



[Click here to go back to search results.](#)

## Connecticut Post (Bridgeport, CT)

October 20, 2007

**Section:** Local

**Article ID:** 7237820

### Bridgeport gangs: deadly or troublesome?

AARON LEO *aleo@ctpost.com*

BRIDGEPORT - Carlos wants to leave the city. And the state. The East Side resident, who wouldn't use his last name, joined a gang at age 12. He wouldn't say which gang.

Twelve years later, he has three children and doesn't want them to follow in the gang philosophy. "It's basically about the territory, the money and drugs," he said. "I'll be damned if my kids ever do that." For his initiation, he had to jump somebody. If he didn't complete his initiation, the gang beat him instead. He participated in gang activities, jumping people and defending territory, for more than 10 years before he landed in jail on numerous third-degree assault charges.

Then his grandmother, who raised him, died while he was in prison. He learned that when he came home.

"It was a real eye-opener," Carlos said.

But while he learned his lesson, there are hundreds of gang members in the city who haven't.

Gangs are definitely in the city and some are in the schools, although school officials say they are loose-knit groups, not the violent, organized drug gangs of the 1980s and 1990s.

But police said even the loose-knit ones can be just as problematic, luring children from broken families with the dazzle of power and money, and most important, respect and love.

City Police Officer Mike Gosha grew up in tough Newark, N.J., so he knows about gangs and their appeal to impressionable youth. He's the department's designated "gang expert."

"I've been doing this my whole life. In Bridgeport, you got Bloods. You got Crips," he said.

The clean-shaven, crew-cut officer speaks quickly and can rattle off half a dozen gang names faster than a pen stroke.

He's also versed in gang history.

The East Coast bloods started in 1993 in Riker's Island prison in New York in 1993. The West Coast Bloods started in California in the 1970s. The two are not related, and most of Bloods on the East Coast are independent groups. There is no parent gang for the Bloods, he said, adding that the Crips grew on the streets in response to the Bloods.

He swears by Lisa Taylor-Austin, a former city school guidance counselor and a national forensic gang expert, who holds numerous counseling degrees. She's been interviewed for many national stories about gangs.

As of April, there were 32 gangs or subsets in Bridgeport, said and more merge or are created every day, she said.

Carlos and city students have the most intimate knowledge of gangs.

"There's quite a few in Central, Harding and Bassick," Carlos said. Central has Bloods and Crips; Harding has Bloods, he said.

Students at the schools partly agree.

Standing with his friends outside Harding High School, Christopher Torres, 16, said there are Bloods, but they're not organized. "They never do anything, not unless you bother them."

Andre Mercy, 15, standing in front of Central High School after dismissal, wasn't fazed.

Are there Latin Kings? He just laughed.

Crips and Bloods? "Who?" he responded.

But two Bassick students, an 18-year-old senior and a 16-year-old junior, paint a different picture. They requested anonymity.

Bassick has loose-knit but relatively powerful in-school gangs of Latin Kings, Crips and Bloods, and the city-based Stack Boyz and Pink Ladies, the female version of the Stack Boyz.

The two students said they don't get hassled, but freshmen are most at risk.

"They just beat them for no reason," one of the teens said.

More recently, a student was beaten at a football game at Kennedy Stadium between Bassick and Central, they said.

Several years ago, a student was wrapped in tape and thrown onto the gym floor during a pep rally, they claimed.

Most after-school fights are gang-related, they added.

The two girls scoff at gang members.

"They say they feel protected," said the 18-year-old.

"It's stupid," added the junior.

Lisa Taylor-Austin, takes it all seriously, but agrees there are different types of gangs.

"All gangs are not identical. Some are hybrids, some are entrepreneurial and some are super gangs," she said. "Each gang has their own methods of operation, culture and crimes."

"Some gangs commit assault and others murder," she added. She said there have been six gang-related fatalities in Bridgeport in recent years.

School officials concede there are loose-knit groups in schools, but most just hang out.

School Security director Melvin Wearing and Robert Henry, the district's chief of staff, said some "gangs" are geography-based: they live in the same neighborhoods.

But many students from different neighborhoods play sports together, not fight, Henry added.

Nonetheless, Taylor-Austin is alarmed.

"We are losing our young men at alarming rates and nothing is being done about it," she said.

Gosha can name two gang-related deaths.

In June 2005, Lucilio Cifuentes, 19, shot Clarence Mills, also 19, in the back at the Midway Carnival in Seaside Park, in what police called a "youth gang" dispute. Mills was not a gang member.

Cifuentes, who pleaded guilty to first-degree manslaughter, is serving an 18-year sentence under a plea deal.

The other, Gosha recalled, was in July 2006 when Antwan Campas, 16, allegedly shot Rashod Leak, 15, in the Marina Village public housing complex, following an argument over a cell phone. Campas reportedly wanted to be a member of Marina Village's Stack Boyz gang. Leak's mother said Leak was a member. The Stack Boyz reportedly started with youths in Marina Village in response to groups of P.T. Barnum Apartment youths who would come into Marina, threatening youths there with guns. They got the name "Stack" from the large amount of money they were going to get.

Campas' murder charge is pending in Superior Court.

For all the disagreement about the meaning of a gang, all agree that today's gangs are not as organized as in the 1980s and the 1990s.

