

BLACK LEADERSHIP IN GANG MOVEMENTS: TOWARD NEW DIRECTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers, professionals, and public officials have been struggling to explain the recent increase in black youth violence in the United States. The current plight of African-American males is believed to be associated with street gang activities. There is a widespread belief that black people, and particularly young black inner city males, are far more prone to violence than white people. The current status of black men and boys reveals alarming data which has often been viewed as gang-related:

Almost one in three (33%) Black males between the ages of 20 and 29 is under the control of the criminal justice system - in prison, jail, on probation, or on parole. This compared with one in sixteen White males and one in ten Hispanic males. (Maurer 1990)

The number of African-American males in prison and jail exceeds the number of African-American males enrolled in higher education. (Maurer 1990)

Black men in the United States are imprisoned at a rate four times that of Black men in South Africa: 3,109 per 100,000 compared to 729 per 100,000. (Morton, Snell 1982)

Forty-four percent of all prisoners in the United States are Black; Black men make up 40 percent of the condemned on death row. (Sentencing Project 1990)

Black males are more likely to be born to unwed teenage mothers who themselves have limited education and even more limited life choices. (Gibbs 1988)

Nearly half (42.7%) of Black youth under 18 live in families below the poverty line. (Curtis 1996)

More than 20 percent of the Black male adolescents in the 12-17 age groups were unable to read at the 4th grade level. (Brown 1979)

Unemployment among Black youth was 34 percent — twice the rate of 17.4 percent among all teenagers. (Gibbs 1988)

By most demographic indices — mortality, health, crime, homicide, life expectancy, income, education, unemployment, and marital status—African-American men have the smallest chance to achieve the American dream. In fact, of the four comparison groups (Black males, Black females, White males, White females), social indicators show that Black males experience the highest rates of health and social problems, including heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, homicide, suicide, unemployment, delinquency and crime, school dropout, imprisonment, and unwed teenage parenthood (Gordon, Mayors 1994). As Gibbs (1988) put it, Black males have been miseducated by the educational system, mishandled by the criminal justice system, mislabeled by the mental health system, and misread by the social welfare system. In fact, she argues that Black males have become rejects of our affluent society and misfits in their own communities.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The literature in Black Leadership in America does not consider the Black street gang hierarchical structure and its leadership as an aspect of Black Leadership. Yet many observers and researchers seem to agree, at least in part, that young Blacks, especially the males, are attracted to gangs because of the potential to become leaders within the ranks of the group. Liberal observers and researchers often argue that Black youth find street gangs attractive because the system and its traditional/conventional leadership have failed them. On the other hand, many gang members are returning to conventional leadership to share in the American traditional values.

Some research has portrayed gang members as relatively invariant. Walter Miller (1976) viewed gang delinquents as representative of a lower-class cultural milieu; his six "focus concerns" are persistent and distinct features of the entire American "lower class." Similarly, Jankowski (1991) said that male gang members were one-dimensional "tough nuts," defiant individuals with a rational "social Darwinist worldview" who displayed defiant individualism "more generally" than other people in low-income communities.

Other research, however, has suggested that gang members vary, particularly on their orientation toward conventionality. Whyte (1943) classified his Cornerville street corner men as either "college boys" or "corner boys," depending on their aspirations. Cloward and Ohlin (1960), applying Merton's (1957) earlier typology, categorized lower-class youths in four cells of a matrix, depending on their aspirations and "criteria for success." Many of their delinquents repudiated the legitimacy of conventional society and resorted to innovative solutions to attain success goals. Cloward and Ohlin took issue with Cohen (1958) and Matza (1964), whose delinquents were internally conflicted but, as a group, imputed legitimacy to the norms of the larger society.

Some more recent researchers also have found variations in conventionality within gangs. Klein (1971), echoing Thrasher (1927), differentiated between "core" and "fringe" members, a distinction that policy makers have adopted seeing gang members as "corporates," "scavengers," "emulators," "auxiliaries," or "adjuncts," mainly on the basis of their distance from gang membership. Fagan (1990), like Matza and Cohen, found that "conventional values may coexist with deviant behaviors for gang delinquents and other inner city youth." Macleod (1987) observed surprising variation among ethnic groups. The white "hangers" believed "stagnation at the bottom of the occupational structure to be almost inevitable" and were rebellious delinquents, whereas the African-American "brothers" reacted to similar conditions by aspiring to middle-class status. These findings suggest that not only are there variations within the gang but that gang members were engaged in leadership acts. They developed corporate and community leadership skills. The use of these leadership skills poses a different question.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The present investigation attempts to address four related questions: Are youth gangs responsible for the plight of Black males? What is the role of Black leadership in the gang movement in Metropolitan Kansas City? What are the changing values of gangs? And finally, what are the perceptions of Black professionals about Black street gangs in the Kansas City area? It is hypothesized by the researcher that answers based on empirical data will increase our current limited knowledge of street gangs in general and Kansas City in particular.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

