

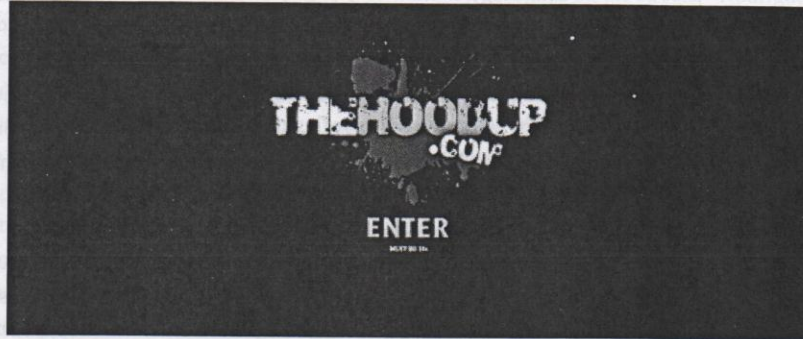
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Gangs Adopt Social Media for Recruiting, Boasting, and Inciting

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By Brooklyn Ink Staff

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TheHoodUp.com describes itself as an open and uncensored forum where residents of American hoods can safely and effectively communicate about "real life hood experiences." (TheHoodUp.com)

Early one evening in April 2010, 18-year-old Roldan Alonzo-Castro was walking with his girlfriend just south of Brooklyn's Prospect Park when a group of more than 10 gang members surrounded him. One wielded a baseball bat and one a machete, and they beat Alonzo-Castro and repeatedly stabbed him in the chest before dispersing and leaving him to die from heart and lung lacerations.

Edwin Rosado and Eric Johnson were subsequently indicted on murder charges for the crime and their trials are pending. In a statement to the arresting officer, Rosado indicated his affiliation with the Trinitarios, a Dominican gang, saying the attack was motivated by Alonzo-Castro's membership in a rival Dominican gang, the Dominicans Don't Play.

Two days after Alonzo-Castro's death, a link to the *Daily News*' coverage of the crime appeared on TheHoodUp.com, a website featuring a blood-spattered logo that describes itself as a "forum where members can discuss what's happening in their hoods." Users can anonymously join and often indicate a gang affiliation in their profiles or posts.

On the discussion thread, comments ranged from laments about Alonzo-Castro's death ("R.I.P. Tito") and the number of casualties from Dominican gang rivalries, to discussions about shifting gang alliances and the use of Internet. A participant identified only as "dominicacity" called out the Trinitarios for allying with the Crips gang to commit the crime, an alliance Rosado had mentioned in his statement.

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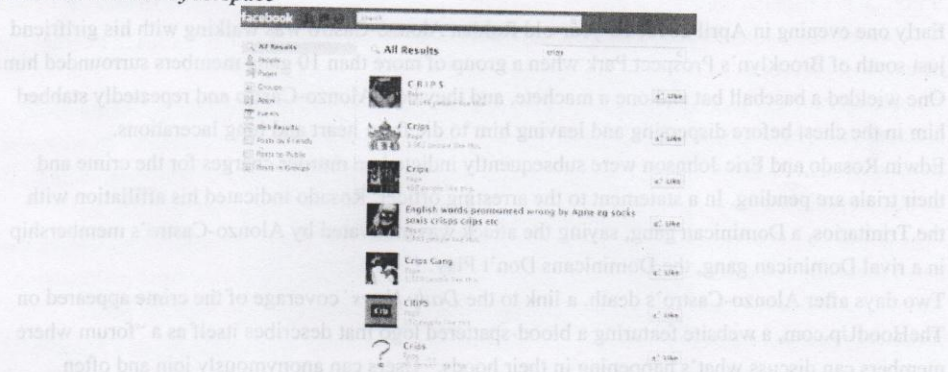
“What Gets Me Pissed Off Is That, 3ni Out Number Us By 100’s In BK,” dominicancity wrote. “Why Couldn’t Ya Come And Commit The Murder Ya Self? Y It Took Crip Niggas 2 Help Ya Do The Sh!t?. See All Over The Net From Youtube 2 Myspace Every Page Basically Ya Discriminate DDP 4 Banging In Certian Ocasions With Other Gangs.”

[Translation: What gets me pissed off is that Trinitarios outnumber us by hundreds in Brooklyn. Why couldn’t you come and commit the murder yourself? It took Crip n---- to help you do the sh-t? See all over the Internet from YouTube to MySpace, on every page you basically discriminate against the Dominicans Don’t Play for banging on certain occasions with other gangs.]

