



21st Century Criminology: A Reference Handbook

Youth Gangs

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Youth Gangs

After some time out of the media spotlight, youth street gangs have made their way back. News coverage of drive-bys and crimes committed by persons with “possible gang ties” appear regularly alongside *Gangland* documentaries chronicling the rise and fall of notorious gangs and their leaders. Occasionally, these stories tell of successful law enforcement efforts to dismantle the gang by “cutting the head off the snake,” as anonymous informants reveal coveted gang secrets and boast of their role in bringing down those who had somehow betrayed or disrespected them. Joining the usual suspects in Chicago and Los Angeles at the center of public scrutiny and fear are gangs and gang nations such as the United Blood Nation and Double II's on the East Coast, Nortenos and Surenos in the Southwest, and MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha) everywhere in the United States.

By contrast, with few exceptions, recent scholarly attention to gangs has become stagnant, lacking fresh insights and the intellectual spirit out of which it was born. Not everyone will agree with this assessment, noting that more than two decades passed between Frederic Thrasher's (1927) landmark study and the pioneering work of Albert Cohen (1955), Walter Miller (1958), Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (1960), Irving Spergel (1964), James Short and Fred Strodbeck (1965), Gerald Suttles (1968), and Malcolm Klein (1969, 1971). Attention to gangs has followed a sometimes cyclical and faddish course, and important research occurred in the United States and elsewhere during the 1980s and 1990s. However, movement forward requires greater recognition of the problematic nature of gangs, better integration of empirical research concerning the efficacy of gang control efforts, and new research tools that are both theoretically and empirically reliable and valid. Roughly a decade into the 21st century, it is time to take stock and to assess the relevance of gangs to criminology and vice versa.

Definitional Issues

Definitional issues distort and confound understanding of what gangs are, why they behave as they do, and what to do about them. Disagreements exist in law, and among and between law enforcement agencies, social agencies, schools, media portrayals, the general public, and academic researchers. One knowledgeable observer likens the process of “deciphering and doing something about modern street gangs” to “interpreting inkblots” (Papachristos, 2005).

Despite such ambiguity, a great deal is known about the history of gangs and the forms they take in modern societies. In addition, it is universally agreed that gangs contribute substantially to such social problems as juvenile delinquency, crime, and racial/ethnic and community tensions. In extreme form, they may also be involved in ethnic wars and terrorism. More will be said about each of these problems below, but first the definitional issues are addressed.

The main concern in this chapter is with a particular type of gang, namely, the *youth street gang*. All definitions of youth street gangs include the following elements: They are unsupervised groups of young people that meet together with some regularity and are self-determining with respect to membership criteria; organizational structure; and the sorts of behavior that are considered acceptable and, in some cases, necessary for belonging. Rather than being products of adult sponsorship (such as church-, social agency-, or school-sponsored groups), they form and develop out of interactions and decisions among young

people on their own terms.

For most young people in most societies, “hanging out” with one’s friends is an important part of growing up, and for many, “that old gang of mine” is a normal part of making the transition from childhood to adulthood. Gangs become problematic when they engage in crime or delinquency; conflict with each other; or otherwise disrupt families, schools, and other institutions. Perhaps because most of the gangs studied by social scientists are involved in delinquent or criminal behavior, many social scientists include law breaking in their definitions of gangs. Others do not, preferring to avoid the logical problem of including in their definitions the very behavior they wish to explain.

The most systematic attempt to overcome this problem has been made by the Eurogang Research Program (ERP), an international effort to understand gangs and other troublesome youth groups in European nations. Although the primary goal of the ERP is to study groups involved in crime and delinquency (which is included in the ERP definition of gangs),¹ the opportunity exists to study other collectivities, and to follow changes in their membership, structure, behavior, and other characteristics helpful in explaining their differences from gangs.

A commonly adopted solution is to be as specific as possible about the group(s) being studied: why they are of interest (because they have been identified as problematic by the police, by a social agency, or by observation, for example), their members and criteria for membership, behavior and organizational structure, cultural style and symbolic markers (often including speech, group colors, tattoos and scars, clothing, and jewelry), and location in social space—that is, how they relate to each other and to their communities.

