

“Gangster Disciples” and Other Gang Organizations

by Gerald A. Carroll

Gerald A. Carroll is a media professional with 23 years experience as a reporter or editor for newspapers and magazines. He is now an adjunct professor and program assistant at the University of Iowa School of Journalism and Mass Communication, and editor of Iowa Journalist magazine.

Carroll spent nearly eleven years (1979-90) at the San Francisco Examiner, a Hearst-owned newspaper, where he learned inside information on so-called “gangs” while reporting in San Francisco, the East Bay Area, and particularly central Oakland, where gang organizations flourish. Carroll was also managing editor at a newspaper in downstate Illinois (Sterling-Rock Falls) for two years, (1990-92) and his staff routinely covered gang-related activities. Through these experiences, in which firsthand information concerning gangs was crucial to the safety of the journalists covering the news, Carroll realized that the available information about gangs was either unavailable or inaccurate.

Following are some frequently asked questions about the “Gangster Disciples”, a Chicago-based organization with reported ties in the Iowa City area.

As you read, note that drug dealing has become the modern equivalent of a “paper route” for kids wanting to make a buck in the inner city. Moreover, note the positive social structure and positive community contributions provided by some drug gangs. By contributing to their community, sophisticated drug dealers are earning the respect and political support of their neighbors. Note also that some gangs discourage drug use among their members, encourage and support “straight” members of their inner city community with services like day care — but at the same time seeks to sell their products outside their community, and apparently targets the middle- and upper- class whites. In this regard, the “Gangster Disciples” are promoting their drugs into “alien” communities just like the CIA allegedly promoted “crack” into the inner city

neighborhoods of California to fund the anticommunist rebels in Nicaragua in the 1980’s.

Mr. Carroll’s description of “gang” activity contrasts sharply with the violent, ignorant, vice-ridden image of “drug dealers” fostered by TV and the legal system. If Mr. Carroll’s observations are correct, dismissing the “Gangster Disciples” as nothing more than a “gang” of illiterate thugs is a dangerous underestimate – the “GD’s” are a sophisticated economic and political entity that wields considerable power in ways more complex than merely waving guns, commands the respect of their community, and apparently engages in a very subtle variety of political warfare against the people of “mainstream America”.

In the 1996 election, Republicans made much of the recent rise in drug use by our nation’s youth. Mr. Carroll’s analysis of gangs and drug-dealing offers an intriguing explanation for that rise.

Q: Just who are the “Gangster Disciples?”

A: The Gangster Disciples were founded in the 1960s in Chicago under the name “Black Disciples” by the late David Barksdale, known historically in gang circles as “King David.” The group’s name was later changed to “Black Gangster Disciples,” a name still used by U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno¹ to describe the organization. More recently, the name was shortened to “Gangster Disciples,” or simply as “GD.”

Q: Who is the current recognized leader of GD?

A: Larry Hoover, who runs the syndicate from an Illinois prison, where he is serving a 150- to 200-year state prison sentence for a gang-related murder. Hoover is also being tried for narcotics conspiracy charges, but his Oct. 7, 1996, trial date was postponed “at least a year”.² Hoover has been incarcerated on various charges since the 1970s, but has retained iron-fisted control of GD and its multimillion-dollar enterprises. It had been hoped by federal authorities that an additional conviction on narcotics conspiracy charges would allow Hoover to be transferred to a higher-security federal prison, where his leadership role in GD might conceivably be reduced. However, assistant U.S. Attorney Ron Safer stated that Hoover’s transfer to a federal jail would lead to gang anarchy and even more violence in the streets.³

Q: Does imprisonment act as a deterrent to gang activity?

A: No. Imprisonment of gang members leads to growth of the problem. Actually, prisons are the nerve centers of major international gangs and syndicates.⁴ Many gang leaders, like Hoover, actually prefer a prison as a headquarters because it ironically provides a safe haven

in which to organize the far-flung arms of the organization. Assassination is common among gang hierarchies, so the safety of a prison, with taxpayer-supported shelter, food, armed guards and other amenities, is by far a preferred option. Most gangs are run from prisons.

Q: How extensive is GD membership?

A: The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) places GD’s membership at roughly 30,000 and rapidly growing. GD chapters have been detected in 35 states.²

Q: What are the business activities of GD, and how extensive are they?

A: According to the DEA, GD drug-marketing enterprises generate over \$100 million annually,² but indications are the operations are much larger in financial scope. For example, 80 gang members in the Englewood section of south Chicago alone moved an

average of 10 kilos (22 pounds) of cocaine a week with an estimated street value of \$1 million in 1995-96.⁵ GD continuously looks for smaller communities to expand markets for its illegal products. Along with Iowa City, other medium-sized Midwest cities reporting GD activity include Bloomington, Ill., Springfield, Mo., Muncie, Ind., Appleton, Wis., Kentfield, Calif., and the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C., including Falls Church, Virginia.⁶

Q: What is the basic leadership and financial structure of GD?

