Gangland Online: Performing the Real Imaginary World of Gangstas and Ghettos in Brussels

Elke Van Hellemont*
Leuven Institute of Criminology, Catholic University of Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

1. Introduction

Using the Brussels black African gangs as an example, this article aims to prove that gang members nowadays take advantage of the new possibilities offered by technological innovation, such as the internet and more specifically weblogs, to communicate ‘gang-ness’.

In recent years, Brussels, the Belgian capital, has witnessed the rise of several troublesome youth gangs, among which black African youth gangs have attracted most attention. Made up of migrants predominantly coming from the African Great Lakes Region, the Belgian police estimate that at least 13 black African gangs are active in Brussels, each with approximately 20–50 members. Their gang labels allude to skin colour, such as ‘Black Demolition’, to the neighbourhood surrounding the subway station of the same name, such as ‘Anneeessens’ or to postal codes of Brussels municipalities such as ‘1140’, ‘1070 style’, ‘1050 Staff’.

Although members are held responsible for extortion, drug trafficking and violent robberies, the foremost distinctive feature of black African gangs is their involvement in public black-on-black fights involving excessive violence, stabbings and occasionally homicides. In 2009 five gang-motivated homicides were recorded in Brussels – a figure that by Belgian standards is exceptionally high.

* E-mail: elke.vanhellemont@law.kuleuven.be.
The fact that (1) victims of violence are almost exclusively black African juveniles, (2) the manifestation of their violent conduct goes far beyond the use of violence in its instrumental form and (3) there appears to be no immediate cause for such violent action, left police officials as well as the public confused about the motives behind this disproportionate use of violence. Considering their repertoire of violent conduct, one may wonder how a study on the communication of gang-ness can contribute to our knowledge about motives for gang violence.

There is a wide consensus among gang researchers that gangs are to be considered as: ‘a social group that uses symbols, engages in verbal and nonverbal communications to declare their “gang-ness,” that has a sense of permanence and gang identified territory or turf, and, lastly, is involved in criminal activity’.1 And although the definitional debate has been going on for decades now and shows no sign of imminent closure,2 scholars tend to agree upon the ‘uniqueness of gang violence’ too.3 That is ‘gang motivated violence’, or violence ‘that arises from a gang activity’.4 Numerous studies suggest that gang violence revolves around insult, such as an ambiguous stare or a verbal insult5 or around honour.6 It can also be a response to deliberate acts of provocation, such as incursions by one gang into

---