

Asian Gang Homicides and Weapons: Criminalistics and Criminology

by

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Abstract

Although the theoretical traditions of criminalistics and criminology differ, the two disciplines are interrelated. This paper examines the nature of this interrelationship in an analysis of Asian gang homicides. Using Uniform Crime Report data, type of weapon used in gang homicides by racial group is examined. Results indicate, controlling for firearms, adult Asian gang members prefer blunt objects while Whites and African Americans favor knives. The findings are addressed in the context of home invasion robberies committed by Asian gangs. In this discussion, the interrelationship of criminalistics and criminology is demonstrated.

Introduction

The fields of criminology and forensic science have traditionally been viewed as separate disciplines. Criminology is the interdisciplinary scientific study of crime emphasizing its causes and control¹. Forensic science, and in particular criminalistics, focuses on the identification of criminal activity as related to apprehending and convicting those involved in such activity.² Sophisticated technology, disciplinary eclecticism, and continual advancements in investigative techniques have made criminalistics one of the most “rapidly developing areas of policing “ (Peak, 2003, p. 173). Criminology explains the *why* of crime while criminalistics pursues the *how* of crime. Although conceptually distinct, criminology and criminalistics are complimentary. This paper demonstrates the interrelationship between criminalistics and criminology in an analysis of weapons and Asian gang homicides.³

Theoretical Traditions

Criminalistics: Theoretically, criminalistics is most allied with the traditions of the classical (Beccaria, 1764/1995; Bentham, 1789/1973) and neoclassical (Cornish & Clarke, 1986; Fogel, 1975; Gibbs, 1975; Tittle, 1969; Wilson, 1975 & 1977; van den Haag, 1975; von Hirsh, 1975). In these

traditions, crime is motivated by free will, calculated by cost-benefit, and deterred only through punishment due to the ineffectiveness of rehabilitation. The classical and neoclassical traditions have little interest in the causes of crime, beyond free will. Rather, the traditions seek to explain how to reduce or eliminate criminal behavior. The classical and neoclassical traditions have a law enforcement orientation; crime can be subverted via deterrence and detection. Criminalistics facilitates this end.

Criminology: Structural strain theory (Agnew 1992; Cloward & Ohlin 1960; Cohen, 1955; Durkeim, 1897/1977; Merton, 1968; Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994) argues societal conditions contribute to criminal behavior. The nature of modern society results in some in the population feeling detached and their societally valued goals blocked. They may turn to crime to obtain these goals in an environment where the opportunity exists for criminal activity to occur. Critical theory (Chambliss & Seidman, 1971; Marx, 1964; Lynch & Groves, 1986; Turk, 1969; Quinney, 1970; Vold, 1958) extends this approach even further arguing law enforcement represents the power-elites who define criminality to protect their interests. This subordination of the lower classes through the legal system results in disenfranchisement from society and victimization by that same society. The ideology of structural strain, embraced by many criminologists, is at odds with the more law enforcement friendly criminalistics.

Homicide and Gangs

Demographics have been shown to play a negligible role in explaining homicide rates (Fox & Piquero, 2003; Sprott & Cesaroni, 2002). For example, Fox and Piquero (2003) found during the 1980's, an inverse relationship between the homicide rate and the proportion of 18-24 years olds in the population (the age category with historically high homicide rates). Offered as explanations for the rise in homicides is the proliferation of crack cocaine, the use of handguns, and homicides committed by increasingly younger suspects, particularly African American males (Blumstein, 1998; Fox, 2000; Fox & Piquero, 2003; Sprott & Cesaroni, 2002).

Factors related to homicide are complex. There are no known predictors. At best, certain conditions have been identified that share a relationship with homicide. Social characteristics found to be related to homicide are socioeconomic status, age, race, and gender; a disproportionate number of young, lower-class males of color tend to commit and be victims of homicide (Krivo & Peterson, 2000; Lee, 2000; Parker & McCall, 1999; Rosenfeld, 2000; Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Whaley & Messner, 2002). The context of homicide also varies. For example, conditions related to murder among intimates differ from those surrounding serial murders (Block & Christakos, 1995; Fox & Levin, 2001; Holmes & Holmes, 2001; Levin & Fox, 2001; Lund & Smorodinsky, 2001).

