Gang Violence Prevention:
Perspectives and Strategies

Comp. by Alfredo Gonzalez, Shirley Better, with Ralph Dawson.

Edmund G.
"PAT"
Brown

INSTITUTE
of
PUBLIC
AFFAIRS

ornia State University,
Angeles

The Edmund G. "PAT" Brown Institute of Public Affairs

The Institute is a university based interdisciplinary center for applied public policy, research and analysis of major issues facing California and its respective local regions. The Institute addresses these challenging issues within a non-partisan, independent approach, and as a facilitator of long-range policy discussion and resolution.

The Institute serves the state and the community in the following ways:

- Intern program in public service;

- Foster dialogue and interchange between government, business, citizen organizations and academic institutions for effective social policies and improving the governmental process;

- Resource bank for constituents and a clearinghouse for information;

- Offering technical assistance, consultations, seminars and forums on vital policy issues;

- Public service and leadership development training;

- Distinguished lecture series.

The Occasional Papers series of the Edmund G. "Pat" Brown Institute of Public Affairs is designed to foster scholarly and pragmatic discussion and dialogue involving key public policy issues on the contemporary agenda. This series, and the content herein, does not necessarily reflect the position of the Institute, or the University, nor an endorsement of the recommendations, observations and conclusions advanced.

GANG VIOLENCE PREVENTION

PERSPECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

Compiled By

ALFREDO GONZALEZ and SHIRLEY BETTER

with RALPH DAWSON

1404█80

Contents

INTRODUCTION

The two papers in this volume are from the fourth conference on "Violence in America" sponsored by the School of Health and Human Services at California State University, Los Angeles. Other conferences on this topic sponsored by the School of Health and Human Services over the past several years were "Violence in the Community," "Violence in America: A Focus on the Young," and "The Gang Drug Connection." The conference from which these papers come from was entitled "Gang Violence Prevention: Perspectives and Strategies" and was cosponsored by the Center for the Study of Black on Black Crime, also at California State University Los Angeles.

There was an effort to structure this conference, as well as the others as a productive dialogue. There were formal conference presentations, but the intent was to allow sufficient time and opportunity for panelists and colleagues in the audience to engage in dialogue around this critical public policy issue. The papers in this volume were intended as a point of departure from which to examine the phenomenon from a variety of perspectives and ideologies.

In this regard, there was no attempt to provide "the ultimate answer." The issue of gang violence is complex and multifaceted. The goal was to have the panelists, the audience and through this publication—you, the reader, debate, question, discuss and provide a critical, rigorous analysis of this phenomenon. The goal is to begin to achieve a collective sense of the problem, the origins of the problem and the responses that will provide the most

meaningful, effective and humane solutions based on a critical understanding of it.

For us living in the urban metropolitan Los Angeles area there is no need to cite statistics on gang violence. We know the killing and the injury is beyond "tolerable" levels—if one can accept any level as tolerable. We know that gang violence is affecting gang as well as non-gang members; it is affecting the schools; it is affecting many of the young—directly and/or indirectly; it is affecting life in our communities and especially minority communities. Children who live in neighborhoods where there are high levels of gang violence are manifesting symptoms of "post-traumatic stress syndrome"—a condition similarly found in children of war-born areas like Beirut. Families in these communities are afraid to leave their homes at night or to use public facilities such as parks. The United States military is sending its doctors to hospitals in the Los Angeles area for "training" in emergency rooms because of the high incidence and type of gunshot wounds that are being encountered here, tragically paralleling real battle conditions.

It is important to keep in mind in the midst of all of this that "gangs," in various forms, go back at least to the 1500s. It's important to note many of their characteristics are very similar to those of today's gangs. Violence goes back to the beginning of time and has run like a thread through the fabric of American life.

Gangs and violence, then, are not unique to this historical time period, to this country, to Los Angeles or to specific communities. The particular form that gangs and/or violence take may be specific, but violence per se is not. It is important, then, that the issues of gangs and violence be viewed, analyzed and understood in the context of history and the larger social structures within which they occur. To paraphrase C. Wright Mills, we must strive to understand the phenomenon at the intersection of

history and biography. Only then can we hope to have some sense of real understanding.

In a broad sense, that was the goal of the conference and the papers in this volume. The first paper provides a macro-perspective on the underlying factors that contribute and lead to violence in the minority community context, if you will, for the issue of gang violence. Dr. Elliot Currie, author of the first paper, is currently a Research Associate at the Institute for the Study of Social Change at the University of California, Berkeley. He received his Ph.D. in Sociology from Berkeley and has taught at, among other places, UC Berkeley and Yale. He has written numerous articles and books. His most recent book *Confronting Crime*, provides a penetrating critique of how this country thinks and responds to the issue of crime, especially in the last decade. He writes early in the book that if we are to build a society that is less dangerous, fearful, and less tramatized by violence, we will have to move beyond both liberal and conservative perspectives. He provides and lays out the issues clearly and boldly and he provides a clear direction in which we must move in order to address the issue.

The second paper written, by Dr. Joan Moore, addresses the issue of what we know and what we don't know about gangs. In some respects to have this as a topic or issue may seem trite. However, what becomes apparent in reviewing and assessing gang prevention/ reduction programs is that they are more often than not based on ideas, beliefs or assumptions that have no bases in the literature. In fact, the literature would suggest that some of these gang prevention/reduction programs may in fact exacerbate the problem rather than ameliorate it. Dr. Moore is a professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and has held faculty positions at the University of California, Riverside and the University of

Southern California. She has studied gangs for many years and has written numerous papers on the topic. Her book, *Homeboys*, received the prestigious Spivak award from the American Sociological Association as an outstanding contribution in the field. The papers are published in a format that reflects their verbal presentation.

