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The Un-Banging of Middle America

by tpitock

On the last day of his life, 15-year-old Ricky Lee Smith sauntered in the front door, let the screen door snap behind him and called, "Mama!" He barely broke stride on his way to the kitchen of the family's home, a twin home in a middle-class neighborhood in New Jersey.

His mother, Pamela Johnson-Smith, was delighted by the singsong in his voice. Lately, her son had been moody, anxious. It was hard even to remember the little boy who once collected Pokemon cards and chased his late father's car down the driveway shouting, "Daddy, Daddy! Don't leave me, Daddy!" These days, he was erratic and needy. "I love you, Mommy," he'd tell her out of the blue. One day, he told her he wanted to start attending church more often. "I want God to forgive me for the sins I've done," he said.

She put it down to adolescent melodrama. As far as she was concerned, he had all the emotional and material support he needed. They certainly weren't rich, but there was a lot of love in their house. After his dad was out of the scene—the parents were divorced several years before Ricky Lee's father died—his mother, sister and he moved in with Pamela's parents in their modest single home in Teaneck, the main town in New Jersey's affluent Bergen County.

Just over the George Washington Bridge was New York City, which Ricky Lee's grandparents had left in the 1970s. Teaneck represented moving up in the world. By the mid-2000s, Teaneck's 39,000 residents lived in homes starting at about $350,000 and ranging up to $3.5 million. Median household income was about $75,000, 50 percent higher than the national average. Teaneck High School, where Ricky was to start as a freshman, looks like a castle within a campus of neatly tended athletic fields.

Alumni include NBA commissioner David Stern, former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker and current Chief Justice of the World Court in The Hague Gabrielle Kirk McDonald. Even if he weren't destined for fame, Ricky had dreams. He loved music and football.

No one knew why Ricky had been so anxious, but it was serious enough that he had trouble sleeping and didn't want to be alone. He'd made the basement into his bedroom, but lately he'd come upstairs and sleep on the living room sofa. Pamela found him sleeping in his sister's room, too. A few weeks earlier, he'd been taken by ambulance to the emergency room complaining of numbness in his arm and shortness of breath. Doctors didn't find anything wrong and suggested he was suffering from anxiety.

But on the afternoon of Saturday, July 8, 2006, Ricky Lee was happy, and Pamela was relieved to see him smiling, hopeful that whatever was bothering him was in the past. This was the boy she knew. He was going to a party that night. He was a funny guy, a bit of a budding ladies' man, and he sure did love a party.

He told Pamela they'd go to church together in the morning.

"If I come home," he said.

He meant that he might sleep at a friend's house.

The authorities in and around Teaneck have noticed a disturbing new phenomenon in that leafy suburb: It has a gang problem. Teaneck and neighboring Englewood had grown their own gangs, the Goonies, and Fame & Money, aka the Fams. Two of the nation's largest gangs, the Bloods and the Crips, were active nearby, especially in Patterson, the state's third-largest city, which was just 15 minutes from Teaneck down Route 4. A third major gang, the predominantly Puerto Rican Latin Kings, had drifted over from New York City, too.

Teaneck's problem reflects a broad trend. The Department of Justice's National Youth Gang Survey in 2007 showed that 50 percent of law enforcement agencies in America's suburbs and 15 percent in rural areas reported youth gang activity. Suburban areas had a 17 percent increase in gang activity between 2002, the year of the DOJ's prior study, and 2007. A quarter of the country's 788,000 gang members

were suburban kids.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation also keeps statistics. In 2005, it estimated 21,500 gangs nationwide with 731,500 members—not counting prison, motorcycle or other "adult" gangs.

As bad as that sounds, experts say government statistics underestimate the problem. "The biggest problem with statistics is that [police] chiefs are pressured not to report gang activities," said Dan Korem, a consultant on gangs who spotted the trend early, saw it ebb somewhat, but has watched with alarm as a next wave has washed in. "Politicians and communities don't want the stigma of being known as 'the suburban gang capital.'"

Another reason for the poor data: There isn't across-the-board agreement on the definition of a "gang." Legal definitions vary between jurisdictions, though they tend to emphasize groups engaged in crime that have common "identifiers," such as wearing particular colors (red for Bloods, blue for Crips, and so on), a shared language of hand gestures (known as "signing") or cryptic codes that are embedded in graffiti; and rituals such as initiations, known in many parts as being "jumped in," which often includes committing violence, even against random victims.

