

# Snapchat, crypto, and gun violence: A look at Utah's young gang problem

Mackenzie Ryan & Wendy Halloran : 6-7 minutes : 2/21/2022

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(KUTV) — Juveniles and young adults joining gangs isn't new, but gang police and a criminal defense attorney says it's getting worse in Utah. A 2News investigation found young gang members are conducting business, selling drugs on Snapchat and collecting payment via cryptocurrency. They're also breaking into homes and cars, stealing weapons, and using them to commit acts of violence.

## Shot Six Times in Broad Daylight

"It was breaking news that a 22 year old man had been shot," says Malinda Jaramillo.

She and her husband, Andrew, had a parent's worst nightmare come true on June 10, 2015.

"When they showed the scene on the TV, they showed his tennis shoes that me and his dad just bought him."

A teenage gang member, 15-year-old Marqus James, shot and killed her son, Marco Cardenas, after an argument on a Utah Transit Authority bus.

"He had shot 6 times in the middle of broad daylight in rush hour."

## Gang-Affiliated Teenagers, Unsupervised, Start Their Own Clandestine Empires

"Crime and gangs go hand in hand, drug and gangs go hand in hand, violence and gangs goes hand in hand," says Detective Bird of Utah County Major Crimes.

Gang police estimate, in the Salt Lake Valley, there are between 3,500 and 4,500 people either belonging to or affiliating with gangs.

The pipeline starts early.

"We do have a lot of people that will sell THC cartridges," Bird explains.

"They're getting younger and younger."

Bird says kids as young as middle school will start their own business, selling THC cartridges. That transitions to them being a drug dealer in high school, and then potentially running a trap house.

Bird says, "We have kids 16, 17, driving to Vegas and picking [cartridges] up there."

Juvenile gang members will sell drugs online through apps like Snapchat and then get paid in cryptocurrency.

"Because of COVID, you have a lot of packages going out," he adds.

"The screening is a lot less stringent."

"Next thing you know they're all wearing red and trying to be a Blood set and they're, it's not anything like the real Blood sets," Bird says.

Bloods members from two completely different gangs were involved in two high-profile shootings last year: the September murder of University of Utah football player Aaron Lowe and the December shootout with police in Taylorsville.

### **What a Hybrid Set Is and Why They May Be More Dangerous Than Traditional Gangs**

Part of nationwide trend, juveniles in Utah form their own gang and use the name of well-known organizations.

They are not, in reality, affiliated with larger gangs.

This trend is what gang experts and police call a "hybrid gang" or a "hybrid set."

2News Investigates learned hybrid sets tend to sell THC cartridges, commit property crimes, and steal weapons.

The experts we interviewed argue that hybrid gangs can be more dangerous than a traditional, territory-based gang with a known hierarchy because they lack a code of behavior.

### **Utah's Disorganized Gang Culture Crosses Territorial and Racial Lines**

"I think what we're seeing is a breakdown in what would be gang loyalty," says criminal defense attorney Skye Lazaro.

Lazaro explains that Utah's gang culture is disorganized.

Members don't need to live in specific areas. They don't need to belong to the same race. They can change affiliations, a practice known as "set hopping." They can even have friends in rival gangs.

### **Gang Members Leverage Social Media to Recruit--and Threaten**

"I think social media and having a broad platform to reach all sorts of people, makes it accessible to kids who haven't otherwise been exposed to it."

Young gang members are not only buying and selling drugs and weapons on social media.

They also use platforms to recruit new members, send threats, and start fights that ultimately end in violence on the street.

For example, two teenage gang members, Zahid Cruz and Kevin Hernandez-Trinidad, await trial in the drive-by shooting of Cesar Manenche last year.

At the time of the shooting, both Cruz and Hernandez-Trinidad were 16. Manenche was 19.

According to an unsealed warrant obtained by 2News Investigates, the pair were threatening the victim on Snapchat for leaving their gang, a Sureno hybrid set based in the southern end of Salt Lake County.

### **"They're Not Learning Interpersonal Skills."**

"I've seen numerous cases that started even over a social media argument where they didn't even know each other," Lazaro explains. "And I do think there is something to not having to talk to somebody face to face."

Lazaro's experience echoes what gang expert Lisa Taylor-Austin told 2News.

"Our young people are growing up on social media and they're communicating on electronic devices," Taylor-Austin explains.

"They're not learning interpersonal skills," she says, adding that young people have a very difficult time with coping mechanisms.

"Many crimes are committed, such as murder, for personal reasons. You know, maybe they're dating a girl and the girl cheats on them with someone else so they go kill that person. In the past, it would just be a fight or maybe it would be a confrontation without a fight."

### **A Young Gang Member Gets Released and Reoffends in Another Deadly Shooting**

"[The gang mentality is] just something that doesn't go away, especially when you're that young in your mindset," Malinda Jaramillo says.

The young gang member who shot and killed Marco Cardenas, Marqus James, was released from juvenile detention in July 2020.

In October 2021, James was arrested for being involved in another gang-related murder--this time at a wedding in Midvale.

And you have that power to think that you, now that you've killed somebody in the gang world, when you kill somebody, you become a hero.

Now the Jaramillo's wants greater penalties for juvenile gang members and for higher-ranking adult gang members to be held liable for their crimes.

*Todd Dinsmore, Michelle Poe, Mike Stephen, and Jake Emerson contributed to this report.*