# Youth Gangs in American Society

Third Edition

RANDALL G. SHELDEN
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

SHARON K. TRACY
Georgia Southern University

WILLIAM B. BROWN
Western Oregon University

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# 2

# What Do Gangs and Gang Members Look Like?

## A WORD OF CAUTION

It is uncertain whether an accurate profile of the typical gang and typical gang member can be presented. As was noted in the first chapter, there is little consensus among professionals of what a gang is and how a gang member is identified. Therefore, the present chapter should be read with this caveat in mind. Also, this chapter should *not* be interpreted as a tool to identify who is or who is not a gang member or what group is or is not a gang. Unfortunately, any such typology presented is going to be used by some (e.g., law enforcement) merely to control or even eliminate the groups and individuals so categorized. We do not want to contribute to this kind of control.

## AN OVERVIEW OF GANG STRUCTURES

It is important to emphasize that there is not only a variety of *gangs* but also a variety of gang *members*. Gangs and gang members come in many forms and can be differentiated by several criteria, including age, race, or ethnicity (all Hispanic or all African-American, Asian, or mixed), gender composition (e.g., all male, all female, or mixed), setting (e.g., street, prison, or motorcycle), type of activity (e.g., social, delinquent/criminal, or violent), purpose of the gang activity (e.g., defensive versus aggressive, turf defense), degree of criminality (e.g., minor or serious), level of organization (e.g., simple or corporate, vertical or horizontal), and group function (e.g., instrumental or cultural) (Spergel, 1990:60).

Most common gangs are rather loosely structured groups who "come together for periods of weeks, months, or as long as a year, but then disintegrate" (Klein and Maxson, 1989:209–210). One of the most common types is the traditional, vertical, or area, gang. Characterized by a common territory, these gangs are **age-graded,** typically all male, often with female auxiliary groups, and mostly ethnic minorities (usually African-American and Hispanic but often Asian). Another variation is the horizontally organized groups. These usually include divisions that cut across different neighborhoods and include youths in different age brackets. Many have spread across cities, states, and even countries. Often they are referred to as supergangs and nations. Examples of these horizontal alliances include the Crips and Bloods (who started in Los Angeles) and the People and Folk (starting in Illinois). It should be emphasized that these large groupings often consist of gangs with very little in common with one another other than their name. To a gang member, what is most important is the particular set or neighborhood of origin. As a gang member told Bing, "See, 'Crip' doesn't mean nothin' to a membership. Like 'I'm a Crip, you're a Crip—so what? What set are you from? What neighborhood are you from? What street do you live on? I may live on Sixty-ninth, he may live on Seventieth'" (Bing, 1991:244).

An example of the vertical type of gang organization could be found in New York City in the early 1960s. The age groupings there included Tots (11 to 13 years of age), Juniors (13 to 15 years of age), Tims (15 to 17 years of age), and Seniors (17 and older). But these age groupings are not consistently the same from one point in time to another, as evidenced in New York City. For example, by the 1970s the most common groupings included the Baby Spades (9 to 12 years of age), the Young Spades (12 to 15 years of age), and the Black Spades (16 to 30 years of age). In Philadelphia the following age groupings were recently identified: Bottom-Level Midgets (12 to 14 years), Middle-Level Young Boys (14 to 17 years), and Upper-Level Old Heads (18 to 23 years). Members of these gangs usually can be divided into such categories as hard-core, fringe, cliques, and wannabes, with the latter grouping reserved for the very young, usually 12 or younger (Spergel, 1990:55–56).

Regarding **gang leadership,** gangs "present a shifting, elusive target, permeable and elastic, and thus inherently resistant to outside intervention. It presents not a cohesive force but, rather, a sponge-like resilience" (Klein and Maxson, 1989:211). Gang leadership tends to shift over time "with changes in age, gang activity levels, and availability of members (owing to marriage, work, or incarceration, for example)" (Klein, 1995:62). The stereotype of the gang leader is someone who is tough, with a long criminal history, and who has strong influence over the members. To the contrary, the typical leader does not maintain influence over a long period of time. Leadership tends to be very situational, and contrary to the belief that to eliminate the gang all you need to do is "cut off the head" and the rest will die off, someone else will generally take his place. This is because gang leadership is, as with most groups, a function of the group rather than individuals (Klein, 1995:63). In other words, gang leadership fluctuates. It is normally undertaken by youths who are the

most stable members, who possess good verbal skills, who are cool under pressure, and who are generally looked up to by other members. But, like life in general, it constantly changes.

One of the most important distinguishing features of gangs continues to be that of territory, or **turf.** However, this must be interpreted with caution, for there have been many changes in recent years (even since the first edition of this book). Klein's most recent research notes that most cities that he surveyed reported the existence of "single or autonomous gangs." These are gangs that occupy smaller territories than was once the pattern, such as single blocks, a school, a "project," and so on. They tend to have shorter histories and fewer ties to traditional neighborhoods, or barrios, than the more traditional gangs. Many of the more recent gangs are what Klein describes as "geographically connected gangs." These are more like branches of the same gang but located in a neighboring territory or totally separate areas and sharing an affiliation but not the residence (Klein, 1995:102). No doubt part of the declining importance of turf is because of the growing sophistication of some gangs and their greater involvement in criminal activities (which means that the actual physical location becomes less important) and the increasing use of the automobile.

Among the more traditional gangs (those who have been in existence for the longest time) the notion of turf or neighborhood remains of critical importance. In many areas, especially in Los Angeles, the term *gang* is often synonymous with *barrio* (sometimes spelled *varrio*) or *neighborhood* (Moore, 1978, 1991). The notion of turf centers around two important ideas—identification and control—with control being the most important. At least three types of turf rights can be noted. The first is that of basic ownership rights, in which a gang "owns" a particular area and attempts to control practically everything that occurs there. The second is occupancy rights, which means merely that different gangs share an area or tolerate one another's use. The third is enterprise monopoly, in which a certain gang is said to have control of certain criminal activities occurring within a specified area (Spergel, 1990:71–72). It should be noted that turf is less important to gangs now, with the exception of Hispanic gangs, who still define themselves as protectors of their own neighborhoods.

Age seems to be one of the most important characteristics of gangs because the clique is one of the basic building blocks of gangs. "Gangs are loosely organized into small age/friendship cohorts or cliques. These groupings are called 'klikas' in cholo gangs and 'sets' in African-American gangs, where they are somewhat less rigidly age-bound" (Reiner, 1992:38–39).

## ILLUSTRATIONS OF GANG TYPOLOGIES

When it comes to categorizing gangs, two methods are generally used: types of *gangs* and types of gang *members*. The distinction is important because not only are there a variety of gangs in existence (more than a dozen specific "gang types" have been identified) but there are about an equal variety of gang members. This idea is consistent with a point made in the first chapter, namely, that

there are a variety of adolescent groups existing at any one time. In fact, the adolescent subculture itself is famous for the infinite variety of groupings.[1] In the next two sections we will review some of the more common typologies, starting with gang typologies and ending with gang member typologies.

It should be noted at the outset that the following typologies should be considered as *ideal types,* to use Max Weber's famous concept.[2] Ideal types are used frequently by researchers in all fields of study to help make sense and organize a vast array of research findings. Ideal types do not necessarily reflect reality in that there are no pure types of anything (e.g., no person is a pure authoritarian personality type, and there is no such thing as pure capitalism or democracy) since human life and nature itself can fit perfectly into any types. These ideal types merely serve as ways to clarify one's investigation. What normally happens is that the researcher suggests that a phenomenon tends to fit into one or another type more often than not. For example, using democracy as an ideal type, a researcher can compare different political systems in terms of the extent to which they are democratic, realizing that there will be no perfect democracy. Or, to use gangs as an example, there may not be a pure hard-core gang member or a pure "predatory" gang, but a particular individual may come close to the pure type, of hard-core but also have certain characteristics that could place him into the category of peripheral member. Likewise with a predatory gang in that a gang may have some characteristics of this type of gang and yet have some characteristics of a territorial gang as well, but it is more predatory than "territorial."

## Types of Gangs[3]

Types of gangs can be based on many different criteria. The most commonly used criteria seem to be certain behavioral characteristics, especially deviant and/or criminal behavior but also certain nondeviant or traditional group behaviors. Research in six different cities by three different researchers uncovered the following major types of gangs.

1. *Hedonistic/social* gangs—With only moderate drug use and offending, these gangs are involved mainly in using drugs (getting high) and having a good time, with little involvement in crime, especially violent crime.
2. *Party* gangs—A group with relatively high use and sales of drugs, but with only one major form of delinquency (vandalism).
3. *Instrumental* gangs—Those whose main criminal activity is that of committing property crimes (most members use drugs and alcohol but seldom engage in the selling of drugs).
4. *Predatory* gangs—Those heavily involved in serious crimes (e.g., robberies and muggings) and seriously involved in the abuse of addictive drugs such as crack cocaine; some with much lower involvement in drug use and drug sales than the party gang; some may engage in the selling of drugs, although not in any organized fashion.
5. *Scavenger* gangs—Loosely organized groups of youths who are described as "urban survivors," preying on the weak in the inner cities, engaging in

rather petty crimes but sometimes violence, often just for fun. The members have no greater bond than their impulsiveness and the need to belong. They have no goals and are low achievers, often illiterate, with poor school performance.