Many gang experts and sociologists, though, say those definitions only hew to street-gang stereotypes. They point out that clothes, music and hanging out with a particular set of friends makes a kid part of a clique or a club. It's a gang only when a crime is committed. "If you're always looking for the features of a stereotypical street gang in the suburbs, you're not going to see it," Korem said. "There are a lot of misconceptions. You say 'gangs in the suburbs' and people have this picture of Crips and Bloods hanging out on the corner. It's more complicated than that."

Korem, who wrote about the phenomenon of spreading gangs in his 1994 book *Suburban Gangs, The Affluent Rebels*, identified four types of juvenile gangs. Ideological gangs include people with a particular worldview, such as neo-Nazis, skinheads, anarchists or even environmental extremists. Cult gangs get into Satanism or other occult activities. Delinquent gangs are packs of kids whose activities

can start with graffiti and vandalism and escalate to theft, assault and even catastrophic violence such as school shootings. At the time Korem started studying the phenomenon in the 1980s for Suburban Gangs, these delinquent gangs were the most common type. As the population of teens contracted in the ’90s, delinquent gangs fell, then rose again as the population expanded in the mid-2000s. Street gangs are a subclass of delinquent gangs.

There can be overlap; one type of group can morph into another. Street gangs have probably had the biggest evolution in recent years. The major ones have matured into quasi-corporate structures and syndicated, becoming a major factor in a metastasizing problem. Even so, most gangs spring from within their communities. Typically, kids form loose groups and get into mischief. Not apprehending the warning signs—minor vandalism, defacing walls with graffiti—suburban communities often dismiss the activity as kids just being kids. The word that comes up frequently is “wannabes,” a term that makes many experts bristle.

“A wannabe is a gonna-be,” Hector Carter, a detective with the Bergen County Prosecutors Office, told me. “It’s troubling to me when I hear, ‘Oh, he’s just a white kid from such-and-such a town.’ Well, I wanted to be a college football player, and I became one. If a 13-year-old says he wants to be a gang member, why would we not listen? Do you wait for kids to do drugs or get to them beforehand?”

Wannabes are worse than recognized gang members, said John Gscheidmeier, a school resource officer and drug recognition expert in suburban Milwaukee. “If I’m dealing with somebody on patrol, I’d much rather deal with a true gang member. They’ll declare who they are, but they won’t do anything stupid. They know the ramifications of doing [something bad] with the five-oh [police officer],” Gscheidmeier said. “A wannabe might feel he needs to prove himself, and that can be really dangerous.”

There are ways to reach wannabes before they’re jumped into gangs, law enforcement experts say—but they have less to do with law enforcement than with changes in the aspects of suburban culture that allow gangs to grow.

The general failure to address suburban gang problems isn't just a result of misunderstandings about what they are; it's caused by a misapprehension of their genesis. The homegrown gangs that morph into street gangs tend to open the gates for established gangs, or super-gangs, to enter. "You'll have a group of a few kids," Carter says, "and if they start to do well [such as earning profits from drug dealing], they'll get noticed and be asked to join with one of the bigger gangs."

Established gangs reach out to the suburbs mainly to sell illicit drugs. The suburbs are soft targets: Low-risk, high-profit markets with a customer base of affluent buyers. Web sites and social media like Facebook help gangs identify and recruit potential members. And sometimes groups of local kids will form in response to threats they perceive by the arrival of outside gangs.

"You have a MySpace page, you're 16 and you're trying to cultivate a look. The image you're sending out to the world is, Johnny's a 'banger,'" Detective Carter said. "The gangs look for that sort of thing online, so the next thing you know you get a message to meet up at the mall. Then Johnny shows up, and the gangbanger flashes him a sign, only Johnny doesn't know the code, and Johnny gets taken out to the parking lot and gets tuned [beaten] up."

Suburban police departments don't typically have specialized training, much less dedicated gang liaisons or task forces, to recognize or deal with the problem. School officials and parents are similarly ill-equipped. Meanwhile, suburban kids, primed by the glamour and edginess of "gangsta" TV, movies, music and music videos, are often ready recruits, eager to emulate known gang members, such as rapper Snoop Dogg, an admitted Crip.

The spread of street gangs accelerated in the late 1990s and the 2000s, with gangs that had been concentrated on the West Coast syndicating to the rest of the country. In gang talk, subchapters of a main gang are called "sets." So you have "West Coast sets" that are affiliated with West Coast gangs but spread across the country and, conversely, "East Coast sets." The large gangs also have a sort of corporate structure; just as, say, Coca-Cola owns Minute Maid, a set of a national gang may go by a different name than the "parent

company."

Like many businesses, gangs have benefited from globalization and the Internet's shrinking of the globe. With the emergence of gangs such as the Mara Salvatrucha (better known as MS-13), Dominicans Don't Play and Asian gangs, gang activity is both an import and an export, and members move freely back and forth between the United States and their place of origin. Many of the gang members are native-born Americans living within ethnic enclaves where members feel a strong sense of identity with their ethnic origin.