The Chicago School of Urban Sociology

Specific definitional criteria have long influenced the way in which criminologists think about and study gangs—and, consequently, what has been learned about them. Rooted in the tradition of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology, early studies tended to view and present gangs as products of their environment, directly and indirectly shaped by (and shaping) their relations with neighborhood adults, local agencies and institutions, and each other. Gangs, therefore, were to be understood as part of a complex story *unfolding* in the real world. Even as disciplinary emphases shifted to grand theory and opportunity structures in American society, researchers remained open to new discoveries in the field and to identification of mechanisms by which problems in the broader class system translated into behavior on the streets. Having intentionally exposed themselves to “data not specifically relevant to existing hypotheses concerning gang delinquency,” for example, Short and Strodtbeck (1965, pp. 24–25) and their research team (with the Program for Detached Workers of the YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago) quickly realized that there was more to gangs than suggested by the macrolevel theories they had set out to test, that the behaviors observed by street workers and graduate students in situ could not be fully explained without reference to the specific contexts in which they occurred.

“Keeping a window open” on the daily lives of gang members and their behavior, individually and collectively, Short and Strodtbeck (1965) conceptualized street gangs and their behaviors as products of ongoing processes rather than as a series of disjointed pathological outcomes. Much like Thrasher (1927), they came to view the gang as the primary social world of its members, and they suggested that the decisions of members, especially leaders, to engage in violence and other serious delinquency were better understood as a product of group

dynamics than as exaggerated reactions to middle-class America. Indeed, much of what previously had been taken as evidence of short-run hedonism and flouting of conventional norms appeared, under closer scrutiny, to reflect a rational balancing of immediate status losses or gains *within specific gang contexts*.

Klein's research (1969) identified gang cohesiveness as the "quintessential" group process. Based on analysis of research data from a 1960s street worker program (the Group Guidance Project) in Los Angeles County in California, Klein suggested that "a group-work approach to gang intervention may inadvertently defeat its own purpose" (p. 135), increasing feelings of attachment to the gang and willingness to engage in delinquency with other gang members. Before this link could be examined systematically, however, street worker programs faded in popularity. As a result, there have been few opportunities to consider more "active development of alternatives to gang participation" (p. 135) or to reconcile Klein's findings with other research showing the risk of gang delinquency to be highest during periods of low, not high, group cohesion.

Outside the academy, multiple social and political movements, some quite militant, converged during this period, polarizing society and fostering a climate in which some street gangs became politically and economically active in Chicago's black ghetto and elsewhere. In Chicago, with the help of private foundation and federal agency grants, programs attempted to promote and institutionalize efforts begun by a few street gangs to better themselves and their communities. Money poured into the hands of three black gangs boasting membership in the thousands and expressing publicly their intent to "go conservative," that is, legitimate: Black Stone Rangers, Devil's Disciples, and the Conservative Vice Lords. Almost as soon as these programs were launched, however, they were overshadowed by massive rioting touched off by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination and by growing resentment among police and local businesspeople toward what they viewed as preferential treatment of predatory teens. Allegations of fraud, mismanagement of funds, and downright failure quickly followed. Recalling this history, as noted elsewhere (Hughes & Short, 2006),

Defenders of the projects attributed failure to resistance by police and local authorities or to the lack of expertise required of such enterprises. Critics charged that the projects were riddled with fraud and that the gangs used government resources as a front to their continuing criminal activities. The U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations (named the McClellan committee, after its chairman, Senator John McClellan) documented massive fraud in the Manpower project and the tortured path by which the grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity was secured. Running throughout the committee hearing documents are the political struggles between The Woodlawn Organization (TWO, which received the grant), Reverend Fry (minister of the church in which many gang meetings occurred), and Chicago officialdom, including the Police Department and the Mayor's office. Although the committee's findings were tainted by charges of committee bias and harassment by police and other authorities, the troubles it highlighted were followed shortly after, in 1969, by Chicago Mayor Richard Daley's "war on gangs." Controversy continues concerning both the programs and official responses to them, including charges that some prominent gang leaders were "framed" by officials. (pp. 45–46, citations omitted)

