WHAT'S THE GANG WEARING?:

AN EXPLORATORY AND DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF POLICE GANG UNIFORMS

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies on police uniforms have found uniform color and style continue to evolve as do the dynamics around police uniforms and citizen impression. Given no research has been done specifically on police gang unit uniforms, this study was exploratory and aimed to determine if there was a visual standard regarding the operational appearance of police gang unit uniforms in Canada and the United States. Using targeted and purposive sampling the researcher collected 64 samples of digital images containing police gang unit officers in uniform for content analysis. The analyzed data yielded quantitative statistics that were applied to the primary research question. These statistics found that police gang unit officers in Canada and the United States are most likely to deploy in a unit-specific police uniform, that is black in color, visually identifies as a gang unit (by patch or crest), and be wearing external body armor that is black in color. The researcher suggests the study's findings be applied to further research to determine the potential implications police gang crime unit uniforms may have on citizen impression. All of which contributes to the ongoing debates around the militarization of the police.

Key Words: police gang unit, gangs, uniform, police uniform, uniform color, militarization, social construction

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Problem Statement

The central question that this research sought to answer was to determine if there is a "visual standard" around operational appearance for police gang crime unit uniforms. To do so, the author conducted an analysis of the daily duty attire for police gang units in Canada and the United States. The research is exploratory and descriptive in nature.

Literature Review

How do we know a police officer when we see one? Is it the vehicle, the lights, the sirens, the uniform, or the badge? Furthermore, once we have identified someone as a police officer, how do we differentiate between patrol constables to specialized police officers? As a society, we use labels to identify things. Labels come from all sorts of external variables that surround us (Berger, Luckmann, & Zifonun, 2002; Boghossian, 2001). A police officers uniform serves to generate one of those labels. At the onset of this research, it became evident that there is limited research on police uniforms and exceedingly limited research on specialized police unit uniforms, such as police gang units. To understand modern uniform impression and uniform functionality, the evolution of policing must first be examined (Johnson, Plecas, Anderson, & Dolan, 2015).

The first application of standardized uniforms in North America comprised of royal blue uniforms used by the New York City Police Department (NYPD), which were first supplied in 1871and were based off the appearance of Sir Robert Peel's British police uniforms. The original NYPD uniform included a hat, tie, and button up coat - several formal features that helped contribute to the evolving visual cues that led to today's ceremonial police uniforms (Lentz & Chaires, 2007). In the late 1800's and early 1900's,

police uniforms shifted away from formal dress and evolved into a functional attire that had more similarities to civilian clothing. During this time period, specialized police branches, such as detectives and sheriffs, wore civilian clothing with only their badge as their identifying marker. Since the late 1990's, uniforms became progressively less formal and they seemed to evolve around functionality, though there continues to be significant variance between departments, organizations, cities and countries (Johnston, 2005).

The bulk of research on the subject of police uniforms focuses on color. In Johnson's (2005) study on citizen impressions of police uniform color, the overall theme was that black colored police uniforms produced the most negative first impressions from citizens. However, it is also noted that having a much lighter uniform, such as an all khaki uniform, does not elicit more positive impressions of police from citizens (Johnson, 2005). Interestingly, the most positive citizen impressions were of uniforms that were a light blue shirt and navy pant Perhaps other police artifacts such as a duty belt, side-arm, and tactical vest could impact citizen impression on the corresponding uniform colour(s). Since Johnsons (2005) study, new research has contradicted his findings. In Nickels (2007) article, *Good Guys Wear Black: uniform color and citizen impressions of police*, the goal was to examine whether officers uniform color influences public impression of officer character. This study used a convenience sample of university undergraduates who were surveyed using digitally manipulated photographs of officers' race, posture, and uniform color. The study found that uniform color does influence impression formation, but not in the expected manner, finding that black uniforms resulted in a more positive impression of officers compared to lighter uniforms.

A critique of many police uniform studies is that the focus is often solely on uniform color and other items such as duty belt, weapons, or vests are examined – raising the question of whether other police artifacts or visible markers impact citizen impression, in addition to uniform colour(s). In a study done by Johnson, Plecas, Anderson and Dolan (2013) entitled *No Hat or Tie Required: Examining Minor Changes to the Police Uniform*, the goal was to determine if police officer uniforms that included a hat and tie influenced citizen impression. The study took place in the Southeastern United States and conducted phone surveys to people after police interaction to determine if the presence or absence of a hat and tie influenced citizen impression during any encounters with the police. The findings suggest that police uniform policies that require a hat and or tie is solely an issue of police agency preference as neither the hat and tie were not found to improve or worsen citizen impression towards police officers (Johnson et al., 2013).

An interesting approach to uniform research was utilized by Cooke (2005) in *A Policing Family*, which is critical lens used to examine perceptions of police. Cooke 2005) suggests that through there is a decline in familiarity between citizen and police officer stemming from the evolution of policing methods, technological advances, private security functions, and legislations that govern various public and private agencies. He particularly suggests that specialized police units who deal with guns, drugs, or gangs are identified by an extra, exterior badge that informs the public, at least to some extent, of what that specialized units mandate is. That said, unfamiliarity with the function of that unit, coupled with one's subjective interpretation of that specialized unit's identification badge, may affect public perceptions of the uniforms. It is also not known how this

decline in citizen and police officer familiarity affects citizen impression towards police officers.

Police uniforms evolve to better serve the public. There is a certain ability of a police uniform to induce subordination, inspire trust, and compel behavior. How an officer's uniform achieves these effects is not yet explored in the literature. The literature has also yet to explore how different variations of police officer uniform design may alter the findings of citizen impression. It would be useful to deconstruct the ideologies around police uniform and citizen impression formation through a social constructionist lens to better understand how officer uniform and citizen impression relate to one another.

Theory

Social construction theory may provide a useful lens in understanding how citizen impression varies between the subjective external reality of police uniform as artifacts and how that is internalized by the public through belief systems within a community (Johnson, 2005; Berger et al., 2002). In the book "The Social Construction of Reality" (2002) by Berger et al., suggests that concepts of both internal and external reality are linked to the ideologies of social construction. These may also be referred to as objective reality and subjective reality. Objective reality is the physical make-up of the external world that can be visually analyzed, while subjective reality is how the individual analyzes, and then internalizes, the external reality (Boghossian, 2001). This notion of reality is also liked to the primary and secondary socialization process of identity formation. In simpler terms, children learn about the external world through what they are told and taught during their primary socialization period (Boghossian, 2001). During

this period, a child will begin to internalize concepts of their external social world that they will carry with them into their secondary period of socialization. Although social construction theory is not temporal, identity formations over primary and secondary socialization periods are temporal. It is noted that the longer a child or youth has outside influences shaping their socialization processes, the more internalized these belief systems will become. Subsequently, the cognitive window for altering the internalization of subjective identity through objective reality narrows (Berger, et al., 2002). Within theories of identity formation, it is noted that social construction is concerned with the sociology of knowledge. Knowledge is socially distributed, and the mechanisms by which it is distributed make up the primary focus of social construction (Berger, et al., 2002).