Many members are impulsive "cowboys," hotshots out for attention and street credibility, according to Gosha. Some gangs are structured enough to have sanctions for members overdoing it.

Carlos agrees. But he still wants to get his children away from them.

Kenneth R. Jackson led a drug-dealing "crew" in Bridgeport in the 1970s and now tries to steer kids away from there.

Jackson's bunch was loosely-organized, but nobody messed with tall, muscular man, who was nicknamed "KJ" and was compared to mobster John Gotti for his power over his neighborhood.

"We didn't have no name, no colors. But we was respected," he said.

School officials have banned the wearing of clothing with so-called "gang colors," in schools. But they're still visible on the street, according to Carlos.

The Crips wear blue handkerchiefs, the Bloods wear red, the Latin Kings, yellow and black and Netas, black red and white with beads, Carlos said.

You can see them in the East Side, he said.

Gang activities also change with the culture, said Jon Bloch, an associate professor of Sociology at Southern Connecticut State University.

For example, he noted, gangs in the 1940s in would "would drink beer on the sidewalks. They would bet on a baseball game."

But that's changed today.

Now gangs are involved in drugs and guns, he said.

Today, it's about drugs, women and territory, Carlos said.

"It's all materialism," he said.

Money is one thing a gang can give, Carlos said. It also gives security and "love."

And another, more urgent need: survival.

"You've got to be with or be against it. If you're against it, you get your ass kicked," he said.

Jackson and Gosha said youths want to be cool and fit in, sometimes just tagging along while other members commit crimes.

Children need mentors, and some find them in gangs rather than families, they said.

"We don't nurture the kids any more. Gangbangers do," Gosha said.

Whether it's parents who both work to survive or just lousy parenting, the outcome is the same.

Add to that the "bonafide gangbangers turned entertainers" and the allure of money, women and power, and it's a recipe for a lost youth to seek fellowship in the wrong place, Gosha said.

But the road of gang life can lead to a dead end.

Jackson went on to sell drugs in another state and was arrested there. He's served 12 years in prison during his lifetime, and was once arrested in front of his son, which he regrets.

He turned himself around in jail.

Gosha said going to prison is a red badge of courage for gang members.

Carlos has found another problem. He can leave the gang but he'll lose any protection he has. And that means staying out of certain neighborhoods for fear of being assaulted.

Jackson and school officials are trying to stop youth from going down the gang path.

In his mentoring service's new office on Stratford Avenue, Jackson has a small computer lab where youths can learn computer skills, draft resumes and generally learn to act professionally.

He's also trying to get local contractors to take youths under their wings, because "it's easier to get guns now than to get a job."

"If you want to carry a weapon, get a tool belt," he said.

He also holds Saturday morning breakfasts for men to be father figures for troubled youth.

In the schools, three officers, Dwayne Harrison, Jeff Babey and Stephen Nelson are certified in the Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) program.

Also, Gosha ran a program that encouraged youths to direct their abilities in more productive directions.

The officer, also the department's handler of graffiti cases, took graffiti-makers and turned them on to design and architecture with successful results.

He shut down the program several years ago after it lost its office space in the University of Bridgeport, but said it's one way to keep youth from gangs.

There's interest in reviving it, he said, adding that he cannot run it because he is busy training new police officers.

But a big step would be to call a gang a gang, and not a crew or group, regardless of what it does or how loosely it's organized, according to Gosha.

The more publicity of the city's gang issues, especially the gangs' influence in schools, would help the city attract funding for anti-gang programs, he said.

"If you remain in denial it's not going away. It's going to get worse," he said.

However, Gosha did concede that gangs have and will always be around, for a variety of reasons.

Bloch said anyone marginalized by poverty and other socio-economic factors will group together for support and power.

"As long as there's an underclass" there will be gangs, Bloch said.

How gangs will change remains to be seen. With more drugs and more guns, he's not sure where it will go. "It seems like it couldn't be much worse but those might be famous last words," he said.

However, there may be light at the end of the tunnel, he noted.

"The majority of youthful offenders do grow out of it," he said.

Just ask Carlos.

[Photo: Brian A. Pounds/Connecticut Post](#)

[Kenneth Jackson stops to look at a makeshift memorial at the corner of Hollister and Connecticut](#)

[Avenues in his East End neighborhood in Bridgeport. Jackson is organizing men to act as role models for the city's youth, hoping to break the culture of street gangs.](#)

[Photo: Autumn Pinette/ Connecticut Post](#)

[Bridgeport police officer Mike Gosha stands in the former Bridgeport Brass building, known to be the site of gang meetings and activity.](#)

[Photo: Autumn Pinette/ Connecticut Post](#)

[Bridgeport police officer Mike Gosha stands in the former Bridgeport Brass administrative building, known to be the site of gang meetings and activity.](#)

[Photo: Autumn Pinette/ Connecticut Post](#)

[Bridgeport police officer Mike Gosha stands in the former Bridgeport Brass administrative building, known to be the site of gang meetings and activity.](#)

[Photo: Autumn Pinette/ Connecticut Post](#)

[Bridgeport police officer Mike Gosha stands in the former Bridgeport Brass administrative building, known to be the site of gang meetings and activity.](#)

(c) 2007 The Connecticut Post. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Media NewsGroup, Inc. by NewsBank, Inc.