

Gangs, Poverty, and the Future

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In this chapter, James Diego Vigil examines urban street gangs in the context of the impoverished barrios (neighborhoods) where Chicanos and other ethnic groups are concentrated in Los Angeles, California. Calling upon more than 30 years of fieldwork in the barrios, the author demonstrates how street gangs have emerged as a consequence of marginalization, destabilization, and fragmentation of people's lives—what Vigil calls their circumstance of “multiple marginality.” Recognizing that current law enforcement tactics are having uneven success in addressing the violence and other criminal activities associated with urban street gangs, Vigil suggests that early intervention and prevention tactics are likely to be more beneficial and less costly.

Poverty is the central the central reason for the rise of street gangs throughout the contemporary world; poor people live in older, rundown areas and labor in the lowest paying jobs. In short, the power of place and the status of a person or groups are the major forces in generating the many situations and conditions that give rise to gangs. This is a more pronounced occurrence after large-scale immigration from foreign countries. Newcomers are adapting to a new place and acquiring a livelihood to survive. The children of the poor are put at risk by factors over which they have no control: their family's living conditions, work situations, health problems, and educational limitations. Especially damaging are the social structural breakdowns that occur when family resources are strained, school systems overwhelmed, and law enforce-

Based on over 30 years of research and extensive investigations, I have learned that street gangs become relegated to the fringes, where social and economic conditions result in the destabilization and fragmentation of people's lives. A sense of powerlessness can develop when these conditions continue over a long period of time. Some of the gang members that I have known have come from such stressed and unstable circumstances that one wonders how they have survived at all. In this chapter, I will use the phrase "multiple marginality" (Vigil 2002) to reflect these strains and their persistence over time.

Multiple Marginality

The model of multiple marginality helps us to dissect and analyze the ways in which marginal place/status undermines and exacerbates social, cultural, and psychological problems in ethnic minority communities. These forces contribute to the breakdown of social control and the emergence of gangs and gang members. Social dysfunctions especially affect family life, educational trajectories, and interactions with law enforcement. In the absence of these influences, the gang replaces parenting, schooling, and policing to regulate the lives of many youth. Ultimately, a gang subculture arises to set rules and regulations for its members.

Street Gangs

Tomson, and Schwartz (1975), especially among immigrant populations. One of the best known was Merton's (1949) "strain theory," which focused on the mismatch between the status goals established by the dominant society and inadequate means available for low-income people to reach those goals. The inadequacy results when poor people recognize their "place" on the margins of marginality fringes. With such structural barriers firmly in place, the socioeconomic process learn to pursue alternative opportunity paths, many of some young persons learn to pursue illegitimate or illegal paths.

Large-scale societal forces lead to economic instability and employment barriers, the fragmentation of social control, material impoverishment, and psychological strains among large segments of ethnic communities in Los Angeles. Within these communities, people face inferior housing conditions, strains and changes in personal and family relationships, and cultural repression and racism in schools. Although most members of these communities cope well enough with these adverse circumstances to lead productive traditional ways of life, some youth in such communities join gangs.

Most gangs are composed of male adolescents and youth who have been together since childhood in specific low-income neighborhoods. Today, close to 1,000 gangs and almost 200,000 gang members operate in the Los Angeles area. Among the youth in impoverished enclaves, only about 10 to 15 percent join gangs (Esbensen and Winfree 1998; Short 1996; Vigil 1988) and despite the conventional wisdom offered by many officials ("once a gang member, always a gang member"), about 70 percent eventually "mature out" of their gangs (Short 1996; Vigil 2007). Gang participants combine both conventional and antisocial behavior in their daily activities. It is the antisocial behavior, however, that attracts the attention of authorities as well as the general public.

As many anthropologists have long noted, social control is an important function in all societies. Institutions such as the family, schools, and police are expected to provide this control; however, where these institutions have broken down, the situation is ripe for the rise and perpetuation of street-level gangs. Operating without conventional influences or secure tethers, gang members do not know how to behave in acceptable ways; nor are proper sanctions applied for unacceptable behavior. When poor people live in crowded homes with large families, they often seek privacy outside the home. For the street-socialized gang member, the rooftops, alleyways, and empty sections of parks serve this purpose.

Los Angeles has had Mexican barrios since the nineteenth century. Those located just east of the town center are collectively referred to as East Los Angeles (Romo 1983). In an ecological sense, "East Los" (as shortened by young native speakers) can be seen as a macro-barrio that serves as an overlay for dozens of meso- (encompassing several street blocks) and micro- (just two or three blocks) barrios. These enclaves have their own place names and spatial markers. Within the vast ecosystem of East Los Angeles exist bar-

rios like El Hoyo Maravilla, White Fence, Cuatro Flats, Little Valley, and numerous others.