As stated above, the goal of the conference and this publication is to stimulate a dialogue that will result in strategies for meaningful, effective and humane solutions to the tragedy of gang violence based on a critical understanding of it. We hope we achieve at least some small level of success in this regard.

Comments on the Social and Economic Context of Violence in Minority Communities

Elliott Currie

Today I want to talk not about gangs themselves—Joan Moore will be doing that—but about what's been happening to the communities that gangs mostly come from. I want to focus on that context in part as a backdrop for Joan's remarks today, but also because I think that with all the media attention and public discussion of gangs and gang violence, the part of the picture that gets left out most often is the part about what's happening to the lives of the real flesh-and-blood people who get involved in gangs, to their families, and to their neighborhoods. If we really want to approach the gang problem in some way that's not just a quick fix, understanding those things has to be step one.

We tend to be impatient people in America and it's natural for us to hope for quick and simple solutions to the very real tragedy that gang violence represents. We want something done about gangs, but we're often not so willing to look hard at the conditions that breed them. We hope that tougher law enforcement or more courts or stopping cocaine at the border will do the trick. But we've been trying all that for some time now. And I don't think we can get very excited about where it's gotten us. So I think it's time that we took a different kind of approach. And the first step in doing so is to understand that what we're up against is much deeper than the gangs themselves.

It's also much deeper than drugs. There is a tendency, especially in the news media, to talk about gangs as if

they were a creation of the drug crisis, especially the rise of crack cocaine. But gangs have been with us a lot longer than crack has. And though there's an overlap between the problem of gangs and the problem of drugs, they are not at all the *same* problem.

The bottom line is that what has happened in low income urban communities in the past ten to fifteen years has been, quite simply, a disaster. Life has become a whole lot more difficult, more stressful, more impoverished, less hopeful, and more insecure. Things were never so great in these communities. But they are a lot harder today. And they're harder as a result of important changes that have taken place in several realms at once—changes that feed each other, that compound each other. We have seen simultaneous changes in the economy, in social policy, in community life and institutions, and, in subtle ways, in culture and values.

Some of these changes are by now pretty well known. Others are much less talked about. And I think we tend to underestimate the impact they've had because we usually don't put them *together;* we don't see the total effect of these changes because we look at one little piece at a time. At one point we might look at changes in the kinds of jobs available to young people. At another time we might look at changes in the availability of, say, mental health care or drug treatment. Taken separately these changes have been pretty ominous, but if you put them together the overall effect is staggering.

Let's start with the economic changes. Throughout this century, at least, urban gangs have been, in part, a response to the poverty, insecurity, and social deprivation of certain kinds of urban communities. In the past fifteen years those conditions have worsened considerably in most American cities—especially for the young: for children, youth, and younger adults trying to raise a family.

We see this first of all in the sheer numbers of people below the poverty line. In 1987 there were 8 million more poor Americans of all races, and more than 3 million poor children, in the United States than there were in 1978; and both years were years of what we like to call "economic recovery." In fact, the risk of poverty for a black child in 1987, in what was widely touted as the fifth straight year of economic recovery, was higher than it was at the height of the economic *recession* in the mid-1970s. By 1987 just about exactly one half of all black kids under six in America were poor, and more than two out of five Latino kids. The poverty rate among Latino children went up by over *40 percent* from 1979 to 1985 alone, the fastest rise since we've been collecting statistics on them.

Although the prevalence of poverty is far worse in minority communities, it's very important to realize that this change extends well beyond them. In fact the fastest rise in poverty since the late seventies has been among *white* kids. I don't say this to diminish the severity of poverty in minority communities, but just the opposite. This illustrates just how deep the problem is and how closely it is related to broader changes in the American economy that are taking place well outside the control of local communities—outside the control of urban minority communities and the people who live in them. That's important, I think, because we hear so often that if people in minority communities would just get their own act together, change their behavior, adopt a different cultural style, and so on, they could rejoin the American mainstream. But the real problem in the 1980s is that the mainstream itself is rapidly shrinking. The dominant trend of the '80s, the growing impoverishment of millions of American families, knows no racial boundaries and has spared no racial or ethnic group.

Likewise, there's a popular tendency to define these problems as the problems of a small hard core urban

underclass, a term I increasingly think is very misleading. That's in many ways a comforting idea, because it seems to suggest that the problems—of urban poverty, of drugs, and of violence—are confined to a hard-core few and if we got tough enough on them, or swept them out of sight, we'd have no more trouble. That's a tragic mistake. It's crucial to understand that *the segment of American society that is now undergoing the kinds of economic and social stress and disruption that are conducive to the development of violent gangs is very large, and that it has grown considerably in recent years.*

But that's not all. Within that growing number of poor young people there are even more troubling changes. On average, for example, poor people are *poorer* today than they used to be. In 1987 two out of five poor people in America had income less than one half the poverty line. That was the highest proportion in a decade. That's less than six thousand dollars a year for a family of four.

Even more troubling, their chances of getting *out* of poverty are also diminishing. Social scientists have recently looked hard at changes in the chances of "exiting" from poverty. All of that research tells us that poor people are less likely to be able to exit, to be able to look forward to getting into that elusive mainstream, than they were ten years ago. Back in the mid-seventies the proportion of poor people in a given year who were *not* poor the next year got up to around 35 percent; by the mid-eighties it had fallen to below 25 percent. If you grow up in a poor family today, you are less likely to be able to get out.

I'll come back to why this should be so in a minute. But obviously it represents a big change, not only in terms of economic realities, but also of psychological ones. It's one thing to grow up in a poor community where, however bad things are, it's still realistic to see ways out; but growing up in a community where the realistic ways out, especially the legitimate ones, are receding is another ballgame

altogether. It changes the economic calculus for young people; it changes what we might call the mathematics of hope.

