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Gordon A. Crews

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, gordon.crews@utrgv.edu

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Every Day is Halloween: A Goth Primer for Law Enforcement

Gordon A. Crews, PhD, Roger Williams University, School of Justice

The following article is based upon field research conducted by Dr. Gordon A. Crews dealing with juveniles and young adults involved in the “Goth” lifestyle across the United States. This research is part of his ongoing efforts over the last decade to examine the impacts of alternative lifestyles, beliefs, and practices upon juvenile delinquency and violence. Most of the information in this article has been derived from face-to-face interviews with individuals aged 13 to 39 years of age proclaiming to be Goth, Vampires, Satanists, Pagans, Wiccans, New Agers, Druids, and a myriad of other occult-based identities.

Introduction

In 1984, the musical group Ministry released a song entitled, “Everyday is Halloween.” This song became an instant favorite of those involved in the early days of what has become known as the Goth lifestyle. The song’s popularity continues almost 20 years later, as does the lifestyle, with newcomers to Goth being exposed to all of its elements by others already involved. The reason for this is its timeless lyrics that summarize many of the feelings that serve as the cornerstone of “Goth philosophy” (if such a concept exists).

The following is a look at the lyrics to “Everyday is Halloween” (Ministry, 1984):

Well I live with snakes and lizards and other things that go bump in the night
cause to me everyday is Halloween.

I have given up hiding and started to fight. I have started to fight well
any time, any place.

Anywhere that I go all the people seem to stop and stare they say, “Why are you
dressed like it’s Halloween? You look so absurd, you look so obscene!

Oh, why can’t I live my life for me? Why should I take the abuse that’s
served?

Why can’t they see they’re just like me?

It’s the same; it’s the same in the whole wide world.

Well I let their teeny minds think that they’re dealing with someone who
is over the brink and I dress this way just to keep them at bay cause
Halloween is everyday it’s everyday.

Why can’t I live a life for me?

Why should I take the abuse that’s served?

Why can’t they see they’re just like me?

It’s the same; it’s the same in the whole wide world.

I’m not the one that’s so absurd why hide it? Why fight it?

Hurt feelings best to stop feeling.

Hurt from denials, reprisals it’s the same it’s the same in the whole wide world.

A brief glance through the lyrics reveals a number of interesting ideas. The chorus of the song offers the justification for being different as, “. . . cause to me everyday is Halloween.” This line has become a traditional response when a Goth is asked why he or she dresses or acts the way they do by others. They will say that they celebrate the “dark, the morbid, the scary, and the macabre” (i.e., what is expected in any celebration of Halloween). Most Goths will state that they “celebrate” these concepts everyday and enjoy expressing their celebration in their clothes and through their behavior. One of the very first reported insults directed towards Goth was from people joking that they all looked like they were dressed for Halloween everyday. So it was natural to say, “Yeah, you are right, everyday is Halloween for us!”

Next, is the line, “. . . I have given up hiding and started to fight.” Most involved in the lifestyle will say that they are tired of hiding who they are and are ready to be themselves. If they are interested in the “dark side” of society or human nature, they feel they should be able to express such. It should be pointed out that the term “fight” used here, does not mean any type of violent action. Rather, it means to express oneself in appearance and behavior, no matter what the consequences.

The third point of the lyrics mentions the treatment of others as, “. . . anywhere that I go all the people seem to stop and stare they say, ‘Why are you dressed like it’s Halloween? You look so absurd, you look so obscene!’” This follows the last point by saying that there are often negative consequences when one does fully express his- or herself. It is natural that people will take notice and may even become actively concerned. Goths will state that they are very often abused and insulted by others simply because of their appearance.

Next, the questions are asked, “Why can’t I live my life for me? Why can’t they see they’re just like me?” These questions are the genesis of many of the complaints of Goths. When discussing how they see others, they will say that many just do not realize that people are all basically the same. They will offer that since this is a given, people should be much more tolerant and accepting of each other. The questions, therefore, point out that sadly, people often do not accept those that are “different.” This is especially true when dealing with people who look and act as most Goths do.

The lyrics, “. . . their teeny minds think that they’re dealing with someone who is over the brink and I dress this way just to keep them at bay” express how they deal with the negative treatment they often receive from others. As will be discussed later in this article, many Goths will say that they became involved in this lifestyle in order to protect themselves from others. They will offer that since no one understands them or wants to accept them for who they are, they would just as soon be ignored. They will offer that many think they are mentally unstable in the first place, so they might as well encourage that belief so that they will not have to deal with those individuals at all.

Finally, the line, “. . . hurt feelings best to stop feeling” is a very interesting line that often causes many to fear some aspects of the Goth lifestyle. A central component to the views of some Goths is the idea that since no one understands nor cares; they are essentially “dead” to the world. Being “dead” in this sense, means that there is no need to feel or care about themselves or others. Parents, educators, and law

enforcement officials naturally become concerned when they hear of young people talking about being “dead to the world.”