6. *Serious delinquent* gangs—With heavy involvement in both serious and minor crimes, but with much lower involvement in drug use and drug sales than the party gang.
7. *Territorial* gangs—Those gangs associated with a specific area or *turf* and who, as a result, get involved in conflicts with other gangs over their respective turfs.
8. *Organized/corporate* gangs—Heavy involvement in all kinds of crime and heavy use and sales of drugs; they may resemble major corporations, with separate divisions handling sales, marketing, discipline, and so on. Discipline is strict, and promotion is based on merit.
9. *Drug* gangs—These gangs are smaller than other gangs, much more cohesive, focused on the drug business, and have strong centralized leadership, with market-defined roles.[4]

Many prefer to describe most of the above gangs (except for drug gangs) by using the term *street gang* (Klein, 1995:132). This is a rather all-inclusive term that refers to most of the above typologies.

## Types of Gang Members

The most common method of distinguishing among different gang members is to base it on the degree of attachment to, and involvement in, the gang. It might be useful to think of a continuum from complete involvement and attachment to very little attachment and involvement. To use an analogy, think of attachment to and involvement in a local church. At one extreme are those who rarely attend church services or any church-related activity, except perhaps for weddings, Easter Sunday, or Christmas Eve services. Otherwise you may seldom see them at church. Next on the continuum are those who attend Sunday services perhaps once a month on the average and on occasion will participate in a church-related activity (a picnic, a lecture, or a play sponsored by the church). Then there may be another type who attends church services almost every Sunday but rarely participates in church-related activities. Closer to the other end of the continuum are those who attend church every Sunday and get involved in many church-related activities during the course of the year and who have several friends that are also similarly involved in the church (but they have many friends not involved in the church). At the other extreme are those who not only attend every Sunday but also may serve as elected officials of the church (may even teach Sunday school) and participate in church-related activities almost on a daily basis. However, in addition to the above, this person literally has no friends who are not connected with the church in some way. In short, the church is, for all practical purposes, their life. They have no identity apart from their roles within the church.

Gang members may be similarly classified. The following gang member types have been discovered by researchers:[5]

1. *Regulars/hard-core*—Those who are strongly attached to the gang, participate regularly, and have few interests outside of the gang (in other words, the gang is practically their whole life). Vigil describes these individuals as having "had a more problematic early life. They became street oriented earlier. They became gang members sooner, and they participated in the destructive patterns over a longer period of time." These individuals also lacked a consistent male adult in their lives, which made the streets even more attractive as they began to emulate other gang members. For these persons, getting into the gang was seen as a rite of passage. They also began experimenting with drugs and engaging in street fighting at a much earlier age than other kinds of members (Vigil, 1988:66, 81–85). The *hard-core,* or simply *core,* members of the gang tend to be a smaller number of members who are the most influential and active members of a particular gang. This is the inner clique who "interact frequently and relate easily to each other." They may be "those few who need and thrive on the totality of the gang's activity." These individuals "may make key decisions, set standards, and provide support and sanction for the action of the leaders. They are the key recruiters" (Spergel, 1990:64–65). The hard-core are "the most gang-bound in terms of lifestyle. For these young men, life outside pretty much ceases to exist. They have few friends outside the gang and recognize no authority beyond its existence" (Reiner, 1992:42).
2. *Peripheral* members (also known as *associates*)—These individuals have a strong attachment to the gang but participate less often than the regulars because they have other interests outside the gang. This person is "just as intense as the regulars once he is a member of a gang, but his level of commitment is mediated less by a problematic early life and more by a life-turning event (for example, incarceration), which causes him to contemplate pursuing another lifestyle" (Vigil, 1988:66). The *associates* are sometimes called *fringe* members. They may belong to the gang but are not considered part of the hard-core group. Using the fraternity analogy, these may be like those students who only recently completed "hell week" and were formally initiated into the fraternity.
3. *Temporary* members—These are only marginally committed, join the gang at a later age than the regulars and peripherals, and remain in the gang only a short period of time. This individual "is neither as intense nor as committed as the others and primarily associates with the gang during a certain phase of his development" (Vigil, 1988:66).
4. *Situational* members—These are very marginally attached and join the gang only for certain activities (avoiding the more violent activities whenever possible).
5. *At risk*—These are not really gang members but are *pre-gang* youths who do not as yet belong to a gang but have shown some interest. They live in neighborhoods where gangs exist. They often fantasize about being

members and also might have friends or relatives who belong to the gang and whom they admire. Often they begin experimenting with certain gang attire and/or language. This may begin as early as the second grade (Reiner, 1992:40–44).

6. *Wannabe*—This is a term gangs themselves often use to describe "recruits," who are usually in their preteen years and know and admire gang members. They are perhaps one notch above the "at risk" youths in terms of commitment and involvement. They have already begun to emulate gang members in terms of dress, gang values, and so on. Such young people are mentally ready to join a gang and perhaps just need an invitation or opportunity to prove themselves in some way. They may be called *Peewees* or *Baby Homies*. An analogy may be made to freshmen college students aspiring to join fraternities. One researcher called this type an *emulator* (Taylor, 1990).
7. *Veteranos/O.G.s*—This group usually consists of men in their 20s or 30s (or even much older) who still participate in gang activities (sometimes referred to as *gang banging*). There are two major subtypes within this category. *Veteranos* have traditionally been regarded as a type of elder statesmen who are somewhat retired but still command respect. The title is more honorable within Chicano gangs than African-American gangs. O.G.s are *original gangsters* and are those referred to in African-American gangs as men who have earned respect through a combination of longevity and achievement. Often they are expected to teach younger members the ways of the gang and/or to straighten out younger members causing trouble within the gang. Sometimes they are literally the founding member or members of the gang.
8. *Auxiliary*—These are members who hold limited responsibility within a gang. This is a very common role for female members. These individuals do not participate in all gang activities. A related type is the *adjunct* member, who is a permanent part-time member by choice, often because of holding down a regular job (Taylor, 1990).

Some gangs have formed unions in order to achieve certain uniform objectives (especially self-protection) and have thus formed so-called supergangs. Still others have simply been described as gang nations or gang sets. Examples of the latter often include the famous (or infamous) Bloods and Crips that began in the Los Angeles area. However, the most popular grouping of gangs into gang nations or supergangs are known as *People* and *Folks*, originating in Chicago in the 1970s.

## THE SUPERGANGS OF CHICAGO: PEOPLE AND FOLKS

There are currently about included 110 active street gangs, with many factions in Chicago, with from 30,000 to 50,000 hard-core members (2003, a "Partial List of Gangs in the Chicagoland Area"). Four of the most active and largest gangs account for about 19,000 members, and they are alleged to be responsible for about

two-thirds of all "gang-motivated crimes" and for about half of Chicago's "gang-motivated homicides" (Howell, 1998:4; see also Block Christakos, Jacob, and Przybylski, 1996; Block and Block, 1993; Chicago Crime Commission, 1995). These gangs "show varying degrees of internal structure ranging from loosely knit groups cohered by one or two focal personalities to well developed, highly structured hierarchies of authority with a leader who oversees several layers of subordinates in a definite chain of command" (Bobrowski, 1988:30). Until the late 1970s there were several alliances, mostly informal, and many rivalries among the gangs of Chicago. However, a turning point came when informal alliances and rivalries came together to form two major supergangs (or nations), known as **People** and **Folks,** at the end of the decade (Bobrowski, 1988:30; Hagedorn, 1998:67).

This formation began within the Illinois prison system when the mostly white Simon City Royals agreed to provide drugs to inmates who belonged to the Black Disciples in exchange for protection; this group came to be called Folks (represented in graffiti by a six-pointed star). Shortly thereafter, and in response to this alliance, the Latin Kings aligned themselves with the Vice Lords and the El Rukns and became known as the People (represented by a five-pointed star).

Presently there are more than 30 Chicago gangs that identify themselves as Folks, including Spanish Cobras, Latin Disciples, Imperial Gangsters, Latin Lovers, Braziers, Insane Popes, and Simon City Royals. There are at least as many gangs identified as People, including Latin Kings, Vice Lords, Future Stones, Gay Lords, Latin Lords, Bishops, and War Lords. Also, there are numerous factions within each major supergang (the Latin Kings have more than 13 different factions, and the Black Disciples and Vice Lords reportedly have about 20), while an estimated 19 gangs are independent (Bobrowski, 1988:34). In terms of the actual number of gang members, these numbers are almost equally divided between People and Folks. In terms of racial distinctions, about 70 percent of Folks are Hispanics, while about 19 percent are African-American, and 10 percent are white. Among the People gangs, around 56 percent are Hispanic, 22 percent are African-American, and 19 percent are white.[6]

These two nations have apparently spread into different parts of the country. One report noted that the Folks nation has a chapter in the city of Atlanta. They are apparently well organized, as they even provide a somewhat formal application for membership that asks potential members about their qualifications, asking them, among other questions, "What can you do for our organization that we can't do for ourselves?" According to the Atlanta police, out of a total of approximately 1,500 gang members, 1,000 are members of the Folks. The police also report that numerous gangs are in the Atlanta area vying for territory. A police official is quoted as saying that "the South is wide open. It's brand new virgin territory. It's like taking Coca Cola to Russia, like a great new market. There's more accessibility and it's easier to recruit" (Speir, 1994:7–9).