Again, it is especially ominous that these shifts have been hardest on kids and on the younger *parents* of kids. For them this change has been really dramatic. Between 1970 and 1986 the real (adjusted for inflation) median income of young families with children headed by someone under 25 dropped by 43 percent! It's mainly people who are now still fairly young, in their 30s or a little older, who are the parents of the young kids who are now involved with gangs. And it is that generation of parents that's been hardest hit by the recent negative changes in the American economy, people who came of age sometime in the 1970s when these changes first began to really hit home.

Obviously, this has put enormous stress on these families. This really comes across when you talk to their kids, as I've been doing over this past year. These kids describe parents who are constantly buffeted by huge economic stresses and insecurities and by enormous, and sometimes insurmountable, difficulties in just making ends meet.

Why has this shift happened? Basically for two reasons: changes in the types of jobs available, especially for younger workers, and changes in social policy that have reduced the other main source of legitimate income in poor communities, government benefits. The depth of the economic disaster in low income communities today results from the fact that both of these have worsened at the same time. Ideally, if you had a decline in people's ability to attain a decent standard of living by working, you would have an increase in other kinds of support to compensate. But of course, the opposite has happened. The negative changes in the economy as a whole have

been enormously aggravated by the very real retreat of the public sector from low-income Americans in the '80s.

Let's look at the changing job scene first. When we look at what's happened to American jobs in the last ten years or so, what we see isn't so much a big rise in joblessness per se, as it is a pattern of declining quality of the jobs the economy is creating, especially, again, for younger people. Of course, George Bush was elected, in part, on the strength of his administration having created a five-year economic recovery in which millions of new jobs were created. And it's true that in terms of sheer numbers of jobs created, our economy outperformed many others in the 1980s. But by now we've come to realize that the underside of that "job miracle" has been that an amazingly high proportion of them have been poor jobs.

It was common a few years ago to talk about the "McDonald's" economy; a service economy in which traditional "good" jobs, especially in manufacturing, were rapidly disappearing in favor of jobs flipping hamburgers. Well, that's a little simplistic, and in the past few years there has been a lot of debate about what's really happened to American jobs. The administration has been arguing, along with a number of economists, that in fact the economy has been producing much better job opportunities than in the past.

However, a study last year by the Senate Budget Committee refutes that view pretty convincingly; it shows just how much the prospects for good jobs have in fact declined and for whom. On the whole it's a pretty grim picture. This study divided jobs into low, middle, and high-paying ones; if a job paid wages below the poverty level for a family of four it was low, if it paid up to four times that it was middle, and above that, high. And they found (like some earlier studies) that what's happened is that both ends of this scale have grown at the expense of the middle. So that in the 1980s there are more high-paying

jobs in America, but also more low-paying ones. But it's not balanced; in most places in the country the growth of the jobs at the bottom has greatly outstripped the growth at the top. So the overall trend across the country—also here in California specifically—is toward what this study calls "downward wage polarization."

This has especially hit younger workers, which helps explain the declining income of the young families I just mentioned. Between 1975 and 1987 there was a net loss of 1.6 million middle-wage job possibilities for people under 35. People *over* 35 actually gained a little in terms of the kinds of jobs available to them. Put another way, *just about all of the burden of these changes in the American job structure has fallen on younger people.*

It has also fallen disproportionately on *men.* Now, of course it's still true that women are stuck in poor jobs *much* more often than men. But the biggest *change* in the '80s has been in the declining job prospects for young men. The Budget Committee study calculates that 82 percent of the gain in new jobs for men in the 1980s has been in low-wage jobs; that is, four out of five new jobs that men have taken pay less than the poverty level.

This shift is a main reason why there are today more than two and a half million more *working* poor people than there were at the end of the seventies. In a nutshell, what you have increasingly in low income communities today is the continued entrapment of most women in low paying jobs and the increasing entrapment of young men in that same low-wage economy. There are two aspects of this that I think are especially crucial for understanding the situation of young people in these communities today. One is talked about more than the other: the constricting future that's faced by a lot of young people, and especially young men, as a result of these shifts. The other is less talked about, but I believe it may be even more important; it's the

change in the lives of younger *parents,* and therefore the change in the quality of family life right here and now.

One result of the downward job shift is that there is a tremendous amount of overwork and of work-related stress—and a tremendous amount of work-related family problems as a consequence. There is still a powerful stereotype of poor communities, especially poor minority communities, being full of lazy welfare people, idly collecting benefit checks and passing on that dependency to the next generation. Much of our social welfare policy has been based on that image. But I've talked lately with a lot of kids from poor neighborhoods and this isn't what I see at all. Instead, what I see is young women holding down two or maybe even three jobs in order to keep from being evicted. (That raises the issue of housing pressures, which I'll come back to in a minute.) But this means that parents are often overworked, overstressed, and also simply never *around,* all of these things strongly affect the way their children grow up. They affect everything from the kid's need to develop some illicit income to help out with the family finances; to the kid's risk of being neglected or abused or, for that matter, simply left alone on their own all day long; to the kid's ability, more generally, to call on stable adults for support, guidance, and nurturance.

All of these pressures are aggravated because these downward shifts in the job structure have been accompanied by cutbacks in social benefits that help maintain the income of poor people, including, most notably, the working poor. Seventy-two percent of poor kids got AFDC benefits in 1979, versus sixty percent in 1986, indeed, the proportion began to fall as early as the mid-1970s, but has fallen further since. And they were getting less money. Adjusted for inflation, the real value of those benefits for a family of four fell by almost twenty percent in those years. Overall, the number of people lifted

out of poverty by cash benefits from government—by AFDC, SSI, and unemployment insurance—has been cut in half since the end of the seventies. That has made a tremendous difference, particularly, for minority women with young children. In 1979 about 40 percent of poor black women heading families with kids were lifted above the poverty line by government benefits. In 1987, 24 percent were.

