009; McLellan, 2004). In response to this, community programs like Bar Watch and Restaurant Watch² have been implemented, in addition to the establishment of the Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit – British Columbia (CFSEU)³ along with increased numbers of independent police gang units (Bolan, 2011, 2010; Brunoro, 2009; Grant 2009; Sinoski, 2007).

figure 3

According to O'Flaherty and Sethi (2010), certain cities in the neighboring United States experience homicides in areas with high poverty, school dropouts, and single parent homes. However, this is not case in the province of British Columbia as indicated by the median housing prices and the all-around standard of living that makes it one of top ten cities in the world (Clarke, 2014). Furthermore, the data in Figure 4 indicate that gang-related homicides occur in various cities throughout British Columbia, unlike other countries where gang violence is limited to certain cities fitting the description outlined by O'Flaherty and Sethi (2010). In addition, these occurrences of gang violence in the province do not transpire in impoverished areas or areas of low property value.

Figure 4

The data presented in Figure 5 illustrates the year-to-year change in gang-related homicides in British Columbia. While the province hasn't experienced levels of gang violence similar to 2008 and 2009, recent trends suggest that it is once again on the rise. There is also the issue created by the lack of witnesses willing to cooperate with the police, which could potentially lead to gang members being released from criminal charges (Trussler, 2010).

Although Figure 3 indicates that most of the gang violence occurs in public venues, Figure 6 indicates that most of it occurs at night and the early hours of the morning. In the last decade, the majority of gang-related homicides have occurred between 8:00 PM and 4:00 AM, while there was continued fluctuation between the 5:00 AM and 7:00 PM. However, there are two time frames throughout the day that would benefit from further research, these are 9:00 AM and 4:00 PM. These are prime hours where people are commuting to work or eating breakfast in the morning, and then leaving work and possibly

going to dinner or other social events. It is worthy to note that schools in British Columbia begin classes between 8:00 to 8:45 AM, and end between 2:15 to 3:00 PM. As result, Figure 6 can possibly be used to formulate a patrol strategy for police to utilize their resources efficiently.

figure 5

figure 6

Figure 7 illustrates the day of the week that gang-related homicides took place between 2003 and 2013. The data suggests that on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday there is a strong possibility of gang activity occurring. By contrast, historical trends suggest that Monday, Wednesday and Sunday experience minor changes with a reduced chance of gang violence taking place. Figures 6 and 7 would be particularly useful to police agencies in helping them determine schedules and allocation of gang task force units. These agencies should formulate similar models using the current patterns and strategies in place, then compare it to the historical data they have on gang violence in order to identify areas of improvement. This could prove to be very beneficial especially when the “B.C. government is cutting \$2.8-million from the budget of the anti-gang police agency that combines the efforts of 14 forces across British Columbia” (Bailey, 2014). Therefore, maximizing the already limited resources available will be critical to efforts directed at the continued fight against gangs in the province.

Conclusion

Despite the abundance of research on gangs, academics and policing agencies still do not have a universal definition for the terms “gang” and “gang-related homicide.” Currently, the majority of police agencies in Canada, and other countries, utilize different criteria for defining “gang-related homicide.” As discussed, the lack of a universal definition can be problematic because it makes it difficult to accurately portray or understand gang violence (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993). It also makes research into this area more challenging and may lead to studies being either overly inclusive or not inclusive enough.

The research illustrated firearms were the weapon of choice in 73 percent of gang-related homicides in British Columbia between 2003 and 2013. A recommendation to combat this issue is for all policing agencies within the province to unify their criteria when

determining whether a homicide is gang-related. In addition, police could benefit from data models such as those in Figures 3, 6 and 7, which illustrate gang-related homicides in British Columbia predominately occur in public at various times in the early evening, throughout the night, and into the early morning hours. The authors contend that the results from this study may vary if conducted utilizing a less inclusive definition or variations in the keywords. In addition, the results would likely be different if this study was carried out in a region where a large percentage of the drug trade was not controlled by organized crime.

Further research into the public nature of this violence should be undertaken to better understand the evolving landscape of the gang culture in British Columbia. This would allow local policing agencies to remain constantly updated in their efforts to disrupt gang violence and organized crime and ensure public safety.

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About the Authors:

Samuel Jingfors has a Bachelor of Arts degree from Simon Fraser University with a major in Criminology. Samuel has spent over 5 years working with youth at-risk of gang involvement in BC's largest school district in partnership with the RCMP. A field practice placement with the Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit - Gang Task Force inspired further research interests. Currently a consultant and trainer with Safer Schools Together, Samuel collects open source social media intelligence for police investigations both in Canada and the United States.

Gloria Lazzano completed her Bachelor of Arts degree in Justice Studies from Royal Roads University and was a recipient of the President's Scholar Award. A member of the BC Paralegal Association, Gloria possesses over seven years of experience as a paralegal and is currently working with a law firm in downtown Vancouver.

Keiron McConnell is a serving police officer in British Columbia. In addition, he is a Professor of Criminology at Kwantlen Polytechnic University and Douglas College, and a Professor of Justice Studies at Royal Roads University. He is currently working on his doctorate degree with a focus on British Columbia and Gangs. Moreover, he was the recipient of the 2014 Frederick Milton Thrasher award.