

Outlaw motorcycle gangs have not always been seen as threats to public safety; however, recent events have changed that perception. For example, in 2012, the motorcycle gang Hell's Angels Rock Hill in South Carolina was convicted of drug dealing, robbery, arson, and firearms violations. Also in 2012, the Wheels of Soul motorcycle gang was convicted of federal racketeering charges linked to murder. These gangs are found throughout the United States and include but are not limited to Hells Angels Motorcycle Club, Pagans, Banditos, Outlaws, and Iron Horsemen. This threat has been identified as a serious concern by policing executives due to their perceived criminal sophistication. These groups are found in urban, as well as, rural areas.

Myth 2: All gang members are African American and belong either to the Bloods or the Crips. The Bloods and the Crips are predominantly African American and are very widely known. These two street gangs are heavily involved in illegal drug activities and are characterized by a confederation of local gangs that stretch across the country.¹⁵⁵ They are not, however, exclusively African American. S. Mydans¹⁵⁶ provided examples of well-to-do white youth joining California Crips and Bloods. The most recent National Gang Survey identified as least one group of Asian Crips.

Although members of the racial minority groups we focus on in this book are overrepresented in gangs, they do not comprise the entire gang problem. (It is somewhat misleading to categorize gangs as Hispanic or Asian. The terms "Hispanic" and "Asian" are very broad and mask the variety within each group. In reality, gangs are ethnically specific by nationality; there are Puerto Rican, Cuban, Mexican American, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese gangs.)

The earliest gangs in the Northeast region of the United States were predominantly white, reflecting the major waves of European immigration, first from northern and Western European countries and later from middle and Eastern European countries. These immigration trends, along with the rapid growth of industrial center cities, left a situation of poverty and unemployment that created fertile ground for the formation of gangs. Sante notes the earliest gangs were commonly Irish, with the Chinese establishing tongs as early as 1860. Italian and Jewish gangs emerged after the Civil War.¹⁵⁷

Currently, white ethnic gangs are not as prevalent. Covey and colleagues¹⁵⁸ argue that "the relative absence of white ethnic gangs in official studies may be a product of a number of factors including the difficulty of identifying them¹⁵⁹ and biases in reporting and public perception."¹⁶⁰ Many of the white ethnic groups that do exist are characterized by white supremacist activities or Satanism.

Myth 3: Gangs are only found in large cities. It is important to understand that the gang phenomenon is not a homogeneous one. Although many gangs are located in urban areas, gangs are increasingly found in suburban and rural communities and on Indian reservations.¹⁶¹ The National Youth Gang Survey in 2007, collected by the National Youth Gang Center from law enforcement agencies, estimated that gangs were present in 86 percent of large cities and 35 percent of smaller cities.

Additionally, this survey revealed that suburban and rural counties each reported the presence of gangs (50 percent and 15 percent).¹⁶² The National Youth Gang Center also tracks the size of urban, suburban, and rural gangs over time. Since 2002 the general estimate of the number of self-identified gang problem jurisdictions went up 25 percent. However, this increase was largely fueled by the 33 percent rise in suburban gangs compared to the 12 percent rise in large city gangs.

Myth 4: Gangs are the result of poverty and a growing underclass. It is overly simplistic to attribute the existence of gangs solely to poverty. The National Youth Gang Survey indicated that although the majority of gang members are identified as underclass, 35 percent were identified as working class, 12 percent as middle class, and 3 percent as upper middle class.¹⁶³ Gangs exist for a variety of reasons: the growth of the underclass, the disintegration of the African American and Hispanic family, poverty, difficulty assimilating into American culture, marginality, political and religious reasons, and general rebellion against adult and conventional society.¹⁶⁴ However, Curry and Decker argued that gang formation and gang delinquency are more likely to be explained at a community level rather than at an individual level.¹⁶⁵

Myth 5: All gang members are males. Although it is true that males are over-represented in gang membership, there are female gang members and female gangs. The early sociological literature on gangs only discussed males; females who accompanied male gang members were often described in terms of an "auxiliary"—present, but not a formal part of the criminal activity.