## Hybrid Gangs

A recent concept has been introduced that may explain some newer type of gang formation. Known as **hybrid gangs,** these groups tend to have the following nontraditional features (Starbuck et al., 2001): 1) they may or may not

have an allegiance to a traditional gang color. In fact, much of the hybrid gang graffiti in the United States is a composite of multiple gangs with conflicting symbols. For example, Crip gang graffiti painted in red (the color used by the rival Blood gang) would be unheard of in California but has occurred elsewhere in the hybrid gang culture; 2) the gangs may adopt the symbols of large gangs in more than one city. For example, a locally based gang named after the Los Angeles Bloods may also use symbols from the Chicago People Nation, such as five-pointed stars and downward-pointed pitchforks; 3) gang members may change their affiliation from one gang to another; 4) it is not uncommon for a gang member to claim multiple affiliations, sometimes involving rival gangs. For example, in Kansas City, Missouri, police may encounter an admitted Blood gang member who is also known in the St. Louis, Missouri, area as a member of the Black Gangster Disciples gang; 5) existing gangs may change their names or suddenly merge with other gangs to form new ones; 6) although many gangs continue to be based on race/ethnicity, many of them are increasingly diverse in both race/ethnicity and gender. Seemingly strange associations may form, such as between skinheads, whose members frequently espouse racist rhetoric, and Crips, whose members are predominantly African-American; 7) gang members who relocate from California to the Midwest may align themselves with a local gang that has no ties to their original gang; 8) some members of rival gangs from Chicago or Los Angeles frequently cooperate in criminal activity in other parts of the country.

Youth in these sorts of gangs often "cut and paste" bits of Hollywood's media images and big-city gang lore into new local versions of nationally known gangs with which they may claim affiliation. Other hybrids are homegrown and consider themselves to be distinct entities with no alliance to groups such as the Bloods/Crips or Folks/People. Because these independent gangs can be the most difficult to classify, they frequently pose the biggest problems for local law enforcement" (Starbuck et al., 2001:5).

## ETHNIC AND RACIAL TYPOLOGIES OF GANGS

Another common method of characterizing gangs is by ethnicity or race. The most utilized is the distinction between African-American, Chicano/Hispanic, and Asian gangs. This section explores some of the differences among these types of gangs. It should be noted at the outset that there may be much more ethnic heterogeneity today than in the past, although for the most part ethnic homogeneity is still the norm (Klein, 1995:106). In some cities there are a few gangs that are ethnically mixed; usually this is white plus Hispanic.

### Chicano Gangs

Chicano gangs in Southern California have perhaps the longest history of any gang in America; they have been in existence for over 50 years. It has recently been estimated that there are more than 500 Chicano gangs in Los Angeles

County, constituting about half of all gangs in this area. They appear to be more geographically distributed throughout the region than other gangs, in all likelihood because of so much geographic mobility during the past several decades throughout Southern California. They are found predominantly in the San Fernando Valley, San Gabriel Valley, Long Beach (and other beach communities) and in South Central Los Angeles (http://www.streetgangs.com/hispanic/htm).

Family and community ties are most apparent among these gangs, which may often be traced back several generations. The individual gang member is expected to assist other gang members in times of need and to uphold the neighborhood gang name. Those who join these gangs are among the most marginal youths within this area. There are economic, social, cultural, psychological, and ecological stressors in the barrios. Most barrio residents suffer from at least one of these, but those who suffer from more than one of these stressors constitute those who are victims of *multiple marginality,* and these are the most likely to become Chicano gang members (Vigil, 1988).

Most of these gangs do not identify with specific colors the way Bloods and Crips do. However, some colors favored include black, white, browns, and tans (Dickie pants are favored). Pendleton shirts are also favorite attire (Atlanta Gang Conference, 1992). Some use red bandannas, which stand for Northern California Hispanic gang allegiance, signified by the notation *Norte 14* (from the California prison subculture); others wear a blue bandanna, which stands for Southern California Hispanic gang allegiance, signified by the notation *Sur 13* (from the California prison subculture).

Several other differences have been noted. Unlike the gangs Thrasher studied in the 1920s, Chicano gangs (particularly in Los Angeles) are not a transitory phenomenon, because they are based in neighborhoods where Chicanos have lived for several generations. These gangs are Mexican-Americans, meaning that they have not assimilated into mainstream American society as did the Europeans. Also, some Chicano gang members remain affiliated with their gang well into middle age (Moore, Vigil, and Garcia, 1983:183).

Chicano gangs can be divided into two distinctive categories: institutionalized and noninstitutionalized. Two of the more important institutionalized extensions of membership are intertwined with the very nature of the Chicano traditions of kinship and alliance. The first is self-explanatory; the second occurs when others come to the rescue or exhibit loyalty and an interest in friendship with gang members. Other categories include an expansion of boundaries (absorbing small nearby barrios) and the formation of branches (occurring when gang members move into new neighborhoods). Noninstitutionalized categories include family motives for moving out of the barrio, ecological displacement (making way for public improvements), and factional struggles within a particular group or klika/clique (Moore, Vigil, and Garcia, 1983:193).

Moore's study, which concentrated on three major Chicano gangs in the Los Angeles area, reaffirms some of these findings and reinforces some traditional sociological theories, especially those of Thrasher. She observes that "the age-graded gang is one among many barrio structures in which boys play

a role; it may be the only structure in which they play a reasonably autonomous role" (Moore, 1978:52). She also notes that the Chicano subculture is more than just machismo, as there is a sense of belongingness, a feeling of family. "The isolated individual is a rarity in the barrios. . . . It is no accident that gang members refer to each other as homeboys. Even in adulthood, when two strangers discover that they are homies they open up to each other as if they were, in fact, members of the same family" (Moore, 1978:53).

Two of the oldest gangs in East Los Angeles are White Fence and El Hoyo Maravilla. As described by Moore, the White Fence gang began during the 1930s as a sports group for young men and was associated with a local church. The younger brothers and cousins of these boys started the gang after most of the original group got drafted into World War II. By the time they began (1944), there were already several established gangs in the area. White Fence was considered more violent than other gangs, probably because they challenged older boys from other gangs (such as the veteranos from El Hoyo) (Moore, 1993:25–34; see also Moore, 1991).

In the Maravilla neighborhood there were several gangs, mostly named after streets (Arizona Maravilla, Kern Maravilla, Ford Maravilla, and others). The first clique of El Hoyo was actively involved in sports and often competed with White Fence neighborhood kids. The early El Hoyo gang was more like a modern gang than the original White Fence group. These were the zootsuiters, or pachucos, and their neighborhood was one that was invaded by white servicemen during the Zoot Suit riots in 1943. As in the original White Fence group, the war separated them and left many younger kids to carry on the tradition (Moore, 1991:27).

By the late 1940s the gangs became permanent fixtures, more or less institutionalized agents of socialization in the form of peer groups. An age-graded structure developed as the older members matured and broke with the gang and younger kids formed their own cliques. For example, the White Fence Monsters, who were formed in 1946, were followed by a gang called the Cherries in 1947, who in turn were followed by the Tinies in 1949. Later cliques went by such names as the Santos, Locos (and the girls' branch of Las Locas), Jokers, and Cyclones. The veteranos in El Hoyo Maravilla were formed in 1933 and were followed by the Cherries, Jive Hounds, Lil Cherries, Cutdowns, Midgets, and Lil Spiders and Winitos (Moore, 1991:31). These cliques and their respective formation dates are denoted in Figure 2.1.

## Asian Gangs

In the United States there are several varieties of gangs of Asian descent. Among the most common Asian gangs are Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodians (including Mien, Hmong, and Eurasian), Pacific Islanders (most notably the Filipinos, but also Samoan, Tongan, Fijian, Guamanian, and Hawaiian), Haitian, Cuban, Jamaican, Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran. There are probably some other examples, but these are those cited most often (Klein, 1995:106–109). (Space does not permit a complete discussion of each

| Hoyo Maravilla | Dates |
|---|---|
| "Originals" | 1935–1945 |
| "Cherries | 1939–1950 |
| Vamps[a] (girls) | ? |
| Jive Hounds | 1943–1953 |
| Lil Cherries | 1945–1954 |
| *Cutdowns | 1946–1956 |
| *Jr. Vamps (girls) | |
| *[Big] Midgets | 1950–1955 |
| Lil Cutdowns | 1951–1969 |
| Las Cutdowns (girls) | |
| Penguins | 1954–1960 |
| Lil Midgets | 1958–1965 |
| *Las Monas (girls)[b] | |
| Dukes | 1958–1966 |
| Tinies | 1958–1963 |
| Santos | 1960–1963 |
| Peewees | 1961–? |
| *Locos | 1964–1968 |
| *Las Locas (girls) | |
| *Chicos | 1967–? |
| *Las Chicas (girls) | |
| Ganzos | 1969–? |
| *Las Ganzas (girls) | |
| Jokers | 1970–? |
| Cyclones | 1973–? |
| Las Cyclonas (girls) | |

| White Fence | Dates |
|---|---|
| *"Originals" | 1944–1952 |
| *Honeydrippers (girls) | |
| *Monsters | 1946–1954 |
| *Lil White Fence (girls) | |
| Cherries | 1947–1960 |
| WF Cherries (girls) | |
| Tinies | 1949–1961 |
| Spiders | 1953–1960 |
| Chonas (girls) | |
| Midgets | 1957–1966 |
| Peewees | 1960–? |
| Los Termites | 1964–1970 |
| Lil Cherries | 1964–? |
| *Monstros | 1968–? |
| *Monstras (girls) | 1970 |
| *Lil Termites | 1972–1981 |
| *Lil Termites (girls) | |
| Locos | 1973–1981 |
| Lil Locas (girls) | |
| Lil Spiders | 1974–1981 |
| Winitos | 1974–1976 |

*Indicates cliques chosen for sampling.