During this turbulent era, major changes also occurred in the academy. Study of the human ecology of the city and the diverse and sometimes conflicting forces within local communities

grew increasingly rare in sociology, as survey research methods and preoccupation with grand theory came to dominate the discipline. Although the Chicago School tradition continued to live on in the work of gang researchers such as Joan Moore (1978), whose *Homeboys* study extended Suttles's (1968) *The Social Order of the Slum* to analysis of barrios of East Los Angeles, the 1970s may be best remembered as a decade of transition, in between the social problems approach of Chicago-style inquiry and the research paradigm that followed.

The Variables Paradigm

Hoping to correct common misconceptions of Chicago sociology in the 1920s and 1930s, Martin Bulmer (1984) noted that an "emphasis on field research and personal documents, though certainly a distinctive feature, is far from the whole story. ... Notable developments in early quantitative methods took place which tend to have been ignored" (p. 188). For evidence of such methodological coexistence in the study of gangs, one need look no further than Thrasher (1927), whose commitment to the collection of social facts demanded both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Picking up where Thrasher left off, the subsequent generation of researchers tended to blend then-sophisticated quantitative analyses with qualitative insights, relying on both to bring gangs into clearer focus.

As the popularity of the group work approach to gang intervention waned, comprehensive research efforts became increasingly difficult to sustain. Throughout the 1980s, and especially the 1990s, studies of gangs divided sharply along methodological lines. The survey data approach, with its ease of administration and quick turnaround to publication (compared to field research), fit well within the new "variables paradigm" dominating sociological inquiry. Surveys and statistical manipulation of data obtained from official records also suited the interests of government funding agencies in quantitative findings obtained quickly, objectively, and for purposes of gang control policy. In addition, crack cocaine had exploded onto the American scene, and despite conflicting evidence, the frequency of hustling activities among individual gang members convinced many within and outside of law enforcement that gangs had assumed violent control over the drug trade and become virtually synonymous with organized crime. Furthering this perception were soaring rates of gun violence and gang homicides; high-profile convictions of ranking members of the Gangster Disciples and their imprisoned leader, Larry Hoover; big-screen movies, such as *Colors* (1988) and *Boys N the Hood* (1991), which drew national attention to the often deadly rivalry between L.A.'s Crips and Bloods; news reports of drive-by shootings claiming the lives of gangbangers and innocent bystanders alike; and the growing prominence of hypermasculine gangsta rap and related industry feuds. What everyone now wanted to know was how many gangs and gang members were out there, who these people were, and how much crime they were committing.

Such questions required answers only quantitative studies could provide. Surveys of law enforcement officials, analyses of police and court records, and self-reports by youth in institutionalized and noninstitutionalized settings were all employed in an effort to determine the overall scope of gang problems.² In addition, although the data occasionally were contradictory, a consensus emerged identifying the typical gang member as a young minority (black or Hispanic) male living in an inner-city urban area plagued by a host of neighborhood, educational, or family challenges. Bolstered by analyses of longitudinal self-report data, quantitative studies also provided the clearest and most convincing evidence that *something* about gangs *causes* its members to behave badly.

Explanation of this “something,” together with the reasons behind the formation and evolution of gangs, should have been the next order of business, but the shift toward quantitative research methodologies was so strong and pervasive that etiological inquiry suffered. By their very nature, survey research and analyses of official records focus primarily on *individual* gang members, rather than on the complexity and dynamics of gangs as *groups*. Even field research came to be based primarily on in-depth interviews with former and current gang members. Although these studies yielded important insight into the attitudes, experiences, and activities of gangs and gang members, including females and Asians in the United States and elsewhere, too often they lacked attention to the contexts of these young people's lives.

Bringing Context Back In

Mercer Sullivan (2006) questions whether studies of gangs distract attention from the larger problem of youth violence. His point is well taken inasmuch as gang research obscures the nature of young people's associations with one another and the influences that shape their lives. Viewing gangs as “fractals” of crime and violence, as “official” definitions and data would have it, ignores the myriad forms of behavior among gang youth and the conditions under which they behave badly as individuals, clique members, or in large (possibly, named) groups. Understanding such varied patterns requires attention to context.