Gangs in suburban communities are further obscured by two trends. One is the spread of gangsta fashions and styles—including hoodies and baggy jeans, particular slang, gesturing with fingers and hinged wrists, and even certain ways of walking—to a wide array of young people, so it's difficult to tell bangers from law-abiding kids. Also, members of established gangs now know that in many jurisdictions a crime deemed to be "gang-related" carries harsher penalties. "Gangs used to advertise themselves," said Steve Lundquist, who heads the gang unit at the Suffolk County Correctional Facility, a transient prison in Long Island, N.Y. "Notoriety was part of the game. It used to be, if a kid wore all red, he was a Blood. Now it doesn't mean that. You have to spend a lot of time to figure out who is a member and who is just some kid dressing up."

The experts seem to agree: Separation, divorce, physical and sexual abuse, and homes with a severely dysfunctional parent are leading risk factors for gang recruitment. But that profile shouldn't bring to mind only families at the low end of the socioeconomic ladder. "It includes a lot of cases in which both parents work even though they don't necessarily have to work because of economic need," Korem said. "So that's where you have kids from million-dollar homes in Boca Raton joining gangs."

And as Bob DeSena, the founder of Council For Unity, a nonprofit group that works with gang members in prisons and communities worldwide, points out, "just because parents are married doesn't mean the home is a stable, functional place." Sometimes homes aren't what they seem to be; sometimes kids are drawn to trouble even when everything at home is just fine.

"We have them coming through here from the Hamptons," said Sheriff Vincent DeMarco, the warden of the Suffolk County Jail. "A few months ago I had a 13-year-old girl, a straight-A student—and her mother never had a clue. She found the gang on Facebook." (Most members are boys, though recent years have seen the rise of all-female gangs. Girls are usually what Sharon Tracy, a Georgia State professor, calls "auxiliaries." "Their role is often just to pleasure the boys," she said.)

"I had one kid from Hudson in the suburbs of Akron," recalled Tim Dimoff, a former Ohio cop who is now chief executive officer and president of Sacs Consulting and Investigative Services, Inc., an Akron-based consultancy specializing in high-risk workplace issues, including gangs. "We're not talking 'affluent,' we're talking rich. He's driving his own $40,000 car into Akron to hook up with drug dealers in the worst part of the city. He'd have his friends who were amazed and wanted to go along. It was like a thrill ride. It wasn't for money, obviously. It was for status. He was a hero among the other Hudson kids.

"It went on for six or eight months before we busted him. His parents were in total shock. They're asking, 'We make good money, he has everything he would ever want, why would he buy and sell drugs?' It was totally humiliating for them. But the kid didn't see the risk he was taking. He was totally at ease and confident that he was among friends. He didn't realize the implications of what he was doing. He didn't see himself as a criminal, just a kid buying some pot or coke and selling it to his friends.

"He had a hard time understanding that it was a big deal."

In La Jolla, a San Diego neighborhood where $10 million homes are commonplace, what started as a band of delinquents, police say, became a horror show. In May 2007, following the beating death of a surfer by four other surfers, police searched the home of one alleged assailant and found that the suspects had formed a group they called the Bird Rock Bandits, or the BRBs. Police also found swastikas and other white-supremacist material.

Pedro Menendez is 26 now and studying law enforcement at Georgia

Southern University, but he grew up in East Los Angeles. His father, he told me, was "a major gang leader" who, though he worked a 9-to-5 job, supported the family by selling drugs. At 13, Pedro, who agreed to speak on condition that I use a pseudonym, got involved himself. "That's when they start tagging you up and tattooing you," he said.

He says he never killed anyone, but he did participate in robberies and assaults. When he graduated high school, Pedro told his father he wanted to leave California, go to college and find another way of life. "The problem is," he said, "by the rules, you can only leave dead. And they enforce that to the fullest." His father helped him escape. Now, though he believes himself still at risk, he does his best to blend into a suburban community in the South.

He's seen gangs encroaching from every segment of the communities that surround the university campus, including children of Latino farmworkers and affluent white Baptists. "At the Burger King, I saw a Latino group that calls themselves the Sureños. They were just hanging out. They get some white kids to start hanging out with them, and they pull out a bone of marijuana," he says. "The Sureños probably wanted to sell them drugs. There's always a reason that they allow a different group, and it's not just to be friendly. They want money or girls.

