

Introduction

Gang activity continues to be a widespread and serious problem in the United States. In addition to numerous (typically larger) cities across the nation with chronic gang problems, in the past 15 years many new cities and towns have reported experiencing gang problems. For most of these areas gangs come and go rather quickly, but for others they have become all too familiar, all too stable. And with each new “discovery” of a gang problem there comes a whole host of stereotypes, misconceptions, and fallacies proclaimed, circulated, and recirculated in the general public. What is known about gangs from systematic, impartial research is all too often unheeded and neglected.

Our intention for this book is to expose the reader to some of the most salient, contemporary issues surrounding gangs. Within that broad intention, we have opted for satisfying quality and readability rather than always seeking the most detailed; we have sought articles that best represent a larger category of material, articles that contribute to a *pattern* of information, and articles that present different or even opposing views on various topics.

As we began preparations for the third edition of *The Modern Gang Reader*, we quickly realized that many new and important pieces on gangs had been published since the last edition. The process of arriving at a third edition, we knew, would be met with some difficulty. First, we invited an additional editor who has been involved in recent gang research and publication and who is currently the senior survey analyst of the largest ongoing study of gang activity across the United States. Second, each of us reviewed the wealth of information published since the last edition and then presented our selections to the other editors. Owing to the quality of recently published material, we did not immediately agree on but a few articles. It took many rounds to decide which articles to include, which ultimately led us to the painful job of deciding which articles from the previous edition to

remove. While there are certainly many justified arguments about the inclusion or continuance of certain articles that have been omitted in this edition, our ultimate goal was, as always, to present the reader with a collection of articles that fit together as an ensemble, a comprehensive exposure to the varied and important research topics regarding gangs. Some topics are entirely new—stemming from largely unprecedented research designs and/or agendas—while others have seen increased research attention and refinement. The end result, we believe, is a highly accessible, readable, and expansive book representing the current knowledge of gang research.

The format of this book is quite straightforward. Section I begins with a discussion of definitional issues regarding gangs—where any discussion of gangs should begin—and proceeds with a brief overview of the history of gang research, a macro-level framework from which to understand the emergence of gangs, and the social variables and processes that contribute to individuals’ joining and leaving the gang. Section II includes recent gang trends as depicted by a large sample of law enforcement agencies, the variability of gang structure and behavior across the United States, a comparison of U.S. gangs to their cross-national counterparts, and an overview of prison gangs. Section III offers an inspection of gangs across racial/ethnic and gender lines and, while noting important differences along these dimensions, demonstrates that on the whole gangs exhibit far more similarities than is generally believed. Section IV gets to the heart of what interests most people about gangs—their antisocial behavior—and specifically concentrates on two behaviors often associated with gangs—violence and drugs. What one *does* about gangs is the most complex issue of all. Thus, the fifth and final section presents articles covering the many different responses to gangs. These include prevention strategies that target the general population, intervention strategies that attempt to provide

services to current gang members, and suppression strategies that are perhaps best exemplified by law enforcement procedures to crack down on gangs and deter their criminal behavior.

Despite the programs and policies and laws, we are left with the sad but inescapable conclusion that despite many genuine efforts to develop gang intervention and control programs, we have not come far. We have learned far more about what to avoid than what can be done positively. Equally sadly, little of what has been learned has been incorporated into prevention and control programs.

To understand why this is so, it may be helpful to review several points in this introduction. Although covered in various ways in the readings we have selected for the volume, the following points can be highlighted as background to what follows.

1. Street Gangs and Others

“Gang” is an ambiguous term, subject to changing usages over time. Most, though not all, of this book is concerned with modern *street* gangs, not with the Mafia, prison gangs, terrorist groups, supremacist groups, motorcycle clubs, or the many thousands of other youth groups that are occasionally delinquent. Even with those exclusions, street gangs come in bewildering varieties. They can be as small as a dozen or so members, they may number several hundred members, or they may be unusual federations of several thousand members. They are primarily but not exclusively male (ratios of males to females are described as ranging from almost 1 to 1 to 10 to 1 or more; there are some all-female gangs, but these are few). Perhaps 85 percent of street gangs consist primarily of racial and ethnic minorities—black, Hispanic, Asian—and can be found in large urban centers, in suburbs, and in isolated towns and cities. Street gang members can range in age from pre-teens to adults in their 30s, with the average age between 16 and the early 20s in most gangs, though this varies by gender. They are usually territorial (both in the sense of living in relatively circumscribed areas and in the sense of having strong neighborhood loyalties). While most of the members’ waking hours are spent on normal, even dull activities, street gang members more than most young people evidence an orientation to-

ward antisocial behavior—various forms of delinquent and criminal behavior. In most cases, they are generalists rather than specialists in crime; that is, the crime patterns are versatile, ranging from the most minor forms of vandalism and petty theft to less common serious violent offenses. Yet it is the violence that has captured public attention and engendered the kinds of suppressive official responses described in several parts of Section V.