The purpose of this article is to offer some insight into the Goth “movement” in America. Inherent in this examination is to offer some explanation as to what is occurring in communities and maybe even why. A common sense approach to this that is most often overlooked is to simply ask those involved about what they are doing and their reasons for doing so. Finally, the article attempts to offer some direction on how the issue should be examined and what actions should be taken in regard to these “problems.”

A Brief History: What Is It and Where Did Goth Come from?

To understand a phenomenon, sometimes it is helpful to look at its history and background. Goth has an interesting origin and history. Ironically, its history and origin actually define it as well.

Basic Definition: So What Is a “Goth”?

There is no basic definition of Goth. Understandably, when there are so many individuals involved in anything, it becomes too complicated to wrap up in one package. Generally, Goth is anything of or pertaining to that which emphasizes the grotesque, mysterious, and desolate in life (Crews & Montgomery, 2001). Historically speaking, it is the name of the Germanic Visigoth tribes that overthrew the Roman Empire. From this source arose the concept of a Goth as an uncivilized person, or a barbarian. It can also be of or pertaining to a literary style of fiction prevalent in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, which emphasized the dark and decadent aspects of existence. It even can refer to architecture of the pointed arch style common in Europe from the 12th to 16th centuries. Goth, as a modern movement, started as one component of the punk rock scene in the late 1990s. As the latter faded, Goth survived into the 21st century by creating its own subculture (Stevenson, 2002).

When it comes to trying to describe Goth as a philosophy or belief system, things become very blurry. It is an ambiguous label with many people using it that do not understand what it means. To complicate matters further, the people who do understand it often have many different definitions. The central ideal that characterizes Goth to many involved is an almost compulsive drive towards creativity and self-expression that seeks to reach out to others by appealing to society’s covert fascination with all things dark and frightening. This art can be either subtle and seducing or nightmarishly terrifying, but it must play on what society secretly knows but cannot acknowledge to itself about its “duality” (Good and Evil). The mediums of self-expression and creation can be anything from a mode of dress to novels or music. Imagination and originality have always been key elements in Goth. Also, those involved will argue that one of Goth’s defining characteristics is the need to take the underlying darkness that is in everyone and bring it into the light in such a way that it can be recognized as what it is—an integral part of being human, for better or for worse (Thompson & Greene, 1994).

Goth is also a subculture, a style, and a way of thinking. The common thread in Goth culture is an appreciation for the dichotomy of life, the contrast between light

and dark, good and evil, with an awareness that the two cannot exist without each other, and that the traditional value judgments assigned to those opposites are not necessarily true. Goths tend to have a dark and perverse sense of humor, a love of history, literature, and music, but trying to divide Goths into orderly little types is pretty much impossible. The spectrum of interests, styles, and activities is far too broad to characterize in a simple manner (Crews & Montgomery, 2001).

The Goth subculture frequently revolves around a music scene, which likely arises from the current subculture's roots as a spin-off of punk from the late 1970s. Music is not the only art form in Goth, though. Artistic endeavors of all kinds are welcomed and encouraged by those involved (Thompson & Greene, 1994).

History of the Movement

There is a great deal of debate surrounding the details of the origin of Goth. There appears to be some consensus with the placing of the origin in 1979 when the musical group Bauhaus released the song "Bela Lugosi's Dead." The band originally intended the song to be tongue-in-cheek; however, many young fans were immediately drawn to the mysterious, eerie sound as inspiration for the emerging Gothic subculture (Thompson & Greene, 1994).

The first generation of the Gothic "movement" emerged mostly in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s and early 1980s as an offshoot of the punk movement. Punk music was losing its stamina as a new more gloomy, introspective mutation of its inherent rebelliousness gained momentum (Crews & Montgomery, 2001).

Many argue that the movement first became established in the Batcave, a nightclub in London in the early 1980s. Musical groups such as The Damned, Bauhaus, and Siouxsie and the Banshees are most often offered as examples to characterize this first generation of Goth. Ironically, these bands were called Gothic later on, but most did not consider themselves Gothic at the time. There is a great deal of uncertainty about who coined the term "Gothic" and how it got attached to this dark music. Some argue that the first use of the term Goth in its present meaning was on a British Broadcasting Commission (BBC) TV program. Anthony H. Wilson, manager of Joy Division described the band as Gothic compared with the prevailing pop mainstream. It does appear that the British music press is most responsible for making the label stick (Thompson & Greene, 1994).

By the mid to late 1980s, the movement was waning. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new second generation of Gothic bands emerged to breathe new life into the scene. They distinguished themselves by being the first to regularly call themselves Gothic. Examples would include The Shroud, Rosetta Stone, and London After Midnight. This time period is when the American Goth movement grew significantly and Gothic became recognized as a distinct subculture. Throughout this period, Gothic music and culture grew and branched out into various subsets, pushing the boundaries of what had previously been considered Gothic (Stevenson, 2002).

In the 21st century, widespread mainstream interest in the Gothic subculture is apparent. Many Gothic cultural quirks have filtered into mainstream culture, such as an interest in the supernatural and dark aesthetics. Historically, a dark leaning is

prevalent towards the end of a century. That leaning was probably more pronounced in the late 1990s due to the close of a millennium.

