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HBO **'Back in the Hood'** for update on Little Rock gang wars

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BODY:

'Back in the Hood: Gang War II.'

Tonight at 10 on HBO.

Four stars (out of four)

With grim references to terrorism, Osama bin Laden and warfare, you might figure the latest installment in HBO's "America Undercover" series had to do with battles fought in distant lands.

Instead, the war waged in "Back in the Hood: Gang War II" is happening in this country, in the impoverished neighborhoods of Little Rock, Ark. The police refer to the gang members as terrorists; one banger chillingly sees the logic in bin Laden's attack; and the scars of the bloody skirmishes are visible everywhere.

In 1994, filmmakers Marc Levin and Daphne Pinkerson profiled members of the Crips and Bloods gangs in their film "Gang War: Bangin' in Little Rock." A decade later, they were curious to know what had happened to the people and the city. (Gang-related violence has killed 400 people in Little Rock since 1993.)

Viewers needn't have seen the original to grasp the gravity and despair in this "where are they now" update, premiering tonight at

10 on HBO. Not only do the directors include clips from the first film, but one former gang leader, Crip Leifel Jackson, uses the original documentary as a cautionary tale for kids he tries to divert from ``the life" at a community center he began running after serving seven years for drug trafficking.

The contrast between the brash, young Jackson -- of the first film and the graying ex-con struggling to do the right thing makes for a compelling portrait of the consequences of a blighted environment and even worse choices.

Former Bloods also are profiled and the tales are equally cheerless. One hopes to make it as a rapper but works as a ``gigolo." Another has been shot and paralyzed. Funerals happen regularly and yet the drug trade and violence continue as the police fight a losing battle with an enemy never short on recruits seeking some kind of family and economic respite.

Those still caught up in what they see as a ``glamorous life" include Moran Ellis, who was recruited at the age of 9 by Jackson. Jackson tries to reach out to him, but Ellis figures he will meet his end on the streets because ``I ain't got nowhere to go."

There is precious little hope in this ``Hood." Like many large-scale wars before it, this one looks to drag on for years to come.

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