



## The Star-Ledger

### Jersey's growing army of young gangsters

Like many, teen charged in Orange officer's death joined while still a child

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Family photos line the walls of Raynard Brown's tidy Orange home. A good home, his mother calls it, with two working parents who believed in the value of education and the power of after-school activities to keep kids from hunting down trouble.

But Cynthia Brown found she couldn't compete with another, more seductive influence in her son's life, not when it grabbed him up so young, molding his behavior since the age of 11.

That's when Raynard Brown first came home wearing the signature colors of the Bloods street gang. Over the next eight years, Brown rose to the rank of superior in the Bloods, authorities say. At the same time, he committed ever more serious crimes, culminating in his arrest last week for the shotgun killing of Orange police Detective Kieran Shields.

Law enforcement officials say Brown's progression from child wannabe to violent gangster is by no means unique. As the number of gang members in New Jersey has exploded over the past decade, so has the number of impressionable young children associated with them.

Investigators say they have interviewed full-fledged gang members as young as 8, and they have come across 6-year-olds so steeped in gang culture that it's likely only a matter of time before they're serving as lookouts and holding drugs for older gang members.

From there, authorities say, it's an easy transition to more serious crimes: car theft, drug dealing, weapons possession, assault and, in some cases, murder.

"Raynard Brown is a perfect example," said Detective Sgt. Ronnie Hampton, an investigator with the State Police street gang unit. "He's been in trouble since he was a juvenile, and being in a gang obviously had an influence in his life."

A State Police survey of law enforcement agencies in 2004 concluded New Jersey had at least 17,000 gang members. Of those, about 2,300 were under the age of 15. But not all agencies responded to the survey. Among them was Camden, where gangs have battled over the drug trade.

Hampton believes the number of gang members in New Jersey is closer to 25,000, if not higher, noting that the state Department of Corrections alone has identified 10,700 committed gang members in prisons, halfway houses or on parole.

While those gang members are spread across the state, with a presence even in suburbs and semirural areas, the problem is most acute in New Jersey's cities. And it is there that the Crips and Bloods largely hold sway, the Crips in their trademark blue, the Bloods in red.

In many neighborhoods, ranking gang members are symbols of success and cool. They're the ones with the nice clothes, shiny cars and, most importantly, respect. Much of that comes from the money they earn from the drug trade and the time they've done in prison.

## THE LITTLEST GANGSTERS

Whether out of altruism or a more sinister desire to groom the young, gang members buy neighborhood children ice cream, sodas, sneakers and clothes.

Too often, kids idolize them. Those impressionable youngsters can turn out to be the most dangerous, gang investigators say.

"Take a kid with low self-esteem and put him in a gang environment, he's the perfect kind to follow orders of violence," said Sgt. Joseph Conzentino, a member of the Newark Police Department's Criminal Gangs and Intelligence Unit. "He will get a reputation in the community and feel good about himself."

Many older gang members, known as "OGs," for "original gangster," take youngsters under their wing.

"They're role models," said Freddy Ruiz, director of youth relations for Stop Shootin,' a Newark anti-violence group that works with troubled children, including gang members. "They see the respect these guys are getting and they say, 'I gotta get the same respect.'"

In his own experience, Ruiz has seen gang members as young as 9. Some were born into it, he said, with gang fathers setting an example. Others gravitated to it on their own.

Two teens whom Ruiz counsels elaborated on his assessment. One of them, a 17-year-old Newark boy, grew up with gangs in his neighborhood and in his own family. The teen would agree to be interviewed only if he was identified by his street name, "Sneaks."

Today, he said, gangs don't even need to recruit. Kids look up to gang members, emulate their behavior and willingly join up.

In Sneaks' words, "You're just smelling the movement."

"They (gangs) don't look for you," the teen said. "You look for them. It's a goal you want to achieve."

On the streets, a saying applies to those not drawn to the gang lifestyle, he said, and it contains a pointed warning.

"Either you get down or you lay down," he said.

The second youth, who would identify himself only by his first name, Al, said the main attraction is popularity.

## WITH CRIME COMES STATUS

"Young people want to be in the gang just to be cool," said Al, 18, who now helps Ruiz mentor kids. "Then you make moves and get your status."

That status, he said, is achieved by committing crimes.

Loucius Jones has seen the same attitude in his Irvington youth center. And like Ruiz, he's seen gang members getting younger and younger.