Toward this end, it is especially important to build on the insights of ethnographic studies of gangs, a few good examples of which must suffice. Ruth Horowitz (1983) carefully documented status considerations within the gang and the complex interplay between gangs and their environments. Other ethnographers, sensitive to process, likewise situate their observations of gangs within broader contexts. Mark Fleisher's (1998) study of the day-to-day lives of the Fremont Hustlers, a “gang” of white teens in Kansas City, chronicles the changing nature of the group and its influence on behavioral choices by individual members, and how they add to already troubled family and other problems. Researchers such as Sullivan (1989), John Hagedorn (1988), James Diego Vigil (1988), and Sudhir Venkatesh (2000, 2008) document the subtleties and complexities of local social orders in which gangs play an important role.

In addition to ethnographic research, network analyses in Chicago and elsewhere add to knowledge of the social relationships within and between gangs, and the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods offers new insights into the group processes leading to violence and the avoidance of such behavior. Comparative multisite, multimethod, and substantively diverse analyses are also beginning to develop, highlighting the need to understand gangs from more than one perspective.

“Levels of Explanation,” “Capital,” and the “Code of the Street”

Attempts to explain gangs take many forms: examination of characteristics of individual gang members or their communities, for example, or the nature of group behavior or the worldwide forces that impact each of these. Such different levels of explanation require different methods of research and data that serve different purposes. Although findings occasionally may seem contradictory, they are, and should be, complementary. Like all other phenomena of interest to criminologists, gangs and gang members cannot be understood apart from the extremely varied spatial, temporal, social, and cultural contexts in which they are embedded.

Among the most important of these contexts in the United States are historical patterns of immigration, migration, social and cultural conflict, accommodation, and assimilation.

Following the Revolutionary War, as the country became more industrialized, immigrants flooded into rapidly growing cities and intensified existing problems of social control. Ethnic conflict involving gangs of immigrant Irish (young and old) versus “nativists” were common (Asbury, 1927), a pattern repeated throughout the 19th-century influx of new white ethnic immigrants. Youth street gangs were problematic during this time, but even they tended to follow the paths of their ethnic progenitors, assimilating and accommodating to America as part of an ethnic enclave or without primary ethnic identity.

The historical pattern of ethnic succession characterizing U.S. communities and their gangs has changed a great deal since these early years. Recent immigration streams to the United States have come from a large number of Central and Latin American countries, as well as from Asia and the Near East. Street gang formation and distribution within this country reflect these patterns, showing especially high concentrations among rapidly growing Latino populations. Contrary to trends observed among white gangs, however, the problem of black street gangs only worsened during this period, and Henry McKay's (1969) optimistic conjecture that blacks in northern U.S. cities would follow the path of their European predecessors (i.e., assimilation into middleclass American society) proved sadly mistaken.

Despite advances in the civil rights of minorities and changed economic conditions that have provided opportunities for the integration of many, those who have been left behind increasingly are relegated to the status of a “permanent underclass” in many U.S. cities. This underclass can be located ecologically in terms of such conditions as unemployment, welfare, educational deficits, and broken families, but William Julius Wilson (1978, 1987, 1996) points to concentrated poverty and isolation from mainstream social and economic opportunities as the defining characteristics of this population and as the primary villains in the production of crime; gang delinquency; “off the books” illegal enterprises; and, ultimately, ineffective social control (cited in Venkatesh, 2006).

Recent empirical and theoretical research linking the structural characteristics of neighborhoods to individual behaviors has helped bridge macro-, individual, and micro(interaction and situational) levels of explanation. Building on the “social disorganization” thesis of the Chicago School of urban sociology, which attributed contrasting trends among communities to the relative effectiveness of their social control organizations and institutions, Robert Sampson and colleagues (Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997) link crime to specific dimensions of neighborhood social capital, including *intergenerational closure*, *reciprocated exchange*, and *informal social control and mutual support of children*. Together, these dimensions comprise what they term “collective efficacy,” a property of neighborhoods and communities based on mutual trust and shared expectations that residents will take responsibility for each other's children. When neighborhood characteristics hinder collective efficacy, crime and disorder flourish alongside street gangs and other troublesome youth groups. A major consequence for young people in such environments is limited “street efficacy,” that is, the “perceived ability to avoid violent confrontations and to be safe in one's neighborhood” (Sharkey, 2006, p. 920).