Within a policing context, people can internalize both conscious belief systems and subconscious macro-aggressions during socialization periods in our lives, which then may contribute to our internal belief systems (Sue & Sue, 1990). A person may have never had a negative experience with the police, but due to the social construction of the external belief systems they are socialized with, they may internalize a subjective bias. A subjective bias which they may then project onto the objective realties of police based off visual cues of socially constructed artifacts such as police uniform (Boghossian, 2001). To articulate this further, an example might be a single, isolated case of a police officer using excessive force is reported at a disproportionate rate within the media. Through the socialization process of social construction theory, any viewer may internalize the individual characteristics of how that single officer appears through their uniform style, uniform color, race, or age. That same viewer is then encapsulated within their own subjective reality of what they believe a police officer is, or does, or

should be, and they may project these internal belief systems onto the external reality of all police officers.

The media's role in this process also increases public awareness of behaviors that have been labelled deviant or defined as problematic. This leads us to the understanding that actual increases in crime can be caused by one of three variables:

I) Actual rises and falls in real crime.

II) Changes in socially constructed fear towards crime prevalence.

III) Reclassification of activities as criminal, (Miller, 2009).

To illustrate these variables, I draw on a personal example from an upper level criminology lecture on community safety and crime prevention:

My professor asked the class what we thought the top 3 reported crimes (UCR data) were in the city of Surrey, British Columbia; excluding driving offences. We were asked this question because, how is society supposed to work on preventing crime if first we don't know what the most prevalent crimes are? Most the class reported assault, theft and robbery. Some even mentioned crimes resulting in death, like manslaughter. In reality, the top 3 offences were: nuisance, disturbing the peace and theft under $5000 from automobiles (Dr. Greg Jenion, personal communication, 2014).

This example showcases a class of 30 upper level criminology students who are arguably more informed regarding issues of crime than the general population. Yet, as a class we still fell short at identifying what the top three crimes were. Perhaps because of *variable II* and the perceived fear of certain crimes; perceptions by which we would have absorbed through the media's over representation of crimes. In response to the socially constructed mechanisms of uniform impression and how the media reports, or perhaps distorts society, can be influenced into a state of moral panic.

It is within these situations that it is important to acknowledge the social constructionism of crime and the importance of examining how crime is constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. Once we better understand this process we can then address the implications of such constructions and apply them to situational encounters of impression. That is, police officers uniform impression on citizens.

Terminology

Gangs

The term gang is not universal. It means something different depending on place and time. If there was a universal definition of gang, it would pose a risk to exclude certain groups that may exhibit gang like behaviors, or it could possibly include too many aspects of groups; making the scope of addressing gang activity too difficult (McConnell, 2015).

Police Uniform

Clothing, in general, is a key factor in making judgement about a person based off their appearance. Understanding the dynamic around how clothing acts as a visual cue to relay information from one person to another is important as it has been found to be a main factor in first impressions. From first impressions, we interpret status, authority, and attitudes from a person based off appearance. While this does not just apply to uniform, the phenomena is arguably heightened with regards to police uniform, as it has been found that police uniform not only acts as a visual cue for impression, but the uniform can elicit positive behaviors when in proximity (Johnson, 2005). However, 'police uniform', as a term, lacks any universal definition and, therefore, can present as

a contested topic. Given that a police uniform can be a contested topic, the very use of the terminology can mean something different in different settings. Within the setting of police gang unit uniforms, uniforms are an evolving attire worn by officers who deal with gang members. Just as those police gang unit officers' unit titles may differ, their uniform styles may differ. How those uniforms come to be defined, may also differ. However, the lack of universal definition around uniforms does not affect how the study unpacks its findings with regards to police gang unit uniforms.

Methodology

The project design was split into four phases.

Phase 1 - Literature review:

From September to November 2016, the researcher conducted a detailed review of the academic literature related to the evolution of police uniforms, social constructionist theory, and police uniform studies, particularly content analysis of digital media.

Phase 2 - Sampling procedure design and implementation

Purposive sampling was used because to draw a very specific targeted sample: uniforms of police gang units in North America. First, to gain a scope of police agencies to include in the research, a preliminary list was created of all the provinces in Canada and all the States in the United States. Once a list was generated, the researcher searched each state and province to determine what the largest city or cities were within each province and state. The list of major cities acted as a preliminary list for sampling. The researcher wanted to include at least one police gang unit uniform analysis from

each State in the US and each Province in Canada. This was not possible because not all states or provinces had police gang units. The sample criteria for the studies data samples of digital media were:

a) The image sample had to be in color and with enough lighting to determine uniform color; this excluded any greyscale images.

b) The image sample had to contain a date stamp to control for temporality.

c) The image sample had to contain the upper body of the police gang unit officers' uniform.

d) The image sample had to be linked to a website or article that contained a description of the photo.

e) The image sample description had to state the officers in the photo were part of a gang unit.

f) The image sample had to be of high enough resolution to analyze the sample as per the research study's sub-questions.

g) The image must have contained a physical person in the gang unit uniform.

Phase 3 - Data collection:

From December 2016 to February 2017, the researcher conducted data collection using content analysis of public sourced digital media. All data was searched and retrieved from a Google Chrome internet browser search. After extensive searches, the researcher yielded 64 data samples listed in alphabetical order by country and then by province or state[1] (see Appendix A).

Phase 4 - Data analysis:

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[1] *The sample names of police gang units may be different from gang unit titles analyzed in the samples because the sample analysis is done solely on what the uniform says the unit identifies as. Whereas sample titles identify corresponding to what the police units' title is on paper.*

Data analysis was conducted by visually examining all 64 of the data sample images in order to answer the following research sub-questions:

1) Are the officers in uniform?

2) Are the officers in plain clothes?

3) Are the officers in hybrid[2]?

4) What color is the uniform?

5) Does the uniform say Gang Unit? (If not, what synonyms are used).

6) What words are used to describe the unit? (Examples: gang crime unit, violent suppression team, gang squad, etc.).

7) Is the officers vest internal or external?