Gang culture has become so glamorized and mythologized in music, movies and on the streets, Jones said, that "it's as American to people as apple pie."

"Gangbanging has become so commercialized," he said. "These kids are learning the culture when they're 5 and 6 years old. They're looking up to the Al Capones of the modern-day era. They relate to that money and power."

Kids are finding new paths to the gangster mystique through the Internet.

A prime example is myspace.com, the social networking Web site in which people post personal pictures and messages about themselves. Kids are increasingly using myspace and similar sites to talk about their membership in -- or fascination with -- street gangs, Acting Newark Police Chief Anthony Campos said.

"As times change with technology like myspace, there's a greater potential for younger kids to be influenced by gangs," Campos said. "Because policing starts at home, parents should monitor their children's activity on myspace and other such sites."

But sometimes, that strategy won't work. Sometimes, children's families are gang members themselves.

"It's become almost genetic," Jones said. "'My daddy's a Crip. My daddy's a Blood.' We're going to lose a whole generation if we don't act."

Jones said he's seen the phenomenon in his own family. One cousin, a Blood, calls his son "Baby OG." Recently, Jones said, the cousin was charged with murder.

Raynard Brown wasn't born into it, but it sucked him in nonetheless.

Cynthia Brown said she tried to steer her son away from the Bloods. She ordered him take off his red clothing and enrolled him in a variety of activities, from football to tap dancing.

But Brown had made his choice.

His first entry as a gang member in law enforcement databases came on May 2, 2002, when a Newark detective identified him as a Blood during a street interview, said Lt. Earl Graves, who supervises the Essex-Federal Gang Suppression Partnership for the Essex County Prosecutor's Office.

Brown continued to pop up as a gang member in subsequent encounters with police, and he tattooed images of dog paws on his right shoulder, another sign of allegiance to the Bloods, Graves said.

Before his 18th birthday, Brown was arrested seven times for crimes ranging from marijuana possession to weapons possession to robbery, earning him two years in the New Jersey Training School for Boys in Monroe Township.

The jail time did nothing to curb his criminal behavior. As an adult, authorities said, he continued to rob and steal, along the way elevating his status within the Bloods to superior, akin to a lieutenant.

Last Monday night, Brown, now 19, fired a sawed-off shotgun at another man outside a dilapidated Orange home frequented by drug users, police said. Detective Shields, 32, was among the Orange police who responded to the report of shots fired.

As Shields approached the house from the rear, Brown fired the shotgun at him from the back porch, striking the detective just above his bulletproof vest, police said. Shields, a five-year-veteran, died a short time later.

Investigators are now trying to determine whether Brown was involved in other serious crimes, noting that to achieve superior status in the Bloods, one typically must commit an act of violence.

## **BREAKING THE HOLD**

Jones, who runs the Irvington youth center, said Shields' killing serves as a grim reminder that New Jersey needs to take a more aggressive approach to its gang problem, reaching down to even the youngest children.

State officials say they're making those efforts on a variety of levels.

Last month, the State Police arrested 41 suspected gang leaders across the state, the latest strike in what has been a stepped-up offensive on gangs over the past several years.

Separately, the Corzine administration earlier this month announced the expansion of "Operation Ceasefire," an anti-gang initiative that pairs state and local law enforcement agencies with social service agencies and clergy.

That kind of multidimensional approach will be necessary to break the gangs' grip, said Gregory Paw, director of the state Division of Criminal Justice.

"We have to look at it in a more holistic way and give help in areas like schools, after-school care programs, providing care inside homes," Paw said. "They're all factors involved in joining gangs."

Ronald Salahuddin agrees, saying that for too long, there wasn't enough effort -- by parents, police, social workers, prosecutors or judges -- to catch at-risk kids before they turned to lives of crime.

A Newark deputy mayor in charge of public safety, Salahuddin previously served as director of the Essex County Juvenile Detention Center. He has long been an outspoken advocate for reforming the way New Jersey deals with juvenile offenders, including young gang members.

"When a boy is 11 or 12 or 13 years old and first realizes that he wants to break the law, that's when he should have a support system around him," Salahuddin said. "What we usually do is wait until they're arrested four or five times, and by then we have a hardened criminal who carries a shotgun and doesn't care about taking a life.

"We allow this evilness, this hardness, this unconcern for society to fester in him until he's 17, 18, 19 years old, and at that point, he's too far gone."

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