As the second generation aged into their mid to late 20s, they became less interested in participating in the Gothic social scene. A distinct third generation emerged in the late 1990s to shape the future progression of the Gothic movement. The third generation represented an explosion in the number of people referring to themselves as Gothic. Many of them have learned about Gothic culture because of the present widespread commercial availability. The huge popularity of the “shock rock” act of Marilyn Manson has thrown the spotlight onto this subculture. Marilyn Manson is far more similar to the heavy metal theatricality of Alice Cooper than the mysterious desolation of Bauhaus. Many Goths wish to disassociate themselves from the younger, over-ardent followers of Manson who seem to dress and act like him purely for rebellious shock value. The term often used for these youths is “spooky kids” (Crews & Montgomery, 2001).

First and second generation Goths look suspiciously upon the new generation, doubting their authenticity and disliking the exposure they give to a subculture, which would prefer to remain underground. The new generation is not presently well-received by their elders, but time may prove otherwise. It would be difficult to predict what the future holds for the Gothic movement. After over 20 years, it continues to change, grow, mutate, and adapt, making it one of the longest surviving youth subcultures in existence (Stevenson, 2002).

Goth Stereotypes

There is a very strong stereotype that comes to mind for many when they hear the term “Goth.” Almost instantly, they picture the typical Goth as an individual who is a depressed, violent, suicidal, drug user, alcohol abuser, vampire and/or Satanist or perverted sado-masochist. They picture an individual who is generally an artist of some type, a musician maybe, or quite possibly a computer programmer. With this is the belief that in addition to having a myriad of emotional problems and useless professional pursuits, they dye their hair either jet black or bright purple, wear only black, and paint their faces with white make-up. The problem with stereotypes is how they make people act and react.

Is There a Typical Goth?

In reality, the truth is quite different—there is no typical Goth. It can be argued that there are a few characteristics that most do have in common. The vast majority of individuals who label themselves as Goth are above average in intelligence, extremely creative, and possess an engaging, albeit dark, personality. Their ages range from early teens to beyond middle age, with professions ranging from student to artist and from construction worker to computer programmer.

When asked to describe themselves, they will most often offer tongue-in-cheek responses. They will describe their personal behavior as moody, overly romantic, self-absorbed, and excessively sensitive. Most will say that they survive from a diet of appetizers, snack food, and cigarettes (most often Clove cigarettes). Many will describe themselves and friends as extremely intelligent creative individuals who love 19th century romance and horror literature, the author Anne Rice, and

wearing anything black. If they are in college, they are quite possibly studying fields such as art, literature, history, psychology, or music. They will describe their “natural habitat” as the local coffee shop, bookstore, library, art museums, Goth clubs, cemeteries, woods, and the Internet.

Types of Goth

Although Goths resent having outsiders “label them” or “segregate them,” they very often do it to themselves. As any Goth will point out, the first mistake is thinking that every person involved can be neatly placed in one of these types; most are a combination of several. Below is a brief listing of the various types of Goth that may be encountered (Crews & Montgomery, 2001):

- **Mopey Goth:** Many in the scene would argue that the Mopey Goth is at the core of what Goth is; sullen, morbid, artistic, quiet, reserved, extremely shy, and very sensitive to their, and other’s, morbidity. This is generally the type that are seen most often alone in a secluded area drawing or reading. They may be in the club or coffeehouse with the rest, but they will be the ones sitting alone in the back simply watching all the action.
- **Fetish Goth:** These are the individuals who wear garments made out of leather, rubber, plastic, spikes, bolts, fishnet stockings, chains, and whips. Their dress, or lack thereof, suggests openly the types of sexual practices in which they may be interested. They often come to clubs with paddles and whips to “spank” each other. Many in the scene would say that in reality these individuals are BDSMers (individuals who enjoy sexual activity involving Bondage and Sado-masochistic activities), who have joined the Goth scene when there is not enough of an underground scene to support their own interests.
- **Perky Goth:** The term “perky Goth” seems like an oxymoron—how can a person be so morbid, yet “perky” and “upbeat” at the same time? Most in the scene cannot answer that but generally hold respect for perky Goths as they do for all the rest. Actually, these are the individuals who are most open about their lifestyle and dress, and most friendly in introducing people and welcoming outsiders. Their dress is most often modern flashy, and maybe even fetish in nature.
- **Pagan Goth:** Many believe that all Goths are into occult practices and alternative belief systems. Actually only a segment, the Pagan Goths, are into such practices such as Wicca, Druidism, Shamanism, New Age, or other Paganistic practices. Many would argue that Goth is largely indifferent to religion of any type. Most Goth are probably uninvolved in any type of organized religion at all except, ironically enough, for the jewelry. Generally, their attitude is that the occult and/or Celtic religions are interesting and much can be learned about one’s self from studying them. Their dress is most often “romantic” or “gypsy” in nature.
- **Vampire Goth:** These types of Goths generally come in two types. First, those that simply love playing with the “vampire” mystique. They may dress like vampires when they go to clubs, or they may be RPGers (Role-play gamers) playing games such as “Vampire the Masquerade.” The second type is called “Vampyre Lifestylers.” These are individuals who live the vampire lifestyle

and may actually believe they are vampyres (they spell it with a “y” in order to differentiate between “real” and fictional vampires). Their dress is very often formal Victorian wear, elegant, and most often styled after the dress described in the Anne Rice novels. Many also add such accessories as artificial fangs, claws, and colored contacts. Some even go to the extreme of sleeping in a coffin during the day.