Not all gangs are street gangs. The recent emergence of drug distribution gangs, for instance, has fueled much of the outcry against street gangs because the two gang forms have mistakenly been taken as synonymous. They are not. There has been some similar confusion of prison gangs and street gangs as well (see Chapter 13), while others have hoped to include white racist groups like the Skinheads in the same category as the more traditional street gangs (see Chapter 9). Every such attempt to overgeneralize yields not only conceptual confusion, but also control programs more likely to fail for bringing to bear on one gang form the beliefs about another. Category-specific kinds of intervention are needed.

2. Gangs Then and Now

A “classical” period of gang research that built upon the original work of Frederic Thrasher in 1930s’ Chicago flourished in the 1950s and 1960s in New York, Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles. In those days, most street gangs studied were of the traditional or vertical type, each consisting of several age-specific subgroups and often one or two auxiliary girls’ groups. They ranged in size from 50 to 200 members and in ages of 11 or 12 to the early 20s. Highly territorial and violent far more in talk than in actions, these gangs were black and Hispanic, but also white in the earlier years—Irish, German, Polish, Italian, and so on.

Located principally in lower- and working-class sections of major metropolitan areas, these youthful gangs fought among and between themselves, and committed a wide variety of delinquent offenses of a principally nonserious type. They were significant features of their inner-city communities, but with a few exceptions they were not the sources of fear and terror one is accustomed to hearing of now.

Things have changed. Instead of a few

score gang-involved communities, we now have a few thousand reporting gang problems. The variety of gang structures has grown, making generalizations more difficult. Many older young adults are now involved and firearms are readily available, yielding a far more apparent violent aspect to many gangs: around 1,500 people have been killed in gang incidents in each of the cities of Los Angeles and Chicago since the turn of the twenty-first century. Ethnic patterns have changed as well, with most street gangs being of minority status, adding to mainstream society's disdain for gang members. Partly because of gang proliferation and increased violence levels, but also reflective of more conservative political times, the official approach to gangs has swung from prevention and social intervention to law enforcement control programs and "crackdown" legislation. In reading the various selections in this volume, readers should note the years of original publication in order to set each piece in its proper place.

3. Sources of Gang Knowledge

The selections in this book come from a wide assortment of sources and methodological approaches. Each contains its own strengths and limitations and, as such, we remind our readers of the obvious truth that no one method can claim fairly to be the best. Each has its problems, and we would argue for a pluralistic approach.

Ethnographic field research, usually concentrating on one or only a few gangs, seldom yields tested generalizations—gangs differ, communities differ, and researcher perspectives differ. Ethnographic research with a comparative focus has been especially fruitful in recent years, avoiding some, but not all, of these limitations. Further, crime statistics of a reliable sort are seldom collected in such studies. Yet from such close-at-hand research, one tends to get at the perspective of the gang member that is simply not otherwise available. Ethnographers "know" gangs in a way that survey researchers and analysts of official crime data cannot hope to achieve.

By the same token, those who rely on youth or adult surveys—interviews or questionnaires—are subject to two highly suspect sets of reporters, the gang members and those who process them (such as the police and service providers). Their perspec-

tives are sometimes self-serving and often unverifiable. On the other hand, surveys can yield systematic information on a wider population of gangs and can take into account the expertise of people who have worked extensively with gangs. A combination of ethnography and survey techniques is perhaps the best antidote.

Those who rely principally on official records—police, court, corrections—have other problems. The records contain a minimum of verifiable data about individual gang members, and far less about gang structures. The criminal records include only a small portion of actual offenses committed, and are disproportionately about the more serious offenses. Yet in no other way can so much gang crime data be gathered, nor data on large numbers of gangs across many communities. And, we have discovered, it is usually only the police who have an overview of gangs in their city; community residents and agency officials are knowledgeable—when they are—only about groups very close by.

It is well to be skeptical about any one source of gang knowledge, and about any one piece of gang description as being applicable to gangs generally. We urge caution, and we urge comprehensive review and respect for what can emerge from many sources. This volume reflects this viewpoint.

4. Group Contexts

So far, we have said little about gang theories. They abound, but unfortunately tend not to be very comprehensive. We find no specific theory of gangs to be satisfactory, and no general theory to be adequate to many specific instances. Further, how one sees gangs is very dependent on the context one employs.

