

*Young gangsters distort Golden Rule:
Do unto others for what they did to you.*



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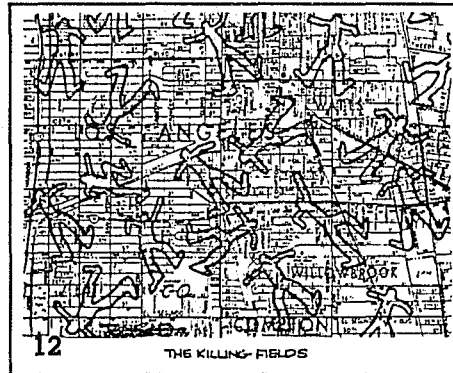
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About the cover:
 Gang "brothers" pose for this portrait, proudly flashing their gang hand sign. Photograph by Merrick Morton.

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 ACQUISITIONS

BY RONALD W. GARRISON

Gangs, history tells us, have changed little through the centuries as groups of violent, delinquent youths. Learning from this dark past may shed light on the future.

Gangsters: Back to the future

*Into the woods, but mind the past.
Into the woods but mind the future.
Into the woods, but do not stray.
Or tempt the Wolf or steal from the
Giant.*

— Stephen Sondheim,
"Into the Woods"

The Blacks and Whites were at it again, but this time the Blacks (named for the colors they wore, not their race) went too far. At a May Day dance, the Blacks launched a deliberate attack, wounding many Whites and cutting off the nose of a White leader. A witness to the event stated, "The devil began his work with these young men, working together in a pitch of arrogance using weapons and their hands."

Another contemporary declared, "They have come in a short time to great estate and, having reached it, they are not only luxurious and offensive but uncultured and ungracious."

This account is not from 1989 urban America, but from 14th century Florence, Italy. The incessant gang violence at that time had such an impact on one young White gang member that he poetically placed some of his rival gang members in hell. Medieval gang member Dante Alighieri, author of the

Divine Comedy, placed many members of the Florentine Blacks in various levels of *The Inferno*.

Gang activity flourished in colonial America as well. One American wrote in his diary on January 14, 1766, "Children nightly trampouze the streets with lanterns upon poles, the Magistry...do not dare suppress it." But by February 6th, the citizens apparently rallied against the youth, taking back their streets. The diarist notes, "This night several children were dispersed by watchmen (for the first time) for parading the streets with three effigies and candles, being about 300 boys."

However, one show of force didn't solve the problem in the 18th century, any more than it does today. In 1791, Philadelphia's *American Daily Advertiser* complained, "The custom of permitting boys to ramble about the streets by night is productive of the most serious and alarming consequences... assembled in corners, and concealed from every eye, they can securely indulge themselves in mischief of every kind. The older ones train the younger in the same path they themselves pursue."

Vast armies of runaway youth roamed the streets of American cities during the 18th and 19th centuries, in part due to the prison-like conditions found in orphanages and the elimination of cottage industry apprenticeships, which had of-

fered youths valuable vocational skills; a minimal level of care that included room, board and education; and a positive role model provided by the master craftsman, according to James Haskins, author of *Street Gangs: Yesterday and Today*.

By the 1830s, traditional apprenticeships had been replaced by the practice of exploiting children in factories without providing the requisite care the apprenticeship system previously delivered. For those who could not or would not cope with the factories' harsh conditions, it was easier to earn a living on the street by forming and joining gangs.

The lessons of history can guide today's efforts in the intervention and prevention of youth gangs, alter our perceptions of gangs, and change our response to gang members and the violence they perpetuate. In fact, the similarities between gangs of a century ago and those creating the urban nightmare of 1989 are startling.

For example, by the 1820s, the Five Points-Paradise Square district of New York City had become a haven for street gangs organized in the backrooms of grocery stores. By 1855, New York had an estimated 30,000 gang members. These gangsters adopted names and created the symbols of their membership, much as today's gangs use hand signs and colors to differentiate themselves from their rivals. The Plug Uglies

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wore large plug hats stuffed with wool and leather for protection, and the Shirt Tails defied fashion by wearing shirts outside their trousers. The Dead Rabbits liked to wear a red stripe on their pants, while the Roach Guards sported a blue stripe.

From 1830 to 1860, gang violence turned Paradise Square into a battlefield. The Dead Rabbits and the Roach Guards were rival gangs that eventually formed an alliance against the Bowery Boys. (One female Dead Rabbit known as "Hell-Cat Maggie" filed her teeth to sharp points and had long fingernails made of brass.)

Today, gangs actively recruit juveniles, knowing they will face less severe legal penalties if caught in a criminal act. According to Robert Lauder, author of *Fighting Violent Crime in America*, "It is in the gangs that the underaged criminals are most useful. Only 1 percent of children 10 or younger who are picked up go into institutions, compared to 20 percent in some cities for those who are 17." He estimates that a million serious crimes, from larceny-theft to murder to arson, are committed by children age 12 and under. In much the same way, very young children joined gangs in the 1800s. Herbert Asbury, author of *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld*, writes: "The Little Daybreak Boys, composed of lads from 8 to 12 years of age, were almost as ferocious as the older gangsters whose name they adopted and whose crimes they strove mightily to imitate."

That startling viciousness can also be seen in today's gangs, whose violence is connected to gang members' own drug use and gangs' increasing involvement in drug distribution. Even before the expanding drug trade hit this country, however, gang members commonly participated in violent acts. In *Epic of New York City*, author Edward Robb Ellis cites the story of an old man who suffered a beating with a huge bludgeon by a Plug Ugly during the 1840s. When asked why he had assaulted the man,



New York Public Library Picture Collection

the gangster replied, "Well, I had 49 nicks in my stick, and I wanted to make it an even 50." Another Plug Ugly seized a stranger and cracked his spine in three places just to win a two-dollar bet.

