

Cambridge University Press  
0521565669 - Life in the Gang: Family, Friends, and Violence  
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## C H A P T E R O N E

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**Life in the Gang: Family, Friends, and Violence**

I'ma die for my colors, that's the first thing they say, I'ma die for my colors. What a color? A color that somebody done painted, red and blue. Say for instance I might be walking down the street and some Crips see me and it may be about five Crips, I'm the one Blood, just walking.

Jump that color, I heard.

They gonna walk up to me and they gonna take me out, yeah, what's up with that color, they talking about they gonna burn me, then we start doing that [pounding on his chest], you know, that mean they finna kill you. (Male #001, "Mike Mike," twenty-year-old Thundercat)<sup>1</sup>

THE COLORS red and blue are the symbols of street gangs, especially the Bloods and Crips. And as this quote from a leader of the "Thundercats" illustrates, colors can have lethal consequences. These gangs, and others like them, have captured the public imagination in the United States, fueling concerns about violence and drug sales. Much of this awareness is generated by the media; movies, television, radio, and newspaper stories are the primary sources of knowledge about gangs for most Americans. However, the picture of gangs and gang members painted by these images misses much that is of central importance to understanding gangs. Without such understanding, our ability to respond effectively to the threats gangs create or the criminality their members engage in will be severely limited.

Interest in gangs is not new. They have been an object of study for at least the last century, and their consideration by journalists and novelists extends well beyond that. Surges of academic and public interest in gangs occurred in the 1890s, 1920s, 1960s and late 1980s into the 1990s.

Changes in four social and demographic characteristics link interest in gangs in each of these periods: (1) immigration, (2) urbanization, (3) ethnicity, and (4) poverty. Each of these decades corresponds to rapid changes in the composition of city populations and economies. Working together, these factors produced conditions that make the formation and growth of gangs more likely. Yet economic and population variables alone cannot explain the growth of gangs or the nature of gang activities. Other insights are needed, particularly those that come from gang members themselves, because these insights can inform us about the values and group processes that lie at the heart of gang behavior.

There is controversy about the first use of the term “gang” to refer to an aggregation of relatively organized offenders. Sanchez-Jankowski argues that the term was first applied to “outlaws” in the 1800s. However, Bursik (1993) cites evidence from Johnson regarding groups in Philadelphia and from Haskins for New York City that gangs existed in cities before they did in more rural Western outposts. Sheldon (1898) is generally credited with the first academic use of the term “gang” (see Yablonsky 1962, 73). His description of gangs stems from a broader interest in the group activities of children, particularly games. In observing youthful social associations, he found that “spontaneous societies” seemed to emerge from the everyday activities of young people. Of particular interest were the predatory organizations involved in violent and property crimes, which he labeled gangs. Despite the involvement of these groups in illegal activities, he found considerable overlap between their characteristics and those of social clubs. The role of imitation was given prominent status in accounting for the behavior of these groups.

Throughout its history, the term “gang” has enjoyed a diverse usage, being linked to outlaws in the “wild west” and organized crime groups, among others. And the use of the term has not been confined to North America; “swing kids” in Nazi Germany were often named as gang members (Bessel 1987), and recent news reports have identified gangs in Russia (Raab 1994), Sarajevo (Burns 1993), and El Salvador (O’Connor 1994). The diversity of groups the term has been applied to provides evidence of the dilemmas in responding to the “gang problem.” On the one hand, since so much adolescent activity takes place in groups, it is important to distinguish legitimate adolescent group activity from that which has a consistent illegal character. On the other hand, it is useful to distinguish groups of juveniles who engage in street crimes from their more organized adult counterparts, typically known as organized criminals. The lack of a consistent definition of gangs creates problems, not

the least of which is the ability to compare information about gangs across cities and across different periods of times. For example, many of the groups regarded as gangs in the 1890s would not be so identified at the current time. Since not all of the illegal group activity of young people has a similar motivation or character, it is useful to have a less rigid definition of gangs. In this way, the term can capture variations across time, cities, ethnic, and age groups. However, the lack of a consistent definition of gangs creates problems for public officials who must formulate a response to what is perceived as the “gang problem.” Without a clear concept of what is a gang and who is a gang member, public officials find themselves responding to an amorphous, ill-defined problem. This often leads, on the one hand, to denial that gangs exist or, on the other hand, to the overidentification of gangs (Huff 1991).