Gang homicides also occur under specialized conditions. In the Los Angeles area, conditions related to gang homicides include retaliation, dispute resolution, criminal activity (particularly as related to drug sales), use of firearms, and young, male, minority participants (Maxson & Klein, 1990 & 2001). Focusing on youths, Howell's (1999) review of the literature, in the

main, corroborated Maxson and Klein's work (1990 & 2001) and added that youth gang homicides are cyclical and a component of processes inherent in everyday gang life. In the United States, the weapon of choice in homicides are firearms, and more specifically, handguns (Blumstein, 1998; Cook & Ludwig, 2000; Holmes & Holmes, 2001; Howell, 1998; Wintemute, 2000). This holds true for gang homicides as well with knives placing second, followed by blunt objects and bodily force, respectively (Howell, 1999; Hutson, Range, Anglin, Kyriacou, Hart, et al., 1995; Maxson & Klein 1990 & 2001).

Asian Gangs

From 1990 to 2000, the Asian population in the United States increased by 72% while the total population increased by thirteen percent.⁴ The majority of the Asian population lives in California, New York, and Hawaii and generally reside in coastal or urban areas. Chinese comprise the largest Asian group followed by Filipinos and Asian Indians (Logan, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Asians tend to live in homogeneous communities where they are over-represented (Logan, Oakley, Smith, Stowell, & Stults, 2001). Gangs have formed in some of these communities. Those who join these gangs tend to be young males from intact families who joined a gang for money or were recruited (Wang, 1998). They associate with drug users and are prone to delinquency, victimization, and fighting (Wang, 1995).

Ethnic and cultural differences exist between Asian subgroups as a result of unique sociohistorical circumstances (see Carino, 1996; Espiritu & Wolf, 2001; Min, 1996; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut, 1996; Zhou, 2001). As Asian cultures differ, so do Asian gang characteristics and processes (Wang, 2000). Recognizing these differences, Joe (1994, p. 412) calls for researchers to focus "on comparisons between Asian gangs and other ethnic gangs."

Chinese gangs in New York are heavily influenced by elders (and the Tong tradition), are embedded in the ecology of the community, and specialize in extortion which may require the use of violence (Chin, 2001; Kelly, Chin, & Fagan, 1993). In the United States, the Tong can be traced to San Francisco and were founded there in the middle of the nineteenth century as an organization designed to facilitate the adjustment of Chinese immigrants. Although not all Tong were involved in criminal activity, many engaged in murder, prostitution, extortion, and gambling (Barker, Thomas, Britz, Grennan & Rush, 2000). In tracing the history and development of the Tong in China, Huang and Wang (2002) articulate that Tongs are distinct from what some refer to as "Chinese organized crime" or "street gangs." Joe (1994a; 1994b) also argues this point asserting Chinatown street gangs are not heavily involved in Tong sponsored drug trafficking but such endeavors are individual enterprises, dispelling the notion of a "mafia" like Chinese drug empire.

Vietnamese gangs, primarily located in Southern California, are controlled little by elders, engage in violence for protection from other ethnic gangs, and participate in criminal activity for material gain (Vigil & Yun, 1998). Vietnamese (many ethnic Chinese) join gangs due to inability to adapt to a new environment, lack of traditional parental control, and

educational and language barriers; all which contribute to a sense of alienation and isolation which the gang alleviates (Long & Richard, 1996; Wang 2000). The gang also serves as a source to access money, sex, and status. Baba (2001) argues culture conflict was minimal among Vietnamese gang members as were family attachment issues, findings contrary to Latino gangs (Lopez & O'Donnell Brummett, 2003).

Although similar in some respects to Vietnamese gangs, Laotian/Hmong gangs have a less centralized leadership structure, usurp symbols from neighboring ethnic gangs rather than develop their own, and may form alliances with African American and Latino gangs (McCurrie, 1999; Wang, 2002). In addition, Laotian/Hmong gangs are more brutal in their application of violence in advancing their predatory crimes. Laotian/Hmong gang members may also suffer from "refugee camp syndrome," use the internet extensively for communication and inter-gang challenges, and relocate easily to various cities (Wang, 2002).