Growing up in deprived neighborhoods and families, capital-deficient youth search for other ways to *be somebody*. Many young black males find themselves, in Elijah Anderson's (2008) felicitous phrasing, “against the wall” in American society and, in the interest of survival and the search for self-respect and status, craft a public image out of unique styles of dress, mannerisms, and behaviors compelled under the “code of the street.” Described by Anderson (1999) as an emergent but pervasive value system based on achieving respect through violence, street codes have been documented in a variety of settings, especially the most

disadvantaged neighborhoods in which gangs and gangbanging flourish. To outsiders, what transpires in these environments is evidence of depravity and perversity, attributable mainly to personal problems and shortcomings. For those more directly involved, however, adherence to the code of the street may simply be common sense. Reviewing *The Violent Gang* (Yablonsky, 1962), for example, R. W. England (1965) noted that description of the “Balkans” gang as an unstable “near-group” led by five sociopathic youth can be interpreted just as readily in a manner consistent with the code-of-the-streets thesis:

In a society that motivates toward the achievement of success and notoriety, the disadvantaged slum boy with limited social ability and training can achieve a simulacrum of these goals through the use of an elemental violence which serves as a ready means for upward social mobility within the gang and, to some extent, in the larger society. (p. 639)

Like other subcultural adaptations, the code offers to its adherents status criteria that are within reach. Those who succeed are afforded street credibility and given their due “props,” some even rising to the rank of “ghetto star,” “badass,” “O. G.” (original gangsta), or “veterano.” Such street capital is the currency among those lacking in economic, political, social, cultural, and human capital and resources. Gangs are an important part of this picture, offering young people the chance to negotiate, albeit not always successfully, the difficult world around them and their place in it.

Global Contexts

Although disagreement exists concerning the precise nature of the forces comprising globalization, it is impossible to deny the human impact of worldwide changes in economic and political systems, international criminal enterprises, and responses to crime. Global trends, often driven by advances in technology and transportation, have transformed economies on many levels of organization. The most devastating effect for inner-city local economies has been the loss of well-paying manufacturing jobs. Once providing avenues of mobility out of poverty and povertystricken neighborhoods, these jobs have moved to the suburbs and, in many cases, to developing and third world countries in which human labor is easily exploited.

Extending the argument of Wilson (1987) in the United States, Hagedorn (2008) argues that an important result of global trends has been the emergence of large-scale underclass populations in many cities throughout the world. Hagedorn's “world of gangs” thesis paints a very different picture of gangs than did research carried out during much of the 20th century. Contrary to Thrasher's (1927) emphasis on the spontaneous emergence of street gangs out of common interests and play groups, for example, Hagedorn argues that the forces of globalization have transformed and *institutionalized* traditional street gangs and created new collectivities of “armed young men.” Hagedorn adopts the view that a “new geography of social exclusion” increasingly affects the “Fourth World,” comprising “large areas of the globe, such as much of Sub-Saharan Africa and impoverished areas of Latin America and Asia,” and is “present in literally every country, and every city” (cited in Castells, 2000, p. 168). Large numbers of young people in these places have been displaced by intertribal conflict and genocide, pressed into military service, sexually enslaved, recruited into drug distribution, and forced to adapt to other extreme conditions. Although such devastations are not limited to young people, the effects of exposure to violence and posttraumatic stress disorder—previously observed among military veterans, street gang members, and victims of crime and torture—may be especially harmful and lasting among youth. In some countries, entire

generations of children have become victims.