Asked about such postings in an email exchange with The Brooklyn Ink, a staff member from TheHoodUp.com who would only provide a nickname, Jynx, wrote that the site is not geared just towards gangs but those involved in “hood” culture. According to the “About Us” section of the website, the main purpose is to “give residents of these various hoods a neutral common ground where they can safely and effectively communicate with each other.”

But to many other observers and experts, including law enforcement officials and criminal prosecutors, the virtual conflict between the Trinitarios and the Dominicans Don’t Play represents a larger trend: the adoption of social media by gangs. Gang members now actively use platforms like TheHoodUp.com, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and YouTube to communicate internally, boast about successful criminal ventures, challenge enemies and, according to a 2009 FBI report, recruit new national and international members.

From the street to cyberspace



Street gangs have a significant presence on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.(Facebook.com)

The FBI report, titled the National Gang Threat Assessment, noted the use of social media by gangs for various communicative purposes. For example, gangs in Oceanside, Calif., that used the Internet for recruitment, staking out territory and “sparring” on message boards. This past spring, nearly two years after the report was published, 38 members of the Oceanside Crips were indicted for sex

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trafficking after using Facebook, Twitter and MySpace to recruit a group of 30 female minors as prostitutes.

The spread of gangs from the streets to cyberspace is something Deanna Rodriguez, chief of the Brooklyn district attorney's gang bureau, takes seriously. While not all users claiming to be gang-affiliated on TheHoodUp.com actually are, Rodriguez said legitimate gang members use social media sites to "put out their power" and gain street credibility.

"They want people to see what they've done, so that they get status on the streets," Rodriguez said. "So, absolutely, I believe that those are gangbangers posting things."

A basic search of any major gang on social media sites—be it TheHoodUp.com, Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter—shows their growing presence online. Facebook, for example, has a multitude of public fan sites and groups devoted to specific gangs. The "C R I P S" fan page has more than 10,000 followers. On YouTube, a music video titled "'Bloods vs Crips Video NYC Wow!" shows a what appears to be a gang member shooting a young man holding a basketball while a song promoting the Bloods plays in the background.

In Brooklyn's 70th precinct, where Alonzo-Castro was murdered, Deputy Inspector Eric Rodriguez said gang use of social media is a concern and something the police are looking out for, especially since younger children have been getting recruited. "We do try to look at things online and be one step ahead," Rodriguez said.

On TheHoodUp.com, Jynx wrote that gang recruitment occurs in the private messages between users where the site cannot access them, unlike content posted in the public forum. "We usually hear about it from angry parents...there is literally nothing we can do about that," said the forum staff member. However, if the user in question is under the age of 18, his or her account is disabled and IP address banned.

According to a 2010 Pew Research Center report on the use of social media by teens and young adults, 93 percent of people from the ages of 12-17 and 18-29 use the Internet. Sean Varano, a criminologist at Roger Williams University, said that like all young people, the current generation of young gang members is heavily engaged in technology.

"I just think of it as the natural communication tools that young people use," Varano said, "and gangs are not immune."

From cyberspace back to the street

A major question being asked by criminologists is if the hostilities incited by gang-related activity online are actually translating to violence on the streets.

On TheHoodUp.com, Jynx wrote that user content is rarely taken down, and while threats on the site are constant they have rarely been linked to an actual event. "If threats are made we advise you to take the threats serious, but us deleting the threat won't make the threat go away," wrote Jynx. "It will just be hidden, which is more dangerous."

But according to Michael Hines, an ex-gang member who now works in New York City schools with the Council for Unity, a nonprofit anti-violence organization, social media has made inter-gang

violence worse. He said that students come into the Council's afterschool programs "on a regular basis with issues surrounding Facebook and Twitter," especially in regards to gangs. Hines said gang members challenge others on Facebook when they want to publicize something they want everyone to know, like a fight. He described a situation "back in the day," when a young male would be more likely to act tough and respond to a challenge to fight if he were in front of a crowd. "Now," Hines said, "the crowd is much bigger, because thousands of people are on Facebook." "People's pride gets in the way, and they say things back and before long it's in the street," said Hines. "You know, 'next time I see you, it's on.'"