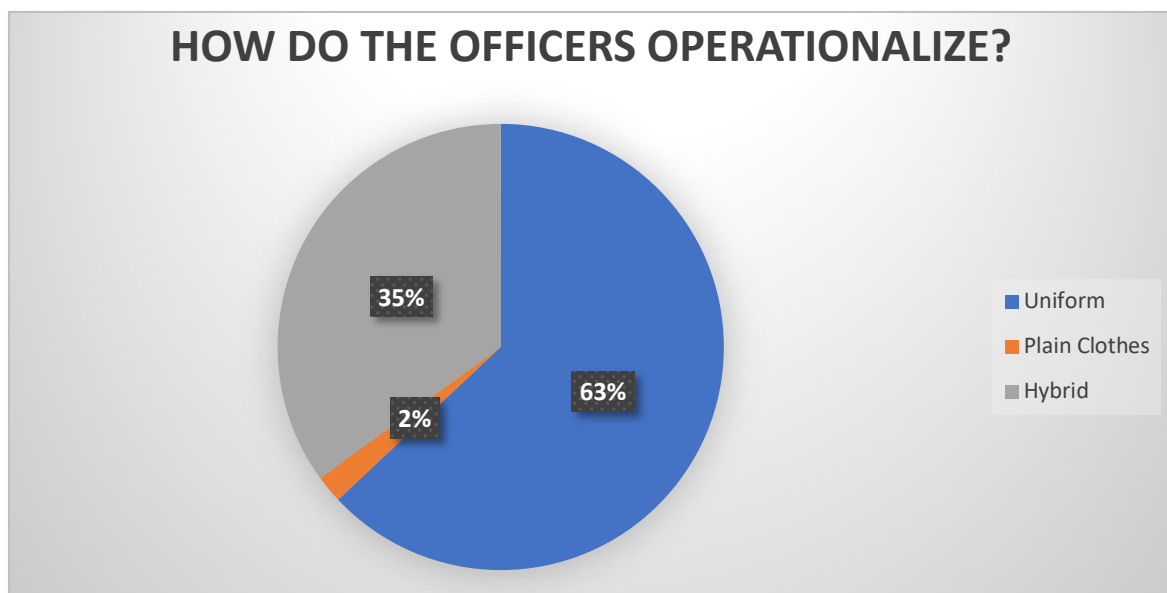 **8)** What color is the officers vest?

Results

The central research question of this project sought to generate insight into the daily duty attire for police gang units in Canada and the United States with the aim to determine if there is a "visual standard" around their operational appearance; being uniforms, plainclothes, or hybrid. Along with this central question, six research sub-questions were used in the visual analysis of the data samples. After collecting a total of 64 digital images of police gang crime unit officers in uniform, the researcher analyzed all 64 samples and generated the following quantitative statistics. This section illustrates the findings derived from the study. These findings are shown quantitatively and illustrated with statistics and visuals. The questions follow in the same order as the aforementioned research sub-question.

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[2] Hybrid is defined as regular clothes with any police garment.

1. "Are the gang crime unit officers in uniform, plain clothes, or hybrid?"

Out of 64 samples, one sample included two officers and was used twice for this question giving a total yield of 65 for this question. The findings suggest that 63% (n=41) officers deploy in uniform, 35% (n=23) officers deploy in a hybrid capacity and 2% (n=1) officers deploy in plain clothes [Figure 1].

Figure 1

## 2. "What color is the officers' uniform[3]?"

Out of 64 samples two samples were used twice for this question, given a total yield of 66 for this question. The findings suggest that 68% (n=45) gang crime unit

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[3]*Officer uniform, as it relates to this research question, was limited to upper body attire only. Previous research has restricted officer uniform to upper body attire only. This restriction to upper body only is justified because most police encounters are in mobilized encounters. That being either in passing as one drives passed an officer in their vehicle, where their lower body is not visible; or during a traffic stop where an officer has pulled a person over and the vehicle door blocks the lower body of the officer* (Johnson, 2005).

officers deploy in uniform. While the remaining 32% (n=21) do not deploy in a standardized uniform.

Furthermore the 68% (n=45) that do deploy in uniform were analyzed for uniform color. The findings suggest that, of that 45 samples who deploy in uniform, 67% (n=30) deploy in a black uniform, 2 (n=10) deploy in a dark navy uniform, 4% (n=2) deploy in a green uniform, 2% (n=1) deploy in a light grey uniform, 2% (n=1) deploy in a light blue uniform, and 2% (n=1) deploy in an orange uniform. Figure 2 illustrates how the uniform colors compare to one another.

Figure 2
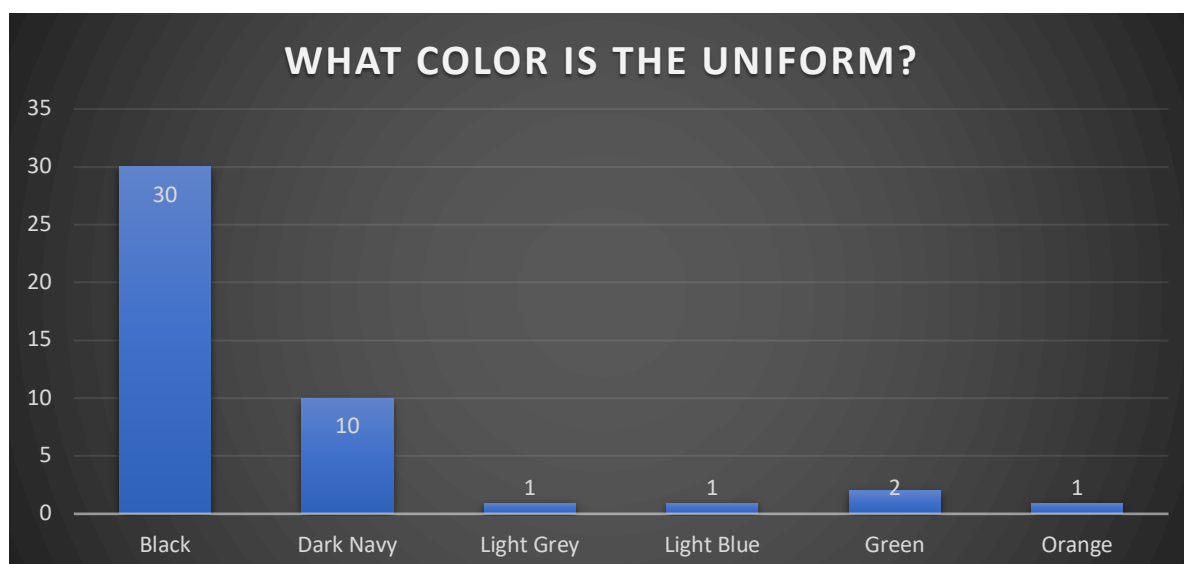
3. "Does the uniform specifically say gang unit?"