As to the first question, Evan Starks (1993) analysis of Black violence does not support the widespread belief that the youth gangs are responsible for Black violence and the plight of Black males. Instead, the epidemic of teenage pregnancy, substance abuse and the prevalence of households headed by women are more closely linked to Black violence. Pundits speculate about these problems; conservatives frequently describe them as being moral deficits; liberals focus on racial discrimination and poverty. Both conservatives and liberals are beginning to reach a consensus that, as former President Bush described in his January 28, 1992, State of the Union Address: "The major cause of the problems of the cities is the dissolution of the family."

According to Feagin (1986), "The end of slavery as a legal condition did not end the subordination of the Black Americans." Although almost 130 years have passed since the 13th Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery, discriminatory practices and oppressive conditions have continued to perpetuate a vicious circle from which the majority of African-Americans are unable to escape extreme poverty, inadequate education, inadequate health care, substandard housing, exclusion from middle income or higher job opportunities, and the denigration of pride in self and the African-American culture. Many African-Americans have yet to obtain basic human and civil rights that were due to them but denied in the U.S. Supreme Court Dred Scott decision of 1857. These elements have contributed to the negative environmental conditions that characterize the plight of many African-Americans.

Scholars have argued that the devaluation of African-Americans, especially their culture, has resulted in psychological scarring interpersonal violence, and ethnic group victimization. In reporting on black-on-black homicide, Poussaint remarked,

Institutional racist practices place a positive value on whiteness and a negative one on Blackness.... Many of the problems in the Black community are related to institutional racism, which fosters a chronic lack of Black self-respect, predisposing many poor Blacks to behave self-destructively and with uncontrollable rage. (1983)

Despair, low self-esteem, and rage often presage intrapersonal and interpersonal abuse and, sometimes, homicide and suicide. An adolescent who lives in poverty and sees his father unemployed and his family suffer, and who is surrounded by destitution, disparagement, murder, and crime, may strike out against others and himself. Survival is problematic and optimistic life changes are at best long shots.

A devalued status, racial stereotypes, and high crime rates have led to the societal perception of violence as "normal" in African-American communities and families (Hawkins 1987). Yet this image belies the historical facts of close-knit and protective kin that have survived despite forced separations and intolerable circumstances.

Our explanations of the status of Black males are more complicated. A picture that emerges of what Wilson (1987) called "the black underclass," is that low-income black people have become isolated in the inner-city. Wilson argues that the twin pathologies of black-on-black violence and female-headed households are mutually reinforcing. Violence-related arrests deplete the pool of black males available for marriage, while the absence of strong male role models in the home leads to delinquency and violent crime. Wilson favors national jobs and income-support programs targeting black men. Another important explanation of underclass behavior emphasizes psychological characteristics such as low self-esteem. In this connection, for West (1993), the underclass of black youths embodies a "walking nihilism" of pervasive drug addiction, alcoholism, homicide, and suicide. Poussaint (1972) traced the ghetto "subculture of violence" to self-hatred, particularly among young Black males.

The links between youth and violence, welfare dependence, and the "tangle of pathology" of the black family were first made by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* (1965) to dramatize the inheritance of white racism. It should be noted that as late as the 1960's, 75 percent of African-American families were headed by a husband and wife. But by the 1980's, there were more than 1.5 million African-American female-headed families in the United States, resulting in poverty for these families (Baker 1988). For these writers, the absence of strong male role models in the home is a major factor. In response, several hundred Black professionals, human service agencies, and

foundations have created several intervention programs: the National Council of African-American Men, National Coalition of African-American Men, the National African-American Male Collaboration, Saturday Academies for African-American Young men, the 100 Men, and the 1 million march on Washington.

