

# **Gangs and the Structure of U.S. Society**

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## **Introduction**

Gangs have been the topic of much contemporary research in the United States. In fact there has been so much research, it has become what Mike Davis has referred to as a “growth industry.”<sup>1</sup> Despite the vastness of this research, it can be divided into two discreet categories: those studies that describe gangs as emerging from the specific attributes of the individuals who join them, and those that describe gangs by various forms of criminal and/or deviant acts they have engaged in. What is wrong with these descriptions is that they misrepresent the nature of the gang phenomenon as well as underestimating the linkages that exist between the structural conditions of the society at large and the gang itself. Therefore, to understand the full extent of the gang phenomenon, it will be necessary to analyze under what conditions the structural conditions of the society influence the development and behavior of gangs. Before I begin the analysis, it is important to identify some of the problems that have been associated with the recent research findings on gangs.

### ***Gangs as Collections of Individual Attributes.***

There are generally six descriptions of gangs that have emerged from this conceptual framework. The first of these is to see gangs as the collection of individuals who have experienced identity deprivation to such an extent that they need to become active in a group that provides positive self-esteem and the development of a social identity they find, albeit in a perverted manner, worthy.<sup>2</sup> The problem with this is that most of the youth that join gangs already have an identity and that identity is tied to their being poor, not to some sense of inadequacy. In fact, the vast majority of the individuals who are in gangs do not behave the way they do in order to gain a new and more positive self-identity, but rather they join in an effort to create a new economic identity—i.e. they want to create a new person who has money and the identity that money can buy.

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<sup>1</sup> See Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in LA* (New York: Verso 1991).

<sup>2</sup> James Diego Vigil, *Barrio Gangs: Street Life and Identity in Southern California* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988); and Ruth Horowitz, *Honor and the American Dream: Culture and Identity in a Chicano Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983).

The second description involves gangs as collectives of individuals who are not very smart.<sup>3</sup> This argument suggests that people who have lower intelligence tend to join gangs because they are less able to succeed through conventional means and have fewer options. Gangs in this scenario are collectives of such individuals who participate in deviant acts in order to overcome stigma, gain status, and accrue some material resources that their intelligence would not be capable of producing. The problem with this position is that there is no evidence that establishes that gang members have low intelligence scores. In fact, there is evidence that most people in gangs are quite smart, and it is their cognitive competence in creating business ventures and alluding the authorities that has made it difficult to eradicate their organizations.<sup>4</sup>

The third description is that gangs are collections of individuals who are sadistic and act out this disposition through violence.<sup>5</sup> This description portends to account for why there is so much violence associated with gangs, but here again there is no evidence that gang members are any more prone to violence than any other individual from low-income neighborhoods. It is of course true that there is a great deal of violence associated with individuals in gangs, but such a situation emerges from the social condition that gangs must operate in. More will be said about the nature of gang violence later, but such violence has not, and can not be linked to the collection of individuals who possess a psychological pathology.

Another common description of gangs is that they are collections of individuals who have dropped out of school, find too much time on their hands, and become involved in crime. This position has been influenced by the work of various control theorists and is predicated on the proposition that one of the major institutions that would normally help to control individuals has become impotent.<sup>6</sup> The problem is that there are a substantial number of gang members who remain in school. Thus, it is not the lack of effective social control agents that has caused young men to become active in gangs, it is a whole range of socioeconomic factors that have provided these individuals with the reason to join gangs.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I am not aware of any studies that directly test the association, but the work of Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994), pp. 235-51 is the best example of the argument that a relationship does exist if only more scholars would direct their attention to the topic. Also see Travis Herschi and M. J. Hindelang, "Intelligence and Delinquency: A Revisionist View," *American Sociological Review*, 42: 571-587.

<sup>4</sup> Felix Padilla, *The Gang as an American Enterprise* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Martín Sánchez Jankowski, *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Carl Taylor, "Gang Imperialism" in C. Ronald Huff (ed.), *Gangs in America* (Newbury Park, Ca: Sage Publications, 1990), pp. 103-115.

<sup>5</sup> See Lewis Yablonsky, *The Violent Gang* (New York: MacMillan, 1966).

<sup>6</sup> See the work of Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi, *A General Theory of Crime* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Robert Sampson and John H. Laub, *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points Through Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). In a more general way, see Ruth Kornhauser, *The Social Sources of Delinquency: An Appraisal of Analytic Models* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> See Martín Sánchez-Jankowski, *Islands in the Street*; Felix Padilla, *The Gang as American Enterprise*; Carl Taylor, *Dangerous Society* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1989); and Kody Scott, *Monster: The Autobiography of a L.A. Gang Member/ Sanyika Shakur, a.k.a. Monster Kody Scott* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 1993).