Out of the 64 samples each sample was used only once, giving a total yield of 64 for this question. The findings suggest that 66% (n=42) of samples have "unit identification" of some kind. Which leaves 34% (n=22) of samples that do not have any specific gang unit identification and/or the sample lacked certainty regarding unit identification.

Of those 42 samples that have unit identification 57% (n=24) specifically identify as being a "gang unit." While the other 43% (n=18) identify as a unit by using some form of synonyms for "gang unit." Taking the sample as a whole, 38% (n=24) identify as gang unit, 28% (n=18) identify with a synonym to gang unit, and 34% (n=22) lack unit-specific identification. Figure 3 illustrates the total breakdown of unit identification as it relates to sub-question three.

Figure 3
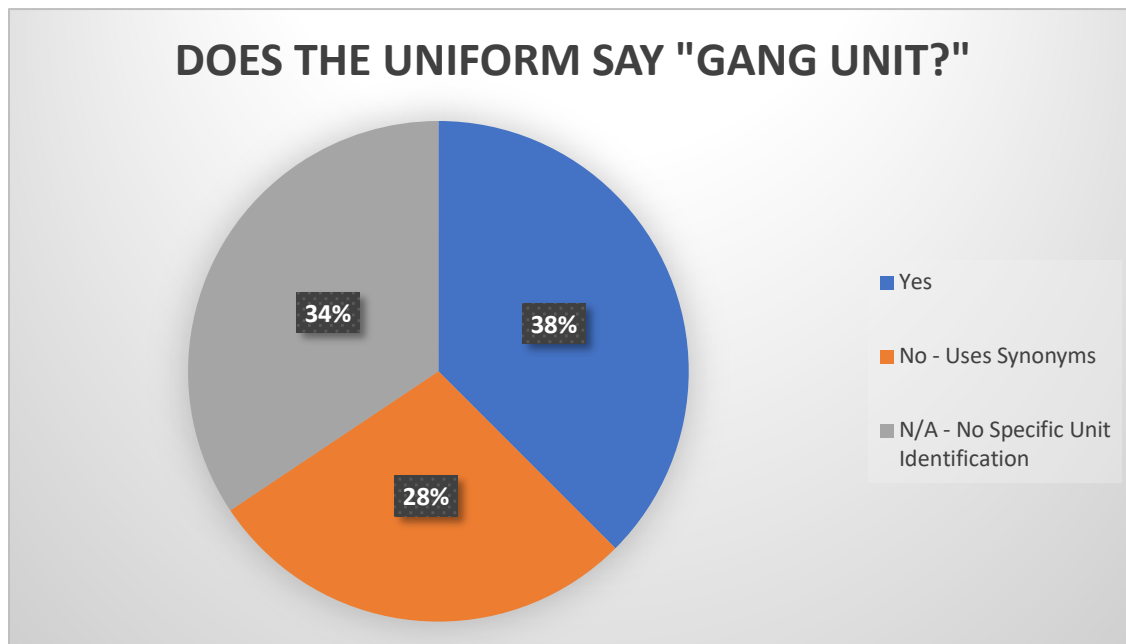
4. **"What words are used to describe the unit?"**

Building off question three, question four illustrates the remaining unit identifiers[4] that are used to describe the police gang unit but are identified by another label. Given that 38% (n=24) sample in question three identify specifically as a gang unit and 34%

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[4] *Unit identifiers, with regards to this question, are limited to the visible representation of what the physical uniform states the units' identification is.*

(n=22) of the sample have no specific identificatio, question four applies only to the remaining 18 of the 64 samples.

The remaining 18 samples identify as follows: 4 out of the 18 identify as being a "Gang Task Force", 3 out of 18 identifies as being "Gang Enforcement", 1 out of 18 identifies as "Dart", 1 out of 18 identifies as being a "Gang Crime Unit", 1 out of 18 identifies as being a "Gang Detail", 1 out of 18 identifies as being a "Gang Enforcement Team", 1 out of 18 identifies as being "Gang Suppression", 1 out of 18 identifies as being a "Gang Tactical Unit", 1 out of the 18 identifies as being a "Gang Squad", 1 out of the 18 identifies as "Guns & Gangs", 1 out of the 18 identifies as being a "Multi Agency Gang Task Force", 1 out of the 18 identifies as being a "Street Crime Unit", and 1 out of 18 identifies as being a "Viper Unit." Figure 4 illustrates these findings and how they compare to one another with regards to sub-question four.

Figure 4
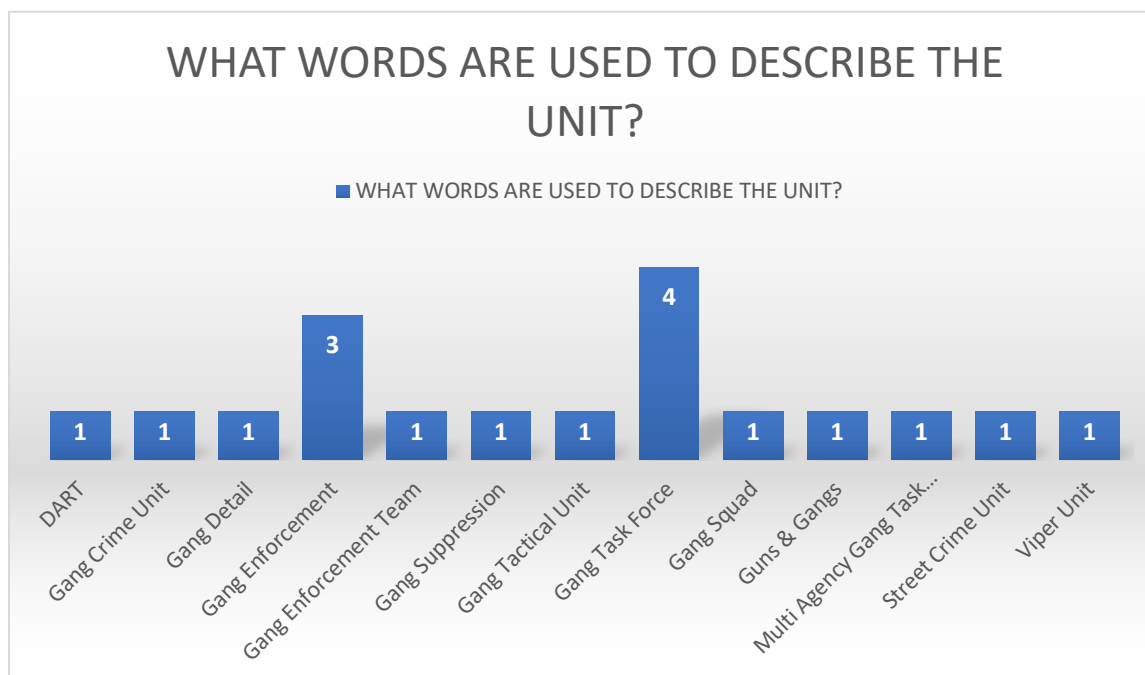
5. "Is the officers vest internal or external?"