In this book, we present the results of three years of studying gangs in a declining Midwestern rust belt city, St. Louis, Missouri. Working the street, we recruited, interviewed, and observed active gang members and their families. Our study corresponded to a period of rapid growth in both the number of gangs and gang members in St. Louis, enabling us to provide insights about the origins and expansion of gangs.

### **Our Study in Perspective**

Our work fits into a long tradition of examining gangs and gang members. We see its historical roots in the work of Thrasher in Chicago in the 1920s and draw considerable theoretical inspiration from the work of Short and Strodtbeck on group process, Klein on gang structure, and Yablonsky on violence. The work of Moore, Vigil, Padilla, and Hagedorn has helped guide our perspective on gang structure, gang activities, and the expansion of gangs. What makes our work distinctive, however, is its dependence on the gang member’s perspective in a city with an emerging gang problem.

**Early Gang Studies.** The themes of immigration, urbanization, ethnicity, and poverty are most evident in examinations of gangs in the 1890s and at the turn of the century. The majority of such accounts were journalistic in nature. Faced with waves of immigrants from western Europe, New York found itself with a considerable level of gang activity in the late 1890s, much of it involving Irish immigrants. According to Riis (1892, 1902) young Irish (and later Italian) immigrants found integration into the economy to be difficult. Lacking activities to occupy their

time, they formed gangs to provide for social and material needs. His descriptions of the gang focused on the myriad social conditions faced by the children of immigrants: poverty, poor education, poor housing, dirt, and the lack of wholesome activities. Gang life was a natural outcome for such youth:

So trained for the responsibility of citizenship, robbed of home and of childhood, with every prop knocked from under him, all the elements that make for strength and character trodden out in the making of the boy, all the high ambition of youth caricatured by the slum and become base passions, – so equipped he comes into the business of life. As a “kid” he hunted with the pack in the street. As a young man he trains with the gang, because it furnishes the means of gratifying his inordinate vanity; that is the slum’s counterfeit of self-esteem. (Riis 1902, 236–237)

The response to such problems was rather straightforward; occupy the time of these individuals and they will cease to be involved in gang activity. Activities such as athletics were recommended as “safety-valves” (Riis 1892, 131) for youthful energies.

The role of immigration in gang formation provided an important foundation for later examinations of gangs. Asbury (1928) studied gangs in New York City, especially in the Five Points area populated largely by recent Irish immigrants yet to move out of the economic underclass. He provided encyclopedic descriptions of the variety of gangs and their activities. The primary activities for these gangs were fighting, with each other as well as rival gangs. Asbury was careful to make the distinction between those who grow up in a gang and criminals who organize to perform illegal acts more effectively. He highlighted with considerable detail the colorful names used by these gangs, names that included the Roach Guards, Pug Ugliers, Shirt Tails, and Dead Rabbits. It is an important historical footnote that red and blue, the colors adopted by the contemporary Bloods and Crips respectively, were the colors used by the Irish gangs of New York City in the 1920s. The Roach Guards used blue as their color, and the Dead Rabbits used red as their symbol. This underscores one feature common to most American gangs throughout history, the use of symbols to identify members. Asbury also described numerous small gangs with affiliations to a larger gang, suggesting that most gang activity was concentrated around the neighborhood among a small group of friends well-known to each other.