So far we've just been talking about the *income* side of the economic crisis that has hit urban communities. But that's only one side. The other is that things cost more. In the 1980s low income people have been whipsawed by the combination of falling income and the rising costs of living a reasonably decent and dignified life. And that crunch is increasingly shaping people's lives in the inner cities—as elsewhere. Housing is, of course, the most glaring example and the one that counts most. So glaring, that it has of course affected most of us, middle class as well as poor, and has a dramatic impact on our lifestyles. But we don't often stop to think about what it really means if you haven't got a lot of money to begin with and then your wages begin to fall and the cost of renting an apartment skyrockets astronomically. In that situation something has to give. And what gives is that either you don't, in fact, keep a roof over your head, or you do extraordinary things, legal or otherwise, to put it there. I can't tell you how often I've heard of kids selling drugs to help their mom pay the rent. That's not the only reason, of course, but it's *one* reason.

The median rent burden—rent as a proportion of income—for families in the bottom twenty percent of the American income distribution is almost 50 percent today, up from about 35 percent in the mid-'80s. And it is much higher for low-income single-parent families, who now on average pay well over half of their income, and sometimes more than three-quarters of it, for rent.

What this means in practice is that you almost have to have more than one job (or some other source of income) to do the trick. That's hard enough if you have two wage earners, but for a single-parent family—well, figure it out. Suppose you make $4.50 an hour, which is a little more than what the Bush administration wants to raise the Federal minimum wage to by 1992. If you can work full time, which is not at all certain, you'll make $720 a month, gross. If you can't find a place for yourself and your two kids that's neither a crack house nor a tool shed for much less than $500, then most of your disposable income is going for rent. Throw in the PG & E and the water, and maybe the telephone, and that's about it for your paycheck. So in order to spend *only* 50 percent of your income on rent you must have another job or a racket of some kind.

These interlocking pressures have put enormous strains on families, again, especially younger families. Under those pressures many families have done amazingly well and are remarkably resilient. But others have collapsed. Many have collapsed into drugs. I don't think we'll begin to understand the involvement of gangs today in the drug trade unless we recognize the enormous increase in the demand for drugs that has been fueled, in part, by the huge stresses on young adults in the inner cities. Where I come from, at any rate, most of the crack dealers are kids, but a big proportion, perhaps a majority of the "baseheads"—their customers—are adults. They're often adults who were, until recently, stable working people, trying hard to make ends meet in a terribly demanding economy. I've heard many, many kids describe poignantly how their mothers used to have a decent job, as a nurse or secretary or whatever, but started hitting that pipe and went right down the tubes—lost the job, lost the house, stopped taking care of business, stopped taking care of the kids. Between 1981 and 1987 the

number of child abuse and neglect petitions filed in Los Angeles County related to parental drug abuse increased by 500 percent.

The next level of the tragedy is that as these pressures have risen, and have been terribly compounded and terribly accelerated by the increased availability of drugs, the resources available to help people *deal* with those pressures have also diminished. Some of this has to do with changes in the cohesiveness of families and local communities under the impact of these economic changes, and some of it has to do, again, with the unprecedented retreat of the public sector from the poor in the 1980s.

In the interest of time, let me move quickly over the first point, and just note that the combined pressures of falling income and rising prices, especially for housing, have a corrosive effect on the social networks of family, kin, and friends that are tremendously important in providing support in low-income communities. As I talk to troubled young people from these neighborhoods, for example, I keep finding that their families are always *moving*—to find a better job (or any job), to get closer to their workplace, to find affordable housing. But those moves take them away from family, friends, and neighbors they can turn to in times of stress or need.

Equally important are the reductions in federal programs that more or less directly address the escalating stresses on children and families. Take child abuse and neglect: from 1981 to 1986 the Social Services block grant, Title XX, lost $300 million in funding--not counting inflation. Title XX is a major source of federal support for child protective programs. While the federal government was cutting that $300 million, reported child abuse and neglect cases were rising alarmingly—by 365 percent in California between 1982 and 1986. The number of kids entering child protective emergency services in Los

Angeles County rose 40 percent in a recent two-year period alone.

Much the same is true across the whole spectrum of federal programs that serve troubled youth, children, and families. Federal spending on preventive health care for the poor through Community Health Centers was $64 million less in 1986 than in 1978, though the number of poor people needing preventive health care had risen dramatically. Federal spending on maternal and child health, which might, among other things, have helped wean mothers away from drugs before pregnancy, dropped 43 percent in the same years. The federal appropriation for the alcohol, drug abuse, and mental health block grant was $32 million less than in fiscal 1988 than in 1981, despite the huge rise in crack addiction. Chapter I education funding for neglected and delinquent youth dropped eight percent in the 1980s, compensatory education funding, seven percent. We could, unfortunately, keep spinning out similar figures ad nauseam. But the bottom line is that in the 1980s supportive services for people in trouble or in need in urban communities have shrunk considerably in the face of often startling increases in the demand for them.

What has happened is not just a diminishing of the social services available to the urban poor, but also a shift in their character. Most people who work in public social services have seen some variant of this phenomenon. When you have diminishing resources coupled with rising needs, what happens is that you fall back and deal mainly or only with the real emergency cases. You don't get to do much preventive work. So you don't intervene with the kid who's getting into little gang things early; you wait until he's a really hard case and then put him in the Youth Authority. You don't develop ways to help him out when he starts having trouble following in math class; you wait until he drops out, joins a gang, and shoots somebody.