RESEARCH METHODS AND SOURCES OF DATA

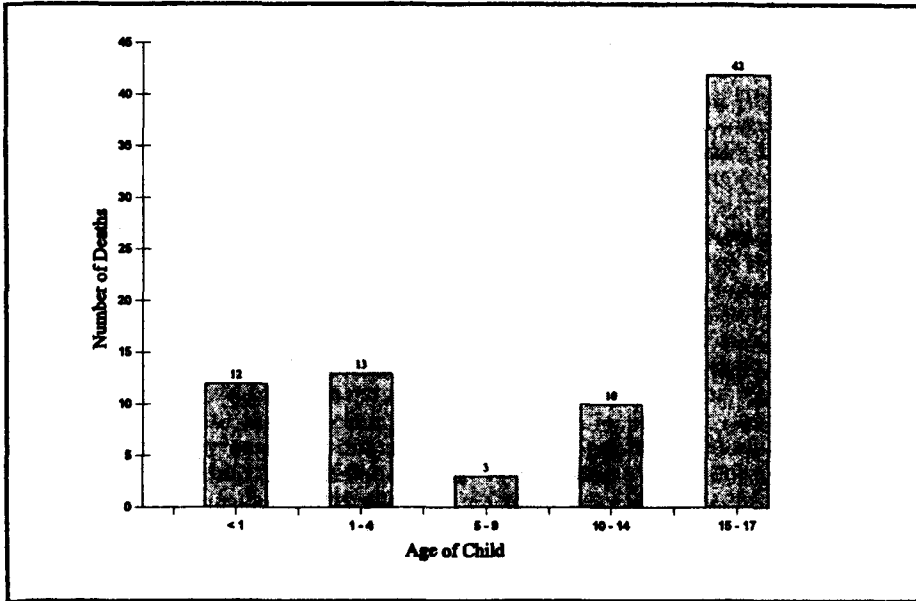
The information and interpretations presented here draw on observations, related literature, questionnaire data, and extensive fieldwork conducted over four months in Metropolitan Kansas City. During the first month of fieldwork in January 1996, I conducted a series of workshops in organizational skills and human relations with the Executive Committee of Break and Build. Break and Build represented the largest youth gang in the area. Between February and March, I conducted four focus groups with members of the Executive Committee of Break and Build. The purpose was to determine project priorities for funding by local philanthropic groups. By mid-February, I developed and administered questionnaires to 50 selected African-American professionals in the area. The purpose was to determine their perceptions of Black youth gangs. I later had the opportunity to personally observe members of Break and Build and their staff (35) in early March. My research design did not enable me to conclude how fully the members of Break and Build represented the more than 50 gang groups in Metropolitan Kansas City. The primary focus here was on the leadership of Break and Build and its implications for future gang activities in Kansas City.

THE CASE OF METROPOLITAN KANSAS CITY

The role of Black leadership in shaping gang movements in the metropolitan Kansas City area is important. It is estimated that there are about 50 gangs in this area. Metropolitan Kansas City is a twin city (Kansas City, Missouri and Kansas City, Kansas). The area has a combined population of 1.4 million. Youth violence is a major problem in Kansas City. The following is a report summary prepared by the Department of Justice outlining the nation's youth violence and victimization crisis.

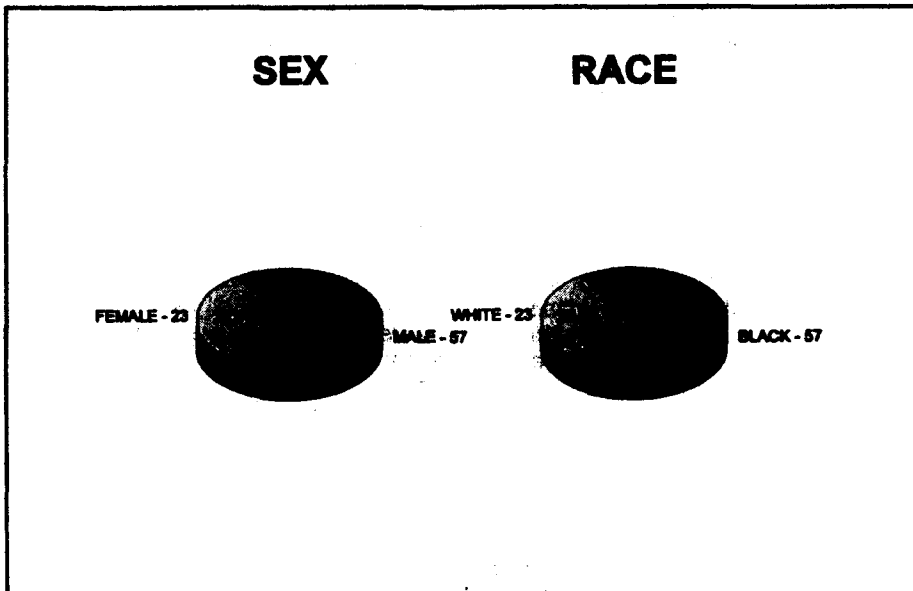
- Between 1988 and 1992 juvenile arrests for violent crimes increased nearly 50 percent.
- Juveniles were responsible for about 1 in 5 violent crimes.