In 1955, Albert Cohen related similar incidents in his book *Delinquent Boys*. The perpetrators summarized their actions with the statement "I guess we was just ornery," an echo of the chilling statements made by the youths who in 1989 went "wilding" in Central Park, attacked a woman jogger, and said they did it because it was "fun."

Finally, a comparison can be drawn between how 19th century and contemporary mayors bring in reinforcements to fight gangs. Nineteenth century New York frequently called in National Guard units to quell gang activity and rioting, and used military parades to establish authority in gang-infested areas. The mayor of Portland, Oregon, recently borrowed from this tradition by using National Guard personnel as clerical officers to free police from their desks and put more officers on the street.

Fighting the attraction of gangs

For more than a century, sociologists have debated why some people fall into the "law-abiding" category and others into the "law-violating" group. But there is little disagreement that a primary motivation to join a gang is the basic human need for recognition, ceremony and status.

In his classic work, *Gang Delinquency and Delinquent Subcultures*, James Short describes the choice an individual makes in determining which social group he or she will join as "highly complex and fluid, resting on a range of factors.... Of critical importance is status.... Action geared to attain status is much more acutely oriented to the fact of status itself than to the legality or illegality, morality or immorality of the means used to achieve it."

The contemporary need for status is often achieved through the marketing of drugs and weapons. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, cocaine seizures have increased nationally from 1,872 in 1981 to 80,000 in 1988. Juvenile crack arrests have tripled in

New York City and quadrupled in Washington, D.C., from 1983 to 1987. This is not surprising, considering an article in the May 9, 1988, issue of *Time* that reported, "Teen-agers dominate all aspects of the crack business." For many urban youth, the choice is not *whether* to join a gang, but *which one* to join.

The desire for status and ritual is a powerful one. To fight gangs, adults must consciously address this need in children, which means recognizing youth as a special group within society. However, the opposite seems to be happening. As our society ages, adults, who form the majority of the population, wrongly assume that all people (including immigrants and children) share collective principles about responsible law-abiding behavior. Adults tell children, "You should not join gangs," yet fail to provide them with the skills needed to avoid gang involvement.

Instead, today's adults are returning children to the status of little adults, a position they held for centuries before the concept of childhood gained acceptance. (The recent United States Supreme Court decision, *Wilkins vs. Missouri*, which made capital punishment possible for juveniles as young as 16, may be one example of our changing attitude toward children.)

Treating children as adults, however, is a way to force children to become responsible for their behavior while denying the adults' responsibility to mold that behavior. Although children were treated as adults in the past, the potential severity of that attitude was mitigated in part by individuals and institutions willing to take responsibility for the rearing of children, Philip Aries writes in *Centuries of Childhood*.

As New York Governor Mario Cuomo said recently, "We are left with the terrible possibility that we have, by our failures, produced young people who have learned to disdain simple principles of right conduct, principles so basic to our good order that we never contemplated their being re-

jected."

Learning to take responsible action is not an automatic process; responsibility must be taught. In the past this was accomplished through:

- Marriage and family
- Military service
- Families "taking in" youth to live in their home
- Apprenticeship programs and employment
- Religion
- Well-managed private and public orphanages
- *In-loco parentis* extending to a large circle of community adults

In addition, many youths naturally rejected gang life as they grew older, and gang violence sometimes decreased as a result of a large social movement to other locations, such as those that occurred during the California gold rush or the Alaskan oil boom.

The grip gangs held on schools and neighborhood was traditionally diminished through:

- A military presence, including parades through gang territory
- Community service volunteers who cleaned and repaired neighborhoods
- Religious missionaries
- Increased laws and penalties
- Stiff sentencing for gang leaders
- Youth service organizations
- Watchful team policing and probation
- Community/school rituals and rites of passage

Adults can learn a great deal from these historical solutions to the gang problem. Communities and schools should seek out and develop partnerships with parents, youth service agencies and active senior citizens to publicly recognize:

- Children's issues, interests and needs
- The positive achievements of childhood
- Individual children who make community contributions
- Groups of children who serve the

community or each other through peer programs

- The natural ties that exist between children and older adults, and
- Programs stressing lifelong civil education and service to the community

By doing this, schools can nurture the development of law-abiding behavior in children. Some schools are currently developing plans to prevent and curb gangs in their neighborhoods by:

- Redirecting gang-affiliated youth in a positive enterprise based on the Junior Achievement model
- Offering extra pay assignments for school counselors to work in gang intervention
- Making more home calls to assist the families of gang members
- Sponsoring a mothers' camp retreat
- Offering role-playing workshops stressing conflict resolution, non-violence and negotiation
- Establishing positive participation contracts
- Developing anti-gang curricula that stresses gang avoidance skills
- Providing vocational placement with tracking and follow-up
- Establishing comprehensive school policies on gang affiliation
- Creating special ceremonies for gang members who left the gang
- Developing a school/community gang prevention consortium
- Forming partnerships with law enforcement gang units, juvenile probation departments and the courts to share information on identified gang members in the neighborhood and school

Successfully competing with gangs, especially today when they offer the added incentive of drug wealth, will not be easy. But one thing is certain: To do nothing is to destroy our future as well as our children's. In the words of George Bernard Shaw, "The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them but to be indifferent to them; that's the essence of inhumanity." □