**Thrasher’s Study of Gangs.** Thrasher’s pioneering work appeared in 1927, the first serious academic treatment of gangs. Working within the

sociological paradigm of the Chicago School, Thrasher gave gangs a cultural and ecological context. Using the concepts of culture and neighborhood ecology, he sought to explain gang transmission (the intergenerational character of gangs in neighborhoods and subcultures) as part of a process of collective behavior. Gangs in Chicago were found primarily in interstitial areas. These areas were characterized by three consistent ecological features: (1) deteriorating neighborhoods, (2) shifting populations, and (3) mobility and disorganization of the slum. The “ganging process” was dynamic and produced organizations that were constantly undergoing change. In this context, Thrasher saw gangs as

the spontaneous effort of boys to create a society for themselves where none adequate to their needs exists. What boys get out of such association that they do not get otherwise under the conditions that adult society imposes is the thrill and zest of participation in common interest, more especially in corporate action, in hunting, capture, conflict, flight and escape. Conflict with other gangs and the world about them furnishes the occasion for many of their exciting group activities. (1927, 37)

Thrasher found considerable variation in the definition of gangs but also noted that gangs played a variety of functions, further complicating efforts to define them in precise ways. In his view, gangs originated from the spontaneous group activity of adolescents and were strengthened by conflict. This process consists of three stages. In its earliest stage, the gang is diffuse, little leadership exists, and the gang may be short lived. Some gangs progress to the next stage, where they become solidified. Conflict with other gangs plays a notable role in this process, helping to define group boundaries and strengthen the ties between members, uniting them in the face of a common threat. The final step in the evolution of the gang occurs when it becomes conventionalized and members assume legitimate roles in society. For those groups that fail to make this transition, delinquent or criminal activity becomes the dominant focus of the group. Among Thrasher’s great strengths is his description of the process by which groups form, solidify, and disintegrate. He portrayed the relationship between gangs and other forms of social organization in a figure that traces the natural history of the gang. Most notable about this figure are the poignant reminders that social associations characterize most adolescent activities, and the majority of activities are law abiding.

Activities within the gang, according to Thrasher, were diverse and motivated by typical youthful concerns, such as thrills and excitement. A

number of predatory activities were observed, with stealing being the most common. Many gangs were characterized by Thrasher as conflict groups that developed out of disputes and flourished in the presence of threats from rival groups. Fighting was the preeminent activity, and clashes with members of one's own gang were as likely as those with members of rival gangs. For gang members, violence served both to unite them and to speed the adaptation of the gang to its environment. In this way, violence played an especially important function in the integration of members into the group. The threat presented by rival gangs served to intensify solidarity within the gang, especially for new members. Despite their involvement in criminal or delinquent activity, most gang members were assimilated into legitimate social activities, most often athletics.

Gangs are isolated from mainstream society both by geography and lack of access to legitimate institutional roles. This isolation contributes to the within-group solidarity so critical to Thrasher's account of gangs, but it also plays another role. It helps to explain the lack of integration into the economic, educational, and social structure of cities and serves to prevent many gang members from giving up their gang affiliations for activities of a more law abiding nature. The isolated nature of the gang also allows it to enforce its rules (such as they may be) in a manner largely unimpeded by other institutions. Order is maintained through informal mechanisms as well, particularly "collective representations" (297) such as symbols, signs, and group argot. The power of the collective is seen in its role in "mutual excitation" (299), promoting behavior among gang members that they would not normally engage in. Despite the attention given to the larger collective of the gang, Thrasher notes the importance of subgroups within the gang.

The two- and three-boy relationship is often much more important to the individual boy than his relationship to the gang. In such cases a boy would doubtless forego the gang before he would give up his special pal or pair of pals. (322)

It is important to note that these subgroups exist in all parts of the city, regardless of whether they are affiliated with larger gangs.

Despite the fact that Thrasher's observations of gangs are nearly seventy years old, and that the demographic characteristics of cities have changed profoundly since then, many of his conclusions have important implications for the contemporary study of gangs. The central questions he addressed – gang transmission, growth of gangs, sources of cohesion among gang members, the role of threats, the importance of collective

behavior, distinguishing adolescent group behavior from gang behavior, and most importantly the role of culture in understanding gangs – remain important today. And many of his observations, especially about the role of structural variables and group process within gangs, remain critical issues for the contemporary study of gangs.