A. Deviance

Gangs and gang behavior are socially deviant, but so are many other things. Within the relatively disadvantaged neighborhoods that spawn gangs, one may well find drug sales and use, homelessness, alcoholism, high dropout rates at school, prostitution and gambling, high rates of non-marital cohabitation and teenage pregnancy, high rates of public health problems, and so on. In other words, gangs don't appear in *gang* neighborhoods, but most often in *problem-prone* neighborhoods where gang involve-

ment is one among many patterns of social deviance. For many gang writers, then, the gang is not the problem: the nature of the community and how it came to be that way is the problem. Gangs, like other social problems, are the byproducts of their communities, and perhaps it is the source of community ills that is the appropriate target of intervention.

B. Racism

As noted above, most gangs are composed of racial and ethnic minorities. This is not a random pattern; it is no accident. Gangs emerge in minority communities, usually those overwhelmed by poverty, unemployment, and low levels of social services, because the dominant society permits such communities to exist. Inadvertent or institutional racism—the racism of social neglect—is hard for many to face, and harder yet to combat. Yet the gangs we describe are a product of these forms of racism. Blame does not inhere in the gangs alone, and many gang researchers find modern gangs more blameless because they reflect an often insensitive white America.

C. Youth

As one reads media and other reports of gang activity, it is easy to form stereotypes of marauding bands, sophisticated automatic weapons, innocent victims, terrorized neighborhoods, and outmanned police handcuffed by restrictive judicial rulings. These are, in fact, occasional facets of the gang problem—very occasional. We lose sight of the humdrum life of most gang members, of their dislocation from much of mainstream America, and of the fact that so many spend their prime gang years as adolescents in trouble, not adult hoods ripping off society. One need not condone criminal behavior in order to appreciate that these are youth—*our* youth—whose futures in many instances are salvageable if we have the patience to apply the knowledge available to us and the persistence to continue supporting the research on gang youth that will yield better prevention and intervention tools.

D. Social Psychology

Of several intellectual traditions that can be brought to bear on gang issues, social psychology seems a particularly pertinent one. Gangs are groups, and a great deal of work has been carried out by social psychol-

ogists on group structure and function. Consider just these well-researched concepts: group size, leadership, cohesiveness, group norms and values, conformity, peer pressure, intergroup relations, role-modeling, morale, rumor transmission, and communication patterns. Each has a well-documented knowledge base, and each can be applied to the understanding of gang processes. A number of gang researchers—fewer than might be hoped—have placed gangs in this intellectual context and have successfully analyzed a number of common gang patterns as well as some of the reasons gangs have been so resistant to attempts at social intervention and control.

E. Organizational Behavior

In addition to their own group organization features, gangs are affected by social organizations whose study comprises another highly relevant intellectual context. Families, school, community agencies, city and state legislation bodies, police, courts, and corrections personnel are all members of informal and formal organizations. As such, these people interact with gangs as organizational representatives both motivated by and constrained by organizational values and norms, bureaucratic procedures, special interests, political pressures, conflicting ideologies and perspectives, self-protection, and inertia.

Gangs develop, flourish, and languish in the contexts of these organizations. Some gang researchers have described the likely effect on gangs of existing and alternative organizational milieus, finding that such analyses help to refocus attention on non-gang factors that can exacerbate the gang situation. Again, the clear implication is that blame and credit do not belong to the gangs alone.

F. Community Structures

Finally, there is a need to consider the macro-structure of gang-involved communities. From Thrasher on, gang researchers have rather uniformly been sensitive to the level of structure and organization of communities as contributors to gang development and absorbers of gang activity. Socially well-organized neighborhoods can include gangs, but more commonly it is neighborhoods in transition (ethnic, economic, etc.) and structurally disadvantaged

neighborhoods that have most often been described as gang-prone.

Thus, a number of gang researchers have concentrated on ways that reorganizing and activating communities can reduce the level of gang tension and reintegrate gang members into mainstream activities. Here, the gang is at most a secondary target of intervention, and the level of a community's social capacity is the primary target.

Each of these contexts—deviance, racism, youth, social psychology, organization, and community structure—provides a perspective from which to understand gangs. As such, each is deliberately included among the papers in this volume. Keeping one's eye on the perspective from which an author seems to be working aids interpretation of the positions taken, and provides the basis for healthy skepticism in judging the validity

of the work in question. In other words, we urge our readers to be interpretive, not just to be recorders of the works presented here.

We end with one other cautionary note. As one considers the articles included in this volume and other gang-related writings as well, one should keep in mind that the gang problem is often *used* for other, usually political, purposes. Gangs have become social and political footballs, kicked around in the public arena to justify ideologies, organizational build-ups, legislative reforms, and budgetary enhancements. Each time one sees or hears of a new proposal to "deal with the gang problem," it seems fair to question the extent to which that proposal is designed to address gangs, and the extent to which it addresses the proposer's needs. Experience in the gang world fosters a mildly cynical outlook. ♦