- **Mod Goth:** These types are generally known as “weekenders,” in that most of them are not truly in the scene or the lifestyle, but enjoy the clubs, dress, and the music. They dress often more flamboyant and in mod or faddish clothes. These are the ones that will spend the money to buy the various outfits that they need to go “clubbing.”
- **Goth Geek:** It would initially appear as a joke, but these are the traditional “geeks” or “computer nerds,” with the addition of the Goth dress and philosophy. Those in this group will most often say that it is better than being just a plain geek. Their dress is the traditional “geek or nerd” wear with the addition of a large amount of black.
- **Ren Faire Goth:** These Goths are into the fun of Renaissance Fairs and role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons. Many are also into medieval reenactments. Their dress is that which would be expected—medieval, renaissance, and Scottish.
- **Mil Goth:** There is somewhat of a debate over “military” Goths. Some feel that most are simply those who are interested in military dress, equipment, and warfare and “add” the Goth lifestyle. Others feel that if there are any dangerous Goths, these may be the ones. Some still try to argue that the Columbine High School shooters were Goth; they use this type of Goth to support the perceived connection. The idea is that these are individuals who are deeply into military weapons, violent video games, and obsessed with death and destruction. Their dress is most often army surplus with black military boots and black metal t-shirts.
- **Academic Goth:** A relatively new type of Goth in the scene and one that is being coined in this article. This is the university professor type who uses research as an excuse to study a culture with which he or she is fascinated and enjoys. They enjoy the music, philosophy, and the people involved in the scene. They also have a deep appreciation for the “darkness” of the culture.
- **Other Dark People:** Finally, there has to be a “catch-all” group. Those in the scene will most often refer to others that they may encounter as “Dark People.” These include individuals who refer to themselves as death rockers, rivet heads, metal heads, weekenders, or a multitude of other titles most often based upon the music they enjoy.

What About All the Black and Darkness?

One area of Goth that is most controversial to many is their use of black. For some reason, black has always been associated with “Evil” and “Satan” in human history; therefore, many people inherently see something negative when they see someone

dressed totally in black. In reality, the reason for the use of black by Goth is quite basic. Most offer that their use of black clothing was originally a backlash to the bright colors of the music and clothing associated with disco in the late 1970s. To the vast majority, it meant nothing more than serving as a symbol of not wanting to go along with the crowd or not wanting to be associated with the perceived fake and materialistic interests associated with disco. After that, the color simply stuck (Stevenson, 2002).

What About Goths, Religion, and Other Belief Systems and Practices?

Most Goth argue that the general public incorrectly associates Goths with the controversial shock-rock performer Marilyn Manson. Those that are familiar with Manson know that he publicly presents himself as a follower of the Church of Satan. The late founder, Anton LaVey, ordained him a priest in the Church of Satan. From this "Satanic connection," the perception has grown that Goths are frequently practitioners of Satanism (Stevenson, 2002). There are a few Satanists who are also Goths, but those in the scene argue that fortunately they are rare.

So What Is the Problem?

The existing "problem" is extremely complex and depends upon who is asked. The general public sees it as a societal problem that is affecting communities across the United States, and actually, the world. Parents see the problem as something that is, or could be, affecting their children and families. Educators see the problem as something that they have to deal with in their classrooms and schools. Goths see the problem as being something others have with them, not any problem they have with others. The media sees it as something to draw attention to, maybe even exploiting it to a degree. Of course, ultimately, law enforcement has to deal with all of the above.

The problem is trying to determine whether involvement in Goth automatically leads to delinquent or violent behavior in young people. As discussed repeatedly in this article, the evidence is weak at best. There are those involved in the Goth scene that are criminal and violent, but the question becomes, "Were they that way before their involvement?" Or, maybe, did the involvement increase their violence or delinquency. Arguably, the correlation is blurry. Many who work with youth day in and day out will state that people must be careful in the way they handle juveniles, especially when it comes to their interests. If it is not directly harming an individual, should they be restricted from participating? Does the wearing of all black clothing and pale makeup and being interested in dark music, inherently harm an individual? Can, instead, this young person be allowed to explore these interests in a healthy and productive manner?

One of the biggest problems facing schools and communities in the 21st century is the way that juvenile delinquency and violence is evolving. Law enforcement has the knowledge, information, and training to deal with traditional street gangs. The problem is that the traditional street gang, while still a problem in many cities, has almost become passé. New groups are developing almost daily and causing new problems of their own.

“New” Youth Groups

There are a number of “new” youth groups that are being seen on high school campuses, in shopping malls, and throughout neighborhoods. Parents, educators, and law enforcement officers increasingly have to face young people who are self-labeling themselves such things as Goths, Preppies, Vampires, Wiccans, Witches, Warlocks, Magicians, and Satanists, to name just a few, but the question is whether these groups are really “new” at all.