Out of the 64 data samples collected, 4 samples were used twice for this question because officers had both internal and external vests within the same sample, giving a total yield of 68 for this research question. The data suggests that 43% (n=29) gang unit officers deploy with their vests being internal (under their uniform). While 57% (n=39) gang unit officers deploy with their vests being external (over-top of their uniform). Figure 5 illustrates the comparison between gang unit officers that deploy with internal and external vests.

Figure 5

IS THE OFFICERS VEST INTERNAL OR EXTERNAL?

43%

57%
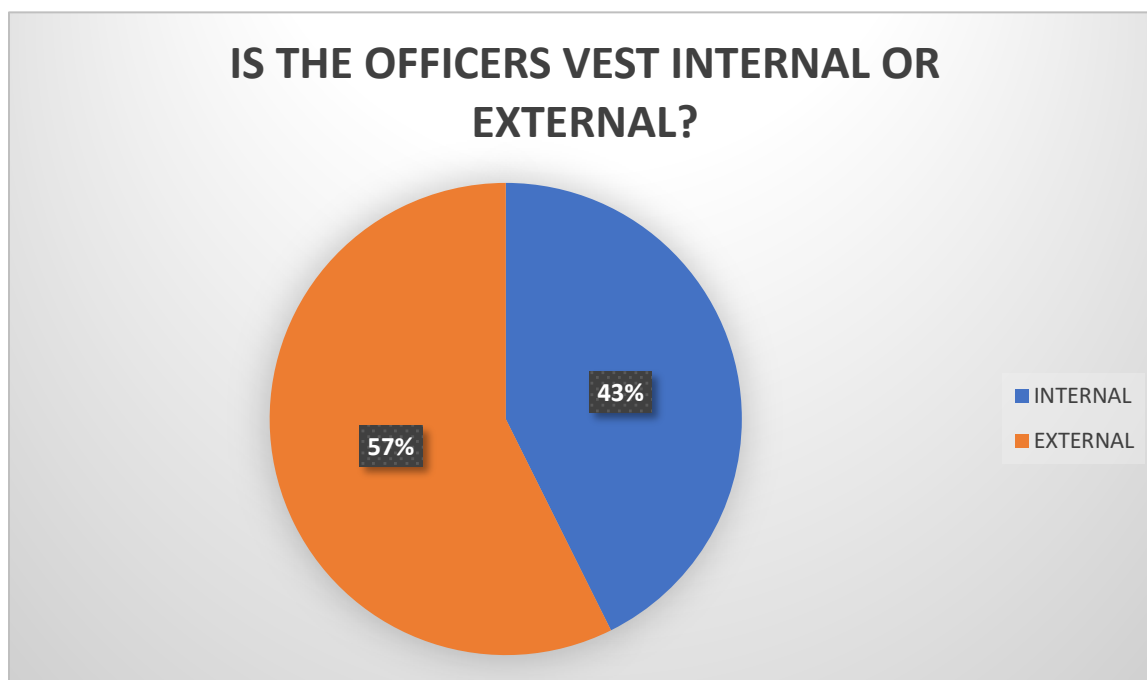
INTERNAL
EXTERNAL

6. "What color is the officers vest?"

Of the 64 data samples collected 7 were used twice [5] for a total yield of 71 for this research question. The data suggests that 59% (n=42) have external vests. While 41% (n=29) do not have external vests, and could not be visually assessed for color.

The research team found that 83% (n=35) of samples that had external vests were black in color, 10% (n=4) of vests were green in color, 5% (n=2) were tan in color, and 2% (n=1) were dark navy in color. Figure 6 illustrates the distribution of external vest colors among gang unit police officers.

Figure 6

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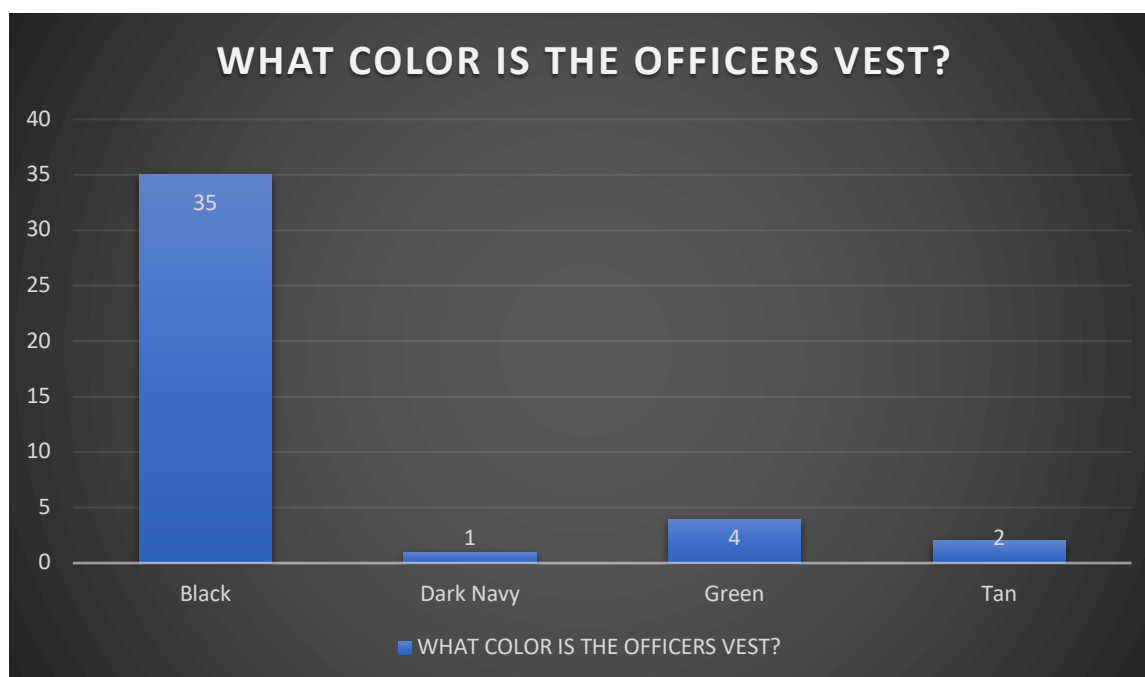
[5] *The sample total in question six is greater because multiple officers had external vests that differed in color, which required that they be counted twice in regards to question six, but only counted once as being external vests in question five.*

Themes

This section will discuss the study's findings. Part of this discussion will be unpacking the core themes inferred from the research sub-questions findings and how these findings relate to the projects primary research question. To be reflexive in the research the findings will be connected back to previous research, assess correlations of new findings, and discuss limitations of the findings in this study.