The power of place cannot be overemphasized. The barrios have provided generations of Mexican Americans with deep memories and lasting impressions. Immigrants who worked on the railroads, in brickyards, inside garment districts, and at hotel and business establishments often had to live in marginal areas near their workplaces. As immigrants continued to be forced into inferior locations and worn-out residences, this workplace and residential linkage became embedded in the minds of the residents, especially the youth. For example, the 38th Street gang is located in the middle of Vernon, near meatpacking factories. Such homes and apartments became part of the stigma associated with poor people, especially among those living in public housing developments (the "projects"). Living in such places—and the associated isolation, rejection, and alienation—often leads individuals to think of themselves as "outsiders." Responses to these challenging circumstances can lead to a continuing spiral of disaffection and inner turmoil.

Living in poverty in such spatially distinctive neighborhoods—the hollows, ravines, "across the tracks"—has not eased the adjustment of Mexican immigrants to American society. In the decades following the U.S. takeover of Texas, California, and the Southwest in the 1840s, Mexicans who found themselves residing in the United States felt unwanted and suffered discrimination. During the past century and a half, large-scale immigration to densely populated areas has created the conditions for major social problems. Throughout this period street children have formed "boy gangs" that, according to numerous commentators, warranted careful observation and perhaps intervention. Even as we move through the twenty-first century, a "street gang subculture" represents a dangerous underside of life in Los Angeles, with the result that violence and drug trafficking have generated problems far beyond the barrios to affect people across the entire Los Angeles region. Children in gang neighborhoods continue to be subjected to the challenges inherent in marginal places that contribute to the lower status fueled by racial and ethnic discrimination.

In contrast to the Mexican American population, the African American population began to develop street gangs during the Depression, and their growth accelerated in the aftermath of World War II with high rates of migration from the U.S. South to South Central Los Angeles. As a result, the problem of ghettos—of poverty and neighborhood deterioration—soon worsened in that section of the city. Children in this overcrowded environment had no place to play safely, as recreational facilities were insufficient. Outlets for youth were few and far between. Furthermore, economic opportunities and avenues for social mobility remained blocked and, in large part, were responsible for the emergence of gang activity and its persistence today.

Yet, most youth living in these situations avoided getting involved in gang activities. For other individuals, casual, episodic, almost reluctant par-

icipation in the gang acts became the norm, while others were continually committed to delinquent or even sociopathic actions.

To understand how gang members spend most of their time in social activities common to most adolescent and youth groups: casual repartee and joking, drinking beer and wine, playing sports, meeting at the local hangout, and catching up with the news of peer groups. The media, police, and public and little about such normal, conventional patterns but focus more on the care little about such activities: the drive-bys, random shootings, and criminal gangs' unacceptable activities by gang observers and authorities are the values (i.e., thinking and behavior). The following cases give some indication of how this works for older, traditional East Los Angeles gangs.

Case #1

Street life, with its crime, drugs, and predators of all stripes and persuasions, necessitates that one acquire protection against dangerous situations and people. One 13-year-old from Cuatro Flats (4th Street Flats barrio) explained this to me in very succinct terms. "I used to come home from Hollenbeck Junior High every day and even though it was only about three or four blocks away, I had to watch my back all the time. The guys from White Fence, King Kobras, Primera (First Street) were always around the area. One time, the King Kobras got me and pushed me around and said they would kick my ass if they saw me again. At school the next day, I told the guys from my neighborhood what had happened and they went over to where the King Kobras hung out on the school yard and told them to leave me alone as I was from their barrio, Cuatro Flats. Soon after I was 'jumped into' [initiated into] Cuatro Flats. Since then I never had to watch my back as it was always covered." Thus, much of the camaraderie and "homeboy" and "homegirl" bonding involves a practical consideration—help when one's life is at stake or potential risks are at hand.