"The white boys want marijuana or pills. They don't understand the danger. They're trying to be like guys they see on TV who dress a certain way. But if they're wearing the wrong colors or acting in a certain way—and they're in the wrong area—they can get in real trouble. You can tell if someone isn't being truthful about who they really are.

"Well, you can't work your colors without earning them."

The party Ricky Lee Smith looked forward to in July 2006 had drawn a crowd, and once there, he saw friends. There were kids from Teaneck and Englewood; soon they were joined by others who drove up from Patterson. As the night wore on it became a stew of mixed gangs.

The conflict started with kids calling out gang-speak. The Fams

shouted “fame!” and the Bloods “brppp!” In another setting, it could have been as innocuous as “tastes great” and “less filling,” but in the world of gangbanging, each side interpreted the others’ calls as disrespect. Fights broke out inside the house, then spilled out onto the street. A call went out to police that a riot had started.

In the thick of the melee, Ricky was punched and knocked down on his back next to the street curb. Witnesses say they heard someone shouting, “Pop the trunk, pop the trunk!” which they interpreted to mean someone was getting a weapon out of a car. As Ricky struggled to get up and flee, then-17-year-old Zechariah Eaton broke through the crowd brandishing a .357 magnum.

“Who’s the man now?” Eaton shouted, then pointed the weapon at Ricky and fired.

The bullet passed through Ricky’s shoulder, piercing his lung, liver and intestine. When medics arrived, he was breathing but unresponsive. At 2:10 on the morning of Sunday, July 9, Pamela Johnson-Smith’s only son was pronounced dead.

Whether Ricky was a gangbanger isn’t clear. A detective familiar with the case says he was “at least dibbling and dabbling” with gang involvement. On Ricky’s MySpace page, which is no longer active, he cultivated a certain look, not just the hoodie and baggy jeans that were in fashion but also colors that suggested he was identifying as a Goonie. He flashed gang signs. A police officer assigned to liaise with students at the school responded to the question with discernible irritation. “Ricky Lee is deceased,” he said. “I’m not going to discuss him.”

“I can’t say he was, but I can’t say he wasn’t,” his mother says. “There are a lot of things that as parents we just don’t know. Kids don’t tell us everything.”

Eaton plea bargained, accepting an aggravated manslaughter conviction that carried a sentence of 22 years. Whatever facts might have been discovered at a trial remain undisclosed to the public. Bergen County police do not believe Eaton knew Ricky. They think Eaton may not even have been a full-fledged gang member himself but shot

Ricky to prove his worthiness.

Ricky's death was one of two gang-related killings in Bergen County in three years. The other victim was 18-year-old Ralph Pinto, shot five times by members of the Latin Kings. "I don't think our problem is unusual," former Teaneck Mayor Elie Katz told me. "We're unusual in acknowledging it and trying to address it."

Following the incidents, the school organized anti-gang initiatives. One on those efforts was an assembly that included U.S. Sen. Robert Menendez and Detective Carter as speakers; they hammered home the message that students needed to make good choices because bad ones can have permanent consequences. "It's like drugs," Carter said. "You have to keep talking to them, keep reminding them to stay away, not to let themselves be recruited." Carter believes this type of jaw-boning is effective but can't provide data to show that.

Gang experts say there are ways to roll back the gangbanger trend. They are based on understanding why kids are drawn into gangs and how communities become prey to them. "Gangs cater to kids' needs," DeSena said. He started Council for Unity in 1975 in New York. It has since grown from six members to 96 "chapters" throughout New York state, as well as in the countries of Moldava and Nigeria. "Kids are tribal, and gangs reflect that," he said. "There's a deep human need for identity within a group. There's a need for discipline and structure. Gangs give you that. They cater to the need to feel important, the need for status and respect. Gangs offer drama. Kids want to be feared. They eat that stuff up. The gangs offer discipline and rites of passage.

"Then factor in drugs and sex."

The suburbs, DeSena says, don't have anything to compete with the gangs. "There is no place to hang out. Kids are bored. There aren't community centers," he says. "What do you expect them to do? The gangs fill the empty space. We aren't creating something to compete with what the gangs are offering.

"Here's the big problem we're facing: Gangs are cultures. You're never going to eliminate a sinister culture with law enforcement,

correctional facilities or schools. None of them have the resources to go into the community and deal with the causes and conditions that create gangs. The only way to reverse the trend is to create an alternative culture that addresses the same needs in kids—a better, productive culture that'll draw kids in."

In the council program, he told me, "we strip away the mask that they're hiding behind. We talk about our family, which is about growth and development. We tell them, 'You're not going to jail or the mortuary. You're safe.' In council, we bring everyone together, so there's nobody left to fight. … It's a huge ego-supporting strategy."

