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0521565669 - Life in the Gang: Family, Friends, and Violence  
Scott H. Decker and Barrik Van Winkle  
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This study is based on three years of fieldwork with ninety-nine active gang members and twenty-four family members. The book describes the attractiveness of gangs, the process of joining, the chaotic and loose organization of gangs, and gang members' predominant activities – mostly hanging out, drinking, and using drugs. The authors also discuss gang members' rather slapdash involvement in major property crime, their disorganized participation in drug traffic, and the often fatal consequences of their violent lifestyle.

Although the book focuses on the individual, organizational, and institutional aspects of gang membership, it also explores gang members' involvement with other school and neighborhood structures. Extensive interviews with family members provided groundbreaking insights into gang members' lives. Throughout the book, however, the authors keep the perspective of the gang member in the foreground. As much as possible, the story is told in gang members' own words.

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# Life in the Gang

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Family, Friends, and Violence

SCOTT H. DECKER  
BARRIK VAN WINKLE



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colleague in the Criminology and Criminal Justice Department at UM-St. Louis, provided important consultation throughout the study, helping to keep it focused on mainstream issues. The book is better for their input.

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## Preface

THIS IS A STUDY of the gang member's perspective. Our goal is to embed the group process and values of the gang within social institutions. Thus, we seek to provide an institutional and cultural context for gang values and activities. Our observations are based on three years of intensive fieldwork and interviews with gang members on the streets of St. Louis. Our study sheds light on the ways gangs grow in cities where there is no recent history of gangs. We do this by directly examining the perspective of active gang members and the family members of active gang members. It is our belief that attempts to understand gangs and gang members are enhanced by this approach and that programs designed to prevent gang membership or enable gang members to remove themselves from the gang can learn from such a study.

Our commitment to highlighting the gang member's perspective is informed by several convictions. The first of these is our belief that the best way to study gangs is to do so on their own turf. To accomplish this, we employed the services of an experienced field-worker, familiar with the St. Louis community and its neighborhoods. Based on contacts with nearly five hundred gang members, we were able to generate a sample of ninety-nine active gang members and twenty-four relatives of active gang members. These contacts were built over a period of several years' involvement in doing field research with active offenders. A second distinguishing feature of our research is that we relied only on field contacts to recruit the members of our sample. None of the subjects in our study were found through official agencies such as the police, courts or social service agencies. It was our belief that what we learned from gang mem-

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bers may well be influenced by the way in which we had made contacts with them. Making contacts in the field does not come without its own biases; however, it did provide us with a method of getting in touch with and interviewing gang members directly. Finally, while we did use a questionnaire, ample opportunity was provided for each participant in the study to tell us their story in their own words.

Our interest in recruiting and studying gang members in the field is linked to our desire to explore the broad range of activities in which gangs and gang members engage. A sample drawn from a criminal justice population or some other institutional setting (such as a school) would undoubtedly focus on activities related to that institution. Our commitment to understanding the gang member's perspective leads us to consider both gang and nongang activities, beliefs, and relationships. Since even the most "hard-core" gang member spends a considerable amount of time outside the gang, we feel that our approach is well suited to uncovering such activities. We also examined relationships among subgroups of gang members that didn't involve the entire gang, or that mixed gang and nongang members. A field study is particularly compatible with such goals.

This orientation places our work in a long and rich tradition of field studies of gangs. Thrasher's (1927) pathbreaking work with 1,313 gangs in Chicago in the 1920s is perhaps the best known of these. In the last decade, a number of field studies of gangs and gang members have been conducted (Moore 1978, 1991; Vigil 1988; Sanchez-Jankowski 1991; Hagedorn 1988; Padilla 1992; Sanders 1994; Campbell 1984). Our work is distinguished from these in a variety of ways. First, we have chosen to study gangs in a city with an emerging gang problem. Unlike Chicago and Los Angeles, gangs in St. Louis have reemerged since the middle 1980s. By using a study site where gangs lack the intergenerational quality found in some cities (Chicano gangs in Los Angeles or black gangs in Chicago, for instance), we can examine the factors responsible for the rapid growth in gang membership. As a city with an emerging gang problem, results from St. Louis may provide insights into the growth of gangs in dozens of cities across the country (Spergel and Curry 1993; Curry, Ball, and Fox 1994). A second distinguishing feature of our work is the choice of the study site. St. Louis is plagued by many of the social conditions that characterize large cities across the country – rapid depopulation, chronic unemployment, a declining industrial employment base, an aging housing stock – yet is still a manageable enough size in which to conduct such a study. An additional feature of our study is its

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## PREFACE

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focus on a greater number of gangs than is generally found in field studies. Padilla (1992), Moore (1978, 1991) and Vigil (1988) conducted intensive studies of a small number of gangs. In contrast, our work spans a much larger number of gangs, choosing instead to focus on the diversity across gangs and gang members.

The most unique feature of our work, however, is its focus on the links between gang members and their families. This relationship has received limited attention in past research and is critical to understanding the activities and perspective of most gang members, especially teenaged members. We could not hope to understand this relationship by studying gang members alone, since a relationship implies that there are at least two parties. By contrasting the perspectives of gang members with family members, we hope to reveal more about the link between families and youth who become involved in gangs.