Fatal intersection: The arc of a crime crew

In the summer of 2004, Dionny Reynolds met Eugene Rhodes, and the two formed a 'crime crew,' the latest scourge to hit the streets. By the time their violent spree ended, almost a dozen businesses had been robbed, a 15-year-old girl had been gang-raped and a state agent had been shot.

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Posted: March 31, 2007

First of three parts

Jay Balchunas had a dozen years of law enforcement work on his résumé by the night of Oct. 29, 2004, when he stopped at an all-hours gas station on Milwaukee's north side. All the state Department of Justice agent wanted was a cup of coffee.

It was about midnight, and he was headed from the office to stake out a suspected drug house. He was a good cop, and his reputation in the courthouse was airtight. He was 34 and engaged to be married. Life was going well, even if work meant keeping strange hours.

In the central city, where he found himself that night, Balchunas stood out - a white man in a black neighborhood, in casual clothes. However, he wore a windbreaker with a small Milwaukee Police Department logo, a badge on his waist and a gun in his shoulder holster. He felt safe enough to leave his bulletproof vest on the seat of his blue Camaro.

Then the streets he knew so well blindsided him.

Balchunas walked straight into the path of the latest pervasive mutation of Milwaukee street crime: the desperate, transitory "crime crew."

Big gangs have a shadow of their former influence here, but they have been replaced by small, loosely organized bands of young men who commit strings of violent offenses before breaking up, or ending up behind bars. Their unpredictability has come to confound even veteran street cops and prosecutors who despite years of studying street-crime patterns are suddenly behind the times.

"They are the least predictable; they’re the toughest to break up because they can be so spontaneous," said Milwaukee County District Attorney John Chisholm, who led the county’s gun-crimes prosecutions for six years and has considered a specialized prosecution team to go after crews. "They would really require the most resources to get rid of. . . .The damage just one crew like that can do is significant."

Although statistics are hard to come by because crime crews have such fluid memberships, authorities believe a large percentage of the hundreds of shootings - 640 in 2005, 808 in 2006 - that happen annually on Milwaukee's streets can be attributed to the carnage of crime crews.
Examples of their volatility filter through Milwaukee’s justice system every day.

Tuesday, Michael Ray Green pleaded guilty to a string of armed robberies and other crimes committed with a rotating group of accomplices. The spree ended with the homicide of a sandwich delivery man. Another crew, arrested in January, is being prosecuted for a series of north side armed robberies that culminated with Milwaukee police officer Tommy Wilson being shot in the chest at a Citgo gas station on W. Appleton Ave. He was wearing a bulletproof vest and suffered only minor injuries.

The crew Balchunas encountered in 2004 turned out to be, in many ways, archetypal: four young men whose backgrounds spanned the criminal spectrum. One had been a felon since age 16. Another had never been handcuffed. All grew up largely fatherless, drawing life lessons from the counsel of neighborhood thugs. There is not a high school diploma among them.

The four bonded that summer of 2004 in an incendiary mix of poverty, impatience and the allure of easy money.

"They had the same mentality I had: Get rich or die tryin’," said crew member Eugene Rhodes, looking back on the connection.

In time, authorities would call Dionny Reynolds the ringleader. Known by his middle name, "Lamont," to everybody but his mother and the law, he was the oldest at 26, and he had the longest rap sheet.

"It was always in them before I met them," said Reynolds, now one year into a 117-year prison sentence. "It just took for me to bring it out of them."

Two lives, two paths

Yvonne Reynolds was finishing up at an Arkansas high school in 1977 when a military doctor discovered she was pregnant while giving her a physical.

"I wasn’t ready for a child," she said. "My plan was to go into the Air Force."

Yvonne Reynolds moved north, following siblings and leaving her boyfriend behind. In Milwaukee, family members helped her raise Dionny. The last she heard, the boy’s father had moved to Nebraska.

Growing up fatherless, Dionny Reynolds found a path to trouble early. At age 12, he and his best friend handled a gun for the first time.

"We were looking at it, admiring it, taking the bullets out and putting them back in," Reynolds said. "And I remember I cocked the hammer back, with the bullets in the chamber. And we was little, so if we woulda tried to de-cock it, it woulda went off because we didn’t have that much strength in our hands."

A year later, he and his little brother Cornell saw "New Jack City." The film, directed by Mario Van Peebles, became an inner city sensation for its graphic depiction of the rise and fall of drug lord Nino Brown, set to a hip-hop score.

Dionny Reynolds traces his path to prison to that day.

"I didn’t have dreams of becoming no law enforcement agent or no fireman, or no doctor or nothing," Reynolds said. "I wanted to be Nino Brown."

It didn’t matter that the character was a drug lord who eventually got gunned down.
"Everybody in the 'hood wanted to be Nino Brown," Rhodes said. "Biggest drug dealer in the world."

Out in the suburbs, Balchunas spent his formative years hewing to a profoundly different path: public safety work.

In 1991, the same year Reynolds took a movie drug lord as a hero, Balchunas turned 21 with a full decade of public-service experience already to his credit. He started young, as an 11-year-old Explorer Scout for the New Berlin Fire Department, where he later became a full member. He even went on to take enough fire-safety courses at Waukesha County Technical College to get an associate’s degree.

But he didn’t feel born to a firefighter’s life, not with a framed photo of a great-grandfather in a Chicago Police Department uniform around the house. At Marquette University, he switched from studying engineering to become a criminology major and public safety department officer - a formative stage toward becoming a cop.

