



Organized Crime Research Brief no. 13

Gangs and Social Networking

BUILDING A SAFE AND RESILIENT CANADA

Gang members generally use social networking sites individually to promote gang culture or individual reputations, not to collectively arrange offending or recruit members. Law enforcement monitoring of social networking sites is useful for policing gangs.

There have been growing claims in media circles and law enforcement settings that street gangs and criminal organizations are turning to Internet-based social networking sites. Organized criminals use these networks for various reasons, ranging from the showcasing of their images and exploits to allegedly recruiting members. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as “cyberbanging.”

The main purpose of this report was to explore how social media can assist in understanding the functioning and activities of criminal groups, the magnitude of the current and future threats posed by such groups’ usage of new communications technology, and potentially provide a reasonable set of options for combating this problem. The study investigated how criminal groups, such as street gangs or criminal organizations, have turned to the Internet and its various resources in order to facilitate their illicit activities, self-promote, and possibly recruit members.

A systematic keyword search was devised to execute the empirical segment of this research. The search was restricted to active users on the three main social network sites: Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. These were the main sites in which awareness was initially raised in regard to a suspected “cyberbanging” problem. Also, and as demonstrated in surveys, these three sites were also the most popular.

This study found that street gangs were not likely directly recruiting members through social networking sites. It is often assumed that street gangs are cohesive groups, but recent criminological research on

this issue has found otherwise. Street gang culture and organization is in many ways an individualized phenomenon, and this feature ties in directly with recent assessments of the Internet as a setting that is governed by a process of networked individualism. Similar to its real-world counterpart, “cyberbanging” appears to consist largely of individualized displays, as opposed to reflecting a collective, unified gang identity and purpose. This theoretical link between the individualized street gang setting and the presence of street gang members on social networking sites enhances understanding of why recruitment is improbable even in a context where people are openly diffusing their image and exploits to a growing number of Internet users.

The gang presence on social networking sites is linked primarily to promoting a general gang or street culture through individual displays. In most cases, the sites are designed and managed by members and associates who emphasize their allegiance to reputed groups such as the MS-13, Crips, Bloods, or Latin Kings. These gangs are the most prominent across the social networking sites that were monitored. There are some exceptions, such as the the Hells Angels, which were also very prominent, but which exist on-line as chapters or groups and not as individuals. Unlike the majority of street gang groups that were monitored in this study, Hells Angels did not display their criminal or violent exploits. Indeed, such cases were more likely to diffuse the non-criminal features of the group and the problems that they were facing from what they characterize as overzealous law enforcement.

This report found no evidence to suggest that visitors to gang sites are being tricked or manipulated into becoming gang members. The visitors are, however, showing their curiosity toward such groups and, for those who share their

comments and opinions, signs of support are evident. Aside from a small set of MySpace sites, street gangs are not proactively recruiting anyone into being gang members. Social networking sites are, however, creating a new venue for people who share or are sensitive to the values underlying street gang lifestyle to come together and reinforce a subcultural commitment to a criminogenic lifestyle.

Although the study found that recruitment is not likely, there are two functions that are fulfilled by the rise of social networking sites that will have an impact on criminal groups.

First, it has been argued for quite some time that one of the main obstacles blocking the expansion of criminal groups and organizations is the inability for participants to advertise their activities and ventures. Traditionally, offenders relied on the grapevine, word of mouth, or media attention for crimes, which they may or may not have committed, in order to diffuse their reputational qualities that could allow the gang to more effectively engage in criminal activity or indirectly attract members.

Second, it is important to recognize interactions between street gang members and the many visitors of their social networking sites as a new form of convergence setting. However, unlike the places where people come to physically interact and co-opt each other, web-based venues, while claiming to be locations for the interaction of 'friends', are nevertheless points of convergence for people who remain physically distant from each other.

In many ways, social networking sites are more useful intelligence resources for law enforcement than they are effective mechanisms for promoting gang culture and drawing in new gang members. Law enforcement agencies have been closely monitoring the emergence of street gangs on social networking sites over recent years. Law enforcement officials have also turned to social networking sites to promote their efforts, encourage aid during their investigations, and diffuse their values across a wider community.

Networking Sites: A Review and Analysis of the "Cyberbanging" Phenomenon. Ottawa, ON: Public Safety Canada.

For more information on organized crime research at Public Safety Canada, please contact the Organized Crime Research Unit at ocr-rco@ps-sp.gc.ca.

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