

MINNEAPOLIS

As Twin Cities street gangs evolve, traditional hierarchies vanish

Police say members are more mobile, violent and brazen.

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By the time the bullets stopped flying, more than 50 casings littered the northeast Minneapolis street.

As police detectives continued to search for suspects in the shootout that led to a killing last June, they started to connect seemingly unrelated dots: Some of the alleged shooters belonged not only to Minneapolis street gangs, but also crews from across the river in St. Paul.

In many ways, the episode was symptomatic of the Twin Cities' changing gang terrain. Youths that once fought bloody turf wars over drug sales have splintered into dozens of smaller, loosely organized cliques that aren't confined by geographical boundaries. Members are more mobile, more brazen, more violent, authorities say. And they're no longer beholden to traditional hierarchies, according to those who pursue and study them.

"You used to have to get permission to shoot somebody," said Ramsey County Undersheriff Mike Martin, who serves as president of the Minnesota chapter of the Midwest Gang Investigators Association. "It's not like that anymore. They just impulsively retaliate."

The evolution has forced law enforcement to rethink its strategies on tackling gang activity — the primary driver of gun violence in Minneapolis and St. Paul. More than half of St. Paul's record-breaking 28 gun deaths in 2019 were linked to gang-related shootings scattered throughout the city. Minneapolis had a similar rate.

After dark, officers with St. Paul's Gun and Gang unit patrol the streets responding to frequent shots-fired calls and occasionally assisting the homicide squad with investigations.

"I've never seen it like this before," Sgt. Steve Lentsch said during a recent ride-along with the unit. "It's heartbreaking when you're driving from one shooting to the next."

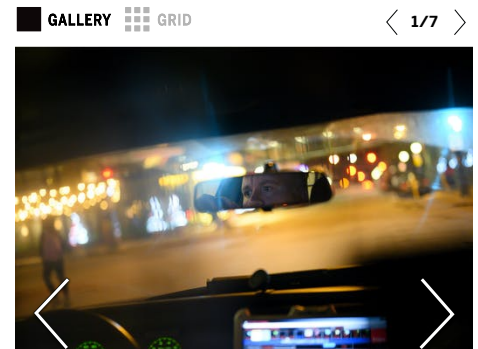
During the mid-'90s, when police had seemingly unlimited overtime budgets to combat growing gun violence, task forces targeted gang leaders with federal racketeering laws.

Those crime-fighting tactics were successful — putting high-profile gang bosses behind bars for decades, Martin said, but also had the unintended effect of creating a power vacuum.

Without someone to call the shots, long-established gangs like the Vice Lords and Gangster Disciples repeatedly fractured into smaller, unpredictable crews that were more difficult to contain.

"Even though we were doing what we thought we needed to do, in some ways, we made the problem even worse," Martin said.

Sasha Cotton, head of Minneapolis' Office of Violence Prevention, said that gang membership is no longer a lifelong commitment, with allegiances much more fluid nowadays, sometimes shifting from week to week.



AARON LAVINSKY, STAR TRIBUNE

Members of the St. Paul Police Department's gang unit, including Sgt. Shawn Campbell, left, and officer Colby Bragg, right, returned to their

“What we’re seeing is, one, people are moving more frequently than they used to across the city,” said Cotton, the chief architect of the Project LIFE anti-violence program. “Geographically, you’re getting a North Side guy who moves to the East Side or moves to the Midway, and they’re linking up with people there.”

As a result, she said, gang violence has largely morphed from ingrained rivalries over territory to interpersonal disputes, with social media playing an outsized role in fanning some of these newly formed conflicts. So teens seek out groups that can help protect them in the short term, regardless of geography.

Looser alliances

“We see alliances striking up all over the place, and they’re based on numbers and resources,” Cotton said. “It’s kind of that old thing: The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

She offered another, simpler explanation: As society becomes more mobile, many young gang members, lacking stable housing, are staying with relatives or girlfriends around the metro area.

The Green Line light-rail line connecting the region’s two downtowns has also increased ease of access for teens and — as St. Paul police argued in a [federal grant application last summer](http://www.startribune.com/st-paul-police-tie-violence-to-lrt/513217642/) — contributed to a spike in gun violence “being committed across city boundaries.” That assessment drew a rebuke from U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, who called it an inaccurate reflection of the city that “undermines the necessary work to advance transit funding.”

Bill Finney, another Ramsey County undersheriff and former St. Paul police chief, suspects that teens feuding online set up meeting spots at transit stations along the light-rail line to settle their differences in person. Last year, he witnessed such an encounter as two boys wielding knives greeted another pair getting off the train. The attack resulted in a stabbing, Finney said.

Before the internet, graffiti was the medium of choice to diss a rival, experts say. The emboldened could, under the cover of darkness, spray paint an anonymous message on an adversary’s property.

But an explosion of social media has accelerated those disputes. Today, teens flock to Facebook, Snapchat and YouTube to disrespect one another through flashy rap videos without ever leaving their homes. The words are not veiled, and neither is the poster. Retribution is swift.

Cmdr. Ken Sass, who leads St. Paul’s Gun and Gang unit, laments that teens often allow those seemingly petty quarrels to escalate into violence.

“If you’ve been insulted by somebody, your recourse is to shoot them,” he said, adding that his team scours social media to try to intervene before groups can retaliate.

But the ability to change usernames and hop from platform to platform makes it difficult to track threatening messages, Sass said, which is why he wants to add a civilian analyst to his department. An extra pair of eyes would free up his investigators to spend more time in the field diffusing tensions.

Authorities say they are seeing more and more Minneapolis gang members align themselves with counterparts in St. Paul, and vice versa.

The shootout in northeast Minneapolis last summer happened in the 2200 block of NE Kennedy Street, where a group of people were attending a live music event. A confrontation broke out between several HAM Crazy members on one side and members of the North Side-based FreeShotz gang and south Minneapolis gang Rolling 30s Bloods on the other.

No one was injured in the incident, but police say it was almost certainly connected to a homicide later that day of a 26-year-old Minneapolis man. The victim, Steven Creamer, was at the scene of the Northeast shots-fired incident and was seen on camera firing several times at members of HAM Crazy, an East St. Paul gang, according to court filings.

High-definition security footage from a nearby building captured the chaos that ensued, with punches being exchanged and, eventually, gunfire, the court filings say. Ballistics testing determined that casings found at the homicide scene were likely fired from a gun used at the earlier shots-fired incident, court filings say. No arrests have yet been announced in the case.

Sometimes the encounters are more random.

A shooting [outside the Minnesota State Fair \(http://www.startribune.com/gang-violence-marred-final-hours-of-minnesota-state-fair/559700292/\)](http://www.startribune.com/gang-violence-marred-final-hours-of-minnesota-state-fair/559700292/) over Labor Day weekend, tied to the opposing “High End” and “Low End” factions of north Minneapolis, wounded three men and terrified a neighborhood unaccustomed to such violence.

Authorities have also noticed an uptick in violence involving east African gangs from both sides of the river.

Any solution to the problem starts with community involvement and a willingness to report those harboring illegal firearms, said Martin, the gang investigator.

“Until we get these guns off the street, we’ll be spinning our wheels.”

Libor Jany is the Minneapolis crime reporter for the Star Tribune. He joined the newspaper in 2013, after stints in newsrooms in Connecticut, New Jersey, California and Mississippi. He spent his first year working out of the paper's Washington County bureau, focusing on transportation and education issues, before moving to the Dakota County team.

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