Varano said that often it can be hard to disentangle the degree to which social media is used as a tool to connect or used as a tool to coordinate. Many times it is used for the former, but in late August, a group of Crips used Twitter to organize a "Crip Holiday" in East Flatbush. According to the *Daily News*, police were monitoring the online activity and arrested 56 people believed to be in the gang after they showed up at Amersfort Park. Following the arrests, police also recovered a pistol from the park.

While nobody was hurt as a result of the "Crip Holiday," Hines said that teenage gang members run the risk of alerting enemies when they use platforms like Facebook to promote something as innocent as a party. "Not only are the friends coming to the party, but the enemies are coming as well," he said. "For the most part, with the use and misunderstandings that these kids are having, it can cause travesties."

The 21st Century Gang



(AP Photo/Lennox McLendon)

While there is little known research published that examines the link between increased use of social media by young people and the rise of youth gang members, there is a national trend of children joining gangs at younger ages.

The 2009 FBI Gang Threat Assessment attributed part of the surge in younger gang members to increased recruitment and drug distribution occurring in middle schools and high schools. Assistant district attorney Rodriguez said that recently she has been getting "a rash of cases of kids who are under the age of 15, 16, who are committing some serious felonies."

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This trend is even visible in elementary schools. Hines recalled speaking at P.S. 106, K-5 school in Far Rockaway. He said 99 percent of the 300 students said they knew someone in a gang, with half claiming to be in a gang themselves.

Many factors are thought to influence a child's inclination towards gang-related information online, including the level of parental supervision and the prevalence of gangs in schools and surrounding neighborhoods. Gilberto Rivera, a 27-year-old inmate in Suffolk County for a gang-related crime, said that young people face the choice of using a computer as a vehicle for good or for bad.

"It depends on his surroundings at home and what he sees when he comes out of his house, what he sees his parents doing," Rivera said. If those surroundings are negative, he went on, "Instead of looking up things to help him on his homework, he's gonna look up things on how to help him join a gang."

However, experts and law enforcement officials have had difficulty pinning today's gang activity to a specific area or demographic. "It's no longer a poor people's problem, or an African-American's problem, or a Latino problem," said district attorney Rodriguez, "It's America's problem."

The Law and Social Media

Law enforcement officials and prosecutors typically refrain from speaking about their Internet operations as not to jeopardize their information-gathering techniques, but arrests and convictions based on online evidence are becoming more frequent. A recent issue of the FBI's Law Enforcement Bulletin featured an article called "Combating Gangsters Online," which emphasized that law enforcement needs to understand how to investigate online gang-related activity.

The "ease of use, potential audience size and reduced risk of user detection has made the Internet one of the most prominent methods of gang communication" the article stated.

"It becomes a really great tool for gang members and gangs themselves to be able to communicate with each other and galvanize, you know, get to people very quickly to congregate or to do whatever that the particular gang is doing," said prosecutor Rodriguez. "So it's extraordinarily frightening from a prosecutor's perspective in terms of how they're able to get out the word very quickly."

Last spring's clash between 1,000 Boston gang members at Carson Beach illustrates the violence that can accompany coordinated social media efforts—despite significant law enforcement mobilization. Resources devoted to the monitoring of online gang activity also tend to vary between police precincts. "In a lot of cases the law and law enforcement community play catch up," said Timothy Flannelly, a spokesperson for the FBI. According to Flannelly, social media is only the newest form of communication that criminals have exploited, and that the use of technology for criminal gain has existed since the 19th century through mediums such as the wireless radio and the telephone.

As gangs continue to proliferate across social media sites, the criminal justice system is faced with increasing obligation to enforce the law across complex terminology. What constitutes "social media" and what is considered a "gang" or "gang crime" is extremely difficult to define. Varano wrote in an email that research and police communities have struggled with the latter two questions for more than 30 years.

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In terms of what the well-known social media sites are doing to monitor gang-related content, a YouTube spokesperson said that pre-screening the 48 hours of material that are uploaded to the site each minute is not possible. However, any content that is flagged by users and in violation of the site's guidelines is removed and the accounts of repeat offenders disabled. Examples of violations include the display of graphic or gratuitous violence, drug abuse and underage drinking. Facebook and Twitter did not respond to repeated requests for comment, but they have similar flagging policies to YouTube for content in violation of the site. All sites must release information required by law.

"If someone was to actually sit back and look and analyze what's going on, on all of these social media sites, a lot of things can be prevented," Hines said. "It just spirals out of control, and these kids are really killing each other."