"It was in his blood," said Mary Kay Balchunas, Jay’s mother.

He enrolled at the Milwaukee Police Academy at age 22.

"He was so determined to be a good police officer and good law enforcement that he would actually come home and practice his take-down moves on me to make sure he had them right," Jay’s younger brother Dan Balchunas said.

After seven years as a Milwaukee cop, Jay Balchunas became a state officer, a special agent with the Department of Justice’s Division of Criminal Investigation. He was assigned to the narcotics bureau in Milwaukee.

In the central city, meanwhile, Reynolds was trying to make a name for himself.

At age "14 or 15" he and his best friend became Vice Lords, just like the friend’s older brother. Then, Reynolds picked up his first felony conviction, at age 16 for setting his neighbor’s house on fire. He got one year of probation.

"I had the mentality: 'Well, I already got one felony. It's prohibiting me from doing a lot of things. Might as well keep going.' "

He dropped out of school, got a gun and started selling crack.

"I made all types of money," he said. "Little money, big money, sometimes no money because you done tricked off all your money, smoking weed and drinking liquor you couldn't afford, stuff like that."

It lasted three years. At 19, Reynolds was arrested while relieving himself behind the plumbing-free house where he stayed. The crack and pistol he had in his pants earned him a prison trip.

"The Nino Brown dream got crushed when I came to the penitentiary in 1996," Reynolds said. "I didn't mess with that no more. I ventured off into other crime."

Questionable role models

The rest of what became Reynolds' crime crew grew up troubled and hungry.

Rhodes helped care for a mother with drug and psychological problems, according to court records.
His role models: street criminals and an ex-convict uncle who gave him a gun "for protection" at age 15.

"My only influence was local drug dealers, killers, pimps and hustlers on the streets," he said. "That's where I would go to get advice, what they call 'game.'

"I didn’t have nobody to guide me, to say you can be a doctor, you can be a lawyer. I didn’t have none of that. I listened to the street life: 'Man, you can get rich in the streets.' That was all I knew. My mother taught me how to cook, she taught me how to clean, sew, but she couldn’t teach me how to be a man. I had to learn from the streets."

In seventh grade, he made fast friends with a classmate named Anthony Bolden, who was not getting regular meals in his home and wound up living with Rhodes’ family for a time. The two would come to consider each other like brothers, with complementary styles: Rhodes was reflective, muscular and loyal to his friends. Bolden was loquacious, lean and dirt-poor.

By the time Bolden turned 19 during that summer of 2004, he had a pregnant girlfriend and an earnest wish that his child would grow up better off than him.

"It's been times when I didn't have nothing to wear to school . . . all our clothes was dirty," he said. "I refused to stay at home, you know. I got in fights because people talked about my hygiene. People talked about the clothes I was wearing - 'You stink. Y’all poor. You ain't got nothing.'"

Rhodes and Bolden had some key differences. Bolden came a half-credit shy of his diploma at Bradley Tech High School, the most conventional education any member of the crew managed to acquire. And he stuck with a job at Arby's restaurant in Mayfair Mall long after Rhodes quit a job at the same place.

Rhodes considered Bolden to be naïve - "a schoolboy" is how he put it. Rhodes had already gained wariness as a practicing street criminal. Bolden was green enough to pick up a felony at the mall for trying to sell dope to teenagers he didn’t know.

Still, if Rhodes was going to make a commitment to a crime crew, then Bolden, his best friend, was going to be in the mix.

Rounding out the crew was a younger neighborhood resident: 16-year-old Marques Walls, who had already been assessed by Children's Court as unstable and "somewhat marginally" competent.

He was reckless, which made him a good weapon. Later, in prison, he would call himself "basically the crazy person of the group" and admit he was willing to take risks just to gain experience - and boost his standing.

"To tell you the truth, we should've never met each other," Walls said. "When we came together it was just like everything started going downhill."

**A new crew forms**

Walls, Rhodes, Bolden and Reynolds found each other in June 2004 at the corner of N. 38th and W. Burleigh streets, stunted lives as ready to catch fire as a stack of kindling.

The first three were teenagers; Reynolds was a high-mileage 26 and already had three children by different mothers.

It started with a single look.

Reynolds was hanging out at the home of an aunt. Rhodes was sitting across from him.
"We was in the living room by ourself," Rhodes said. "He was counting his money, and I was counting mine. He had his pistol, I had mine. We just got to talking, and we clicked."

Rhodes recognized Reynolds' determination. "I saw that he was ambitious," he said. "The lifestyle he was living, the lifestyle we was living, we saw beyond that. It was - life of crime was sort of like a stepping stone for us."

Reynolds felt the same spark.

"He didn't want to be in the streets forever," Reynolds recalled, "just like I didn't."

Reynolds knew immediately what the burly, calculating Rhodes could do for him.

"I'm like, 'If he plays his cards right, he can be a pretty decent goon out there. If not, man, he can go right back to what he been doing.' "

Reynolds snapped his fingers to illustrate the volatility of street life.

"Everybody got a little goon in them, everybody," Reynolds said. "It just takes that one instant to tick you off, and you're throwing chairs and smacking people with beer bottles and stuff. Or you can handle it like a player and talk yourself up out of it. I liked his attitude. He was real smooth and he was laid-back, you know."

In that moment, a criminal plan began to take shape.

They envisioned a spree - and ignored its inevitable reckoning.

"Man, we wanted the world and everything in it," Reynolds said. "We'd snatch what we could and work for the rest of it. We had a plan."

From the April 1, 2007 editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
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