[a]Most of the Vamps lived in El Hoyo Maravilla, which counts them as one of their cliques, even though they were not formally attached either to the neighborhood or to any boys' clique.

[b]Las Monas was an independent girls clique, contemporaneous with but not an auxiliary of the Lil Midgets, the Dukes, and the Tinies. At the outset of our study we believed that it was attached to the [Big] Midgets. See Appendix for details.

**FIGURE 2.1** Names and Beginning and Ending Dates for Gang Cliques in East Los Angeles.

*Source:* Moore, 1991:28.

and every one of these varieties. We will concentrate on the most common: Chinese, Vietnamese, and Filipino.) Asians immigrating into the United States enter gang life and often pursue the same kind of activities that they pursued in their native countries. In general, the crimes they commit are much more often property offenses than other types of gangs. What little violence they commit is mostly of the instrumental variety (e.g., threats, retaliation, warnings, and paybacks) (Klein, 1995:110). Police find that Asian gangs are difficult to penetrate, as they are extremely secretive. Also, most members are clean-cut and

| | Dates |
|---|---|
| | 1944–1952 |
| ɔpers (girls) | |
| | 1946–1954 |
| Fence (girls) | |
| | 1947–1960 |
| ːs (girls) | |
| | 1949–1961 |
| | 1953–1960 |
| rls) | |
| | 1957–1966 |
| | 1960–? |
| | 1964–1970 |
| | 1964–? |
| | 1968–? |
| (girls) | 1970 |
| | 1972–1981 |
| es (girls) | |
| | 1973–1981 |
| girls) | |
| | 1974–1981 |
| | 1974–1976 |

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ɔr Gang Cliques

ntrate on the most common: grating into the United States of activities that they pursued they commit are much more ngs. What little violence they ., threats, retaliation, warnings, at Asian gangs are difficult to ost members are clean-cut and



polite and act with respect toward law enforcement. They are highly entrepreneurial in nature (Reiner, 1992:46). Asian gangs generally victimize people from their own culture; therefore, the victims usually fail to report the crimes to the police.

**Vietnamese Gangs** In recent years these gangs have been widely publicized in the press, especially in Southern California towns like Garden Grove and Westminister. They are also found in such cities as Atlanta, Houston, New Orleans, St. Petersburg, Washington, D.C., Boston, New York, Denver, St. Louis, Chicago, and Vancouver, British Columbia (Klein, 1995:109–110). Obviously they have become quite mobile.

Due partially to the American desire to provide a safe haven to South Vietnamese who wished to immigrate as the Vietnam War escalated, the U.S. immigration policy was changed. Subsequently, a large number of Asians entered the United States. Many were young, unskilled, and unable to speak English.

Currently the ages of Vietnamese gang members range from mid- to late-teens to the early 20s. They have been described as youths who are frustrated by their lack of success in both school and the community and their inability to acquire material goods. These gangs are unlike their African-American or Hispanic counterparts. They do not claim turf, nor do they adopt particular modes of dress and often do not have a gang name. They tend to be very secretive and loyal, so that it is difficult to obtain good information about them. Fighting is infrequent, while drug dealing, wearing tattoos, and using handsigns are avoided, as attention would be drawn to their activities. They are organized very loosely, and membership changes constantly (Chin, 1990:139; Goldstein, A. P., and Huff, 1993:15–16; Vigil and Yun, 1990:160). Unlike Chinese gangs, they have few ties to adult groups, although they often develop relationships with protection and extortion operations of the more established organized crime groups (Spergel, 1995:139).

Money is the focal point within these gangs, for they have been extremely entrepreneurial, as have been most other Asian gangs. Their crimes include mostly auto theft, burglary, robbery, and extortion, and they travel rather extensively. They are very pragmatic in that they victimize other Vietnamese citizens because of this group's inability to understand and/or utilize the American legal system. (About half of the strong-arm robberies go unreported; Reiner, 1992:48). Vigil and Yun note that many Vietnamese-Americans "keep large amounts of cash and gold within their homes. Knowing this, the youth gangs will survey a residence and in small groups (usually four or five persons) will enter the home armed with handguns. Victims are beaten and coerced into revealing the location of their valuables" (Vigil and Yun, 1990:157). Many have become very mobile when it comes to the crimes they commit, often traveling from city to city, sometimes going on nationwide crime sprees (Spergel, 1995:139).

The story of one Vietnamese gang member vividly illustrates the often tragic backgrounds they come from.[7] "Huc" was a product of the Vietnam War as he and his family fled the war-torn nation in an old, dilapidated boat that eventually capsized, resulting in the drowning of his mother (who was pregnant at

the time), all of his siblings, and an aunt (a common story among the boat people). He and his father were lucky to survive. They were coming to America, where they had heard that the streets were paved with gold. They arrived poor and with little education. (In contrast, the first wave of Vietnamese refugees were much more educated and were thus better prepared to succeed in America.) It was not too long before Huc's relationship with his father became quite strained (his father was absent through most of Huc's childhood because he was imprisoned in one of the government's so-called reeducation camps). The streets of Southern California, where they eventually settled, were not, of course, paved with gold. Huc was placed several grades below his age because of his lack of English (a common experience for these youth). As a result Huc's involvement in school activities was minimal, and he eventually lost interest and dropped out. His relationship with his father became more strained, and his belief in the American Dream turned rather cynical. The gang became a way out, a way of fitting in. Huc eventually ran away and spent his nights with his new family, the gang, "as they traveled from city to city on the West Coast." In due course the gang gave him a "shortcut to his American Dream" and a "new value system" which was "emblazoned on his thigh in the form of a tattoo that depicts four Ts, representing the Vietnamese words for love, prison, crime, and money" (Vigil and Yun, 1996:144–145).

**Chinese Gangs** Chinese gangs have strong roots in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, tracing back to the famous tongs and triads. They are the most likely to have connections to organized crime groups (Spergel, 1995:139). They can now be found in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Boston, Toronto, Vancouver (British Columbia), and New York City (Chin, 1990; Toy, 1992). In the 1960s and 1970s most Chinese gang members were from Hong Kong. After the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act in 1965, thousands of Chinese-Americans sent for family members, who started immigrating to the United States. Thus, a second generation of Chinese youths were either born in this country or brought here at an early age. As with other second-generation adolescents, many formed gangs, often simply to protect themselves from other students in local schools. Most of the youths who are recruited are those who are vulnerable, are not doing well in school, or have dropped out. Their English is usually very poor, and they have few job skills. Many who dropped out of school began hanging out on street corners (like so many other gangs members), whereupon they began to be recruited by adult Tong groups (hiring them to run errands for gamblers and to provide protection for gambling places). Thus, unlike other groups, Chinese gangs already had an existing organized crime network to emulate or operate within (Reiner, 1992:49; Spergel, 1995:139–140). Since the mid-1960s gang members of new Chinese gangs have included not only Chinese immigrants but sometimes Vietnamese-born Chinese and both Korean and Taiwanese youths as well.

Between 80 and 90 percent of Chinese businessmen pay these gangs on a regular or occasional basis for protection. Four distinct types of extortion are

common among Chinese gangs: monetary gain, symbolic (used as a display of power to indicate control of a territory), revenge, and instrumental (to intimidate the victim into backing down in certain business or personal conflicts) (Chin, 1990:134, 142).

Several characteristics of Chinese gangs distinguish them from other gangs: 1) They are closely associated with powerful community organizations, 2) they tend to invest in legitimate businesses and spend a lot of their time in these pursuits, 3) many have national and even international networks, 4) they have been heavily influenced by Chinese secret societies, 5) they are involved in serious forms of mostly property crimes and control large amounts of money, 6) monetary profit is their main goal, and 7) they victimize most local businesses (Chin, 1990:137).

Chinese gangs are different from African-American and Hispanic gangs in that 1) they are not based on youth fads or illicit drug use and are closely related to their community's social and economic life; 2) they do not operate in deteriorated, poor neighborhoods; and 3) they are embedded in the legendary Triad subculture and so are able to claim legitimacy in the Chinese community. (Triad secret societies date back several centuries in China) (Chin, 1990:137). Chinese gangs are composed predominantly of males, whose ages range from 13 to 37, with an average age of 22. Each gang has between 20 and 50 hard-core members. Gangs tend to have a hierarchical structure nearly parallel to that of the Mafia or other organized crime groups. Many gang members are used as muscle by older gang members and, in this sense, "may be seen as the first rung on the ladder of Chinese organized crime" (Reiner, 1992:48–49). Most gangs have two or more cliques constantly at battle with each other, so that the intergang conflicts are more threatening (gang members are most often killed by other members of the same group) than attacks from external sources, such as rival gangs or the police (Chin, 1990). There are some exceptions, however. A study of Chinese gangs in Vancouver, British Columbia, found that they engaged in a lot of street fighting over such things as status and turf (Joe and Robinson, 1980).