### Gangs in the Sixties

The advent of the Depression and World War II induced a decline in gangs and the attention paid to them. However, the conclusion of World War II brought rapid social change to American cities, as the American economy struggled to adapt to peacetime. At the same time, northern cities experienced a massive migration of southern blacks moving to the “promised land” (Lerman 1991) of jobs and greater opportunity. In many ways, this migration mirrored earlier waves of European immigrants who had moved to the industrial cities of the northeast and Midwest seeking employment. And like many of their European counterparts who came before them, southern blacks often found their new homes to be less than hospitable places.

**Theory Development.** Gangs began to reemerge in cities in the 1950s and spawned a new generation of gang research, theory, and policy. Attention paid to gangs by criminologists in the 1950s and 1960s yielded important theoretical insights and policy recommendations. Building on the theoretical traditions of Emile Durkheim and Robert Merton, Albert Cohen (1955) developed the theory of status frustration to explain the process by which boys become involved in delinquent activities and gangs. Because they are judged by middle-class standards that many are ill equipped to meet, working-class and lower-class boys develop frustrations about achieving status goals. As a means of resolving these status concerns, they turn to delinquent activities and to the group affiliation of the gang. Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (1960) also built on the Mertonian tradition of emphasizing the role of shared cultural success goals and institutional means of achieving those goals. Rather than emphasizing status concerns, they focused on the blocked opportunities for achieving legitimate success faced by most working-class and lower-class boys. Because the opportunities for success were differentially distributed by neighborhood, some boys found that they lacked the access to achieving the goals society defined as important. The result was three forms of adaptations; conflict gangs, property gangs, or retreatist gangs.

The adaptations resulted from the level of available opportunities and the extent to which boys were integrated in the neighborhood.

Not all commentators on gangs and youth delinquency concurred with the premise that a single set of cultural values permeated American society. For the theories of Cohen and Cloward and Ohlin, it is critical that this be the case, because the commitment to a common set of values causes status frustration (for Cohen) or blocked opportunities (for Cloward and Ohlin) and leads to delinquency. Walter Miller (1958) theorized that a far different set of values permeated lower-class culture, values that naturally lead to increased levels of delinquent and gang involvement. For Miller, six “focal concerns” defined life for lower-class boys: fate, autonomy, smartness, toughness, excitement, and trouble. Commitment to these values, as opposed to those of the dominant culture, need not be explained by lack of access to legitimate success roles. Lower-class boys learned these values as a consequence of living in their own neighborhoods where such values were dominant. Miller’s approach emphasized the role of a subculture in the creation and maintenance of delinquent groups and gangs.

An important development in theory and research occurred with the appearance of Lewis Yablonsky’s (1962) work on the violent gang. Drawing on Thrasher, he identified three types of gangs – delinquent gangs, violent gangs, and social gangs – indicating that the violent gang was the most persistent and problematic for society. Not unexpectedly, the role of violence looms large in every aspect of this gang. The violent gang forms in response to threats against safety, and thus represents a form of protection for its members. It has a loose structure and little formal character; for example, leaders in this gang “emerge” and membership within gang subgroups in many cases is more important than the larger gang. Violence, the defining event for members of these types of gangs, can arise over seemingly senseless matters but most often occurs in response to perceived threats against gang territory. Membership fulfills a number of needs; most importantly, it meets the psychological needs of boys incapable of finding such fulfillment in the larger society. Because of its lack of organization, Yablonsky identifies the violent gang as a “near group” (272); a “collective structure” situated somewhere between totally disorganized aggregates (like mobs) and well-organized aggregates (like delinquent or social gangs).

