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Cities taking wrong steps to stop gangs, report says

Role of Seattle police special unit defended

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P-I REPORTER

A report by a Washington, D.C., think tank concludes that anti-gang legislation and police crackdowns across the country only worsen the gang problem and suggests more needs to be done to prevent children from joining in the first place.

Local law enforcement officials agree with that assessment but aren't ready to say that tough stands against gangs are ineffective.

Lt. Ron Wilson, head of the Seattle Police Department's gang unit, reviewed portions of the Justice Policy Institute report released Wednesday and said he agrees that law enforcement suppression alone isn't enough to curb gang activity.

"It's a community problem; it's not just a law enforcement problem," Wilson said.

But that doesn't mean there isn't a place for a gang unit, which he suggests can help criminal investigations -- and even prevent some teens from joining gangs.

"The more they (detectives) have contact with gangs, the more they develop a rapport, an understanding, and cooperation, even if it's behind the scenes," Wilson said.

The authors of the report argue that targeting gang members and putting them in prison to serve time with other gang members actually strengthens gang ties.

"We're talking about 12-, 13-, 14-, 15-year-olds whose involvement in gangs is likely to be ephemeral unless they are pulled off the street and put in prison, where they will come out with much stronger gang allegiances," said Judith Greene, co-author of "Gang Wars: The Failure of Enforcement Tactics and the Need for Effective Public Safety Strategies." The institute advocates alternatives to incarceration.

Gabriel Morales, a local gang-prevention consultant, said the report appeared more about criticizing police than offering substantial recommendations.

"I think we're doing a lot of things right in Seattle. I think there's a lot we can do

better," Morales said. "But not doing anything, that's not the answer."

The institute's report is based on interviews and analysis of hundreds of pages of previously published statistics and reports. The authors focused much of their work on Los Angeles and Chicago -- cities, the report says, that are losing the war on gangs because they focus on law enforcement and are short on intervention.

Morales, in Los Angeles for a conference of gang investigators, disagreed with that assessment of L.A.'s gangs.

"The problem is they didn't do enough early on," he said. "They let it get too bad; they let it get out of control. I just hope we never get like that in Seattle."

Still, gang activity has been a growing concern in the Seattle region and across Washington.

More than a year ago, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco Firearms and Explosives formed the Violent Gang Task Force, a partnership with the FBI, Seattle police and the King County Sheriff's Office.

In its most recent operation, announced in May, the task force arrested 47 alleged drug dealers, many of them accused gang members.

And earlier this year, some state officials and legislators pushed for laws that would give tougher sentences to those convicted of gang-related crimes. Supporters also wanted to define gang membership and develop a database to be shared by law enforcement statewide.

But the law failed to pass. What survived was a work group that must now come up with a common definition for gangs and gang membership.

In King County, the Sheriff's Office announced plans to form a gang unit following the death of Deputy Steve Cox, who was shot and killed last December while investigating a shooting in White Center. His killer was identified as a gang member.

The report was critical of all these types of actions and argues that the focus on gangs is based in part on some commonly held myths -- that most or all gang members are hardened criminals, that they spend most of their time planning crimes, or that they are responsible for the bulk of violent crime in a community.

Rather, the research shows that gang members account for a small share of violent crime and much of the crime is self-serving, with the gangsters spending whatever they earn in their criminal activities on themselves.

One of the authors of the report said the research shows that social service

programs are far more effective at reducing violence than tough gang enforcement.

Wilson said Seattle gang detectives do work with social programs meant to prevent youths from joining gangs.

And there are city programs focused on those efforts. Last month, city officials announced \$250,000 for summer programs in the city's South End, where gang activity has been a longtime concern.

ATF Assistant Special Agent in Charge Doug Dawson said the federal agency has long supported intervention programs to curb gang violence.

"All of us in law enforcement would agree that it has to be more than beating people over the head with the law and putting them in jail," he said.

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