Still another recent study reveals a great deal of violence, heroin trafficking, and even human smuggling (Chin, 1996). This particular study focused on Chinatown in New York City and was based on interviews with 62 males who were either current or former gang members. They represented 10 different Chinese gangs in New York City. Most were between 16 and 21. The majority were born in another country, most commonly in either Hong Kong or China, although 35 percent were born in the United States. Their ethnicity was mostly Cantonese. It was reported that only a slight majority were ever arrested (52 percent) and that only 15 percent were ever in prison. Most reported that their gangs were only somewhat or not at all organized, that most of their gangs had rules, and that almost all (98 percent) had their own territory. They also reported that most had a division of labor within the gang and that a clear majority (three-fourths) of the gangs were involved in legitimate businesses. These gang members were also heavily involved in criminal activities.

(More will be said about the criminal activities of these gang members in chapter 4, which covers the subject of gangs and crime.)

**Filipino Gangs** These neighborhood gangs are similar in structure and operation to Hispanic gangs and so affiliate largely with the latter in the western United States. They are located mostly in Los Angeles and San Francisco but also in cities in Alaska, Washington, and Nevada (e.g., Las Vegas). The largest gangs include the Santanas, Taboos, and Temple Street Gang. Their crimes include burglaries, muggings, drug sales, and assaults (Jackson and McBride, 1992:50).

Filipino gangs began in the 1940s in the California prison system. However, many came from the Philippines during the 1970s and early 1980s during the height of the political unrest in that country. As the children of these immigrants began to attend school, they met with cultural confrontations and street gangs. In defense, they began to form their own gangs with other members of their families. These family groupings became cliques or sets within each gang (Los Angeles County, 1992:47–49).

## African-American Gangs

A study of Chicago's African-American street gangs by Perkins raises the issue of institutional racism as a major role in the development and perpetuation of these gangs. He also suggests that African-American youths are drawn into gangs to develop a sense of belonging, identity, power, security, and discipline, consistent with Maslow's theory (Perkins, 1987:54–55).

According to Lavigne, Crips currently outnumber Bloods by about three to one in Los Angeles. The Crips and Bloods have so influenced African-American street gangs in Los Angeles that the only distinction between the thousands of gang members is the blue and the red colors (Lavigne, 1993:54–55). Crips do not use words starting with the letter *B,* and Bloods do not use words starting with the letter *C.* Crips often refer to themselves as *cuzz,* while bloods often call each other *Piru.* Also, graffiti often includes rival gang abbreviations along with the slant sign and the letter *K,* which means *killers.* Thus the letters *C/K* mean *Crip killers,* and the letters *B/K* stand for *Blood killers.* Typically African-American gang members will ask for an individual's gang affiliation with the question, "What set you from?" (Atlanta Gang Conference, 1992:6).

Dolan and Finney suggest that the gang's clothing borders on the outrageous to attract attention and to advertise gang identity. The style of clothing and an attitude known as hip, capturing the idea of soul and brotherhood, denote African-American gangs. In addition, a street language, which employs a long string of slang words and secret gestures, is referred to as smack. Black T-shirts, controlled or natural hair, bandannas (often either blue or red) hanging from the rear pocket, earrings, jackets (bomber and tanker types), jeans (with rolled-up cuffs), hats (the knitted, floppy types with jewelry attached), canvas shoes, canes, and umbrellas are part of the typical dress of many African-American street gangs (Dolan and Finney, 1984:67–68).

## WHITE GANGS

White youths make up only about 10 percent of the nation's gang population (they make up only 2 percent of all gang members in Los Angeles).[8] Since the late 1970s white teenagers have been forming groups based on an interest in punk rock music and the social attitudes it represents, including helplessness, anger, and rebellion. Many of these youths view the world as offering scant opportunity for individual self-expression. Both the listeners and the performers in the punk rock scene exhibit both angry and violent behavior, mostly for shock value. There are, however, groups of punkers who are very involved in drugs and alcohol, which leads to an ever greater involvement in crimes (Atlanta Gang Conference, 1992).

Usually white youth gangs express their delinquent behavior in different ways from those of most other street gangs. White youths typically join gangs of other ethnic groups, such as Hispanic or multiracial groups. Some are involved in the skinhead movement, identified as a militant racist organization. This organization provides a family link, much the same as with other gangs (Los Angeles County, 1992:33). A closer look at these skinheads follows.

**Skinheads** Skinheads have been described by some as "the kiddie corps of the neo-Nazi movement."[9] Youths have belonged to skinhead organizations since the early 1980s. However, skinhead groups are not all avowed racists; they can be divided into both racist and nonracist subgroupings. The racist skinheads advocate white supremacy, but the nonracist skinheads have a multiracial membership. They are rivals and often engage in violent confrontations. These groups are quite scattered, with erratic membership, although in some areas they claim territory and are classified as a street gang (Los Angeles County, 1992:33). One example of a nonracist skinhead gang is a group known as SHARPs (Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice) or SARs (Skinheads Against Racism) (Wooden, 1995:131). A variation is the kind of group known as a separatist group. These youths consider themselves to be "survivalists, concerned only with their own personal welfare and survival in the likelihood of a nuclear holocaust or natural disaster." These groups do not care too much about what is going on around them and try to avoid overt racial violence (Wooden, 1995:136).

A group similar to the racist skinheads is known as political skinheads. These are youths who tend to take orders from such groups as WAR (White Aryan Resistance) or the Aryan Brotherhood. Perhaps the most avowedly racist and very critical of the U.S. government, these groups claim that minorities are given preferential treatment over whites. These skinheads are common in most prisons and frequently join forces with the White Aryan Brotherhood or the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) (Wooden, 1995:136).

Skinhead gangs in the United States have their roots in a similar movement in England during the late 1950s. Those youths, known as Teddy Boys, were working-class males who wore distinctive Edwardian coats and tight pants and were viewed by British society "as threatening to everything the traditional family stood for." Some described them as folk devils. However, by the 1960s

the Teddy Boys had evolved into a more moderate group, sometimes referred to as "mods" because they wore a type of flashy clothing similar to that worn by young African-Americans (Wooden, 1995:132).

However, according to Wooden, the original skinheads were actually black Jamaican immigrants to England who were called the Rude Boys. Their close-shaven heads and music style were eventually adopted by white working-class youths in Britain. While not avowedly racist, these skinheads adopted a very conservative, working-class view of the world. By 1972, with police harassment and political pressures, the British skinhead movement diminished, only to be replaced with the emergence of punks as the new form of skinheads. These groups were even more flamboyant than the original skinheads, sporting boots, jeans, and suspenders and adding the swastika as a prominent tattoo (Wooden, 1995:133).

The skinhead movement in the Southern California area began in the late 1970s. These early groups were not just kids hanging out in local malls, for they soon began to develop a collective identify around shared interests that included various dress styles, such as Doctor Martin (steel-toed) boots, blue jeans, military flight jackets, short-cropped hair, T-shirts, Ben Shermans (similar to polo shirts), and specialized slang language. Additionally, they engaged in not only the "garden variety" delinquent activities, but also attending music shows, dances, and partying. Race emerged somewhat later as they began to develop close ties with both domestic and international adult white supremacist organizations. Although they held a variety of views on social issues, one of the most important was the perception that white youth were victimized by several outside social fores (e.g., minority street gangs, affirmative action programs, etc.) (Simi, 2003).

Other groups in Southern California played a part in the formation of the skinheads. The most important were the punks. So-called "punk rock" provided a subcultural foundation for the development of skinheads. In fact, most of the original skinhead groups came directly from the punk scene. Other groups included surfers, skaters, bikers, stoners, and peckerwoods. All of these groups were white youth subcultures. But the punks were the most important connection. Punks can be viewed as a sort of rejection of left-wing political movements and represented a result of the anxiety of a rapidly changing world that tended to leave out the white working class. The shaved heads of many of these individuals was a strong statement to the "hippies"—a sort of "in your face" protest. Much of the punk subculture evolved into a more aggressive attitude, often expressed through random violence. The punk rock music reflected this aggressiveness, with very loud and hard music tones (Simi, 2003). Skinhead music is as important to these youths as rap is to African-American youths. This music is radical and often reflects the racial and political attitudes of the skinheads (Los Angeles County, 1992:39).

Eventually, skinheads began to construct a racist ideology that included, in part, neo-Nazism. Some of the early skinhead gang members became involved with Nazism when they were punks and long before they shaved their heads and became skinheads. Furthermore, some of the surfers, such as those living

in La Jolla (a very upscale town just north of San Diego) were sort of "Nazi punks" (Simi, 2003).

The first skinhead groups in Los Angeles modeled themselves after British skinheads. The music was an important component, with music bands like *Sham 69, Skrewdriver,* and *The Four Skins.* They were not very organized at first, and many groups dissolved quickly. Eventually they became very aggressive groups with shared interests, which was pivotal in their development. The swastika tattoo was very significant as a symbol of what they stood for. These groups resembled other gangs in that they identified with specific "turfs." So, for instance, among the earlier skinheads were the Huntington Beach Skins, Chino Hills Skins, South Bay Skins, Norwalk Skins, and the like. Sometimes they marked parks as their turf and used graffiti "tags" to identify themselves (Simi, 2003).

