Study explores gang activity on the internet

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Gangs are not using the Internet to recruit new members or commit complex cybercrimes, according to a new study funded by Google Ideas.

"What they are doing online is typically what they are doing on the street," said David Pyrooz, an assistant professor at Sam Houston State University, College of Criminal Justice and coauthor of the study. "For the most part, gang members are using the Internet for self-promotion and braggadocio, but that also involves some forms of criminal and deviant behaviors. "

"Criminal and Routine Activities in Online Settings: Gangs, Offenders, and the Internet," coauthored by Scott Decker, director of the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, and doctoral student Richard Moule of Arizona State University, was recently published online by *Justice Quarterly*. It investigates the use of the Internet and social networking sites by gang members and other young adults for online crime and deviance.

The study was based on interviews the authors conducted with 585 young adults from five cities, including Cleveland, OH; Fresno, CA; Los Angeles, CA; Phoenix, AZ; and St. Louis, MO. It was funded by Google Ideas, a think/do tank that explores the role that technology can play in tackling human challenges, such as violent extremism, illicit networks and fragile states.

The study found that much of the online activities of gang members are typical of their age group; they spend time on the Internet, use social

networking sites like [Facebook](#) and watch YouTube videos. Much like what studies find in offline or street settings, their rate of committing crimes or deviant acts online is 70% greater than those not in gangs. Gang members illegally download media, sell drugs, coordinate assaults, search social network sites to steal and rob, and upload deviant videos at a higher rate than former or non-gang members, the study found.

However, gang members are not engaging in intricate cybercrimes, such as phishing schemes, identity theft or hacking into commercial enterprises.

"We observe that neither gang members nor their peers have the technological competency to engage in complex forms of cybercrime," the study found. "In short, while the Internet has reached inner city populations, access alone is not translating into sophisticated technological know-how."

Gangs do not use the Internet for purposes instrumental to the group, such as recruiting new members, drug distribution, meetings or other organizational activities. Gang members recognized that law enforcement monitored their online behaviors, so they limited their discussion of gang activities on the Internet or [social media](#) sites. Only 20 percent of gang members surveyed said that their gang had a web site or social media page, and one-third of those were password protected.

[Gang members](#) recognized the importance of the Internet, but sites were used mainly as status symbols. Instead of exploiting the Internet for criminal opportunities, YouTube, Facebook, or other social media is used much like an "electronic graffiti wall," according the study.

One-quarter of gang member said they used the Internet to search out information on other gangs and more than half watch gang-related videos online, such as fights or videos.

"Many respondents were simply interested in gang related fights and threats in general, finding them as entertaining as a boxing or UFC match," Pyrooz said, referring to gang-related videos on YouTube .

Law enforcement should continue to monitor and address gangs and crime online by working closely with different web sites and ISPs, as well as investigating other forms of telecommunication like cell phone and emails. In addition, they can request service providers remove images that glorify gangs or violence, or use Twitter for citizens to report crime in the community.

"Technology is part of the problem, but it is just as likely part of the solution." said Pyrooz, with regard to documenting the "digital trail" left behind, as well as prosocial opportunities.

More information: www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/1 … 07418825.2013.778326

Provided by Sam Houston State University

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