As the findings are primarily concerned with the visual appearance of police gang unit uniforms, we feel it is useful to briefly unpack the terminology of "uniform" first. Clothing in general is a key factor in determining background characteristics to a person based off their appearance. Understanding the dynamic around how clothing acts as a visual cue to relay information from one person to another is important as it has been found to be a main factor in first impressions. From first impressions and perceptions, we interpret status, authority, and attitudes from a person based off appearance. This does not just apply to uniform, but is heightened with regards to police uniform as it has been found that police uniform not only acts as a visual cue for impression, but the uniform can elicit positive behaviors when in proximity (Johnson, 2005). However, 'police uniform', as a term, lacks any universal definition and, therefore, can present as a contested topic. Given that a police uniform can be a contested topic, the very use of the terminology can mean something different in different settings. Within the setting of police gang unit uniforms, uniforms are an evolving attire worn by officers who deal with gang members. Just as those police gang unit officers' unit titles may differ, their uniform styles may differ. How those uniforms come to be defined, may also differ. However, the lack of universal definition around uniforms does not affect how the study unpacks its findings with regards to police gang unit uniforms.

With this in mind, the author found six themes which were drawn from the findings of each research sub-question:

1. **"Are the gang crime unit officers in uniform, plain clothes, or hybrid?"** This sub-question's findings suggest; *Police gang unit officers are most likely to operationalize in a uniform. Meaning that police gang units deploy to the streets in a gang unit specific police uniform more than they deploy in plain clothes or hybrid capacities*

2. **"What color is the officer's uniform?"** This sub-question's findings suggest; *Police gang unit officers who deploy in uniform are most likely to deploy in a black uniform. In other words, gang unit officers are three times more likely to visually appear to operationalize in a black uniform than a non-black uniform.*

3. **"Does the uniform specifically say gang unit?"** This sub-question's findings suggest; *Police gang unit uniforms that identify as being a specialized unit that deals with gangs are most likely to represent this title visually with the unit identification baring the words Gang Unit. In other words, police gang unit officer uniforms are more likely to identify specifically as being a gang unit than by identifying by any other synonym of gang unit.*

4. **"What words are used to describe the unit?"** The sub-question's findings suggest; *Police gang unit uniforms who do not identify as being a gang unit specifically, are most likely to identify as being a Gang Task Force. Meaning that aside from gang unit, gang task force is the most used synonym for a police unit that specializes on gangs.*

5. **"Is the officers vest internal or external?"** The sub-question's findings suggest; *Police gang unit officers are more likely to operationalize with an external vest than an internal vest. Therefore, gang unit police officers are most likely to operationalize with visual body armor (external), as opposed to having their vests under a uniform (internal).*

6. "What color is the officers vest?" The sub-question's findings suggest; *Police gang unit officers with visual vests, are most likely to operationalize with a black vest. In other words, gang unit police are 9 times more likely to use a black vest than any other color vest.*

Discussion

After having a general understanding of the themes derived from each specific research sub-question, it is now possible to see how these themes interact together. The following section links the above themes back to the primary research question.

As the primary research question of this study states its curiosity around the analysis of the daily duty attire for police gang unit officers in Canada and the United States with the aim to determine if there is a "visual standard" around their operational appearance; being uniforms, plainclothes, or hybrid. The research sub-questions findings combine to depict a response to the primary research question. The combination of these findings suggests that; **by combining all of the research sub-questions findings police gang unit officers' uniforms are most likely to appear as: a unit specific police uniform, black in color, visually identify as a gang unit, and be wearing an external bullet proof vest that is black in color** [6].

Now if police gang crime unit officer uniforms are most likely to be an actual uniform that is specific to the unit, be black in color, visually identify as being a gang unit (most often by a patch or crest), and operationalize with an external vest that is also

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[6] *Note: reference to uniform in this context is limited to upper body attire only, given the dynamics of police work and sample availability for analysis. However, most often those with a black uniform were accompanied with black pants.*

black in color; what might be the reasons that these variables are suggested in the research findings to be best practice? Furthermore, how do these findings connect to previous studies.

Connecting themes with previous research around color

With connection to the previous literature, studies around uniform color has been suggested to change both officer perception and officer's actions. This is important because it is not just the person encountering a police officer whose behavior towards that officer may change based off the color of the uniform the police officers are wearing; but the very police officers can also internalize aspects of universal-sociological responses to color that humans encounter (Johnsons, 2005).

Basic examples of universal color meanings and associations would be that white is perceived to have these qualities: positive, innocence, purity, cleanliness, and faith. Therefore, it is common for brides on their wedding days to wear white gowns. While the universal color meanings behind the color black are perceived to have these qualities: power, elegance, formality, authority, and death. Therefore, the color black seems to be associated with funerals. While red is perceived to have the qualities of: blood, energy, danger, power, passion, desire, and love [7]. Therefore, red is associated with warning signs, like street lights, break lights, stop signs, and alternatively hearts and other symbols of love. Lastly blue is perceived to have the qualities of: loyalty, trust, wisdom, confidence, and truth. Therefore, first responders or healthcare workers tend to wear

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[7] *Examples of color meanings may differ based on cultural beliefs and values. However, the examples listed are reasonable with regards to culture given the scope of this research, as the research reflects Canada and the United States.*

blues (Sue & Sue, 1990).

Perhaps it could be inferred that police officers who operate on gang units with the specific mandates to respond to and suppress gang related offences find it useful to operationalize in a black uniform as a means elicit compliance by presenting in a more authoritative and aggressive color towards the specific clients they are tasked with serving. Clients that are more likely to engage in violent crimes than non-gang affiliated clients.

Alternatively, could it be possible that gang unit officers wear black to simply separate themselves from regular patrol officers? Given that a common color for patrol constables is dark navy, perhaps there is only so many colors that present as viable options for the job.

Connecting themes with previous research around evolution of uniform and targeted clients

With connection to previous literature, studies around the evolution of police uniform suggest that uniform has evolved around officer functionality. A functionality linked closely to the evolution of technologies police use. Technological advancements have lead to evolution in police responding and communications. Even today the use of body cameras has added to such evolutions. Officers are not simply carrying revolvers, batons, handcuffs, and flashlights anymore. Now officers may have all that plus more, such as tasers, pepper spray, extra magazines, and so on. In some instances, specialized units that operationalize with more tactical abilities have advanced weapons training for assault riffles and are required to carry those extra assault riffle magazines as part of their uniforms. Given only so much equipment can fit around a police officers' duty belt, the use of an external vest contributes to officer functionality to carry all that is

required by the units' mandate to uphold public safety.