You don't have the resources to intervene in a family where a stressed out young mother is "whuppin" on her kid; you have to wait until he's embittered and rageful enough to take it out on the body of someone else. You can't create support services for the 12- and 13-year olds running around on the streets of Los Angeles with virtually no one to take care of them; so you put them in McLaren Children's Center. You can't help a kid or his/her parent get off drugs because there's a three-month wait in Los Angeles County for outpatient drug treatment and more than that for residential care. So you wait until the mother winds up in an emergency room and you offer short-term medical treatment. Meanwhile, you lock the kids up to protect them from the mother and to keep them off the street. Everybody knows that that's not the right way to do it, but we do it anyway because we don't have the money to do anything else.

Unfortunately these statistics are just the tip of the iceberg. But in terms of setting the context for understanding the place of gangs in urban communities, I think the picture is pretty clear. The changes I've been talking about help set the stage for gang violence, I believe, in several interconnected ways at once. They have restricted the legitimate opportunities for the future of the young, especially for young men. They've put enormous stress on families, which among other things has diminished families' capacity to nurture, train, and supervise kids, to help them grow up cooperative and respectful of others' lives, instead of predatory and oblivious. They have simultaneously increased families' incentive to go after illegitimate income. They have increased, in my judgment, the demand for drugs, especially crack cocaine. Partly for that reason, as well as for others, they have increased child abuse and neglect. And more.

I have to tell you that in talking about these consequences I sometimes start to feel like I'm sounding like a broken record. I first started investigating the relation between poverty and jobs and families and violence in the inner city almost exactly twenty years ago, when I worked for Lyndon Johnson's National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. Since then, the main change is that things have gotten much worse. What's terribly frustrating is that we could have predicted the outcome, way back then. In fact, we *did* predict it way back then. I hope that before the conference is over we'll have time to talk in some detail about what we might really do about these developments and about how we might begin to reverse the downward spiral we've set in motion in recent years.

GANGS AND GANG VIOLENCE
WHAT WE KNOW AND WHAT WE DON'T

Joan Moore

If there are only two things that you take away from today's session, this is what I would like them to be. First, be very careful about what associations you lay on the term "gang," i.e., what you really mean by "gang." Second, be *very* careful about attributing all behavior performed by gang members to "the gang." The corollary for both of these is: Be skeptical about what you hear, even if you get it directly from gang members. (Gang members have lots of games to play—with themselves, with each other, with police or anybody else in authority, and with anybody who can possibly be "impressed.")

These warnings are particularly salient when it comes to thinking about gang violence. There were young male groups that have been called "gangs" throughout American history and they have always generated a lot of public concern. But when historians try to reconstruct what actually happened with those early city gangs, they usually find themselves frustrated. The truth is, nobody knew much about those groups, and most of what historians tell us comes from the newspapers of the day. This is also true today. Very few people are actually doing objective research on gangs and what people think they know comes largely from the media.

The problem is, of course, that the newspapers and other media are notoriously unreliable about gangs. When the media talk about gangs, then as well as now, they do *not* simply report news about gangs. *Most* reporting about gangs is "interpretive" and almost always it trumpets the

dangers posed by gangs. And the gangs have always *symbolized* something that is deeply threatening to American society. What is the threat? Perhaps we can return to that question later on.

In what I say today I'll be addressing each of the two points separately: "What is a gang?" and "What is the relationship between individual and gang behavior when it comes to violence?" I'll use my own research experience with East Los Angeles gangs as a jumping-off point for both discussions.

What Is "A Gang"?

I'll turn first to the question of what associations people generally tend to lay on the term "gang." It can mean a group of adolescents who hang out around a candy store, something like "West Side Story," a group of kids whose members are aggressive and rebellious, but appealing. At the other extreme it can mean a highly disciplined criminal organization with elaborate networks of "soldiers" under strict control from the top. Both images appear almost interchangeably in the media. This very real confusion influences the way we think about gang problems.

When I do research on gangs in East Los Angeles, the phenomenon we are looking at differs from both of these images. To begin with, the gangs we study did start out as friendship groups of adolescents who shared common interests. They had a more or less clearly defined territory in which most of the members lived. The members were committed to defending one another, the territory, and the gang name in the status-setting fights that occurred in school and on the streets. Their families tended to live conventional lives. Although some families may have been troubled, this was by no means true for all of them.

As time passes, normal adolescent interests in partying and dating combines with street socialization and the gang value of defiance of authority to lead the gang to accept or encourage drug use by most members and property offenses by some members. The gangs are, intentionally, highly visible: they fight other gangs and they spray their graffiti all over the place. Police harass the gang and some members go into juvenile facilities for longer or shorter periods of time.

As its members age, the clique begins to splinter. Some of the members marry and settle down, while others remain involved in a street lifestyle, often mired in drug use and finding only marginal, if any, employment.

In a very few years, another clique of the gang comes into being. There are kids from the neighborhood who are too young to join the "originals," but who value the gang name and want to extend its reputation. The gang has developed what anthropologists call an "age-graded system." In the gangs we study, each clique has been fairly self-contained, with not much association between older and younger cliques (although this may be changing).

The point of this description is that *neither* of the simple stereotypes of the gang—as a harmless group of mischievous kids or as organized crime—is valid for these groups. In its adolescent phase, the gang is the rowdiest of all the adolescent peer groups in any given community. It has the reputation of being, and usually is, the roughest, the most drug-using, and the most sexually active group around. And there is violence inherent in some of the gang processes. But it is an adolescent group and not a unit in a massively organized crime syndicate. Apart from gang fighting, graffiti, and occasional forays into vandalism, delinquency is a matter of individual or pair activity and not an activity of the gang as a whole.