The skinheads in Los Angeles were reacting to some very specific trends that they perceived as threatening to them and their class and especially their race. Increased immigration was one of the most important of these changes occurring in Southern California. Immigrants from the Middle East were especially hated and used as convenient scapegoats for the problems of working and middle-class whites. Not all of these gangs embraced a political stance, and others splintered and formed anti-racist gangs. The most highly visible skinheads who espoused neo-Nazism drew the most attention and repression by the police. As a result, some skinhead gangs began to deemphasize overt political activities. Some of these shifted their attention to profit-making activities, not unlike many African-American gangs. Part of the reason for their less visible activism stems from increasing incarceration of their members. While law enforcement efforts were sometimes successful in breaking up some of these gangs, putting them in prison tended to further solidify their commitment to skinhead values, mostly from their association with powerful and notorious prison gangs, such as the Aryan Brotherhood (AB), who were already a strong force within the California prison system before the skinheads emerged (Simi, 2003).

Eventually, two skinhead groups, the Nazi Lowriders (NLR) and Public Enemy Number One (PENI) developed a close relationship with ABs. Thus, as has been noted by Klein (1995), attempts to break up skinhead gangs has helped to bring them closer together, especially within the prison system. Many skinheads have been recruited from within the California Youth Authority (CYA), starting in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The CYA has been the subject of many critical analyses finding extremely high rates of recidivism and numerous problems (Lerner, 1986).

The modern American skinheads usually wear a polo shirt or T-shirt, suspenders (often the color matches that of their shoelaces), pants (usually Dickies or Levi's) that are rolled up or tailored so that the entire boot is exposed, flight jackets (often with personalized graffiti), and boots (Wooden, 1995:36–38). If a skinhead's boot has been scuffed on the steel tips, he is considered to be tough; the more scuffs on his boot, the tougher he is considered to be. If he is seen with his suspenders down, this means he is ready to fight. If he wears white laces in his boots, this means that he upholds white pride, while red laces

stand for a more aggressive type of white power, and yellow laces signify hatred for the police or a claim that he has killed a police officer.

Skinhead graffiti is similar to that of other street gangs, with the addition of a racial and political orientation. Hand-signs are given as well. Tattoos are common, appearing on the face, neck, and inside of the lips. American skinhead gangs have jumping-in initiations for new members, during which the recruit is attacked with fists by between 4 and 12 other members for a certain period of time (Los Angeles County, 1992:39).

Skinheads are highly likely to engage in violent acts and to direct such acts against those they perceive as the most different or a threat to the white majority—homosexuals, racial and ethnic groups, and religious minorities. According to one source, during one period of time in the early 1980s skinheads were responsible for 121 murders, 302 assaults, and 301 cross burnings (Wooden, 1995:134).

**Stoners** Youths known as **stoners** are distinguishable from traditional street gangs by their secretiveness and the difficulty in identifying them. Often referred to as cults, they engage in many ritualistic activities. They are white suburban youths from a higher socioeconomic background than that of most other gangs. According to the California Youth Authority, stoner gangs constitute only about 5 percent of all gangs in the state and an even smaller percentage of all white youths in the correctional system (Wooden, 1995:160–164).

A survey of 52 stoners in the CYA by Wooden found that the majority (62 percent) had an income level in their homes described as either "adequate" or "more than adequate." The majority (72 percent) scored above average on standard intelligence tests, and almost all had some work history prior to their most recent incarceration. Despite their high intelligence, none had graduated from high school, while two-thirds had been placed in special education classes. More than 40 percent had dropped out of high school. Most were described as either low achievers or nonachievers. Most had been heavily involved in the abuse of both alcohol and drugs, with the majority (69 percent) beginning their drug use before the age of 13. All except two were white. Their most common offense was burglary (70 percent were incarcerated for this offense). Most (81 percent) came from Southern California (Wooden, 1995:164–165).

Stoner gangs are heavily involved in the use of various kinds of drugs (e.g., speed, LSD, rock cocaine, PCP) and have an especially high rate of toxic vapor use. They are almost always into heavy metal music. They generally do not have any organized leadership, are antiestablishment, and often dabble in Satanism, participating in animal sacrifice and ritual crimes (e.g., grave or church desecrations). These gangs are made up of lower- and middle-class white youths of junior and senior high school age who typically have a higher scholastic and economic status than found in other street gangs (Jackson and McBride, 1992:42–45).

Stoners typically dress in red or black clothing, with athletic jersey tops portraying heavy metal music stars; metal-spiked wrist cuffs, collars, and belts; earrings; long hair; and tattoos. They often wear Satanic relics or sacrilegious

effigies. Stoners use graffiti to mark territory, not necessarily geographic, but musical—to claim music groups or types of music (Jackson and McBride, 1992:42–45).

**Taggers** It seems that everywhere one travels in urban and suburban areas one sees a form of graffiti known as **tagging.** Such graffiti is not done to mark turf. Rather it is a way these mostly white middle-class youths call attention to themselves. Wooden, who has studied these groups extensively, quotes one 17-year-old **tagger:** "It's addictive, once you get started. It's like a real bad habit." Wooden comments that

> the addiction has drawn thousands of teenagers—who call themselves and their rivals "toys," "taggers" or "pieces"—to devote their time to "getting up" to attain "fame" by tagging poles, benches, utility boxes, signs, bridges and freeway signs in the San Fernando Valley with graffiti. (Wooden, 1995:115)

Police estimate that in Los Angeles County there are at least 600 tagger crews, with about 30,000 youths. One crew, who call themselves NBT (Nothing But Trouble) claim a membership of 400 or more. These groups are also referred to by such names as graffiti bands, posses, pieces (so called because they believe that they draw masterpieces of art), housers (because they like to tag houses), and snapers. What specifically is tagged varies by age. Younger taggers (10 to 15) usually tag around school grounds. Older youths will go after bigger targets, such as freeway overpasses or bridges, public transportation (especially buses), streetlight poles, and so on. "Less geographically bound to protecting a particular neighborhood turf than are ethnic and inner-city gangs, the taggers spread their marks far and wide on their nightly runs" (Wooden, 1995:117–118).

Taggers, like regular street gangs, have their own slang. For example, a toy is someone who is a novice or amateur tagger; to "kill a wall" is to cover a wall completely with graffiti; taggers will go on a "bombing run" whereby members of a crew will go out and try to mark as many places as possible with their "tag names" and the names of their crew; and sometimes crews will "slash" or cross out rival crews' or taggers' names, which is considered an insult or challenge (Wooden, 1995:119).

To distinguish taggers from others it is helpful to note three distinct types of graffiti vandalism and motivations (Barnard, 2002). *Hate crime graffiti* is motivated by personal or group prejudice, hatred, racial or religious discrimination and is the rarest type; *gang graffiti* is generally perpetrated by members of street gangs whose primary purpose is to make some sort of announcement (e.g., the superiority of a specific street gang in a specific neighborhood, the gang's turf); *tagger graffiti* is committed by individuals and groups of kids for the sole purpose of establishing identity and recognition for themselves among their peers, generally other taggers. Putting their tag names up in highly visible areas or dangerous places increases the recognition, or "fame" value of the effort (see chapter 3 for more on graffiti).

Among some of the more common names, or monikers, of taggers in Southern California include AAA (Against All Authority), KNP (Knock Out Posse), ABC (Artist By Choice), ACK (Artistic Criminal Kings), DCP (Destroying City Property), and CMC (Creating Mass Confusion). Many of the names suggest a form of rebellion typical of many suburban white teenagers (Wooden, 1995:120).

Tagger pseudonyms, or nicknames, usually have four to six letters or numbers, usually three. They usually adopt a name comprised of two or three words, e.g., Clever Writing Kings, Phantom Causing Krime, or in the form of numbers, such as OPU, or Oxnard Piecers Unite, which is written as 678K–corresponding to the letters OPU on the telephone. The K is for crew or "krew." A tagger can have two nicknames and may belong to several tagging crews at once. There may be several tag names and/or crew names put up by the taggers in the same incident (Barnard, 2002).

One explanation given for the rise of these tagger groups is that middle-class, suburban white youths have been influenced by the ethnic gangs of the inner cities and their "gangsta rap" and have tried to emulate them or even compete against them. However, taggers did not suddenly appear in the 1990s.

There was a crew in New York City in the early 1970s who called themselves Tough Artist Group (TAG). There were even a few tagger crews in Southern California in the 1980s (Wooden, 1995: 121). Wooden's interviews with tagger crews found that they typically do not have much of a formal organizational structure, that most members are not jumped in or otherwise go through a formal initiation process, that members often drift in and out of the groups, and that they often change their names (monikers) when they get tired of the old ones. Often these groups will "do battle" with each other, which is merely a contest to see who can have their name up the most often (ibid.: 124).

Although more and more are carrying weapons, mostly for protection from rival crews, for the most part tagging is a form of fun and play. Most do not choose to call what they do a crime but merely an art form and a way to express themselves. They are insulted when others (e.g., the police) call their work graffiti. On the other hand, many become increasingly destructive in order to achieve some form of notoriety with other taggers. Many are merely trying to outperform their competitors (ibid.).

Police in Southern California have recently noticed two other types of tagger crews (Los Angeles County, 1999). One is known as the *dance and party crews*. Many of these crews are associated with street gangs with whom they get together at parties and coexist peacefully. They may use this association as intimidation against rival crews. There has been an increase in violence associated with "dance battles" where crews dance against each other for recognition. They may each be associated with rival gangs, which usually leads to confrontation and violence. Many times parties are held at a private residence, where it is not unusual for gang members to ransack and steal property.