Many would argue that these “groups” have been around for a very long time. It is just that they are much more prevalent and more comfortable exposing themselves to others. In the past, these individuals may have been more likely to keep their activities secret and private. The question is whether that has changed in the 21st century. If so, why?

Extent of Criminal Activity

As with all areas of discussions about Goth, there is much debate over the extent of the “associated” criminal activity. Criminal activity commonly associated with “alternative” beliefs and practices involves crimes such as child abuse, kidnapping, murder, and even human sacrifice. The problem is that there is not much evidence to support those associations. That is not to say that crime does not occur in connection with some of these activities; it is just much more mundane and commonplace than most would expect (Crews, Montgomery, & Garris, 1996).

Although most Goths would argue that those perpetuating such offences are not true Goth, some crime does in fact occur. Vandalism, trespassing on private property, and desecration of and thefts from churches and cemeteries does occur. These crimes are most often committed by teenage groups or gangs who may be trying to explore “evil” by practicing what they believe is an alternative belief system. Some of these individuals or groups do go as far as animal mutilations, suicides, and even murder, but fortunately these are very isolated incidents, which can be explained by a myriad of factors, not just the alternative involvement (Crews & Montgomery, 2001).

Goths and Violence

It is unfortunate that whenever a teenager in black clothing commits a crime, the Goth scene most often receives a myriad of bad press attacks. It contributes to the association that so many try to maintain between Goths, cults, and violence.

The reality is that there is actuality no unifying belief system for being a Goth, much less one that promotes violence. There is no organized leadership, no means of social control, and no rites of inclusion or exclusion of “members” (Crews, 2001).

Also, Goth culture is one of the few Western subcultures that shun violence—it is an unwritten code between Goths. When discussing the idea of violence and the Goth scene with a Goth, they will most often point out that one should simply see for themselves. Those thinking that there is inherent violence in any Goth activity

should come to a Goth club or event and simply see for themselves. Most will offer that a person is less likely to be accosted or assaulted at a Goth club than the local “beer joint” downtown.

When discussing the connection between Goth and violence, an important distinction must be made. There is a Gothic subculture comprised of people who subscribe to a Gothic aesthetic as a lifestyle, and then there are people who simply wear black and who may or may not “worship” the dark side of life. Common sense would offer that the popular scene is much larger than the subculture. The inherent problem for Goths is that anyone who wears black or is “different” and who commits a crime will most often be connected by the media to the Goth community, thus perpetuating the negative public perceptions.

One of the best examples of this is quite possibly the tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. While black clothing and black nail polish may have made the shooters appear Gothic to outsiders, Goths would argue that they were not true Goths. Immediately following the shooting, the Gothic community worldwide overwhelmingly rejected these people, not just because of what they did, but because they did not even seem like Goths in the first place. Goths would argue that the shooters’ obsession with Nazism, guns, and violence, were clear indications that they did not subscribe to the Gothic aesthetic (Crews, 2001).

Are Goths a Gang?

The question that is most often asked by law enforcement, parents, and educators is whether Goths are a “gang” or not? If one has had any experience with Goths, then they will agree that they very often travel in groups. Very often these groups will be seen in coffee shops, bookstores, schoolyards, cemeteries, etc. Those familiar with traditional gangs will even add that they do exhibit many of the traits that would be expected in a gang: wearing of the same colors and dress, similar hairstyles, similar race and gender, and uniform behaviors (Crews, 2001).

In actuality, there is no evidence of any typical gang type activities. There is no initiation to become “Gothic,” and the wearing of all black is a preference, not a requirement. Some Goth groups have been labeled a gang because of criminal activity of some individuals. Those in the scene would argue that any Goth who resorts to violence or does anything to harm themselves or others is not a true Goth. Most Goth crime stems from individual choice, not through “gang-like” leadership structure that promotes it. The vast majority of the evidence supports the idea that any violence is usually caused by some mental instability in an individual, not by simply being “Goth” (Crews, 2001).

Why Such Groups in Communities?

The second most often asked question is how do such groups begin in communities in the first place? The answer is both simple and complex. The simple part of the answer is that the needs of some youth are not otherwise being met. The complex side is to examine what the “needs” are and how a community is supposed to meet them. One central part to both sides of these issues is the connection that juveniles feel to their “world” (i.e., family, school, community, neighborhood, friends, etc.). If a juvenile does not feel connected to “something” in their lives, then they will look

for something to be connected to, whether the “something” is positive or negative. These groups provide youth with a sense of family and acceptance. Goth actually prides itself on “pulling in” those who have not been accepted by society (Crews & Montgomery, 1996).

Inherent in the adolescent experience is the feeling of a sense of alienation and powerlessness. Joining these groups gives juveniles a sense, albeit a false one, of being powerful and in charge of their lives. Membership gives youth a sense of belonging (Crews, 1996).

Who Is Involved and Why?

When trying to understand why humans do what they do, all one needs to do is look at the motivation that may exist. This motivation will include trying to determine what inherent costs and benefits might exist in the activity. The motivation behind involvement in Goth, or almost any alternative belief system or lifestyle, centers greatly on the concept of “power” (Crews & Montgomery, 1996).