Finally, there is the description of gangs as collections of individuals who are the products of broken homes. This version has individuals joining gangs as a result of being deprived of the nurturing that accompanies the nuclear family with both parents present. Thus, individuals join gangs because they are deprived of the nurturing that is needed to create a positive sense of self (i.e. there is a lack of either a male or female role model), money for leisure, companionship, help in school work, etc. What is more, it is believed that broken homes are not capable of providing effective control over the behavior of children because one parent is unable to provide the techniques mentioned above that work either to get the child to internally control themselves; or to externally control them.<sup>8</sup> The problem with this depiction is that there is a significant amount of evidence that indicates that there are as many members who come from homes where both the parents are present as there are from single parent homes. In addition, given the increasing separation rate among all families in the United States, it becomes increasingly more difficult to point to broken families as the cause of joining a gang. Since a large majority of kids in these areas will be from, or experience periods of having one parent present, it will make it more arduous to account for those members who are from single parent homes and who do not become members of a gang.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Gangs as Collections of Individuals Who Perform Deviant Acts.***

Most of the research would define gangs as a loose association of individuals that perform acts of delinquency or crime.<sup>10</sup> Such acts can be of an economic or violent nature, but the illegal label of the acts is what distinguishes these groupings from other forms of association. Along with such definitions is the inevitable insistence that gangs behave in a territorial fashion.<sup>11</sup> It is of course not difficult to miss the similarities of this description of territoriality and the more general descriptions of territorial behavior provided in a number of studies by animal behaviorists.<sup>12</sup> With such descriptions made by people in the academic community, it is no wonder that the images of gangs as packs of individuals preying on virtuous and harmless people are pervasive in the public mind.<sup>13</sup> There are several problems with such a description, but the three most fundamental problems have to do with (1) defining the gang as a loose association of individuals; (2) the primacy paid to illegal acts; and (3) the focus on territorial behavior.

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<sup>8</sup> Much of the delinquency literature that is informed by control theory accepts this position.

<sup>9</sup> See Kristin Luker, *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1996); and William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), pp. 87-111.

<sup>10</sup> Many works depict gangs this way, see Malcolm Klein, *The American Street Gang* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Lewis Yablonsky, *The Violent Gang*; and to a certain extent Hagedorn, *People and Folks: Gangs, Crime and the Underclass in a Rustbelt City* (Chicago: Lakeview Press, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> Malcolm Klein, *The American Street Gang*; and Gerald Suttles, *The Social Order of the Slum: Ethnicity and Territoriality in the Inner City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

<sup>12</sup> See Konrad Lorenz, *On Agression* (New York: MacMillan, 19); and Desmond Morris, *The Naked Ape* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1967).

<sup>13</sup> See Loïc J. D. Wacquant, "Le Gang Comme Prédateur Collectif," *Actes De La Recherche En Sciences Sociales*, 101/102 (March 1994), pp. 88-100.

To begin, there is a general problem with defining a group as any loose association of individuals. In essence, this definition treats any association of individuals behaving in a territorial fashion and engaged in illegal acts as a gang. This definition does not allow researchers to separate what is a gang from any other group that is engaged in collective behavior and this remains a problem even if we include territoriality and illegal behavior. For example, a college fraternity that becomes territorial over its house and engages in the consumption of alcohol and drugs, or uses violence in their hazing of new recruits; or a “crew”<sup>14</sup> which is a small group (3 to 5 people) of individuals engaged in robberies would both meet the definition of a gang even though they are not gangs. It is this lack of specificity that has both prohibited a clear sociological understanding of what a gang is, and at the same time confused the workings of gangs by merging the actions of distinct groups acting in a collective manner under the label of “gang behavior.” In sum, the bulk of this research has labeled most of the behavior of groups having a self-identifying name as being “gang behavior,” and this misconstrues “ganging behavior” with the collective behavior of a group that has been sociologically identified as a gang.

What most of the previous studies have done is to treat the actions of bands of individuals as the actions of gangs, but sociologically gangs and bands are not the same. Bands are groups of individuals that act in a collective manner understood to be “ganging.” Ganging should be understood as a process by which individuals join together to oppose or attack something. Bands assume two forms. One form has a leader, but the group lacks organizational structure. That is to say, even though there is a leader, the people in a band will not behave in a way that follows regularized rules, assume differentiated roles, or operate under a *modus vivendi* that places the primacy on group survival.