Despite Hagedorn's (2008) defense that "gangs are not a unique form but one of many kinds of armed groups that occupy the uncontrolled spaces of a 'world of slums'" (p. xxiv), his amorphous definition of gangs as "alienated groups socialized by the streets or prisons, not conventional institutions" (p. 89) obscures important distinctions among and between "street gangs" and other gangs in levels of alienation, armament, and unconventional socialization. Child soldiers and other groups of armed young men (and young women) have become a tragic reality, no matter their differences from street gangs. However, Hagedorn's impressive documentation that such groups exist in many parts of the world fails to provide the sort of rich, locally contextualized information needed to answer questions of how, why, and under what conditions they develop into a street gang or "morph into an ethnic militia, a fundamentalist paramilitary group, or a drug cartel" (p. 22). His overall theme that the ubiquity and permanence of racism and the black/white divide trumps social class and the underclass thesis fits uncomfortably with armed conflicts involving other groups and with huge variations in intergroup relations based on class distinctions in the United States and elsewhere.

However, Hagedorn's (2008) insistence that gangs are "social actors" rather than passive reactors to oppressive conditions is surely correct, as confirmed by a number of researchers. Venkatesh (2000) links the emergence of street gang control of the distribution of crack cocaine in Robert Taylor Homes (on the South Side of Chicago), the largest public housing complex in the world, to a combination of the disappearance of legitimate work, weakened police and Chicago Housing Authority control, and the compensatory rise of indigenous forms of social control within the massive complex. Indigenous forms of control included gang leaders and members who provided "protection" for legitimate as well as underground businesses and "enforcement" of informal contractual arrangements. Such arrangements were successful for a time, but in the absence of effective police protection, they proved to be too fragile to contain excesses of gang violence and harassment. Venkatesh and Murphy (2007) concur with Hagedorn in suggesting that local indigenous behaviors, including those of gangs, "can be understood as a reaction to and a manifestation of greater, global shifts that have transformed both the formal and informal structures under which communities balance local demands and relations with those of a broader, global order" (p. 153).

Gang Control

Thus far, little has been said in this chapter about efforts to address the problem of gangs, saving for last what has become an enormously important and controversial topic. Reflecting multiple points of view, the history of gang control in the United States has changed drastically since the early days of street worker programs, an indirect descendent of the Chicago Area Project emphasizing community organization. Fast forward roughly 50 years, and the picture appears quite different. Weapons, drugs, money, and cars have all made gang violence more deadly, fueling American society's long-term reliance on the police and the nation's prisons for "suppression" of such problems.

Although programs emphasizing suppression have dominated gang control policy, little success can be demonstrated that is based on rigorous evaluation. Malcolm Klein and Cheryl Maxson (2006) express skepticism, however, noting that the vast majority of gang control programs in the United States have targeted individuals rather than groups, thus ignoring the group processes and structures that are so important to gang behavior. A few consequences of this approach are illustrated by anthropologist Elana Zilberg's (2007) ethnographic study of criminal, immigration, refugee, and human rights law within and between the United States

and El Salvador. Zilberg studied the rise and decline of Homies Unidos, “a transnational youth violence prevention organization,” an organization of young people, many of them members or former members of Salvadoran gangs who had been deported from the United States:

Homies functions as a liaison between gangs, civil society, and the state, and is one of the only alternative spaces of representation available to gang and deported gang youth. While the organization works with gang-affiliated, -alleged, and -impacted youth in general to redirect the gang structure, its disciplines, and its solidarities into tools for stopping the violence committed by gangs and against gangs, it also functions as a support group for gang members deported from the United States who are seeking an alternative to violence. (p. 62)

Pointing to the paradox that the United States has championed both human rights legislation and draconian law enforcement policies with respect to street gangs, Zilberg (2007) attributes the declining effectiveness of Homies Unidos to the “boomerang effects of the globalization of zero tolerance policing strategies” (p. 83), which undermine their efforts by treating members of the organization as active gang members. Further, to earlier criticisms that deportation globalizes gangs and gang violence, she adds that the U.S. policy of forced exile has had especially devastating effects on the identity and future prospects of targeted youth.