Case #2

After initiation into the gang, young members have to show their allegiance and loyalty. One 14-year-old had just been inducted into VNE (Vario Nuevo Estrada) and was walking around the periphery of the barrio turf, where encounters with outsiders from rival gangs often materialize, and was stopped in his tracks when a car going in the same direction approached the curb and stopped. There were three older "cholos" in the '62 Chevy Malibu, all looking at the youngster in the "mad dog" style of gang members. "¿De dónde eres?" ("Where are you from? What gang?"), yelled one guy from the car. Freezing up right on the spot, the kid bought time by being deliberate. He knew this could be a test since not all the gang members from VNE knew each other, especially the older guys unfamiliar with the younger novitiates. So, he decided to throw caution to the wind and uttered "VNE" with confidence and a proud, defiant look. All the guys in the '62 started laughing and one said, "We were just test-

ing you, but you were scared, huh?" A test of loyalty under fire is expected of a gang member.

Case #3

In addition to fulfilling basic human needs of friendship and emotional support—that is, creating a sense of fictive family—street gangs also aid persons under duress to survive. A 15-year-old from El Hoyo Maravilla had to learn how to act *loco* (crazy) in order to gain the recognition and respect of his fellow gang members. He would go out of his way to show that he wasn't afraid of anything. One time there was a drive-by where the White Fence gang members sprayed bullets at him and two other homeboys standing on the corner of their barrio. They all ducked when the shots were fired, while the other guys stayed put, the "loco" jumped up right away and starting chasing on foot the car that was racing away. Along the way he picked up anything he could find on the ground—rocks, bottles, sticks—and threw it at the car. The car was soon too far away, but his actions left an impression on the two onlookers, who later recited the story to the other members of their gang. Whatever respect he had before was doubled by this act of fearlessness and spontaneity.

These case studies show that young people learn how to navigate their way through the aggressiveness and violence that pervade certain places within their neighborhoods. All youth in these neighborhoods are affected, whether or not they are involved in local gangs. Gang families can be distinguished from nongang families along a number of dimensions (see Thornberry 2001 for the association between family dynamics and delinquency). In the end, it seems that some families are more vulnerable to gang membership. Gang households, for example, are poorer, significantly larger, and more likely to be headed by single females. There are also indications of greater economic stress in the gang families, including a smaller proportion of those households having access to a car, in a region such as Los Angeles where automobiles are often the only reliable means of transportation. Previous research in similar neighborhoods (Moore 1978, 1991; Moore and Vigil 1987; Vigil 1993) has shown differences in family dynamics, variations that account for why some children within a neighborhood undergo street socialization early and become gang members and why others are able to pursue a more conventional lifestyle.

Generally, institutions of social control (families, schools, and law enforcement) have broken down in the communities where gangs are found. Chronic unemployment, lack of adequate employment skills, a high incidence of drug use and sales, and a pervasive street gang presence affect nearly all residents.

One issue to focus on is how the streets generate—through the process of street socialization—a need to seek out the gang in order to survive, especially when families falter and schooling comes up short. These are certainly precursors to street socialization, and reflect the broader "multiple marginality" and poverty that shape Latino, as well as other ethnic minority, neighbor-

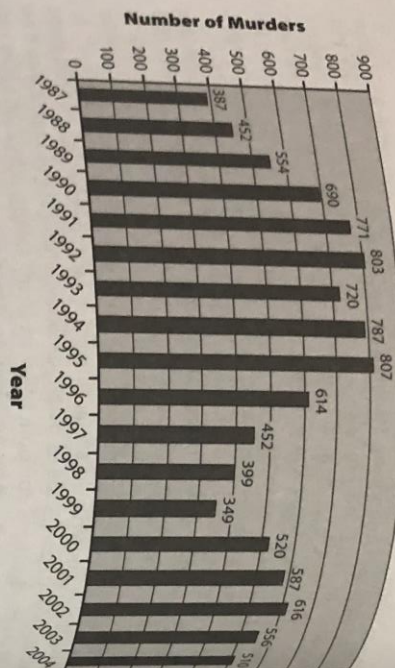
hoods. Human developmental trajectories are thwarted under such situations and conditions. Group/gang activities are sought for approval and praise. Participation in gang life provides a sense of worthiness not found anywhere else. All of this occurs at a time in young people's lives when they are expending high energy and enjoying practicing new skills to function in the streets. Guidance and supervision in other outlets for these children in highly stressed families and overburdened schools are practically nonexistent.

It is, as previously noted, primarily in the most stressed households that children find themselves bereft of supervision and thus seek attention and adventure in the streets. Poor immigrant families and their second-generation offspring are more likely than affluent families to experience such adaptation problems. When immigrant parents adjust to a new place and source of livelihood, their children also are acculturating, and for many it is a problematic experience. In gang-ridden neighborhoods, street gangs compete with other sources of identity formation, often replacing family, school, and other conventional influences. Among Mexican Americans, gang members are often called *cholos* from the Spanish word *solo* (alone, abandoned)—as a reflection of their marginal identity.