Changes Over Time. Let me continue with this question of what we mean when we talk about gangs. What I've just said implies that gangs change. The White Fence gang of the 1980s is not the same as the White Fence gang of 1960; there are continuities, but there are also changes. What anybody "knows" about a gang in one year, even a gang member's knowledge, may in certain specifics be out of date the very next year.

Some of these changes are particularly important to the question of the kind of violence that is uniquely and distinctively gang-related, that violence which stems from fights between rival gangs. In East Los Angeles, gang warfare was increasingly lethal, over a fairly long period of time. In the 1970s far more Chicanos than Blacks were killed in gang warfare, for example.

Our research suggests that this escalating gang violence was related to gang processes. Each clique wanted to match or outdo its predecessor clique in standing up for the gang name. Unfortunately, for all too many cliques this meant increasing the rate and intensity of violence. It meant more guns, and more impersonal violence directed at bystanders, for example, in drive-by shootings.

Escalating gang violence was also related to elements of the gang subculture, like the emphasis on *locura* or wildness, and to the increasing reliance on street socialization over the years. But the gang subculture can be put to nonlethal uses as well. Thus, in some cliques that we studied, even in gangs with a long history of violence, *locura* came to be defined more in terms of drug use than of violence, and the cliques were quite peaceful.

The importance of change in the gangs is nowhere more clear than in violence. After a decade or more of steady escalation, in the 1980s the level of lethal intergang violence began to decline in East Los Angeles and to decline sharply. Why? There are several possible

answers. The simplest may be that intergang violence goes in cycles. It stands to reason that a gang whose members are regularly killed will ultimately have some difficulty in recruiting, even from the most ambitiously rowdy youngsters. Thus, escalating violence may carry the seeds of its own destruction.

But there are other possible answers, too. One is that East Los Angeles during the 1970s saw one gang program after another disappear, and the gangs were increasingly left to themselves, and to the police. This may actually have fostered an increased sense in the gangs of being "outlaws," of not being acceptable in community programs. It certainly left the gangs increasingly at each other's mercy. Yet in the 1980s, a program began to hire gang members in East Los Angeles to mediate and slow down the violence—and a number of our respondents felt that the program really had an impact.

Yet a third possible answer has to do with some other changes in the gangs, and what may be the increasing number of gang members who fail to "mature out" of gang membership. Young men in their 20s and 30s who still hang around with the gang may serve as a moderating influence in gang warfare.

In summary, then, gangs change, both internally and externally. We should thus understand the reality of changes when we talk about gangs and violence.

Differences From Place to Place and Group to Group. If gangs differ from one time to another, it is also very obvious that gangs differ from one place to another and from one ethnic group to another. Gangs appear in distinct "culture areas," and these culture areas differ from one ethnic group to another within the same city and from one city to another.

These variations are important in understanding gang violence. For example, during the 1970s, as I mentioned, deaths from gang violence were very high among

Hispanics in both Los Angeles and Chicago, but were low among blacks in both cities. Now the reverse is true in Los Angeles and Chicago seems to be going through a similar transformation. Whatever is happening to "gangs" in these two cities, it's happening differently in black and Hispanic communities!

Furthermore, what little comparative research has been done on gangs shows significant differences in social structure from one culture to another. The gangs we study in East Los Angeles are age-graded, but members very rarely "graduate" from one clique to another. They do "graduate" in Hispanic gangs that we and other people have studied in the Midwest. The East Los Angeles gangs that we study are very informally organized, without any acknowledged leadership. Black gangs studied both in Los Angeles and in Milwaukee are more formally organized, with formal meetings, dues, and officers.

These variations that I've been able to describe between gangs in different culture areas do not explain anything about differences in violence, but they do underscore one of my main points: be very careful in laying irrelevant associations onto your local "gang." What is true for one gang is not necessarily true for another. Gangs really are different, one from the other, and something about those differences relates to violence.

Gang Violence or Individual Violence?

Now let me turn to the second point that I want you to come away with. Be careful about attributing all behavior performed by gang members to the gang as a whole. This is a tricky one, but it becomes very important in untangling many of today's confusions about so-called gang violence. One of the most common interpretations of today's gang

violence, for example, is that it stems from gang involvement in increasingly violent drug-marketing.

Let me go back to the gangs we've been studying. I mentioned earlier that during the adolescent phase in these gangs, some members commit property offenses, usually small scale, and sometimes these involve violence. Occasionally the member does this on his or her own, but more often with another homeboy or homegirl.

Is this gang-related violence? Gang members would fiercely contest such an interpretation. That is not a gang activity, but an individual activity.

When we consider the gang in young adulthood, the same pattern continues, but the line becomes more blurred. By this age, a goodly portion of the gang, usually the more stable members, have stopped hanging around regularly with the guys; they're involved in their jobs and their families, and their priorities have changed. Among those members of the clique who are still hanging around together, there are some who do have jobs and families, but many do not.

Many of the guys that are still hanging around are also involved in a drug-related street lifestyle, with continuous "ripping and running." Almost inevitably, some of the drug users start to market drugs—and so do some of the nonusers; it's a lucrative business until you get caught. Almost inevitably, dealers turn to their homeboys and homegirls when they do go into business. Some of the drug deals go sour and there is violence.

Is this gang-related violence? Again, gang members would contest such an interpretation. The gang itself is not acting as a unit to deal drugs, but individual members of the gang are dealing drugs and drawing on one another as their partners, completely outside the context of the gang as a whole.