More recent studies have found both fully active female gang members and a few solely female gangs. The NGIC reports that 1 in 4 jurisdictions report female gang members (up from 1 in 7 in 2007), with up to 10 percent of gang membership made up of females. Moreover, more than half of recognized gangs have female members, with smaller cities reporting the largest percentage of female gang members compared to larger cities, suburban counties, and rural counties.¹⁶⁶ Anne Campbell identified several all-female gangs in New York City. "The Sandman Ladies," for example, were Puerto Rican females with a biker image. "The Sex Girls" were African American and Hispanic females involved in drug dealing. Currently, female gang members are known to assist with the "movement of drugs and weapons for male gang members and [the gathering of] intelligence from rival gangs."¹⁶⁷

The presence of female gang members differs by ethnicity as well. Females are found in Hispanic, African American, and white ethnic gangs, but they appear to be conspicuously absent in both journalistic and scholarly accounts of Asian American gangs.¹⁶⁸

In December 2012, federal authorities arrested 40 members of the Bronx Trinitarios gang. They were charged them with multiple counts of murder and attempted.¹⁶⁹ The arrests included the leader of the all-female faction called "Bad Barbies," who was charged in connection with the shooting death of a rival gang member in 2005. She was identified as one of as many as a hundred women who run the Bronx Trinitarios.

Myth 6: Gangs involve only young people and have few ties to organized crime. For a number of years, gang researchers have documented generational patterns of gang membership in a number of Hispanic and African-American gangs. Moreover, outlaw motorcycle gangs are predominantly 20 years of age and older. Furthermore, in a recent survey law enforcement, officials report that gangs in their jurisdiction were associated with organized crime. Law enforcement agencies report that street gangs are associated with transnational criminal organizations (Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean), Asian organized crime groups, Russian organized crime, and outlaw motorcycle gangs.¹⁷⁰ These street gangs include but are not limited to Bloods, Crips, Gangster Disciples, Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation, and Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13).

New realities in gang behavior include:

- Gangs are present in middle schools and high schools. In a recent survey of students, sponsored by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, nearly half of high school students respond that gangs are present in their schools while more than one third of middle-school students report gangs presence in their schools.¹⁷¹
- Gangs now employ cell phone, computer technologies, and social media to identify target and communicate gang operations. The National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC) has also documented use of online gaming systems such as Playstation and Xbox.¹⁷² Gang activities have been identified to include cyber-bullying and cyber-crime.
- In addition to tradition crimes of violence (for keeping territory and extortion), drug running (most common income activity), and prostitution, gangs are now using identity theft, credit card fraud, insurance fraud, counterfeiting (i.e., designer products, currency, and so on) and human trafficking to generate income.
- The NGIC, on the basis of a law enforcement survey, assert that 40 percent of street gangs are involved in some level of weapons trafficking. Theft is another source of weapons, including law enforcement and military targets.
- Recently, gangs have started pursuing jobs in law enforcement and the military to exploit sources of information to protect their enterprises and to gain information on rivals. As of June 2013, the NGIC identified "at least 60 gangs whose members or associates have been either enlisted or have attempted to gain employment in the military or various government agencies. Of these gangs, 54 had members who served in the military or who were otherwise affiliated with the military."¹⁷³ The resulting weapons and tactics skills are highly valued by street gangs.
- The NGIC has also documented increased gang presence on college campuses. It is argued that street gang members have also sought out college degrees, all as ways to increase the skill set that is needed to maintain and expand modern gangs.

Varieties of Ethnic Street Gangs

We already noted that, contrary to popular wisdom, all gang members are not African Americans. There are also Hispanic, Native American, Asian, and white gangs. In a recent year, the National Youth Gang Survey indicated that 49 percent of gang members are identified as Hispanic, 35 percent as African American, 9 percent as white, and 9 percent as other.