Alsaybar (1999) argues contemporary Filipino American gangs are less involved in criminal activity than their predecessors and emphasize "party culture" centered on dance clubs and car shows. In Hawaii, male youth gangs tend to be Filipino while female gang members tend to be Samoan, the processes associated for joining the gang and gang activities differing (Joe, 1995). Asian gangs vary by culture and as such, activities and outcomes of those gangs will differ as well. Activities such as homicide.

Data and Methods

Data from the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) were used in this analysis (Fox, 2004). UCR data is offered voluntarily to the FBI from approximately 17,000 law enforcement agencies nationwide. Developed in 1929, the FBI established uniformity in the collection of crime related data and was charged with producing and maintaining such statistics (Uniform Crime Reports, 2004).

It has been well established that firearms are the primary type of weapon used in gang homicides across all racial groups (Howell, 1999; Hutson et al., 1995; Maxson & Klein, 1990 & 2001). To further understand the relationship between race and type of weapon used in gang homicides, firearms and racial group were controlled for in the present study⁵. In addition, since differences exist in gang processes between adults and juveniles, analyses were conducted for each respective group. Data was analyzed for the decade of 1990-1999 since gang activity in the 1990's increasingly became a societal and law enforcement concern (Wang, 2000). The data lent itself to crosstabulations which were subjected to chi-square tests of statistical significance.

Findings and Discussion

Firearms (particularly handguns) were the weapon of choice in gang killings for Whites, African Americans, and Asians.

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Table 1: Crosstabulation of Race and Type of Weapon (Including Firearms)

| Type Weapon | Race | | | Total |
|--------------|------------------|------------------|----------------|--------|
| | White | Black | Asian | |
| Personal | 43 (.6%) | 59 (1.0%) | 20 (3.0%) | 121 |
| Blunt Object | 174 (2.2%) | 45 (.8%) | 27 (4.2%) | 247 |
| Knife | 648 (8.4%) | 182 (3.1%) | 46 (7.2%) | 877 |
| Other Gun | 985 (12.7%) | 511 (8.7%) | 56 (8.7%) | 1,552 |
| Handgun | 5,914 (76.2%) | 5,100 (86.5%) | 495 (76.8%) | 11,509 |
| Total | 7,764 | 5,898 | 644 | 14,306 |

$X^2 = 238.07$

X^2 where $df = 8$ is 26.12, significant $p, <.001$.

.001,

For adult gang killings, the preferred weapon among Whites and African Americans was a knife and for Asians blunt objects, controlling for firearms.

Table 2: Crosstabulation of Race and Type of Weapon (Controlling for Firearms)

| Type Weapon | Race | | | Total |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------|
| | White | Black | Asian | |
| Personal | 14 (9.4%) | 19 (28.9%) | 0 (0.0%) | 33 |
| Blunt Object | 35 (23.6%) | 4 (6.1%) | 21 (71.3%) | 59 |
| Knife | 98 (67.0%) | 43 (65.0%) | 8 (28.7%) | 149 |
| Total | 146 | 66 | 29 | 241 |

$X^2 = 45.82$

X^2 where $df = 4$ is 18.46, significant $p, <.001$.

.001,

Among juvenile gang killings, controlling for firearms, the preferred weapon for Whites, African Americans, and Asians was a knife.

Table 3: Crosstabulation of Race and Type of Weapon: Juvenile Homicides (Controlling for Firearms)

| Type Weapon | Race | | | Total |
|--------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|-------|
| | White | Black | Asian | |
| Personal | 29 (4.0%) | 40 (18.1%) | 20 (30.4%) | 89 |
| Blunt Object | 140 (19.4%) | 41 (18.6%) | 7 (10.4%) | 188 |
| Knife | 550 (76.5%) | 140 (63.4%) | 38 (59.2%) | 728 |
| Total | 719 | 221 | 65 | 1,005 |

$X^2 = 52.31$
 X^2 where $df = 4$ is 18.46, significant $p, <.001$.
_{.001,}

The data suggests, with firearms removed from the equation, that a racial difference exists in adult gangland killings with Asians preferring blunt objects. What the data are unable to tell us, is what particular Asian subgroup committed the murders and this clearly is a limitation of the study. However, something compels those who commit these crimes to select a blunt object over another type of weapon. Presumably, knives are equally accessible to all, as evidenced by the use of such weapons by Whites and African Americans. The use of blunt objects, to a certain extent, is related to being Asian.