**Skating crews** are a recent phenomenon resulting from the popularity of skateboarding and rollerblading. These crews form when a group feels the need

to adopt a name and/or nickname. Some crews claim certain parking areas and alleys as their own. They may begin tagging their group's name to claim an area or for recognition. Fights among rival skating crews are increasing, according to police reports.

A comment on the above information about these two types of crews is in order. While we have no doubt that such activities exist, we wonder if it is correct for the police to label these groups as gangs. One must have some very specific criteria to distinguish between the literally thousands (perhaps millions) of teenagers who engage in skateboarding and rollerblading in virtually every city and small town in the country. Similarly, one should have some very good criteria to distinguish street gangs bent on criminal activity and kids who go to parties. Certainly kids will attend parties and engage in other activities that may incur the wrath of many adults. But are these gangs? Given the elusive definitions of gangs and gang members, plus the millions of dollars in funding to fight gangs, we also wonder if there is a tendency on the part of some law enforcement agencies to add every sort of teenage grouping and activities to the term gang, whether or not it is warranted.

Taggers have drawn the ire of many citizens and criminal justice officials. Some citizens, however, have taken matters into their own hands. In Los Angeles, during the winter of 1995, many people applauded the actions of a man named William Masters after he shot two graffiti taggers in the back. One of the youngsters died. There was conflicting testimony about whether the taggers really threatened Masters. A report containing an interview with Masters (*Chicago Tribune,* February 16, 1995) revealed that he had been in this sort of trouble before and that he apparently is urging citizens to "take matters into their own hands" with the use of weapons. There was a time in this country when such behavior would have been considered an act of cowardice and/or murder. However, the Los Angeles district attorney stated that Masters had acted "reasonably."

## SOME COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF GANG MEMBERS

Are there any characteristics (personal or social) that distinguish youths who belong to gangs from youths who do not? This is not an easy question to answer, for there are a variety of types of gang members, and often there is little differentiation between the gang member and the typical adolescent urban dweller, both delinquent and nondelinquent. While research into this question is at best incomplete, some tentative conclusions can be drawn about the typical gang member. Jankowski, after seven years of observing gang members in three large urban areas (Boston, New York, and Los Angeles), has concluded that most gang members have developed a social character structure he calls *defiant individualism* (Jankowski, 1990: 22–25).

## Gang Members as Defiant Individualists

According to Jankowski, gangs emerge within poor inner-city communities because these areas have their own unique form of social organization. They are organized "around an intense competition for, and conflict over, the scarce resources that exist in these areas" (Jankowski, 1990: 22). This social order is an alternate social order, a sort of Hobbesian order characterized by Social Darwinist principles.

Jankowski's theory starts with the assumption that people from low-income communities tend to develop a social character known as defiant individualism. He uses the term *character* in the sense that Erich Fromm used it, in contrast to the term *personality*. According to Fromm, this social character is a constellation of characteristics common to an entire group that comes about as a result of people's adaptation to various conditions (social, cultural, economic, and so on) unique to that group. The defiant individualist character consists of seven main attributes, outlined as follows:

1. *Competitiveness*—This trait stems from the scarce resources available within low-income communities. Most youths begin to experience this within their own families (typically there are a number of children), where there are not many material items to go around. They also must compete for the affection and general attention of the parents (contrary to popular belief, most of their parents work). In low-income housing, space is also limited, so there is competition for both physical and psychological space.
2. *Mistrust or wariness*—This trait is the outgrowth of the first trait, especially as it is manifested in the community outside of the home. Youths learn that trust is not something that is given but rather is "something to be calculated."
3. *Self-reliance*—Because there are so few resources, both within the family and in the outside community, youngsters soon learn that they are going to have to do things on their own because they cannot rely on others due to mistrust.
4. *Social isolation*—This trait stems from both self-reliance and mistrust as individuals become less emotionally attached to others (including women). Therefore, they become isolated from others, and this reduces their options (and the chances of being emotionally hurt by others). This may be one reason why entire low-income communities have become so isolated, as noted by W. J. Wilson (1987).
5. *Survival instinct*—This trait is the logical result of the first four traits. Life in general within these poor neighborhoods results in youths becoming like "predators trapping prey." That is, youths often "observe, confront, and negotiate with people whose competitive mode has led them to view young people as prey" (Jankowski, 1990:25). Thus, there are drug dealers and drug users, pimps, armed robbers, and all sorts of people preying on others for scarce resources. Jankowski makes a telling point when he says that within this kind of environment it is those who are the ultimate "failures" that help solidify this survival instinct more than others. This is

because the "derelicts, the women and men dependent on public assistance, and the men and women (including possibly their fathers and mothers) who have taken jobs in secondary or informal labor markets that lead nowhere represent to many young people those who have succumbed to the environment" (Jankowski, 1990:25). The result is that these youths become determined, at least in the early stages of their lives, not to fail like all the others they see (especially their own parents). Their goal is to survive, to fight, and to prevail.

6. *Social Darwinist worldview*—From the perspective of these young people the outside world is characterized by competitiveness, illegal behavior, and corruption, all of which are tolerated and often encouraged. Such behavior can be found even within the upper echelons of society. To these young people even the most successful (e.g., the white upper class) have achieved their success in a manner not unlike that of offenders within their own lower-class world (although not quite as crudely). To them this is the natural order of things, how things are supposed to be. Moreover, they look around them and see what people in more affluent neighborhoods have, they want the same things, and they will obtain these goods through illegal methods, just as "respectable" members of the community do.
7. *A defiant air*—This final character trait is a culmination of all the other traits and is a type of demeanor that says to others, "I am going to take what I want and no one is going to stop me!" It is expressed on two levels: public and private. Publicly, when confronting authority (especially the police and the courts) there is little display of fear, deference, or remorse. Privately, it is more subtle and involves a quiet resolve to continue and to resist any attempt to change. In contrast to what some gang researchers have suggested, the hard exterior is not insecure or fearful on the interior but rather is equally as hard.

While most members of low-income communities will display some of these traits, gang members tend to display all of them and do so more intensely. What is important to emphasize is that gang members display these traits not because they are in gangs but rather because they come from low-income communities. Gangs, in order to persist, must attempt to cope with and control these defiant individuals.

Growing up in such communities can also lead to another characteristic, namely, a resignation to one's own death, even at an early age. In the final section of this chapter we will explore a somewhat different perspective on gangs and gang members, a kind of typology that no one else has considered when studying gangs. We contend that gang members can be both victims and victimizers.

## Gang Members as Victims and Victimizers

Alex Kotlowitz (1991), in his penetrating book about youths growing up in a Chicago housing project, makes the following observation about 9-year-old Diante McClain, whose older brother, William, was fatally shot at Chicago's Henry Horner public housing project. During the gunfire, Diante remained

glued to a playground swing. His friend pleaded with him to take cover. Instead, Diante continued swinging, repeating over and over again, "I wanna die. I wanna die" (Kotlowitz, 1991:54).

A 13-year-old gang member told one of the authors, "Man, I don't give a fuck if I die—it don't mean nothing" (Brown, W. B., and Shelden, 1994). What is often lacking in recent research on gangs is a close look at the immediate environment of gang youths as they are growing up, long before they even begin to think about joining a gang. This is not to say that researchers never address the social sources of gang delinquency, for indeed most have done this. However, what is the long-term impact of a very violent environment on young children? By a violent environment, we mean both inside and outside the home, where millions of children are exposed to an incredible amount of violence. Whether or not they are directly harmed in a physical sense is not the issue, although many are harmed in this manner. What needs to be looked at is how much indirect harm is done and how this exposure to violence tends to produce, over time, youths who not only act in aggressive ways but also are desensitized to violence.

The typical gang member has been a persistent victim of violence, both directly and indirectly. We also believe, as argued by Deborah Prothrow-Stith (1991) in her book *Deadly Consequences,* that many of these youths have suffered a form of posttraumatic stress syndrome.[10] The statements at the beginning of this section are typical of those who suffer this problem. The statement by the 13-year-old gang member reminds us of what many soldiers in Vietnam experienced. During this war many combat soldiers used the phrase "It don't mean nothing" to reflect a self-defensive mechanism that reduced the impact of disappointment and dangerous situations. This expression was not an indication that the individual was resigning from life, nor did it mean that the individual was going to commit suicide. Rather, it was a response to a set of circumstances in which the individual felt little or no control over the outcome. Many would argue that such an attitude is irrational, and in a normal situation they would probably be correct. However, many Vietnam soldiers frequently found themselves, very much like many inner-city youths, in abnormal settings where such an outlook is very rational. There is still another analogy with Vietnam soldiers that applies to inner-city youths. Some of these veterans have been described as "trip-wire" veterans. This term refers to those who suffered so much from the war that they developed a sort of siege mentality or an "us versus them" outlook on life. They would go far into the woods in the Pacific Northwest, set up trip wires or booby traps, and hide from the world, fully armed and ready to defend themselves.