A potential critique to the use of these larger weapons on police units is raising the question around whether these units need to have larger weapons like assault rifles. As a response to this critique I draw on some recent examples in Canada where citizens have used hunting rifles that are capable at firing a greater distance than a standard sidearm, leaving the responding officers at a disadvantage. Now although this example did not specifically involve someone from a gang, given that gang members and those who associate with gang members are more likely to engage in violent crimes having the officers who respond to these people should be able to have the required tools to uphold public safety against those who bring it into dispute. Part of having the proper tools may include the use of wearing an external vest that can carry the required tools such officers need to uphold their mandates.

Now given that gang unit officers follow a specific mandate that is focused on gangs the use of identifying specifically as such seems reasonable. In both Canada and the United States gang members may use colors, names, labels, graffiti, and specific clothing to identify themselves, mark territory, induce fear, extort the community, and maintain power (Sappenfield, 2001; Tyson, 1996). Gangs use reputation for violence to support their criminal organizations and maintain control through extortion such as the scenario depicted above. In this situation gang members show up and intimidate civilians, which is when gang unit officers, by mandate, would respond - to intimidate the intimidators. In such situations, the black police uniform, external vest, and specific unit labelling of gang unit all serve as positive tools for these gang unit officers to respond to such illegal gang activities. In a sense the police gang unit officers' uniforms are not just indirectly stating "we are here to target gang activity" with their

gang unit crest or logo; but visually displaying as being a tactically enhanced police unit that has the tools and resources required to show up and act against the elevated violent tactics gangs use, such as the use of intimidation to uphold public safety.

Connecting themes with previous literature around militarization of the police

With connection to previous literature, studies around the militarization of the police seem to be an ongoing debate and have connections rooted in political legislations and policy. Given that political legislation and policies can influence how public service agencies like police forces, the findings of this study support the previous themes regarding the correlation between more tactical (militarized) police units and policy; because if the severity of the threats and risk to public safety with regards to the specific threats from gangs was not as prominent the very 64 gang unit specific samples collected in this study – would not exist. Furthermore, these units are not cheap to operate. The enhanced abilities afforded to these gang units comes at a price. A price that simply could not be justified for no reason. Meaning that if funding becomes approved for a specialized unit like a police gang unit, there must be a demand, be it public or private, for resolve around the various issues both criminal and non-criminal that stem from gang activities in the community. The dynamic relationship between police uniform and the militarization of the police as it relates to politics may simply be explained by use of the following illustration: *"What came first? The gang units in uniforms and therefore the legislation that approved the funding for them or the gang issues in the community?"*

Generally, legislation is proposed in response to something, in other words political bodies tend to play catch-up to issues, as opposed to being proactive. Therefore, if it's more likely that police gang units are being put together in response to

something, perhaps that something they are responding to is demanding a more militarized response to maintain public safety and security. It is not as though the police gang unit officers are geared up for no reason to induce fear and police the state or community. To emphasis this further, aside from the unit title of "gang unit" this study found that the next most common synonym that was used was "gang task force." The title of gang task force was used as their uniform identification because the specific organization and operationalization of the unit was that of a joined task force. A joined task force being an amalgamation of police resources to form said gang task force. Although more common in the United States, these (joined) gang task forces are combining resources and information to tackle the issues gangs present to their communities. Issues to large and to violent with no centralized jurisdiction. To respond to such illegal activities these often-smaller police forces who share jurisdiction within a state combine to make the joined task forces. Thus, the demand for response comes before the deployment of more tactical units. Leaving the operationalization of police units deploying to police the state – not upholding powers of a *policed state*.

Connecting themes with previous literature on social construction theory

With connection to previous literature around social construction, there is a clear connection between how we identify a police officer based off visual cues and artifacts. Those being a police officer's uniform, badge, vehicle, lights and sirens to name a few (Boghossian, 2001). These are all devices of social construction and the corresponding responses to them are learned behaviors from how we, as societies internalize these things. Although, the findings in this study do not engage with the deeper explanations behind these visual cues or artifacts, the study does find what appears to be a visual standard around police gang unit uniforms. One aspect that has not been mentioned yet

is the officers' perception of themselves with regards to being part of a gang unit that wears the uniform and faces the difficult clientele who are more prone to violent behaviors, those being gang members. Therefore, from a socially constructed perspective, police who work on gang units may internalize an enhanced capacity for policing based off their tactically enhanced uniforms and specific gang unit title.

Limitations

Although this project was successful in answering its primary research question, the projects findings are not without their limitations. One key limitation to this study was its use of content analysis of digital media to gain its samples of police gang unit uniforms. White digital media presents few ethical and access issues, sample availability can be significantly affected and can lead to both over-inclusive or under-inclusive sampling based off what is available from online sources (Riff et al., 2014). This means that the replication of the study may differ as online availability of data samples may potentially shift.

Another limitation to this study originates from its strict quantitative design; although it yields numbers that where generated into statistics, how these numbers reflect the deeper or more complex meanings behind the research is left unexplored. Another limitation to using content analysis is that the samples lack generalizability (Holsti, 1969). Even though there are 64 samples in this study, there were countless more police gang crime units that were identified in the targeted sampling process but had be excluded as they either did not yield a visual image of the unit or the image lacked the sample criteria as laid out by the researcher.

Recommendations

The research project set out to determine if there was a visual standard to police gang crime unit uniforms. This primary question was of interest because the researcher has a curiosity on how the presence of a police gang crime unit uniform elicits behavioral response from anyone that encounters said officers. How does the average patrol in that restaurant seeing these police gang unit officers feel and or respond to seeing these officers in that setting? The answer to this question is still not known. However, further research could ask this question based off the findings of this study because they would know how those gang unit officers are most likely to visually appear as. This standard, most often, includes a black uniform, with an external vest that is also black, presenting with the unit identification of a "gang unit." For these reasons, I recommend the findings of this study are taken further to qualitatively analyze the relationship between citizens' impression and police gang unit uniforms.

Another recommendation to be made based off this study is the development of an awareness project aimed at increasing the publics understandings of police functions and authority. Such a project could be developed with the goal of increasing the likelihood that young kids and youth have positive understandings around police work in hopes of strengthening the social cohesion between officers and the community. Use of social construction theories primary and secondary socialization periods that lead to projection of self and identity formation may be a useful framework for developing an awareness program. Given that the program would be aimed at children and youth, previous research states that the older youth get the harder it is to re-socialize them (Berger, et al, 2002). With regards to police officers' uniforms and citizen impression, best application of an awareness project could be curriculum interjection among children

6 to 12 as part of a social studies type course. This would potentially benefit how these kids internalize police powers, uniforms, and authority in a positive way that may increase positive social cohesion between police and the public. Rather than leaving socialization of the police to be delivered through mass media outlets – often at times of dispute or crisis.