Among members of the African American community of Los Angeles, the situation was no better than it was among Mexican Americans. During the 1980s, the unemployment rate for African American youth was a staggering 45 percent. The dramatic rise of African American gangs between 1978 and 1982 was most evident in Los Angeles, Compton, and Inglewood and was due in part to deindustrialization, which led to some 70,000 layoffs during this period. As Davis (1992:88) writes, "This deterioration in the labor-market position of young Black men is a major reason why the counter-economy of drug dealing and youth crime has burgeoned." Another reason has been the growing poverty in Los Angeles County. During the 1980s, 40 percent of African American children lived below or just above the poverty line.

For many young persons, joining a gang is the beginning of a life of aggression and violence. It is a violent lifestyle: violence against others in the form of rampant gang conflicts and killings, and against oneself through the abuse of drugs and other chemical substances. These represent the destructive, debilitating habits that separate gangs from other adolescent peer networks. Such public and private destructive acts, including *locura*, reflect the "crazy" orientation that is a feature of Chicano gang members' behavior style. For some, this street style is an available *persona* to use when warranted, while for a smaller number it becomes an expression of their more unthinking violent personalities.

The violence brought about by youth gangs is not insignificant. An examination of gang-related homicides in Los Angeles County over two decades confirms the long-term impact of gang violence on their communities. Gang-related killings reached all-time highs during the 1990s, when Latino immigration into Southern California was peaking (see the figure on the following page).



Source: Adapted from data provided by Sgt. Wes McBride, retired, Los Angeles Sheriff Department.

Gang-Related Homicides

Such violence represents a form of "storm and stress" during adolescence, when daring, excitement, courage, and adventure are valued by peers. Indeed, doing "gang" work earns respect and recognition as a dependable gang member with *huerros* (balls). Notwithstanding their attempts to conform to such expectations, however, most youth remain conscious of, and concerned with, the detrimental effects of such behavior. Oftentimes, the negative results of this behavior accelerate the "maturing out" process, which hastens one's exit from a gang. These human sentiments show, as Edgerton (1978:444) has noted in his study of deviance generally, that such individual and group behavior must be viewed not as that of "freaks in a side show," but rather as "principal performers in the everyday dramas of life."

Research in communities where gangs maintain a significant presence suggests that such "neighborhoods are female-based in the home and youth-dominated on the streets" (Cartwright, Tomson, and Schwartz 1975:65). In such spaces, the behavioral adaptation of many young males becomes focused on the streets around them, where they learn very quickly that one must become or act "like a man" in order to survive in the street-gang world. Enculturation to street values and customs proceeds apace in their social interactions and networks. Fear is omnipresent in street life, especially if one is unprotected. Being and acting "tough" has become a focal street value and a salient aspect of gang members' behavior, as Miller (1958) discovered in studying East Coast youth. A youth's sense of self is affected by his concern for being tough, especially insofar as outsiders label him as such, and how he responds.

The more isolated and poverty stricken a barrio, the more its "boundedness" results in its children having severe problems that lead to prolonged street-gang socialization. These spatial features of communities generate the roughest, most active, and most violent of the street gangs. Barrio youth, whether part of a gang or not, know that their self-identities are shaped by the boundedness of barrio life; they recognize that both spatial and social distance separate them from their more affluent neighbors. This ecological distinctiveness affects their quality of life in terms of job opportunities, education, and the like. Poverty, discrimination, and group choice helped create Mexican barrios, but the effects of urbanization—along with poor city planning and uncaring authorities—have made the barrios an ecologically inferior place for raising a family.

Efforts during the 1970s to ameliorate difficult community conditions led to the creation of such programs as the Job Corps, the Neighborhood Youth Corps, and the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). The dismantling of these programs by Ronald Reagan (first as governor, then as president) left Latino and African American youth with nowhere to turn. For gang members, especially, there were virtually no legitimate job opportunities in or near their home communities. As one youth counselor commented, "You could pull 80 percent of gang members, seventeen years old or younger, out of gangs, if you had jobs, job training and social alternatives" (Davis 1992:101).

Schools also have long been a serious problem for impoverished ethnic minority communities in the Los Angeles area. California now ranks 42nd nationwide in per capita spending on students, and the Los Angeles Unified School District (the nation's second largest district, with over 700,000 students) has a dropout rate of 30 to 59 percent in inner-city neighborhoods. In 1995, the California state budget for 150,000 prisoners stood at \$4 billion, the same amount as was budgeted for all of the children enrolled in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Further, there is de facto racial segregation and tracking of students based on biased test scores, with the result that African American males from South Central Los Angeles are three times more likely to end up in prison than at a University of California campus.