Does it make any difference? I think it does. Many of the people hanging around with the gang in young

adulthood are people at loose ends with their lives, still hung up in adolescent loyalties and preoccupations. They are *not*, however, caught up consciously in a violence-prone criminal activity. They may be aware of such activities, and they may occasionally dabble in illegal income-generating activities themselves, but they have *not,* in their minds, joined a criminal group. This self-concept makes a difference.

Even more important, the often false notion that every gang is a criminal conspiracy can lead to legislation like that recently passed in California, which greatly inflates the criminal justice involvement for kids who are in noncriminal gangs and who are not deeply committed to a street lifestyle. I'm not defending gangs, but I am hoping that we can maximize the chances of *all* kids, including those who get caught up in gangs for a short period of their adolescence, and such labelling doesn't help.

Gangs, Drugs, and Violence in the Larger System. As I said, it is particularly important to sort out the drug factor, because it has generally been assumed that the recent increase in gang-related violence in a number of cities is related to the appearance of cocaine and crack and to an increased gang involvement in the sales of cocaine. It was assumed that gangs were a ready-made crack marketing unit, since they were already "organized." And it was further assumed that gangs were highly prone to violence. Police believed this interpretation and so did the media.

However, when these assumptions were actually tested with Los Angeles Police Department data for 1983-1985, they proved to be wrong. Cocaine drug sales did increase markedly during the period, as expected. Involvement of individuals identified as gang members in drug sales did increase slightly, but the overwhelming majority of individuals arrested in these five South Central stations (75 percent) were *not* gang members. And in

cases where more than one person was involved in the sale, the number of members from the same gang actually declined during the period studied. Most important, perhaps, when gang members were involved in cocaine sales, violence, or even the presence of guns, was not more likely.

Most of these arrests were for small-scale dealing and such low-level activities are not likely to provoke much violence. Thus, the researchers thought they might get some answers by looking at homicides. The answers pointed in the same direction: drug motives did not increase in importance in homicides where gang members were involved, whereas they did in homicides where gang members were not involved. Cocaine, then, had a big impact in generating violence, but it was not because of gang member involvement.

These are surprising findings only if you have in mind the image of "gang" as a tightly organized violence-prone criminal conspiracy, ready to go into drug dealing effectively and efficiently when a new drug comes along. Or if you believe that whatever a gang member does necessarily involves the gang as a whole. Some of the gangs involved in these arrests in South Central L.A. may well be like this. Since 1985, more gangs may have become like this. And there may well be such gangs in other cities. And it may well be that some of the more loosely organized gangs evolve to become such organized criminal groups. But we don't know that from the arrest data and we don't know it from what the police or the media believe. In fact, the researchers took their hypotheses from what the police believed was happening; one of the most interesting implications of their research is that the police were wrong.

Just to confound the matter further, in at least one city, Detroit, researchers on crack-dealing organizations argue that although these organizations call themselves

"gangs," they are not by any measure the kind of thing we generally mean by "gang". They did not grow out of youth gangs and they have none of the characteristics that I talked about earlier. They are adult criminal organizations which happen to call themselves gangs. Similarly, you can't think about the Jamaican posses as youth gangs grown meaner: they are adult criminal organizations.

To summarize, there is clear evidence that gang members deal drugs, and there is clear evidence that gang members who deal drugs may kill and be killed. But there is no clear evidence that gangs as a whole do either. Just to drive the point home: if we were to eliminate all gangs from Los Angeles tomorrow, would all the drug-related killings stop? Of course not.

Implications

Let me recapitulate what I've said so far. There is one kind of gang-related violence that is inherent in gangs. That is the kind that is related to intergang conflict. Gang members and innocent bystanders alike are hurt and killed in this kind of violence. And sometimes it seems that this kind of violence does nothing but escalate without abatement. (After all, media cover violence only when it is present, not when it abates.) But, as the East Los Angeles case illustrates, intergang conflict can also decline and the declines may happen "naturally" (on their own) or with the help of programs that intervene.

There is another kind of violence that appears to be related to gangs, but the connection is a lot fainter. That is the kind that is related to illegal activity, particularly drug marketing. It is not safe to assume that such violence is inherent in gangs. Some youth gangs may become that kind of criminal organization, but we have yet to have evidence that this is the norm. (Parenthetically, in the late

1950s, a couple of famous sociologists pulled out some old stories about the 1920s Mafia to argue that in some neighborhoods youth gangs are training grounds for adult criminal organizations, whereas in others they are just violent. The typology took hold, but it had only a very feeble grounding in fact then and not much more now.) Some violent criminal organizations may be composed of men and women who were associated with gangs, but we have yet to have evidence that this is the norm, either. Certainly we have evidence that some violent criminal organizations have grown and flourished with no gang connections whatsoever.

But what does all this mean for our worries about gangs and violence? Sorting out gang connections to drug marketing may seem like an unimportant exercise. After all, is the answer of any real importance to anybody except, perhaps, the police and the gang members themselves? And a few people concerned about civil liberties?

At the beginning of this discussion I suggested that gangs have always symbolized a threat to American society and that part of the media's endless fascination with gangs reflects that threat. What is the threat? The obvious answer is that gangs and gang members *do* pose problems for their communities. But the answer behind that is that gangs represent problems *within* those communities, problems that are not going to be solved by the simple declaration that gangs are criminal conspiracies.

In many cities throughout the country, gangs have been cropping up for the first time since the 1950s. Most of the gangs are in black and Hispanic communities. Studies of these "new" gangs (in Milwaukee, Columbus, and Cleveland) are very consistent. In all three "new cities," gangs grew out of corner groups or groups that came into being with a youthful fad—breakdancing and

rapping. The groups became solidified in the course of intergang warfare.