Figure 1. Age Distribution of Homicides in 1995



Source: Missouri Child Fatality Review Program 1995

Figure 2. Sex and Race of Homicides in 1995



Source: Missouri Child Fatality Review Program 1995

- Law enforcement agencies made nearly 2.3 million arrests of persons under age 18 in 1992.
- If trends continue as they have over the past 10 years, juvenile arrests for violent crime will double by the year 2010 and the juvenile rate for murder will increase 150 percent.
- Any juvenile between ages 12 and 17 is more likely to be the victim of violent crime than are persons past their mid twenties.
- Most offenders who victimize juveniles are family members, friends or acquaintances.
- A gun was used in 1 in 4 serious violent crimes against juveniles in 1991.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (1993) has also provided some juvenile homicide data which suggest an alarming trend.

- Between 1984 and 1991 the rate at which juveniles ages 14 to 17 committed murder increased 160 percent.

At this point in the year, the Kansas City metropolitan area has exceeded the previous year in child and youth homicides, according to the Childhood Fatality Review Program. Current available data indicate that Kansas City is not immune from the national trend of growing youth violence and victimization.

- Homicide was the cause of 80 deaths of children less than 18 years of age in 1995, representing 23 percent of injury-related deaths.
- As shown in Figure 1, 53 percent (42) of homicides were children 15 through 17 years of age. The next largest group was one through four year-olds with 16 percent (13) of the total.
- While black children make up a minority of the overall population, they are over-represented as a majority of the homicide deaths (Figure 2).
- The peak month for homicides in 1995 was May with 14, followed by February with ten (Figure 3).
- Firearm injuries followed by Shaken/Impact Syndrome were the common known causes of child homicides in 1995 (Figure 4).

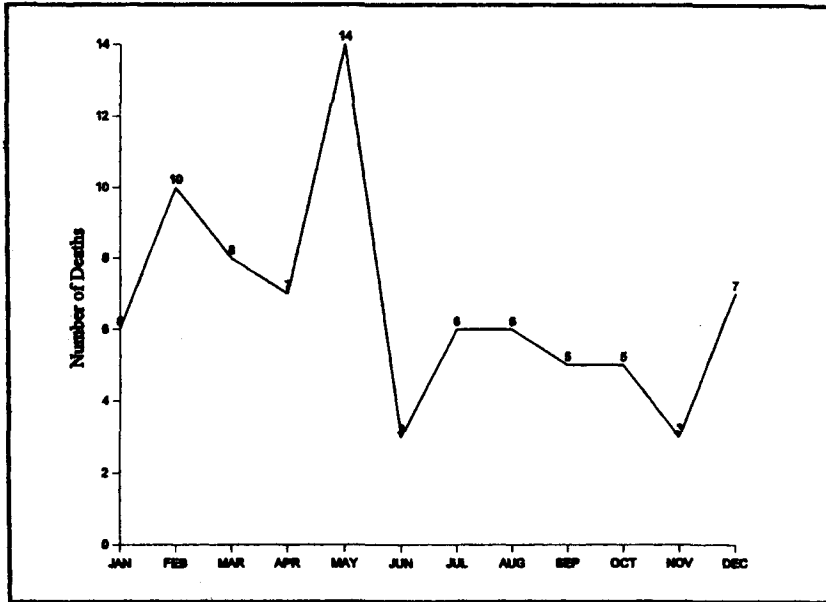
As Spergel (1995) has indicated, there are youth gang-related problems in America. However, there is no evidence to support the assertion that street gangs are responsible for American violence. Available data indicate that gangs alone are not responsible for the violence in Kansas City as indicated above.