If ethnic minority students manage to graduate under such challenging conditions, they find few opportunities open to them after high school. Because good jobs are practically nonexistent, "Young street people enlist in the . . . youth employment program operated by the cocaine cartels" (Davis 1992:257). Connecting, engaging, involving, and grounding youth in a socially acceptable belief system is nearly impossible if social control is broken or absent. Poverty situations and conditions regularly undermine social control foundations, especially those taught in the home and at school. In this void it is difficult to shape conformity to a dominant society that otherwise shows little interest in assisting large numbers of children living in marginalized conditions. Thus, the alternative street socialization process is strongly influ-

enced by the breakdown of family life and the tendency to drop out of school. From a structural perspective, the streets become a replacement for the family. Involvement with street gangs starts in the elementary school years, typically between the ages of seven and nine years, and continues beyond the (often aborted) high school years into young adulthood.

Conclusion: Toward the Future

The place and status of populations begins the process of gang formation and development of gang members. If a child grows up in a neighborhood of gangs and drug problems, his or her life path necessarily must contend with joining or avoiding it. When that neighborhood has a high percentage of poor people, and one's family is among the poorest, one's avenues for survival and achievement become skewed and different. To reiterate, the process of multiple marginalization leads to a series of other destructive changes that undermine adaptation of immigrants and disrupts social control. In turn, these breakdowns lead to street socialization and the emergence of a gang subculture and enough individuals with a street identity to constitute a gang. In the long view, to better assess these dynamics and developments, a cross-cultural (and cross-national) investigation across groups (and nations) along similar dimensions, specifically social control institutions, will provide more insights and a deeper understanding of the contemporary (and global) gang problem (Vigil 2002).

Law enforcement and suppression tactics, already overtaxed as a solution to a problem they did not start, are having only moderate and uneven success in addressing the gang problem. It does not make any difference how many jails we build or how many cells are set aside for each new gang cohort; the current strategy has failed. It has failed because it is *not* based on the facts of human development or common sense. We need to be honest in recognizing this reality, and be willing to take bold and courageous steps in charting a new course. A focus on the roots, not the buds, of the problem will generate logical solutions and aim not merely to stem the worst violence but to begin the long hard march to regain social control in urban areas. While the stick of punishment will have its role, emphasis will shift to introducing carrots—rewards—early in a person's life to balance the present formula to include prevention and intervention.

Such a balanced approach is sensible and workable and reflects human developmental principles. Programs step in and phase out, each one a separate, age-specific entity, but each involves working with the same common coordinated goal of winning the hearts and minds of youth. Would matters turn out differently for gang members if their family lives were more structured and if their parents provided more direction and guidance? How can we address the absence of parenting and the early voids in the development of

connections that are so necessary for leading children to positive engagements, involvements, and beliefs? We must not forget that families and other household members do not exist in a vacuum.

Instead of a vacuum, a long history of racism and poverty has generated lingering effects throughout urban areas, including where people live and what types of jobs are available to them. This in turn is related to how family life is structured so that young people can participate effectively in society. Moreover, to the extent that poor people often receive short shrift from all types of authorities, especially law enforcement officials, it is hardly surprising that family life has been negatively affected and that a sentiment of distrust and fear of the police persists among Latinos and Blacks. Any new program that can present the police in a favorable light will be a "win-win" situation because it not only will be creating a new future but also will help to wipe out the memories of the past.

What is needed today to address gang problems and related social problems is a balance of prevention, intervention, and law enforcement—the carrots and sticks that enable parents to help their children conform to society's standards of behavior. We must begin to think of our society's children, particularly those who are less fortunate, as our responsibility to care for at an early age. Detractors will claim that this strategy is unworkable, impractical, and—if it were implemented—just another expensive form of welfare. Failing to realize that the present criminal justice apparatus is also a form of welfare—that we might label "criminal justice welfare"—these naysayers forget that hundreds of billions of dollars are spent every year to warehouse hundreds of thousands of largely poor, ethnic minority peoples and to support the middle-class bureaucrats who handle their cases, even though many studies (cf. Sherman et al. 2002; Walker et al. 1996) have shown that the benefits of early intervention and prevention tactics, especially through schools and community organizing efforts, would be far less expensive than the current failed strategy.

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