

Gangs

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ORANGE COUNTY
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Garden Grove, Westminster police fight Asian gangs with education

By Clay Evans

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WESTMINSTER — The walls of

Detective Marcus Frank's cramped office tell the tale of a man who has spent years delving into the secretive and sophisticated ways of Vietnamese gangs.

Photographs of youthful Vietnamese plaster one side. They hold handguns, aim assault rifles at unseen targets, defiantly display tattoos and even burn brands into their forearms with lighted cigarettes.

Frank, his Westminster colleagues and police from neighboring Garden Grove, while hesitating to call themselves experts, are known by police across the nation as the most knowledgeable sources on Vietnamese organized crime in the United States.

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Portrait of a gang member

Recent estimates put the Vietnamese population in Orange County at 60,000 to 70,000. Garden Grove police describe a typical Vietnamese gang member as:

Age: 14-21

Education: Generally well-educated and a high school graduate. Some are model straight-A students.

Family background: Parents are recent immigrants. Many gang members were born in Vietnam but have spent most of their lives in the United States.

Weapons of choice: Primarily handguns and assault weapons. Involved in relatively few drive-by shootings but use the weapons in robberies.

Identifying symbols: No standard mode of dress, but many bear tattoos.

Crimes: Home-invasion robberies, lock-picking schemes, theft of gold and computer chips. Driven almost exclusively by economic gain.

Source: Garden Grove Police Department

GANGS: Area police teach others about Asian culture

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As Vietnamese gangs grow bolder and spread into new communities, the Westminster and Garden Grove departments increasingly are in demand, both as trackers of criminals who pass through Little Saigon, which stretches into both communities, and teachers in the ways of the Vietnamese.

"Garden Grove and Westminster are the pioneers on this subject. People are waking up to the problem of Asian gangs, and they turn first to people like Mark Frank," said Detective Phil Hannum of Falls Church, Va. Hannum is past president of the International Association of Asian Crime Investigators.

Police in the two north Orange County departments say they were in the dark about Vietnamese culture and gang behavior before the influx of refugees after the Vietnam War. Today there are 60,000 to 70,000 Vietnamese in Orange County.

Now, with a decade of experience behind them, both departments have become virtual libraries on the subject.

Each has produced videos on gang behavior and pamphlets detailing everything from tattoo identification to computer-chip theft.

Frank has taught seminars on the subject from Florida to Canada. Sgt. Frank Hauptmann of the Garden Grove Asian Services Unit recently testified about Asian gangs before the Senate Judiciary Committee in Washington.

Statistics from the Orange County District Attorney's Office attest to both the increase in Asian gang crime and the success of police in learning how to identify and capture Asian gang suspects.

In 1989, the first full year the district attorney kept such figures, 54 Asian gang cases were prosecuted. In the first six months of 1990, 74 cases were prosecuted. The cases are not divided according to ethnic origin, but a majority involved Vietnamese gangs.

For cities where Vietnamese gangs are just now showing their muscle, police in Orange County have one important message: Toss out the rule book on gang behavior.

"Most departments are dealing with definitions developed by Occidentals to define Orientals," Frank said. "But Vietnamese gangs don't even technically meet the definition of a gang by the (state) Department of Justice."

Vietnamese gangs, and Asian gangs in general, do not claim territory, as do black and Hispanic gangs in most large cities, Frank said. They generally don't have initiation rites, there is no punishment for quitting, and they made no effort, until recently, to establish a formal hierarchy.

Vietnamese gangs tend to prey on Asian victims and in recent years have been involved in computer-chip and gold-theft rings, sophisticated lock-picking, and sometimes brutal home invasions in which they terrorize families while robbing them.

Perhaps most puzzling for departments new to investigating Vietnamese gangs is their high degree of mobility. After a crime, they think nothing of driving thousands of miles to lie low.

Understanding the history of the Vietnamese culture is the first step. Garden Grove and Westminster police suggest other departments take in combating nascent gangs.

"It was tough for us because we had dealt very little with Asian gangs in the past," said Glen Gibson of the Grand Prairie, Texas, Police Department.

"All of a sudden, they started to come out. We didn't really know how to deal with the community."

Grand Prairie is a community between Dallas and Fort Worth with a sizable Vietnamese population.

Gibson asked Frank last spring to conduct a seminar on Vietnamese gang lore for several Dallas-area departments.

When dealing with people from a war-ravaged culture where a uniform often meant danger instead of help, police must first assure the community of law enforcement's protective role, Frank and the other experts say.

Both Garden Grove and Westminster established storefront offices a few years ago in predominantly Vietnamese Little Saigon. Other police departments have taken the cue.

Police new to the problem often do not understand basic elements of Vietnamese culture and misinterpret actions, said Garden Grove Community Service Officer Thien Cao.

"A Vietnamese who is confused or frightened will grin," Cao said. "Sometimes police think they are making fun of them. But if they are in the community, they will learn that that is not true."

In addition to educating police about Vietnamese culture and gang methods, Westminster and Garden Grove police have developed extensive computer files on gangs and gang members.

"That is invaluable to us," said Detective Dave Smith of Boise, Idaho, where Westminster's Frank gave a seminar last week.

"We had an armed robbery last year where the victims were tied up and a woman was pistol-whipped inside a market. We had sketchy leads to Orange County, and working with Westminster, we were able to quickly hook them up and bring them up here."

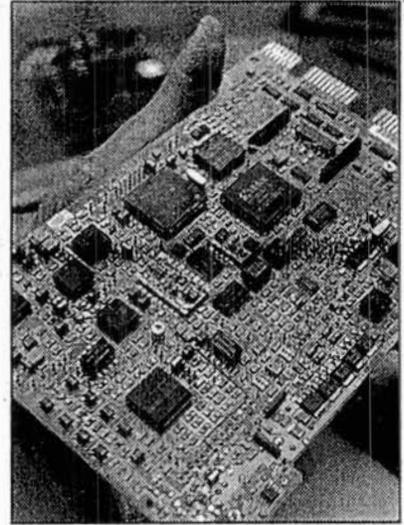
Though it might be a dubious distinction for Garden Grove and Westminster, it seems that all roads lead to north Orange County when Vietnamese gangs are involved.

"Just now, departments are starting to address it as at least a potential problem," said Detective Rance Redican of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department.

"The old tried and true methods just don't work, so we are lucky to have these guys around who can help police begin to deal with the problem."



Ana Venegas/The Register
Detective Marcus Frank greets Little Saigon resident Paul Doan.



Among the targets of Vietnamese gangs are computer chips such as these.