Covey and colleagues stated, "[Ethnicity] is not the only way to understand gangs, but gangs are organized along ethnic lines, and it would be a mistake to ignore ethnicity as a variable that may affect the nature of juvenile gangs."¹⁷⁴ Most ethnic gangs reflect a mixture of their members' culture of origin and the American "host" culture; indeed, many gangs form as the result of a clash between the two cultures. The National Gang Intelligence Center reports that law enforcement agencies identify more and more gang collaboration, likely due to the networks needed to generate profits through drug trafficking and counterfeiting schemes.

African American

The most widely known African-American gangs are the Bloods and the Crips. Each gang has unique "colors" and sign language to reinforce gang identity. It is believed that these gangs are really "national confederations of local gangs" in American cities.¹⁷⁵ They are characteristically very territorial and use violence at intimidation. They are also linked to nationwide drug distribution that is supplied by international criminal organizations. They have also been linked with human trafficking.

Other African-American gangs exist across the United States. Researchers have identified many big-city African-American gangs that are oriented toward property crime rather than drug sales. In addition, African-American gangs have formed around the tenets of Islam, with corresponding political agendas.¹⁷⁶

Native American

The circumstances among which Native American youth are becoming part of the gang culture in the United States include the emerging presence of gangs in the semi-sovereign tribal lands throughout the country and the formation of gangs located in urban and rural non-reservation areas around 20 years ago.¹⁷⁷ In 2010, of 132 tribal communities in the United States, 81 percent were identified as having some gang activity. Specifically, the Navajo nations have documented the presence of youth gangs consisting of tribal members. They have reported the presence of more than 60–70 gangs with more than 1,500 members on the tribal lands. Similarly, the Pine Ridge Indian reservation reports 30–40 active gangs. Some Native American gangs identify themselves with the native culture of their unique areas (such as the Native Out-lawz, Red Nation Kligue, and Native Mob), whereas other gang names indicate alliances with more nationally recognized

groups like the Bloods and Gangster Disciples (with names like the Indian Bloods, Native Gangster Disciples, and Native Latin King). Actual evidence of structural alliances with these other urban gangs seems to be in doubt. Some gang researchers speculate that such affiliation is "utilized for the purposes of notoriety and intimidation." Most gang crimes on tribal lands seem to be property based, but there is increasing concern about violence and drug distribution (especially methamphetamine and marijuana).¹⁷⁸

Gang activity includes the presence of graffiti, vandalism, drug usage, and assault, up to burglary, robbery, and murder. Grant has found, through his interview based research, that lack of connection to tribal cultural heritage is a risk factor for gang membership. Conversely, he asserts that connection with cultural heritage may be successful in Native-American-based reintegration programs.

Asian American

As previously stated, there are a variety of Asian ethnic gangs. Most Asian gang researchers attribute the formation of these gangs, at least in part, to feelings of alienation due to difficulty assimilating into American culture.¹⁷⁹ Similarities between Asian gangs include an emphasis on economic activity and a pattern of intraracial victimization. The tendency to victimize others in the Asian community may contribute to lower reporting rates of gang victimization to local law enforcement.

The origins of Chinese American gangs can be traced to the early 1890s and the secret "Tong" societies. Chinese American gang activity has increased with the relaxation of immigration laws in the mid-1960s. The research on Chinese gangs reveals that these entities have a commitment to violence, both for its own sake (gang warfare) and also as a means for generating income (through robbery, burglary, extortion, and protection). Gang researchers report that it is not unusual for Asian-organized crime groups to work with street gangs in such activities as "drug trafficking, credit card fraud, illegal gambling and money laundering." K. Chin noted that generally the structure of Chinese American gangs is very hierarchical; he also explains that gang members may participate in legitimate business, establish drug distribution and sale networks, and form national and international networks.¹⁸⁰ Vietnamese American gang activity is not as structured as that of Chinese American gangs. The increase in gang activity for this ethnic group can also be tied to an influx in immigration. Overall, Vietnamese American gang activity is less violent, usually economically oriented, and most likely to target other Vietnamese Americans.¹⁸¹