The data shows that there are multiple causes for violence, including substance abuse, dysfunctional families, values, lifestyles, a sense of personal responsibility, greed etc.

It is important to understand that African-American gang leadership is in part, a search for alternative leadership. In a real sense, the emergence of street gangs in this country is a product of our national contested values. It is no exaggeration to say that the fraying of America's social fabric has become a national obsession. Presumably, it is in this context that the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich (1995) calls for "a return to mainstream American civilization and the basic principles upon which we must face as a nation." According to recent polls, more than three-quarters of American adults are convinced that the United States is in moral and spiritual decline. For example, America's public schools, traditionally responsible for teaching common values, have become battlefields. At issue are differences about moral authority, family life, sexual expression, and how to live together in a multicultural society despite our differences. It should also be noted that for many African-American street gang leaders, pocketbook pressures have been a major consideration — the apparent lack of equal chance for all Americans. Whatever the motives and causes of African-American street gangs, their leadership has had a tremendous negative impact on society. It has also been significantly different from traditional African-American leadership in the context of American civilization. Perhaps most importantly, it has sensitized America to the needs of its youth.

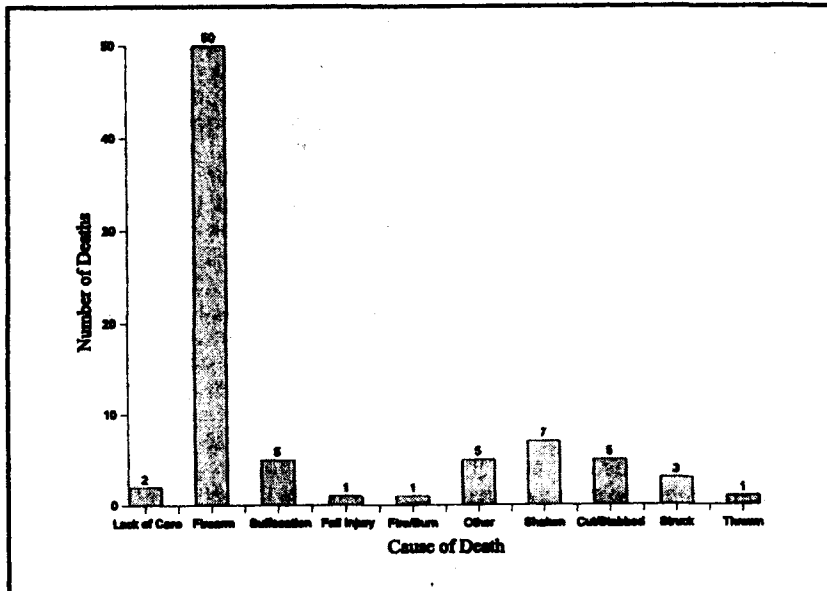
In the quest for human rights and racial advancement, African-Americans have managed throughout their history to draw their leaders from their own ranks. African-American leaders have always sought diverse ways to overcome the racial barriers and oppression that have pervaded American society. It should be noted that the security of power, prestige, and ideological differences in the African-American community have resulted in a struggle for leadership that is often ruthless and ineffective. This form of leadership grows out of the dispersion of Africans to the Americas. Thus the African-American leadership that emerged was conditioned by environmental factors and the psychology engendered by the system of slavery. Although both forms of African-American leadership (traditional and street gangs) are products of the dominant

Figure 3. Homicides by Month in 1995



Source: Missouri Child Fatality Review Program 1995

Figure 4. Causes of Death in 1995 Homicides



Source: Missouri Child Fatality Review Program 1995

cultural oppression, they are significantly different. The traditional leadership is built on the concept of bourgeoisie reformism; that is, the notion that full political participation within the system will produce benefits to African-Americans. On the other hand, African-American street gang leadership operates from the perspective that the American power structure, dominated by white males, will never fully accept African-Americans as first class citizens, qualified and capable of sharing in the American "dream."

Led by Andre Thurman (1996a), the Break and Build in Kansas City, Missouri is providing a foundation for new directions in street gang activities in Kansas City. Members of this group are former gang members who have had diverse street and criminal justice experiences. Although the founder and President of the group is an African-American male, the organization's leadership involves both African-Americans and Hispanics.