But why now? These are not the children of demoralized immigrants, like the gang members of Chicago in the 1920s or of East Los Angeles in the 1940s. Instead, today's new gangs started in a time of plant closings, meaning a drastic loss of good industrial jobs that hit minority workers particularly hard. Even in prosperous cities like Los Angeles and Phoenix, minority communities have been left out of the prosperity. The gangs also got under way in an epoch of continuing racial tension in most of these cities, as well as of disastrous performance in inner-city schools.

There is a good explanation for gangs to be starting up now, just as there is for there to be an upsurge in illegal drug marketing, gang and nongang, in these communities. If a community's economy is not based solidly on wages and salaries, other economies will begin to develop. Welfare, bartering, informal economic arrangements, and illegal economies become a substitute, simply because people must find a way to live. Young people growing up in these communities have little to look forward to.

There is, then, a deeper threat behind the appearance of gangs and a more solid basis for society as a whole to worry about the violence, gang and nongang, that is associated with illegal economic activity and also about the violence that is associated with the kind of frustration that gives rise to gangs in the first place. It is only rarely that the violence and the gangs actually spill over into middle class and Anglo communities. Then the media have a field day. But both the threat and the reaction to the threat are signs of some deep and serious wrongs in our society: the media does not get excited about those problems. We may be able to contain the violence and the gangs, if we are willing to spend larger and larger amounts for police, courts, and prisons. But we have got to decide if

our society's democratic values are really surviving in the presence of a large and disaffected underclass in the very heart of our cities. Or have we, in fact, already become so badly split into two worlds that we are satisfied to lock up the violent and step over the homeless on our streets and call that democracy?

SUGGESTED READING

Bowker, Lee H.; et al. Fall, 1980. "Female Participation in Delinquent Gang Activities". *Adolescence.* 15:59:508-519

Brown, Waln K. 1977. "Black Female Gangs in Philadelphia". *International Journal of Offender Theory and Comparative Criminology.* 21:3:221-228

Brown, Waln K. 1978. "Black Gangs as Family Extensions". *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology.* 22:1:39-45

Chase, William L. November 5, 1984. "Asian Gangs Stake Out Turf in U.S.". *U.S. News and World Report.* 9:82

Colvin, Mark; Pauly, John. November 1983. "A Critique of Criminology: Toward an Integrated Structural-Marxist Theory of Delinquency Production". *American Journal of Sociology.* 89:3:513-551

Davis, Mike. November 11, 1988. "War in the Streets". *New Statesman and Society.* 1:23:27-30

Fattah, David. November, 1987. "The House of Umoja as a Case Study for Social Change". *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science.* 494:37-41

Fox, Jerry R. January-February 1985. "Mission Impossible? Social Work Practice with Black Urban Youth Gangs". *Social Work.* 30:1:25-31

Hunsaker, Alan. September 1981. "The Behavioral-Ecological Model of Intervention with Chicano Gang Delinquents". *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences.* 3:3:225-239

Johnstone, John W.C. July, 1981. "Youth Gangs and Black Suburbs". *Pacific Sociological Review.* 23:3:355-375

Kleiner, Robert J.; Stub, Holger R.; Lanahan, James. Winter, 1975. "A Study of Black Youth Groups: Implications for Research, Action, and the Role of the Investigator". *Human Organization.* 34:4:391-394

Labov, Teresa. December 1982. "Social Structure and Peer Terminology in a Black Adolescent Gang". *Language in Society.* 11:3:391-411

Lindsey, Robert. July 9, 1987. "Californian Seeks U.S. Aid to Stem Asian Gang's Rise (John Van de Kamp, Attorney General of California)". *The New York Times.* 136:11

Martinez, Douglas R. September/October, 1978. "Hispanic Youth in the Barrio". *Agenda.* 8:5:7-9

Needle, Jerome A.; Stapleton, Wm. Vaughan. January, 1985. "Police Handling of Youth Gangs-Reportsof the National Juvenile JusticeAssessment Centers". National Institute for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (Department of Justice), Washington, D.C.

O'Hara, Jane. October 26, 1987. "Young and Merciless - Asian Youth Gangs". *Maclean's.* 100:43:59

Quintara, Craig. July 9, 1987. "Van de Kamp Warns of Growth of Asian Gang Activity". *The Los Angeles Times.* 106:37

Richburg, Keith B. March 16, 1988. "More Heroin Said to Enter U.S. from Asia: Chinese Gangs Replacing Traditional Organized Crime Networks". *The Washington Post.* 111:A16

Savitz, Leonard D.; et al. August 1978. "City Life and Delinquency - Victimization, Fear of Crime and Gang

Membership". National Institute for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (Department of Justice), Washington, D.C.

Shenon, Philip. October 5, 1985. "Crime Panel Finds Asian Gang Threat: President's Commission on Organized Crime". *The New York Times*. 135:7

Stover, Del. August 1986. "A New Breed of Youth Gang Is On the Prowl and a Bigger Threat Than Ever". *American School Board Journal*. 173:8:19-24

INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS PUBLICATIONS

Monograph Series

1. *The Perfecting of Los Angeles: Ethics Reform on the Municipal Level.* By H. Eric Schockman (1989)

2. *Emergency Disaster Management Patterns of Inter City Mutual Aid (Los Angeles County).* by George C. Littke (1989)

Occasional Papers Series

1. *Political Battles Over L.A. County Board Seats: A Minority Perspective.* By James A. Regalado (1989)

2. *Gang Violence Prevention: Perspectives and Strategies.* Comp. by Alfredo Gonzalez, Shirley Better, with Ralph Dawson (1990)

Other Institute Publications

1. *Twentieth-Century Los Angeles: Power, Promotion, and Social Conflict.* Co-edited by Norman Klein and Martin Schiesl. Claremont, CA: Regina Books, (1990) Special Edition.