**Action Research.** Much criminological work takes place in a policy vacuum; that is, the research is seldom closely coordinated with ongoing



policy or programmatic initiatives. A remarkable exception to this is found in the work of four researchers: Spergel (1966), Klein (1971), and Short and Strodbeck (1974). Each of these projects evaluated a gang intervention program that was premised on theories about gangs and gang behavior. And in each the researchers used the evaluation to revisit theories about gangs and delinquency, an occasion too rare in our field. We examine each of these because they helped to set the tone for the gang research that was to follow.

While Spergel, Klein, and Short and Strodbeck all examined active gang and delinquency prevention programs, Spergel's work was most concerned with the practical matters of working with gangs. He analyzed the approach to gang intervention that had become popular, the detached worker. At its heart, detached street work is problem-oriented, group social work, an approach with a long history, especially in Chicago, where the Chicago Area Projects had used it for some time. In part, this approach depended on the social structure of the neighborhood or community in which it operated. Spergel argued that successful work with gang members depended on an understanding of four factors: (1) the delinquent subculture (beliefs, norms and values) within the neighborhood, (2) the delinquent group itself, (3) the individual delinquent, and (4) the agency worker. Spergel highlighted the role of delinquency theory, particularly that of Cloward and Ohlin, and argued that street work *practice* must be determined by *theoretical explanations* of delinquent groups. Spergel's work had a prescriptive orientation, offering program and intervention suggestions for street workers addressing gang and delinquent behavior.

Klein (1971) assumed both a more theoretical and analytic approach to dealing with gangs, though his analysis emerged from the "action context" of evaluating gang intervention programs. Two programs, the Group Guidance Project and the Ladino Hills Project (which operated from 1962 through 1968) formed the basis of his analysis. He notes the programmatic efforts of Mobilization for Youth in New York, the Los Angeles Youth Project, the Chicago Area Projects, and Youth for Service in San Francisco. Each of these projects held many features in common, especially the detached worker approach that took programming into the community and encouraged street workers to fully involve themselves in the gang and gang activities. Klein's theoretical antecedents include Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin, Miller, and Bloch and Niederhoffer.

Klein arrived at the unsettling conclusion that the Group Guidance Project may have increased delinquency among gang members. Specifi-

cally, he found that delinquency increased among gang members who received the most services and that solidarity among gang members seemed to increase as a result of the attention paid to the gang by street workers. This led Klein to the conclusion that gang intervention programs may have the latent consequence of contributing to the attractiveness of gangs, thereby enhancing their solidarity and promoting more violence. He paid considerable attention to issues of gang structure, particularly solidarity among gang members. He concluded that most characteristics of gang structure were difficult to differentiate from other features of adolescent street culture and that members of gangs shared most in common with other (nongang) adolescents. His conclusions that gangs and gang members contained large variation within their respective ranks reinforced his earlier observation that gangs were not monolithic.

Klein's views of leadership and the sources of cohesion within gangs were consistent with his definition of gangs and gang membership. In his view, leadership was largely age related and was not so much a specific office as it was a mixture of functions. This reinforced the notion that gangs resembled other features of youth culture (disorganized, spontaneous, short term) more than they did more formal adult structures. Further support for this contention was found in the consistent report by gang members that their primary activity was "hanging out" with other members on the street. And their delinquency was described as "cafeteria style" (125) rather than a purposive, well-organized specialization. Cohesiveness, the force that keeps gangs together, was more a product of external than internal sources. That is, the bonds of gang membership do not become stronger in response to internal mechanisms (meetings, codes, signs, activities) but rather as a response to external pressures. In general, Klein found that few gang goals existed outside of those generated by external pressures, and the few internal gang norms that did exist were weak and transient. The external sources of cohesion were structural (poverty, unemployment, and weak family socialization) but also included pressures that resulted from interaction with other gangs as well as members of one's own gang. In particular, the threat of violence from another gang increased solidarity within the gang. One effect of this is that most victims of gang violence were other gang members. Of particular concern to Klein was the role membership interaction played in strengthening gang cohesiveness. The more gang members met and the more important their gang was perceived to be in the community, the stronger the bonds were between gang members. Against this backdrop,