A: Hoover admits studying Al Capone and his Prohibition-era crime syndicate, and modeling his organization after the infamous gangster’s network.³ “The Gangster Disciples are one if not the largest and most successful gangs in the history of the United States,” says James Morgan, special DEA agent in Chicago. GD members are “incredibly well-disciplined and well-trained.”³ Entry-

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level pay for “shorties” (teenaged lookouts) averages \$25 an hour. Low-level dealers have well-defined territories and, in a few hours’ work per day, will move \$500 worth of contraband. Of that \$500, \$350 goes to GD’s network, \$150 to the dealer. The 70-30 split is standard. Higher-level dealers control entire buildings, where income reaches an average of \$5,000 per day.³ Much of this income, aside from welfare, is the only reliable source of income for most neighborhood residents. GD members commonly share profits with others in their neighborhoods, and provide armed security as needed. Neighborhood children are provided a steady stream of snacks, toys and other treats, mostly purchased with drug proceeds. Paid day care is also available for women who choose not to purchase drugs, but instead seek straight employment. Mid-level dealers are often looked upon favorably in their respective com-

munity circles. Gang networks regard themselves as “families.”

Q: What are some of GD’s member rules, policies and command structures?

A: GD members are prohibited from using drugs, but encouraged to market the substances to anyone desiring them. Use tends to create business conflicts of interest. Gambling on credit, poor sportsmanship, stealing and showing disrespect for other GD members is expressly prohibited. Personal health and hygiene are strongly encouraged, even required. Dress codes are prevalent, mainly for identification purposes. Rule-breakers are routinely beaten, shot in the leg or abdomen or otherwise kept in line by the severe top-down management system. GD members possess intricate command-and-control structures, similar to a military organization.³ Cellular phones, beepers and police radio scanners are key components to GD’s organizational structure. GD intelligence networks, using mostly preteens, routinely monitor all visible police activity. Police informants are ruthlessly rooted out and severely punished or even killed. Such details as when police personnel shift changes take place are recorded by “shorties.” In Chicago, the boyfriend of a female Chicago police officer was a major boon for GD because the officer would leak vital information to the boyfriend, who would in turn disseminate the information to rank-and-file gang members in advance of major drug busts and other police investigative activities. Colors signify various gang affiliations. Blue and black are GD’s colors, for example. Red and blue have long been the standard colors for the Bloods and Crips, gangs based in Los Angeles who now have 150 subsets and 60,000 members around the nation.⁴

Q: Why are these gangs so violent?

A: Gangs such as GD seldom engage in “random” violence. In almost every instance, the person who is attacked has provoked gang members into doing so by breaking rules, owing money, disrespecting or “dissing” other gang members, or causing unnecessary turmoil within gang ranks. GD members who begin using drugs are often purged from the organization and are sometimes killed if they threaten to expose any illegal activity as a result of their addictions. Most violence occurs when rival gangs battle over drug territory. Territories are clearly marked with spray-painted gang insignias. A rival gang will compete with an established gang if they also paint their insignia on a particular building or sign, or if they paint the rival gang’s insignia upside-down. GD and other gangs also have at their disposal any weapon they choose, whether or not it is legal for the general population to own it. The high-profile assault weapons ban and Brady Bill passed by Congress only serve to keep law-abiding citizens from owning these weapons. GD and other gangs have the resources to get any firearms they need. In September of 1995, alleged GD members shot up a Bloomington, Ill., housing project using a fully automatic TEC-80 assault weapon.⁶

Q: Why are GD and the other major gangs so wealthy and powerful?

A: Current drug laws benefit the criminals. Drugs are now selling at 200 to 400 times what they would sell for if they were decriminalized, making the activity enormously profitable as long as it remains prohibited. Gangs greatly appreciate these suppressive laws, because they pit normal citizens against police, and

gangs reap the profits from this artificially enforced "siege mentality." Mandatory sentencing of drug offenders also benefits the gangs, enabling gang leaders to be protected behind prison walls while running their enterprises with impunity. Youth antidrug programs like D.A.R.E. also benefit the gangs by alienating young people who are already rebellious by nature and/or because of their age, inexperience and lack of parental involvement in the home. Antidrug programs encourage young people to rat or snitch on their friends, and often to bypass their parents/ guardians and go straight to police. Police departments run most of these programs, including D.A.R.E., with very little prior input from parents. Parents are simply asked to enforce D.A.R.E. directives and funnel all information about the activity of young people straight to the respective police departments. Fear is used as a blunt instrument to intimidate young people, an unsustainable tactic. Naturally, under these conditions, drug use has actually risen in almost every category. Recent polls suggest that parents are doing little to prevent this, mainly because they themselves used drugs at an early age and suffered few negative effects aside from the enormous cost of

the prohibited substances, and harassment from police whose crusade is to enforce drug laws. Under the Clinton administration, this same atmosphere of intimidation has now spread to the legitimate tobacco industry, despite its clear violations of personal liberty.

Q: What can we do to stem this disturbing trend?