As indicated by recent calls for expanded police gang units and punitive legislation such as the Gangbusters' Bill, suppression is likely to remain for some time the single most popular strategy for dealing with gang problems. However, there is growing consensus concerning the need to get past “business as usual” and focus on community involvement, investment, and institutional support. In California, for example, authorities continue to experiment with civil gang injunctions and other civil—as opposed to criminal—remedies, albeit often involving legal controversy. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention has supported the (Irving) Spergel model for a comprehensive, community-wide approach to gangs, seemingly embracing the importance of prevention and intervention as well as suppression. The Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) program brings gang education to many classrooms throughout the country, and encouraging results have been reported for Operation Ceasefire, an initiative of the Boston Gun Project. Father Gregory Boyle's Homeboy Industries, offering “at-risk and former gang involved youth ... a variety of services [e.g., tattoo removal, job training, counseling, and so on] in response to their multiple needs,” emphasizes mentoring, life skills, and “first chances” (<http://www.homeboyindustries.org>). Several other programs have placed workers (i.e., ex-gang members) back on the streets, in an effort to build capital and promote collective efficacy among gang youth and their communities.

Determining the efficacy of such programs is extremely complex, if not impossible. Few systematic evaluations have been conducted, and criteria for “success” among existing studies are often defined and measured narrowly in terms of arrest, prosecution, and incarceration. The issues discussed in this chapter underscore the need for an expanded view of gangs and strategies for their control. In addition to problems of capital and their effects on families, communities, and individual socialization, both in the short and long term, much greater attention must be paid to the relationship between prison and street gangs. In view of America's heavy reliance on incarceration and suppression as means of crime control, it is also important to understand the nexus of prison and street. Since James Jacobs (1977) documented the dramatic rise of Chicago gangs in an Illinois maximum security prison during the 1970s, the consequences of prison gang influences on the street, as well as street gang activity behind bars, have received little consideration.

Conclusion

Understanding gangs and the control of their behavior has become much more complex as a result of social change at global, national, and local levels. Immigration continues to change the face of this country, as people come from all over the world in search of a better life. Most will be welcomed and assimilate rapidly, adding to the growth of the country and American culture. Some will do much worse, contributing to and confirming stereotypes that both fuel and reflect intergroup conflict and competition over scarce resources.

To young people facing the impacts of such broad changes in society, in school, at home, on the streets, and in their communities, gangs represent an attractive means by which to negotiate and capitalize on their daily lives. In return for the often high, sometimes deadly, costs of “putting work in,” gangs offer protection, friendship and belonging, status, and material comforts. David Brotherton (2008), long-time student of the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation street gang in New York, suggests that gangs also provide members and associates with opportunities for political resistance against oppression and social control. This contrasts sharply with the history of Latino gangs elsewhere, and with the work of Thrasher (and Asbury before him), who documented the participation of white ethnic street gangs *in the service of* politicians in Chicago and New York. Latino and white gang histories, in turn, contrast with the history of failed attempts by black street gangs to achieve political power. Despite the apparently sincere efforts of some gang leaders and their followers to “go conservative,” continued violent and other types of criminal behavior by gangs and their members made them easy targets for Chicago officials threatened by the prospect of politically organized black gangs.

Whatever their consequences for the politicization of gangs, it is clear that arrest, prosecution, and incarceration did not make gangs go away back then, and they are unlikely to do so today. These are strategies for dealing with the problem of individuals. Gangs are part of ongoing processes played out in the lives of young people, but heavily influenced by the world around them. Insight into these processes has been slow to develop, but decades of hard work have brought them into much clearer focus. More hard work is needed, however, to bridge levels of explanation and existing gaps in knowledge. Problems of youth violence and troublesome youth groups (including street gangs), and what to do about them, will always be present. The least that can be done is to try to better understand them.

Notes

1. The ERP consensus definition is this: “A gang is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (Klein & Maxson, 2006, p. 4). Although durability is subjective, this stipulation is meant to distinguish street gangs from ad hoc groups or milling crowds that engage in delinquent, criminal, or other types of troublesome behaviors.

2. Recent estimates place the number of gangs in the United States at 24,000, with approximately 760,000 active members in 2,900 jurisdictions (Egley, Howell, & Major, 2004).

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