Conclusion

This study was exploratory and descriptive in nature and aimed to determine if there were visual standards around the operational appearance of police gang crime unit officers in Canada and the United States. The author used purposive targeted sampling of digital media to collect data samples of images that contain deployed gang unit police officers in their gang unit uniforms. The data was analyzed through social construction theory because visual artifacts, such as a police uniform or badge, are socially constructed objects of the external world society subjectively internalizes (Boghossian, 2001). This process of labelling one's uniform as a police officer can differ from person to person, just as the meaning of the term gang can differ from person to person. Given there is no universal definition for gang, the term may mean different things to different people; therefore, a police officer's uniform with the specific identification of gang unit may be internalized differently from person to person (McConnell, 2015). Social construction theory is a useful framework for understanding how these processes can potentially affect citizen's impression formation towards police officers' uniforms from gang units. After correlating social construction theory, the study looked at how both the evolution of police uniforms and the militarization of the police are connected to the findings of this study. Data collection and analysis suggested that

there is, in fact, a perceived standard of operational visual appearance regarding gang crime unit police officers' uniforms. That standard being: police gang unit officers' uniforms are most likely to be a unit specific police uniform, black in color, visually identify as a gang unit specifically, and contain an external bullet proof vest that is also black in color.

These findings are important because there a significant research gap in the literature around police uniforms in general, and even more so with respect to specialized police units. This is crucial because citizen impression and community-social cohesion between police agencies and the public is a vital pillar in upholding the law and maintaining public safety. This study's findings are also important because there is a lack of legislation that outlines the various powers of uniformed police personnel. The findings in this study help build a base for future research on gang crime unit police officers. Given that there is a lack of literature around current police uniforms, I argue that it is extremely important that research be conducted on the subject as technology and police uniforms will continue to evolve at a rapid rate.

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APPENDIX A – RESEARCH SAMPLE

CANADA

ALBERTA (AB)

1) Calgary Police Service: Gang Suppression Team (GST)

2) Edmonton Police Service Gang Unit

BRITISH COLUMBIA (BC)

4) Surrey RCMP Gang Unit

3) Vancouver Police Department: Gang Crime Unit (GCU)

MANITOBA (MB)

5) Winnipeg Police Service: Street Crime Unit (SCU)

ONTARIO (ON)

6) Ottawa Police Service: Guns and Gangs

7) Ottawa Police Service DART

QUEBEC (QC)

8) Montreal Police Service

SASKATCHEWAN (SK)

9) Saskatoon Police Gang Unit

INTEGRATED TASK FORCES (Throughout Canada)

10) Police Gang Enforcement CFSEU-BC

11) RCMP: Uniformed Gang Task Force (2010)

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

ALABAMA (AL)

12) Lamar County Sheriff Department – west Alabama Narcotics Task Force

ARIZONA (AZ)

13) Phoenix Police Gang Unit

14) Tucson Police Department Gang Tactical Unit

CALIFORNIA (CA)

15) Coachella Valley Police Department Gang Unit

16) Fresno Police Department Anti-Gang Unit

17) La Habra Police Department Gang Unit

18) Los Angele's Counter Surveillance and Gang Unit

19) Placentia Police Department Gang and Homicide Investigation Team

20) San Diego County Sheriff's - the North County Gang Taskforce

21) San Diego Police Department – Gang Suppression Unit

22) Santa Ana Police Department Gang Detail

23) Salinas Police Department Violence Suppression Unit

24) Santa Rosa Police Gang Unit

25) South Bay Police Department Joined Gang Task Force

26) South Los Angele's Police Department Gang Unit

COLORADO (CO)

27) Aurora Police Department Gang Unit

CONNECTICUT (CT)

28) New Haven Police: Vice / Narcotics Unit that includes the Tactical Narcotic Unit and the Street Interdiction Unit

DELAWARE (DE)

29) Delaware State Police Drug Unit / Intelligence Unit

FLORIDA (FL)

30) Boward County Sheriff Department – Gang Task Force

31) Miami Florida – Multi Agency Gang Task Force

GEORGIA (GA)

32) Floyd County Police Department: Gang Unit

HAWAII (HI)

33) U.S. Marshals Task Force, Honolulu Police Department (HPD), Maui Police

Department (MPD), Hawaii Police Department (HCPD), and the Bureau of Alcohol,

Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF)

IDAHO (ID)

34) Boise Police Gang Unit

ILLINOIS (IL)

35) Willis County Police: Gang Enforcement Unit

INDIANA (IN)

36) Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department - Street Operations Group (SOG)

KANSAS (KS)

37) Wichita Police Department Gang Unit

KENTUCKY (KY)

38) Louisville Metro Police Departments: Violent Incident Prevention, Enforcement and

Response Unit (VIPER)

LOUISIANA (LA)

39) St. Landry Parish sheriff department

MARYLAND (MD)

40) Baltimore Police Department

MASSACHUSETTS (MA)

41) Boston Police Department Gang Unit - Youth Violence Strike Force (YVSF)

MICHIGAN (MI)

42) Detroit Police Department: Gang Squad

MINNESOTA (MN)

43) Minneapolis police Gang Unit

44) St. Paul Police Gang Unit

NEBRASKA (NE)

45) Omaha Police Gang Unit

NEVADA (NV)

46) Las Vegas Metro Police Department – Gang Unit

47) Reno Police Department Gang Unit

NEW MEXICO (NM)

48) Albuquerque Police Gang Unit

NEW YORK (NY)

49) Brooklyn Police Department Gang Task Force

50) New York Police Departments Bronx Violent Fugitive Squad

NORTH DAKOTA (ND)

51) Clay County Anti-Gang unit

OHIO (OH)

52) Toledo Police Gang Task Force

OKLAHOMA (OK)

53) Tulsa Police Department Gang Unit

OREGON (OR)

54) Portland Police Bureau's Gun Task Force and Gang Enforcement Team

TENNESSEE (TN)

55) Chattanooga Police Department Street Crimes Response Team

56) Jackson Police Gang Unit

TEXAS (TX)

57) Dallas Police Department Gang Unit

UTAH (UT)

58) Utah Police Joined Gang Task Force – Salt Lake City

WASHINGTON (WA)

59) Seattle Police Gang Unit

60) Seattle Purge: Port Unified Resources in Gang Enforcement

WISCONSIN (WI)

61) Green Bay Police Department Gang Task Force

AMERICAN FEDERAL AGENCY'S AND JOINT TASK FORCES

62) U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) – Southern California

63) U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) – In California

64) U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) – In Dallas