A: Push for radical changes in current drug laws to keep drug lords from using the prison system as a sanctuary. Use all captured drug proceeds to benefit *victims* of violent drug-related crime instead of lining the pockets of local, state and federal government bureaucracies. Talk to children pragmatically about the pitfalls of drug use without using the sledgehammer of fear over their heads. Promote family-centered activities and recreation. Open a dialogue with gang members themselves, identify them publicly and give them a strong signal that they are not welcome in your community. Media should aggressively report and expose gang activity and insist on police candor in doing so. Keeping vital information on the circumstances of a gang-related incident hidden from the press only endangers the general public. Police should immediately curtail

enforcement of drug laws at the possession level and instead concentrate their efforts on penetrating sales networks and arresting the real criminals at the top of these sales networks. Instead of harassing bicyclists who ride on the sidewalk or motorists who fail to fasten their seat belts, police should monitor and apprehend violent criminals. Police priorities need to change dramatically if any headway is to be made against drug sales and use by young people.

If Mr. Carroll's research is correct, why hasn't his information been publicized by government, police, or mainstream media. The answer can only be self-interest. Somebody besides the drug dealers, somebody we trust or even elect, is also profiting from the sale of drugs.

For example, as Mr. Carroll implied, law enforcement is not only pleased but probably addicted to the financial "benefits" they receive from applying seizure laws against drug consumers. (But when do they seize the property of the really big distributors?) Given that so much money is being seized to support our local police, where's the incentive for the police to stop the flow of drugs? No drugs means no sei-

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zures, no raises and no razzle-dazzle hi-tech police equipment.

This is not to say cops are bad, but only that they are human and therefore unwilling to jeopardize a source of income. Still, Mr. Carroll's suggestion to distribute the financial gains from drug seizures to victims rather than the government strikes me as brilliant. Once government is separated from drug-profits, we can expect government to launch a real effort to end the drug problem -- either through increased force or increased smarts (legalization).

- Imagine the political impact on blacks who learn the CIA intentionally promoted drugs into the inner cities in the 1980's. Based on that exposure, the Gangster Disciples could easily justify selling drugs to middle- and upper-class whites not merely for money or out of criminal indifference, but on the political basis of retribution, even as their own brand of "counter-ter-

rorism". I.e., on behalf of the white middle- and upper-class, the CIA intentionally poisoned blacks with crack in the 1980's. Today, on behalf of the black community, the Gangster Disciples are intentionally poisoning the white middle- and upper- class.

That kind of political argument might inspire elements of the black community to see the Gangster Disciples as black "patriots" and drug dealing as just another weapon in a war of revolution and liberation. Given this political motivation, drug dealing and Gangster Disciples stand to generate enormous political power. Moreover, if the CIA sold crack to blacks to support Nicaraguan forces against Communism, it's probable that the Gangster Disciples feel a reactionary empathy for Communism.

- The only stone missing from Mr. Carroll's analysis of the Gangster Disciples' cultural foundation might be a religion that's contrary to the mainstream faiths of America (Christianity) and willing to overlook the sale of drugs - at least to members of other faiths. Although the black community's Christian faith has roots several centuries deep, I wonder if the Muslim faith (with its political undertones of holy war against "infidels") is being embraced by the GDs. Imagine the potential power of a "movement" that tied drug dealing (money), revolutionary politics, Communism and Islam into one political smorgasbord. Endowed with almost unlimited financial resources and passionate political and religious motivations, that movement could present a serious challenge to the existing culture and de facto government.

- The key to the drug organizations' political power is their enormous cash flow and profits and their willingness to use that cash to benefit their friends and bribe their enemies. As always, the real addiction is to money and

as long as drugs remain illegal (and therefore outside the free market and exorbitantly profitable), those people who deal drugs - be they "Gangster Disciples" or C.I.A. - will be empowered in ways that are contrary to the social, medical, and political interests of the free market and free Americans.

- No government "war" or prohibition has ever stopped an organization or activity as profitable as drug dealing. Anyone who believes the "git tuff" mentality can work had better explain how the Gangster Disciples' leader maintains power over a multi-million dollar drug distribution network while being imprisoned for two decades. If prison life and regimentation is not "tuff enuff" to stop drug-dealing, what is? If America finds "gangs" and drug dealing truly offensive, the only solution is to legalize drugs, subject their sale to the rigors of the free market (fair profits and increased legal liability), and watch drug-related crime and violence wane to a level similar to that currently associated with alcohol or tobacco.

¹ Federal News Service, press conference, Aug. 29, 1996.

² Matt O'Connor, "Trial of Hoover Delayed At Least a Year," *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 27, 1996.

³ Ann Scott Tyson, "Bringing Down a Gang," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 15, 1996.

⁴ Marcia Slacum Greene, "Outside Allegiances Exert Lethal Force," *Washington Post*, Sept 9, 1996.

⁵ Ann Scott Tyson, "Chicago Neighborhood Generates \$1 Million a Week," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 15 1996.

⁶ Tom McNichol, "How One Small City Combats Gangs," *USA Weekend*, Sept. 29, 1996. ■

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