Again, feelings of alienation and powerlessness are inherent during adolescence. Actively being involved in lifestyles such as Goth offer a strong sense of status and power. Much of this status and power comes from simply being “different.” Intertwined in this being different is the rebellion and shock value towards others. Goth is a wonderful way to play upon the fears and apprehensions of parents, teachers, and law enforcement officers (Crews & Montgomery, 2001).

A second benefit of involvement in the Goth lifestyle is the sense of belonging. Goths are a very open and accepting group; the inherent understanding and tolerance for others is a great draw for “members.” Ironically, peer pressure has a reversed impact in pushing individuals towards becoming a Goth. It would be expected that the peer pressure would come from Goths trying to push others into joining in their behavior; the truth is quite the opposite. Goths do not actively recruit others. Instead, most of their “membership” is derived through peer pressure, but the peer pressure comes from the general student population pushing each other to be “just alike.” Those that cannot be “just alike” will need something else—alternative beliefs and practices will always be there to “pick up” those individuals (Crews, 1996).

Finally, the old arguments can always be made about why juveniles are involved. Many will argue that life’s pressures become too great for some youth and they turn to a fantasy life where they can escape the pressure. Many times this escapism will involve curiosity of the mystery behind things, such as the occult and alternative beliefs. Many will argue that it is the commercialization of music, movies, and literature with Satanic, violent, or occult themes. It is believed that there should be no surprise when numbers of young people are involved in alternative lifestyles, such as Goth, when one looks at the entertainment and media that American youth are exposed to daily (Stevenson, 2002).

Types of Kids

Research has supported the opinion that there are certain types of young people who will be drawn to alternative lifestyles and belief systems. On one side, there are the “rich kids,” for lack of a better label, who are sick of putting on appearances and trying to fit set molds. These individuals want to rebel to gain some perceived independence. These are the same kids who are bored and looking for excitement. They also enjoy the shock value of such involvement; they see it as a wonderful way to be different and stand out from the rest (Crews & Montgomery, 2001).

On the other side of the coin are the “poor kids” who have no money for “power”; instead, they get it through their appearance and behavior. These are the kids who cannot afford better clothing and may in reality have only rags to wear. The Goth fashion is acceptable to “rags” and actually encourages their wear in certain circles. These kids have found a group that is acceptable and nonjudgmental in their treatment of others. Sadly, it appears that mistreatment by students towards other students continues to rise, so there are more and more kids who have lost their identity. There are so many children who simply have no identity; therefore, they are picked on. Once they become a Goth, they then have an identity and may actually be left alone (Crews & Montgomery, 2001).

Benefits of “Membership”

To even use the word “membership” is a problem when discussing those involved in the Goth lifestyle. Membership implies criteria for admission, guidelines for acceptance, and quite possibly rules for continued participation—the Goth lifestyle involves none of that. When discussing benefits to these individuals, it is probably better to use the term *participation* or *involvement* (Crews, 2001).

Whether they will admit it or not, most involved in Goth enjoy the perceived “power” over others. The power described here centers on the amount of impact they have on others or how much they can shock others. Many already feel that they are superior to most anyway, so being Goth is simply another way of showing their difference from others (Crews, 1996).

Many will state that they enjoy the “togetherness” with others and being part of a group. The vast majority, if not all, will state that they are comfortable in that they have finally found a community where they “fit in” (Crews, 1996).

A very revealing confession that some will make when asked about why they enjoy the Goth lifestyle involves their descriptions of treatment from others before and then after becoming Goth. They will state that they were picked on and bullied until they became Goth. Once they became Goth, they found that others no longer accosted them; instead they were shunned or ignored. It is not hard to understand how a young person would rather be treated as if he or she did not exist rather than be abused. They are shunned or ignored because people may be superstitious or afraid of persons who appear to be involved in alternative belief systems or religious practices. Others may be afraid of the mental or emotional state of the individuals they are encountering. Either way, young people who have been abused by others and who simply do not fit in with the rest have found a way to cope and be comfortable in an extremely uncomfortable world. This idea may be

the central reason for young people's involvement in Goth and other alternative lifestyles—protection from others and protection from life (Stevenson, 2002).

How Are Young People First Introduced?

An interesting side note to this entire situation is to examine how young people involved in Goth were first introduced to the scene. Most will state that they started in early teens and in middle school years. They will often associate their initial interest to the age where they first entered puberty. Many will state that they started at the point they were beginning to search for their own individual identity (Crews & Montgomery, 2001).

Many were introduced to Goth by boyfriends, girlfriends, peers, or older siblings. Many found the concept while surfing the Internet, while some enjoyed the music and got into the culture later. Almost all will state that they always felt different and had finally found a group to fit in with (Crews, 1996).

What Do They Think?

It is interesting how often, when trying to determine what is occurring and why in a social phenomenon, the last people asked about the behavior are those actually exhibiting the behavior. If one wants to know what it is like being a Goth, they should ask . . . a Goth.

Treatment from Others?