The findings were discussed with two police officers and the head of the Gang Unit of the Huntington Beach (HB), California, Police Department. Huntington Beach is located in Orange County and is contiguous to Westminster, a city with a large Asian gang population, mainly Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians/Hmong (see Wang 2002). Although gang homicides in HB are primarily committed by Latinos, occasionally the Asian gang violence from neighboring Westminster finds its way into Huntington Beach.

According to the officers, it is common among Asian gang members to perform home invasion robberies on other Asians. This trend is often found in Asian communities (Burke & O’Rear, 1990; Song & Hurysz, 1995; Wang 2002 & 2003). During the course of these well planned robberies, victims may be confined and assaulted in an effort to extort information on the whereabouts of valuable items (e.g., money and jewelry). Among Asians in Orange County, due to experiences in the country of origin, banking institutions are not trusted and valuables are often kept in the home. This is

just one characteristic of Asians victimized by Asian gangs, the others being a culture of silence, skepticism toward public officials (i.e., the police), illegal immigrant status, and living in congested ethnic communities proximate to criminals and illegal activities (Song & Hurysz, 1995).

During home invasions, in attempting to gain information on the location of valuables, gang members may assault victims to the point of death. The modus operandi reported by the HB officers corroborates findings of Burke & O'Rear (1990) and Wang (2002) wherein gang members physically restrain victims and threaten or commit battery. The HB officers stated that a baseball bat (a blunt object) is a popular weapon used in the commission of these assaults.

Evidence at a crime scene suggesting use of a blunt object might lead detectives to consider as possible suspects Asian gang members. Although the ideological underpinnings of criminalistics and criminology differ, the disciplines can be synthesized in addressing criminality. This paper demonstrated how criminological variables (race, and sociohistorical contexts) and criminalistics (type of weapon used in commission of a crime) interrelate. Such knowledge will be useful for professionals specializing in gang criminal activity, particularly homicide.

Endnotes

1. Conklin (2001, p. 542) defines criminology as "a discipline that gathers and analyzes empirical data to explain violations of the criminal law and societal reactions to those violations." Brown, Esbensen, & Geis, (1988, p. 11) view criminology as "a scientific endeavor to explain crime (the breaking of laws), while acknowledging the importance of making law and reacting to law violation." The field is described by Schmallegger as "the interdisciplinary profession built around the scientific study of crime and criminal behavior, including their manifestations, causes, legal aspects, and control (2002, p. 14).
2. Forensic science is "the direct application of scientific knowledge and techniques to matters of law" (Lee, 2002, p. 11). It [forensic science] is "a broad term that embraces all of the scientific disciplines that are utilized in investigations with the goal of bringing criminals to justice" (Nickell & Fischer, 1999, p. 1, italics in original). Campbell (2000, p. 15) submits it is "science applied to answering legal questions." Baden and Roach (2001, p. 21) write the "ultimate point of all of the forensic sciences in criminal cases [is]: To find anything that will incriminate or exclude a suspect and then to argue successfully in court that with these traces of evidence it can be proved to a reasonable degree of scientific certainty that a specific crime was or was not committed by a specific person." Criminalistics is "a branch of forensic science that deals specifically with the scientific collection and examination of physical evidence as it relates to a crime" (Campbell, 2000, pp. 15-16). A practitioner is a "criminalist." (Nickell & Fischer, 1999, p. 2). According to the California Association

of Criminalistics and American Academy of Forensic Sciences, "Criminalistics is that profession and scientific discipline directed to the recognition, identification, individualization and evaluation of physical evidence by application of the natural sciences to law-science matters" (quoted in Nickell & Fischer, 1999, p. 2).

3. For brevity, this analysis includes Pacific Islanders with Asians unless otherwise noted
4. Due to the ability for respondents to select multiple racial categories in the 2000 U.S. Census, included in this figure are those who identified as Asian in combination with some other race. If those who identified as Asian alone is considered, the increase in the Asian population between 1990 and 2000 is 48 percent.
5. Firearms were removed from the analysis all together. The UCR data set used for this study only identifies White, African American, and Asians as racial groups, omitting the ethnic group of Latinos.

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