Alex Kotlowitz (quoted at the beginning of this section) has written extensively about some very young African-American males living in the Henry Horner projects in Chicago, in a book with the poignant title *There Are No Children Here.* He describes two youths, one a 12-year-old named Lafayette Walton, the other his 9-year-old brother Pharaoh, as living in a war zone. Lafayette "knows how to fling himself to the ground at the sound of gunfire. He knows how to crawl on his belly through the dirt to safety. He knows how

to distinguish a .357 caliber Magnum from a .45 caliber revolver. . . . There is no one to protect Lafayette or his five siblings from violence. To live in the project is to live outside a protected circle. Inside the circle are middle-class people, middle-class neighborhoods, middle-class institutions. Outside are the very poor, the very powerless. . . . During the summer, someone is shot, stabbed, or beaten every three days at Henry Horner Homes." This reality cannot be captured in mere words. Kotlowitz describes one occasion when 9-year-old Pharaoh found himself in the middle of a drug-gang gunfight while walking home from school (aren't children supposed to feel safe walking home from school?). One of the gang members had a submachine gun, and Pharaoh just barely escaped the gunfire, which occurred literally outside the door to his home. But, as Kotlowitz notes, "other kinds of shootings, beatings, stabbings, and rapes occur more frequently. Weapons are ubiquitous, and family disputes often end in violence. Women as well as men resort to physical force, and project residents are often the victims of crime" (quoted in Prothrow-Stith, 1991:66–67).

We believe that every Diante McClain, every Lafayette and Pharaoh Walton, and every other child growing up in such an environment are victims of crime. Yet with few exceptions, their names do not appear on police reports as crime victims, and the environment, such as that described by Kotlowitz, is not typically what people have in mind when they speak of crimes or criminals. (More often than not the image of the victims is an innocent middle-class white person, and the perpetrator is an African-American gang member.) But the effects are the same as if they had been raped or assaulted.

Prothrow-Stith writes that many "mental health providers have begun to see signs of posttraumatic stress syndrome in crime victims, in the victims of terrorist attacks, and *in the children chronically exposed to violence in their homes and communities*" (Prothrow-Stith, 1991:68, emphasis added). We all know the data on the victimization of young African-American males: The most common cause of death is now homicide, and this group has the highest rate of victimization by violence in general. The fact that this same group has the highest rate of offending is also nothing new to us. But why do so many not see a connection here?

Given the violent environment most of these children grew up in, it should come as no surprise that one of the main reasons they give for joining a gang is for protection. And there is some research that is beginning to show the extent to which gang members have been victims—and we are not talking only of drive-by shootings. Studies have shown that gang members have had plenty of experience with violence while growing up. Such youths have seen and have been victimized by violence in their homes and in their communities.

These experiences have shaped the attitudes of these young people toward perpetuating violence. Gang youths have accepted violence as the normal and appropriate way to resolve minor and major disputes. These youths have come to believe that there is no nonviolent method for dealing with daily disputes and other problems of life. Further, as our own research shows, these gangs reinforce what their environment has taught them by encouraging and even praising a gang member's willingness to engage in violence.

Data from 77 Detroit gang members were collected over an 18-month period by Brown through unstructured interviews and observations. Some of the interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants, on street corners, in alleyways, in the backseats of automobiles ("ride-arounds"—the equivalent of "ride-alongs" with police officers), and in crack houses. The concept of "interviews" is used rather loosely here because many of them were simply recordings of conversations in a variety of situations in which several participants were involved. Although there were specific research questions for this study, an unfettered interview schedule was used to prompt subjects to volunteer information on selected topics.

The majority of the gang members (74 percent) had been involved as a perpetrator in gang-related violence, and an almost equal number (70 percent) had been a victim in some kind of gang conflict. The gang members gave various reasons for why they engaged in the gang-related violence, and some of their responses indicated that many were not altogether-willing participants. For example, two members said they faked involvement in the violence, while another four individuals said that they had protested but engaged in the violence anyway. Six members bluntly said that they did not want to be involved at all but did it anyway. The largest number (40 percent) said, in so many words, that they had no choice but to get involved in gang violence because they were members of the gang and felt that this was a basic requirement. Only 5 percent had actually initiated the violence. The remainder were admittedly willing participants in the violence.

It would be safe to say that just about every member of this gang had experienced some form of victimization during his lifetime. For example, more than one-third (36 percent) had the experience of losing someone close to them from a homicide, and an almost equal proportion (35 percent) had actually seen someone dead following a gang-related homicide. However, when asked if they were ever concerned about being killed or seriously injured through violence, the vast majority (84 percent) said no. When asked why they were not concerned, they gave some fascinating reasons. About one-fifth (19.5 percent) said it "doesn't matter"; another 18 percent said, "I don't worry about it"; and 13 percent said, "Who cares?" About one-fourth (24.7 percent) responded that they "don't think about it," while an equal number said, "Someone will get even."[11]

Clearly gang members are not strangers to the world of violence. But to conclude, as many do, that they themselves are violent people is misleading. We wonder how others (including everyone who reads these pages) would respond if they grew up under similar conditions. When so many young men and women accept violence and accept even the inevitability of their own deaths from violence (some as young as 12 or 13), how can anyone say that they have not been victims and that this victimization is not a causal factor in their own violence against others?

We now turn to a consideration of the question, "What do gang members *do* with their time"? The stereotype (constantly reinforced in the media, especially in full-length movies, and by "war stories" told by some police officials, who should know better) is that all gangs do is engage in drive-by shootings, drug deals netting thousands of dollars, robberies, and other crimes. Actually, the life of a typical gang member is rather boring. Our favorite line is from a

30-year veteran of gang research, Malcolm Klein, who writes that during the years of research he and his colleagues have engaged in,

> we learned much about gang member life which, with the occasional exception of a boisterous meeting, a fight, an exciting rumor, is a very dull life. For the most part, gang members do very little—sleep, get up late, hang around, brag a lot, eat again, drink, hang around some more. It's a boring life: the only thing that is equally boring is being a researcher watching gang members (Klein, 1995:11).

However, they do commit crimes—a lot of crimes, compared to the average delinquent. (The reader should not jump to the conclusion that gangs commit the bulk of *all* crimes committed in your typical city. They just tend to commit more than nongang members their age.) Chapter 4 will be devoted to this subject.

## SUMMARY

It is impossible to provide a profile of a gang member that is inclusive; it is equally difficult to identify a gang precisely. From scavenger to corporate gangs, with vertical to horizontal structures, any attempt to identify a typical gang falls short. Similarly, gang members cross gender, racial, and ethnic boundaries. There is evidence not only of the fairly traditional notion of gangs but also of a relatively new phenomenon—taggers—which further expands the parameters of a definition and further challenges the drive of social scientists to capture a universality of theme. Further, gangs in the United States are composed of youths from a wide variety of ethnic origins, including Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Filipino, Korean, Mexican, and Cuban.

Viewing gang members as victims as well as victimizers was suggested. While few researchers probe beyond the surface of this thesis, we are convinced that the overwhelming majority of those youths involved with gangs have indeed been victims themselves, both of specific persons who inhabit their social world and of the environment that surrounds them.

## NOTES

1. There is plenty of literature on adolescent groups and subcultures. For a good review, see Schwendinger and Schwendinger (1985).

2. German-born Max Weber (1864–1920) was one of the earliest and most famous sociologists in history. Perhaps most famous for his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958), he was a very prolific writer and wrote several books covering such wide-ranging subjects as law, economy, and religion. Within the academic world he is also popular for developing the notion of the *ideal type*.

3. These typologies are taken from Huff (1989), Fagan (1989), Taylor (1990a).

4. This definition comes from Klein (1995:132).

5. Based mostly on Vigil (1988, 1990), Vigil and Long (1990), and Reiner (1992).

6. Bobrowski (1988:31). Although this reference may seem out of date, information provided at the 1999 National Youth Gang Symposium in Las Vegas (attended by the senior author) confirms that not too much has changed.

7. This story is told by Vigil and Yun (1996:142–145).

8. Reiner (1992:114). As alluded to earlier in this book, such a low estimate may be reflection of both the standard definitions of gangs and a racial bias or stereotype of what gangs are. It is suspected that there would be more white gangs and white gang members if the criteria used to define *gang* were expanded. This would especially be the case if groups known as taggers were included in the definition of *gang*.

9. Wooden (1995:129). Other than Wooden's book cited here, there has been very little systematic research done on the topic of so-called white hate groups such as the skinheads. The bombing at Oklahoma City in the spring of 1995 apparently awakened many people to the existence of these kinds of groups, which may be more prevalent and dangerous than the typical minority gangs discussed in this text. A very comprehensive study has just been completed by Pete Simi, a dissertation project at the University of Nevada–Las Vegas (the senior author is a member of his committee). Some of his findings will be reported in this section of the book.

10. *The Diagnostic Statistical Manual* (DSM-IV) used by psychologists and therapists include the following features associated with "posttraumatic stress syndrome": ambivalence, self-destructive and impulsive behaviors, attention seeking, needing to be around others, despair or hopelessness, feeling victimized, hostility, social withdrawal, feeling constantly threatened or unsafe, and impaired relationships with others.

11. In a special report on gangs called "Lives in Hazard" (about the filming of *American Me,* starring Edward James Olmos), Father Greg Boyle, a priest in East Los Angeles, said that every time he attended the funeral of a gang member he cautioned other gang members that "this could happen to you" and there were two typical responses that he heard over and over again. One was "You gotta go sometime" and the other was "Why not?"