Asian gangs are traditionally found in a number of coastal states across the United States such as California, Oregon, New York, Massachusetts, and Connecticut.¹⁸² Asian gangs are also emerging in the South. More gangs are emerging in Atlanta, Georgia, fueled by an increase in Asian population since 2000 (87 percent increase). The largest numbers of Asian gang members are Indians, followed by Koreans and Chinese ethnicities.¹⁸³

Hispanic

Hispanic gangs have identifiable core concerns: brotherhood/sisterhood, machismo, and loyalty to the barrio (neighborhood). Many Hispanic gangs have adult and juvenile members, and gang members may be involved in the use and sale of drugs. The importance of machismo may explain the emphasis of many Hispanic gangs on violence, even intragang violence.¹⁸⁴

Hispanic gangs make up the largest ethnic population of gang membership in the country. Hispanic gangs have the most gang members in large cities, small cities, and suburban counties. This trend reverses for rural counties where Hispanic gangs comprise 32 percent of gang members, while African-American gang members comprise 44 percent of the identified gang members. Prominent Hispanic gangs vary by region. In the western part of the country, Sur 13 and The Latin Kings are most evident. The former is strongly associated with the prison gang Mexican Mafia (discussed in Chapter 9). Law enforcement agencies have identified Hispanic gangs in Northern California in alliance with outlaw motorcycle gangs to transport drugs (primarily methamphetamine). International connections emerge with such gangs as the MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha), which has El Salvadoran roots. Other gangs are reported to have connections to crime groups in Honduras, Guatemala, and other Central American countries.¹⁸⁵

The National Alliance of Gang Investigators report that some Central American gang members, from El Salvador and Honduras, have gained Temporary Protective Status (granted by the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement) in the United States as a result of the gang prosecution efforts in their own countries. The Department of Homeland Security requires migrants to be deported if they have been convicted of a felony or two or more misdemeanors, but some gang members are able to remain for a period of time if they are looking for work.¹⁸⁶

White

The white ethnic gangs—composed of Irish, Polish, and Italian youth—identified by researchers earlier in this century are less evident in today's cities. Contemporary white ethnic gangs are most often associated with rebellion against adult society; with suburban settings; and with a focus on white supremacist, domestic terrorist, or Satanist ideals. Larger cities report that about 8 percent of gangs are comprised of white members, while smaller cities and suburban and rural counties identify between 14 percent and 17 percent of gang members as white.¹⁸⁷ "Skinheads" may be the most well-known example of a white ethnic gang. Covey and colleagues describe them in this way: "Skinhead gangs usually consist of European American youths who are non-Hispanic, non-Jewish, Protestant, working class, low income, clean shaven and militantly racist and white supremacist."¹⁸⁸ Skinheads have been located in cities in every region of the country and have been linked to adult domestic terrorist organizations such as the White Aryan Resistance (WAR) and other Neo-Nazi movements. Skinheads are unique in the

sense that they use violence not to protect turf, protect a drug market, or commit robberies, but rather "for the explicit purpose of promoting political change by instilling fear in innocent people."¹⁸⁹

Youth gangs with connections to domestic terrorist groups comprise less than 10 percent of known gang activity. These groups include the Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Resistance, National Socialist Movement, and various militia groups. Little evidence exists of youth gang connections with international terrorist groups because most evidence suggests recruitment is more common in adult prisons (see Chapter 9).¹⁹⁰

"Stoner" gangs, another form of white ethnic gangs, are characterized by an emphasis on Satanic rituals. This doctrine is supplemented by territoriality and the heavy use of drugs.¹⁹¹