In discussing the Goth phenomenon with Goth individuals, several interesting points come to light. First, they will always point out that the media has, in their opinion, blown everything out of proportion. Lack of knowledge, understanding, and tolerance are the primary issues that most Goths will point to as the core to the problem. Inherently, lack of understanding and tolerance will immediately produce fear, hatred, and hysteria.

Many Goths will describe the same experiences when the topic of how they are treated by others comes up. Many will explain how they were always mistreated or bullied by the "sporty or preppie types." Some will state that they were bullied before and after becoming a Goth, so what does it matter either way. They will list the comments that are yelled at them in the streets ("It Is Not Halloween!"; "Freak, Fag, Psycho, etc."; "Don't Shoot!"; and "When You Snap, Don't Kill Me!"). A growing number will even report being actually physically assaulted on the street.

Almost all will discuss how parents, teachers, and salespersons ignore them and how they are harassed by law enforcement.

Advice for Parents, Teachers, and Law Enforcement

Ironically enough, the best advice for parents, teachers, and law enforcement officials on how to deal with the "problem" of Goth involvement comes from Goth individuals. In discussing what they want others to understand, they focus

their responses on trying to attack the negative stereotypes and media hype that is associated with the Goth lifestyle.

The first thing they will ask of people not familiar with Goth is to not believe everything they hear and see in the media and instead find out for themselves. This involves trying to understand what it is and what it stands for. Secondly, they will argue that Goth is not a “drug, occult, Satanic, or crude thing.” Instead, it is an interest, a lifestyle, a perspective on how to look at life and one’s place in it (Crews & Montgomery, 2001).

In addition, they will admit that it does attract some alienated or misguided young people with problems, but that in reality, this is a positive occurrence. Most, if not all, will argue that it is better for young people who may feel alienated and powerless to turn to a Goth lifestyle instead of drugs, gangs, or other criminal involvement. Ridiculing, shunning, abandoning, or targeting these people is the worse thing one can do. It is asked that parents and law enforcement work with them, not against them (Crews & Montgomery, 2001).

They will also state that young people should be allowed to develop, as they will. Attacking them can lead to running away, drug use, or even suicide. Finally, people should not automatically assume one is a criminal if they are a Goth. In addition, a common sense approach is helpful; show them respect, and one will receive it in return (Crews, 1996).

Are These Involvements a “Bad” Influence?

Many people may not want to believe it, but adolescents change identities, involvements, and interests like they change their socks. Most of these changes are healthy and part of normal growth in a child’s life. Whether it is the Goth lifestyle or some other interest, the majority of teenagers move on to something else within a few years if not months. Most do find it appealing initially as a way to rebel and gain a type of social belonging.

Those involved in the scene will say that those who remain in the lifestyle do so because they have found some comfort or answer to personal problems. As they will point out, that does not automatically mean that is a bad thing. They will offer that it is no different than when people find anything that gives them direction in their lives.

Participants in the Goth lifestyle are faced with the same basic decisions regarding drugs, drinking, smoking, and sex. Many people automatically believe that those involved in the Goth lifestyle are more likely to be exposed to drugs and promiscuous sex. In reality, *all* adolescents are exposed to drugs, alcohol, sex, and violence equally.

Many people believe that involvement in Goth, or similar lifestyles, will almost always lead to emotional problems, violence, antisocial behavior, and ultimately suicide. Those in the scene will argue that it is quite the opposite. Many will offer that Goth is actually an outlet for juvenile depression. That it is in reality a healthy philosophy and one that can help its “followers” deal with the myriad of issues that adolescence brings.

Adolescents go through the world with a multitude of issues, fears, and concerns. Also, anyone working with school children can describe how hard students are on other students. This harsh treatment turns into picking on and bullying each other. This mistreatment exacerbates the fears and concerns of children. It leads to loss of identity and self-esteem. When children have no where to turn, they often turn to drugs, gangs, and/or crime. A basic tenant of Goth is to be accepting and tolerant of others no matter what problems, interests, or issues they may have. Some Goths argue that they have probably saved many lives by telling kids that it is alright to be different; it is alright to have issues; a “we all do it; it is ok” attitude (Crews, 2001).

What Should We Do? Is It All Just a Fad?

The Goth culture has been around for over 20 years and is showing no sign of waning. Mainstream interest in the Gothic world is certainly fad-based and tends to come and go periodically. Those who are deeply involved appear to be going nowhere, and their numbers seem to be growing almost daily. Reasons for this have been discussed throughout this article. It may actually center on the changes in adolescents, the world, and the stresses of life. It could be argued that Goth and other alternative lifestyles are simply a defense mechanism and a way for young people to cope with the growing harshness and survival-of-the-fittest mentality of the world (Crews, 1996).

Adolescents have always exhibited depression, anxiety, and rebelliousness, resulting in strange and unexplainable behavior. Maybe the older generation is simply disturbed by the manner in which traditional problems are manifesting themselves in the modern generation. Parents and law enforcement are used to groups of teenagers hanging out in parking lots or drinking alcohol in the local woods, but what about the local cemetery? Parents and law enforcement are used to gangs terrorizing a school or neighborhood by their violence, but what about a group of teenagers all dressed in black, with silver jewelry and pale faces doing the same by simply sitting in the local coffee shop? Educators are used to dealing with the loud mouth bully sitting in the front row of class, but what about the quiet, small, introverted young man sitting in the back of the room with jet black hair and black fingernail polish reading Poe, Shelly, or Keats?