The council uses its programs in schools, starting in the elementary grades, in an attempt to reach kids before gangs do, and then continue through college. The Adult and Family Partnership gets the community at large involved, and the council's Public Safety Curriculum includes police. Finally, there's the council's prisons program, which reaches gangbangers who are in jails and prepares them for life after prison.

I met some of the men whose best chance in life now will involve parole. At a council meeting at the Suffolk County Jail, they shared poetry and paintings, feelings and personal stories. Most were in their 20s and 30s. A few had attended private and Catholic schools, and had come from middle-class homes. The meetings were run as support groups.

One of the men came from what he described as "a good home" near Hempstead, on Long Island. For as long as he could remember, he said, he "just liked being bad." He identified with dark characters in movies and got pleasure from acting out. Other men nodded and laughed in self-recognition. "I went to Catholic school," he said. "The gang was a fashion thing for me. I was dressing the part. Then it was addictive: the money, women, the independence. You felt like you were running your own life. You got respect."

I asked what he was on trial for. "A body," he said, meaning a homicide. He claimed the victim came at him, that he acted in self-defense. Whatever the jury would find, he had become aware that the freedom of gang life was an illusion, and now he, along with

many others in the room, faced the reality of serving hard time in Sing Sing, the notorious maximum security prison in upstate New York. “Sing Sing,” another inmate said, “is hell. I mean, hell. I’m tough, believe me I’m tough, but that place, man.”

Although some inmates become involved in the program too late to remake their lives, DeSena says the council program has gotten traction with others. “When we got started in the prison, only two guys were working toward their GED,” he said. “Now every one of them is studying for it.” Under the council’s auspices, parolees are steered toward jobs so they don’t need to return to selling drugs or running guns. One such option is a truck driving school that offers guaranteed employment upon completion. Tuition is less than $400.

DeSena has hired nine parolees from the council since 2004 and placed two others with jobs elsewhere. In the five years since, none of the 11 has gone back to prison.

Meanwhile, Dan Korem has developed a program for schools and communities called the Missing Protector Strategy. It’s a fairly simple idea: Identify at-risk youths and match them to adult protectors who live in the neighborhood and visit their kids every other week in person, making sure to talk by phone at least once a week. “The No. 1 factor that drove kids into gangs was that they didn’t feel they had someone to protect them,” Korem said. “If you take a youth with at-risk factors, especially ruptures in families, and he doesn’t have a protector, he will gravitate to a gang.”

The results of the Missing Protector Strategy, he said, have been dramatic, with reduced gang activity, drug use and teen pregnancy where it has been used. In Odessa, Texas, for example, the program was applied to new immigrants from Mexico who had a high rate of truancy, and school attendance shot up. In Chadham, Ontario, officials told Korem that after matching 30 young people with protectors, none was involved in high-risk behavior—assaults, truancy or chronic drug use—in the subsequent 90 days.

Frequently, though, the success of an anti-gang program has been a prelude to its abandonment. Communities see the gang problem as solved, rather than an ongoing condition that needs managing. They

disband anti-gang units that identify kids likely to be gang recruits and stop funding programs that helped dismantle gangs. “Having dodged the bullet, they don’t recharge the batteries,” Korem said. “I think things are going to get a lot worse.”

I attended an anti-gang assembly last year at Teaneck High School. Ricky’s mother, Pamela Johnson-Smith, was also there. Later, sitting in a deli on Teaneck Road, I asked her if what happened to Ricky had made her rethink the causes of his anxiety. She said she didn’t know and put the situation in a spiritual light.

“Ricky knew God was calling him,” she said. “It’s not just me who lost my child. That boy’s mother also lost her child. He lost all his young years when he should be building something for the future. He destroyed his own future, too.”

The crying spells, she said, come mostly at night now, when she’s alone.

“You have plans for your child. You want to see him become a man, to see him go to college. I’d been thinking how I’d need insurance for him because he’d start driving. It was all just taken away from me, all the things I looked forward to for him. My goodness,” she said, drawing a breath through the weight of grief.

“I never thought anything like this could happen in a place like Teaneck.”

Along with two other mothers, she has started a group, “Teaneck Comes Together,” that meets every few months. It has sponsored dances and workshops to raise awareness among kids and parents. “We have to reach these kids,” she told me, “and give them something positive. You can’t assume it’s not in your backyard. This gang stuff is rising, and we need to face it. I’m sorry it took my son’s life to open our eyes here, but maybe if his death turns other kids toward a better future, maybe what happened will have more meaning.”

In April, a little more than two years after Ricky Lee Smith died, there was a drive-by shooting in Teaneck. Four shots were fired into a house. No one was hit—this time.

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