Operation Break and Build is a result of the 1993 Urban Peace and Justice Summit referred to as the Gang Summit. Its primary purpose is to provide viable alternatives for the transformation and redirection of its staff, members, and clients. More clearly stated in its promotion material, Break & Build's purpose is "to develop non-traditional leadership to improve the quality of life of African-American and Latin American young men and women in the metropolitan Kansas City area." This is a very challenging goal with enormous responsibility.

During the 1993 Urban Peace and Justice Summit in Kansas City, Missouri, the gang members identified four areas they felt must be addressed for their transformation process. These areas were: Crisis Intervention, Economic Development, Women's Issues, and Criminal Justice. Later, Operation Break & Build added Education as a fifth area. Operation Break and Build leadership was determined to change the fate of the gangs and dedicated themselves to the reconstruction of society and the environment from which they came. They searched for resources to support their new agenda, a redirection of street gang activities from destructive to constructive behaviors. With funding from the Kauffman Foundation, the Jackson County Anti-Drug tax (Combat), the Amercorp Program, and the National and World Council of Churches, Operation Break & Build has officially kicked off its program.

A recent flyer (April 8, 1996) (Thurman

1996b) mailed to hundreds of groups stated: "we are seeking the opportunity to network with you/your organization on behalf of Operation Break & Build and its participants." Specifically, the organization is seeking employment for the youth, opportunity for apprenticeship, mentoring of young people in schools, and resources for the work done.

Break & Build prides itself on being unique because it is youth-driven. Its leadership, composed of youth, has travelled throughout the country giving speeches, lectures, and seminars to other youth-focused programs. This effect is likely to have tremendous impact on American youth because of the youth leadership of Operation Break & Build.

At a recent seminar on March 7, 1996 with the founder and Executive Committee members of Operation Break & Build, the author of this paper developed a plan of action for the future (Gordon 1996a). That plan included two additional areas of development: 1) arts and culture and 2) political participation. In addition, the group planned a peace negotiation—street gang organization forum. The forum focused on conflict resolution among all gangs and collaboration with traditional human service providers. The group planned to work with alternative schools, providing monthly retreats for high-risk youth. Its working committee was represented by 1/3 youth, 1/3 professionals, and another 1/3 members of the faith community. A timeline to accomplish its immediate objectives was set.

In light of the desire of Operation Break & Build to work with Black professionals, social providers, and street gangs in order to accomplish its mission, a survey of the attitudes of fifty black professionals who are regarded as power brokers and/or impactors in the metropolitan Kansas City area was conducted by the author of this paper (Gordon 1996b). Among other things, the survey asked participants to describe their attitudes toward street gangs. The most frequently used words and phrases were as follows: Bad news, crying out for acceptance, needs self-esteem, needs guidance in setting goals for upward mobility, neglected and misguided, dangerous drugs, out of control, fear, I am not proud of them, black power, losers, lawless, dangerous, no hope. It is important to note that the educational levels of the participants ranged from a bachelor's degree (25%) to the master's degree (40%) and the doctorate degree (35%).

The current attitudes of the sample of African-American professionals toward

African-American street gangs have serious implications for the future. The new direction of street gangs in Kansas City should not only be applauded but encouraged and supported, especially by Black professionals. Many Black professionals represent the traditional Black leadership and the power structure in Kansas City. This is probably the case in most American cities, particularly the inner cities. The development of the inner cities requires collaborative efforts among all concerned. In the case of Kansas City, if Break & Build is to turn things around, it needs the support of Black professionals, especially those in the power structure.

CONCLUSION

The problems of gang violence have been well documented. However, it is unclear whether the growth in urban violence should be attributed largely to gangs, law-violating youth groups, or nongang youths. Although several studies have documented higher levels of violence among gang members compared to nongang youths, the research necessary to clarify this issue has not been conducted since Miller's study in the 1970's. More definitive data must be collected to untangle this situation. What roles have Blacks played in gang movements? There is much evidence that Blacks have played major roles in gang movements and gang-related violence. Black involvement includes leadership roles toward new, productive directions. Regrettably, this leadership style has been neglected in American leadership literature. As indicated in this study, the current activities of Operation Break & Build gang groups in metropolitan Kansas City are a case in point.

The current plan of action by Operation Break and Build in Metropolitan Kansas City is indeed a refreshing model in street gang history. It needs to be nurtured and replicated. Its present funders are to be commended. Equally important is the grassroots support. But it also needs the blessings of traditional Black power structure in the community. The question is, will the Black professionals come around just like the street gangs have come around? Only time will tell.

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