The answer is probably quiet boring and anticlimactic if one is expecting some big revelation. The answer is simply treat them like any other juvenile who may be, emphasizing *may* be, in need of help or direction. As any competent person working with young people will say, approach each juvenile with confidence, honesty, and genuine concern. Work with juveniles on areas impacting their school work or school participation. Try to discover the juvenile’s fundamental problem or issue (which he or she is probably trying to solve with the alternative practice or belief system). While concentrating on not insulting the young person’s current interests or beliefs, offer better ways to solve the problem (Crews & Montgomery, 2001).

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are a few final comments that must be made. First, can what is being seen in the United States actually be an example of a “self-fulfilling

prophecy?" This is to say that it could be argued that those trying to solve the problem are the same ones making the problem much worse. Efforts directed through concern and understanding can make a difference, but what about those that are directed through lack of understanding and panic? So many juveniles become involved in alternative beliefs and practices as a fad for a short period of time. Their involvement will only last a few weeks or months; then they will move on to something else. What happens to them during this time, however, may last a lifetime. These juveniles are often labeled as deviant or delinquent, treated as such by adults, and become involved in the criminal justice system simply because of their appearance. If mistreated enough, they may actually begin to exhibit the behaviors complained of (i.e., become involved in drug related or criminal types of behavior because they feel that everyone already believes they are involved so they might as well be). Thus, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy by individuals being forced into exhibiting the behavior, although they were never involved before.

Can Goths be seen as symbols of a new counterculture? If one thinks back to the late 1960s and the growth of the "hippie" movement, this question may make sense. Initially, there were a dozen or so young people hanging out in the Haight-Ashbury area of San Francisco, California. The media picked up on this small group of individuals and the relatively unknown band, The Grateful Dead, and several news stories were released profiling how these individuals lived. Almost over night, the hippie counterculture took off as young people from across the United States witnessed a lifestyle that promoted free love, drug use, rebellion against authority, and love of music. Young people from across the country left home to join those in this new counterculture, and the numbers expanded exponentially.

It could be argued that the Goth movement is the same. The more exposure Goth receives, the more young people are drawn to it. Many efforts to warn juveniles of the potential dangers of involvement in any type of alternative belief system or practice may actually peak their interests. Many young people would never have thought of being Satanists, Vampires, Wiccans, or Goths, but once they hear of it and see how scared adults are, it immediately becomes appealing; therefore, it can be argued that some that are trying to help are actually making the problem much worse. It must be remembered that careful dissemination of information is vital to any effort.

In addition, those trying to have an impact must keep asking themselves, "What does such involvement actually reveal?" The vast majority of those involved in alternative practices and belief systems are so in order to find some type of answer to some type of problem. As discussed earlier in this article, young people are missing something. There is a void in their lives, and involvement in such things as the Goth lifestyle may be the best way to fill the void. Depending upon one's perspective, this can be positive or negative.

Finally, it must be remembered that the biggest problem is still the resulting damage inflicted upon the young people from the hysteria. As discussed earlier, lack of understanding and the resulting hysteria and panic has caused many situations that could have been dealt with in a positive manner to become uncontrollable. If the general public panics, then there may never be a chance at

dealing with the issue in an intelligent and practical manner. If educators panic, then many students could be labeled and mistreated, ultimately making them drop out or lose their appreciation for education. If parents panic, rifts between them and their children could develop to such an extent that they can never be repaired—mutual trust can be lost forever. If law enforcement officials panic, community relations could be at stake and . . . maybe even lives.

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Dr. Gordon A. Crews is currently associate dean and associate professor in the School of Justice Studies at Roger Williams University in Bristol, Rhode Island. Prior to coming to the school, he served as associate professor and chair of the Department of Criminal Justice at Jacksonville State University in Jacksonville, Alabama. He serves as 2nd vice president and prior member of the board of directors for the Southern Criminal Justice Association. He earned a PhD in education/criminal justice, a graduate certificate in alcohol and drug studies, and bachelor's and master's degrees in criminal justice from the University of South Carolina. Prior to teaching, Dr. Crews worked in law enforcement as a bloodhound officer and trainer, field-training officer, and criminal investigator; in corrections as a training and accreditation manager; and in insurance fraud as an investigator. His publications include journal articles dealing with school violence, occult and satanic involvement and youth, and various law enforcement and correctional issues. His books include *Faces of Violence in America* (1996), published by Simon & Schuster; *The Evolution of School Disturbance in America: Colonial Times to Modern Day* (1997), published

by Praeger; and *A History of Correctional Violence: An Examination of Reported Causes of Riots and Disturbances* (1998), published by the American Correctional Association. His most recent book is entitled, *Chasing Shadows: Confronting Juvenile Violence in America* (Prentice Hall, 2001).

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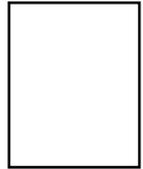
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