In recognizing the racial nature of gangs, it is important to clarify the role of racism in the formation of gangs. Most gangs are racially and ethnically homogeneous. Some researchers argue that this situation is merely reflective of the racial and ethnic composition of neighborhoods and primary friendships—that is, "where schools and neighborhoods are racially and ethnically mixed, gangs tend to be racially and ethnically mixed."¹⁹²

Although violent conflicts do occur between and within ethnic gangs, violence is seldom the reason for gang formation. Racism as a societal phenomenon that creates oppressive conditions can contribute to gang formation. However, individual racism explains very little in terms of the formation of gangs or the decision to join gangs. Skinhead membership is a notable exception, being almost exclusively a function of individual racism.¹⁹³

CONCLUSION

We began this chapter with a discussion of the presentation of crime stories in the media in comparison to their actual occurrence. We argued that incidents such as missing person reports and racial hoaxes shape perceptions of crime in the United States. In the minds of many Americans, the typical crime is an act of violence involving a white victim and a minority offender. We have used a variety of data sources to illustrate the inaccuracy of these perceptions and offer a more comprehensive view of victimization and offending.

We have shown that people of color are overrepresented as victims of both household and personal crime and have demonstrated that this pattern is particularly striking for crimes of violence. We have demonstrated that the typical offender for all crimes except robbery and gambling is white; however, African Americans are arrested at a disproportionately high rate. We also have shown that most crimes involve an offender and victim of the same race, which means that crime is predominantly an intraracial event.

The information provided in this chapter may raise as many questions as it answers. Although we have attempted to paint an accurate picture of crime and victimization in the United States, we are hampered by limitations inherent in existing data sources. Some victimization events are not defined as crimes by the victims, many of those that are defined as crimes are not reported to the police,

and many of those reported to the police do not lead to an arrest. There is no data set that provides information on all crimes that occur.

We have attempted to address this problem by using several different sources of data. We believe that we can have greater confidence in the conclusions we reach if two or more distinct types of data point in the same direction. The fact that both NCVS data and data from the SHRs consistently reveal that racial and ethnic minorities are more likely than whites to fall victim to crime, for example, lends credence to the need for a more comprehensive picture of victims and offenders. Similarly, the fact that a variety of data sources suggest that crime is predominantly an intraracial event enhances our confidence in this conclusion as well.

We have less confidence in our conclusions concerning the racial makeup of the offender population. Although it is obvious that African Americans are arrested at a disproportionately high rate, particularly for murder and robbery, it is not clear that this reflects differential offending rather than selective enforcement of the law. Arrest statistics and victimization data both indicate that African Americans have higher rates of offending than whites, but some self-report studies suggest that there are few, if any, racial differences in offending. We suggest that this discrepancy limits our ability to draw definitive conclusions about the meaning of the disproportionately high arrest rates for African Americans.

One final caveat seems appropriate. The conclusions we reach about victims and offenders are based primarily on descriptive data; they are based primarily on percentages, rates, and trends over time. These data are appropriate for describing a disproportionate representation of people of color as the victims of crime and as the criminal offender, but these data are not sufficient for drawing conclusions concerning causality. The data we have examined in this chapter can tell us that the African-American arrest rate is higher than the white arrest rate for a particular crime, but they cannot tell us why this is so. We address issues of causation in subsequent chapters.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the social and psychological costs of racial hoaxes? What do you think? Should states have racial hoax sentence enhancement statutes? What should the content of such legislation be?
2. Does the media systematically discriminate against crime victims, favoring white victims? Or is the discrimination contextual (see Chapter 1)? How does the media cover racial hoaxes? Does this coverage perpetuate the view of young African American males as the typical criminal offenders?
3. What are some of the possible explanations for the overrepresentation of minorities as crime victims? Are minority communities particularly vulnerable to crime? Why?
4. The descriptive information in UCR arrest data depicts an overrepresentation of African-American offenders for most violent and property crimes.