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HEADLINE: TELEVISION REVIEW;
Are Hugs the Solution to Violence?

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BODY:

Just when you thought that the three-strikes-and-out, crackdown-on-crime spirit had taken over, here comes evidence that the old softhearted liberal attitude toward the wayward is alive if not exactly well. "**Gang War: Bangin' in Little Rock**" presents a picture of young gang members who are helping keep up the record murder rate of Little Rock, Ark., as losers in need of understanding and help from the society that has made them what they are and is now paying for it.

The camera tracks Steve Nawojczyk, the Little Rock coroner, on his mission to persuade inner-city youths to put away their guns. He goes from turf to turf, showing photographs of children and teenagers who have been killed, on purpose or because they just happened to be in the way of the sort of drive-by shooting that he is seen stepping into as the camera rolls. "We've got to reach out and hug those kids," he says.

The problem is that the kids interviewed -- mostly young black members of the 23d Street Crips, the West Side Bloods and the Original Gangster Crips and a few white members of Hoover Folks -- are not all that huggable. Some are in the drug game; others steal where they can; all seem to rely on guns to retaliate for incidents of "disrespect."

There is much talk here about the members' loyalty to their particular gang, which has a way of erupting into mayhem against enemy gangs and passers-by. The message is that these youngsters turn to

gangs because their families and society have failed them.

"Black people have nowhere to go," one says. With no hope of decent jobs, the gang members, black and white, get money the old-fashioned way, by not working for it, and may occasionally kill for want of more wholesome recreation. Subtitles are provided for their street lingo, and the soundtrack raps along in the usual way.

The program's social-worker assumptions are a touch mushy, but its picture of youths who have come to a dead end when their lives have scarcely begun is nonetheless sad. You don't have to be bloody-minded to despair of the hugging approach to teen-age killers, but you don't have to be a softy to be pained by tonight's glimpse of wasted lives.

AMERICA UNDERCOVER

Gang War: Bangin'

in Little Rock

HBO, tonight at 10:15

Marc Levin, director; Alan Levin, Marc Levin and Daphne Pinkerson, producers; Sheila Nevins, executive producer. A presentation of Blowback Productions for HBO.

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