The other form of a band is a collective of individuals who operate without a leader, but who regularly associate with each other in a loose configuration and undertake an ad hoc (i.e. unregularized) approach to their “ganging” behavior.

The second definitional tenet concerning gangs advanced in the literature is that they are inherently criminal.<sup>15</sup> This is an enormously unfounded proposition. Simply because gang members have engaged in crime, does not necessitate that they be understood as being inherently criminal groups. Members of fraternities also engage in illegal behavior that has resulted in death, albeit to a lesser degree, but they would not be considered criminal organizations because most of their activity does not involve criminal activity. Likewise, if one were to take a twenty-four hour period most of the activities of gang members do not involve criminal activity.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the evidence points overwhelmingly to the fact that, like fraternities or other social clubs, gangs are formal

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<sup>14</sup> A “crew” is a name given to identify a small group of individuals (generally less than ten and usually three to five) who are organized for the exclusive purpose of theft, i.e. they are organized for the sole purpose of engaging in criminal activity.

<sup>15</sup> Jack Katz would see them in this way because crimes satisfy emotional needs. See his *Seductions of Crime: Moral and Sensual Attractions of Doing Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Several works corroborate this. See Frederic Thrasher, *The Gang: A Study of 1313 Gangs in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928); William Foote Whyte, *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943 [fourth edition, 1993])

collectives where the main focus is to provide social and economic benefits to their members and to varying degrees members of their communities.<sup>17</sup> Now it may be that society (including sociologists and criminologists) are only interested in the illegal behavior, but any definition of a gang that incorporates illegal behavior as the fundamental tenant has misspecified the basic elements of a gang.

The third definitional tenant found in the literature is that gangs are territorial. The problem with making this a part of the definition is that all groups are to some extent territorial. What separates some organizations from others is not whether they are territorial or not, but what territory will be their focus. For example, some groups such as tribes or nation-states will focus on physical territory, and gangs, because they emerge from the social interactions at the neighborhood level, also share this emphasis. However, there are other groups that focus on the territory of social class or status. Such groups as fraternities, sororities, and other social clubs focus on those people who occupy certain social status territory in society. Other groups will focus on the social territory of ethnicity, such as those ethnic social clubs that hope to capture all those who are members of a particular group. Finally, there are groups who are focused on the social territory associated with markets. It is possible that social groups may focus on more than one territory and gangs are just one such group. They will focus both on physical territory as well as that related to markets, especially contemporary drug markets. Thus, territoriality as a fundamental element within the definition of a gang does not adequately separate it from other group forms.

To have a more realistic understanding of gangs, it is necessary to avoid the pitfalls associated with the tenets identified above. In that regard, the gang is more than a territorially based collective of individuals engaged in crime. It is first and foremost an organization, but an organization with certain characteristics. We should understand a gang as:

“an organized social system that is both quasi-private (not fully open to the public) and quasi-secretive (much of the information concerning its business remains confined with the group) and one whose size and goals have necessitated that social interaction be governed by a leadership structure that has defined roles; where the authority associated with these roles has been legitimized to the extent that social codes are operational to regulate the behavior of both the leadership and the rank and file; that plans and provides not only for the social and economic services of its members, but also for its own maintenance as an organization; that pursues such goals irrespective of whether the action is legal or not; and that lacks a bureaucracy (i.e., an administrative staff that is hierarchically organized and separate from leadership).”<sup>18</sup>

I have used this definition before and it has a number of advantages that capture the unique sociological character of the gang. It captures the organizational quality of this type of group behavior while specifying the sociological characteristics that separate

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<sup>17</sup> Martín Sánchez Jankowski, *Islands in the Street*, pp. 178-211.

<sup>18</sup> Martín Sánchez Jankowski, *Islands in the Street*, pp. 28-29.

it from other forms of collective behavior. Further, it does not rely on illegal acts as the single most important character in defining a gang. It does say that the gang will pursue its goals without regard to whether the actions are legal or not, but the main element in the definition is that it will pursue a strategy of accumulating resources for its purposes without regard for whether the actions associated with the strategy are legal or not. Finally, this definition has the ability to differentiate between actions of a gang and those associated with a group that is a “pre-gang” (a band, or a group aspiring, and moving, toward being a gang) and a “post-gang” (a group that was once a gang, but is in decline and hopes to regroup and reestablish itself as a gang again.); as well as other formal groups like a “crew,” or “posse,”<sup>19</sup> or syndicate. Such ability is essential to understanding the differences in behavior that are associated with the divergent groups along an organizational developmental continuum.

## SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND GANG BEHAVIOR

Gangs influence the social structure they find themselves in and at the same time they are influenced by the social structure they are apart of. In the past fifty years five structural environments have influenced gangs. During this same period, gangs have also influenced these structural conditions.

### *Gangs in a Time of Immigration.*

The U.S. has been a country that has continually experienced the immigration of peoples from throughout the world.<sup>20</sup> The shared experience of each of these ethnic groups was having to overcome the prejudice and discrimination of those who had come before. Beginning in the eighteenth century gangs have been associated with the lower classes of the various immigrant groups who found their way to the United States.<sup>21</sup> It was the structure of their lower-class position that was the primary reason why lower

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<sup>19</sup> “Posse” is the name utilized by Jamaicans to identify a certain type of organization they become involved in. Although a “posse” assumes the same internal organizational structure as gangs, it is organized for the specific purpose of trafficking drugs. Since gangs assume multidimensional roles in their communities, they occupy a central institutional position within the communities. On the other hand, because “posses” assume a far more restricted role in their communities, they are not elements that functionally contribute to an organic community. Therefore, the “posse” represents a new historical actor that is similar, yet different from a gang.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Archdeacon, *Becoming American: An Ethnic History* (New York: The Free Press, 1983); and Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> See Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Dover, 1901 [1971]); and Harvey Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum: A Sociological Study of Chicago's Near North Side* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929 [1983]); Jenna Weissman Joselit, *Our Gang: Jewish Crime and the New York Jewish Community, 1900-1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983)

class kids started gangs and became involved in delinquent behavior.<sup>22</sup> In brief, it was their parent's lower class positions that limited the opportunities of these youth to buy things and have fun. They associated in gangs because gangs gave them camaraderie and some goods to consume and/or play with, even they were obtained through various delinquent acts.<sup>23</sup>

The situation in the 1990s regarding immigrant groups has remained somewhat the same, but the structure of the immigrant experience has influenced the phenomenon of gangs in two new and distinct ways. First, like in the past, immigrants have come to the United States and established their own communities. Some of these groups, like the Chinese and Vietnamese, had a long history of gangs being in their societies before immigration. Recently, the gangs in the various sending countries have waited until their respective countrymen have established their own communities in the United States and then sent elements of their organizations to these sites to set up enterprises. They have primarily, although not exclusively, been involved in drug trafficking and gambling establishments. Because the people living in these new communities are themselves newcomers, the language barriers and the out-group prejudice they experience makes them feel socially isolated. This condition provides these gangs with a fertile environment to develop their operations because these neighborhoods provide a conveniently protected environment in which to sell their illegal drug products to members of the more affluent sectors of the society. Because the residents of these neighborhoods have limited competency in English, there exists a natural economic niche to establish enterprises to satisfy the immigrant community's entertainment needs. This has been accomplished through the gang's installment of illegal gambling houses. What is most significant here, is that these gangs have not only found drug trafficking and gambling houses to be quite lucrative, they have used the structure of the immigrant community's social isolation to hide their activities from the police.<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, some gangs have begun in immigrant communities because the socioeconomic mobility of the youth of these communities has been structurally blocked. In this scenario, a gang emerges when the youth in these areas, primarily those from the first and second generation, become frustrated and disillusioned by the prospects that they will find the type of jobs that will allow them to become mobile from the socioeconomic position of their parents. This leads some of them to form gangs in order to generate the money they believe will allow them to be better off than their parents. These gangs have had two primary sources of money. First, they have been involved in extorting money from the small storeowners and restaurant workers living in their communities. Second, they use the extortion money to become involved in buying heroine and cocaine from the

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<sup>22</sup> Herbert Ashbury, *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld* (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1927 ); Frederic Thrasher, *The Gang*; and Harvey Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum*, pp.155-158.

<sup>23</sup> Frederic Thrasher, *The Gang*; Harvey Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum*, p. 157.

<sup>24</sup> See Ko-Lin Chin, *Chinese Subculture and Criminality: Nontraditional Crime Groups in America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990); and James Diego Vigil and Steve Chong Yun, "Vietnamese Youth Gangs in Southern California," in Ronald Huff, *Gangs in America*, pp.146-163..

larger drug organizations, and then selling it to various retailers in the city.<sup>25</sup> This has proved quite profitable for many of these gangs.

In sum, what is striking is that it is the structure of the immigrant experience that has influenced the development of gangs. This has included both the structural conditions (the existence of strong and sophisticated gangs) existing in the sending communities, as well as the structural conditions (blocked mobility and socio-geographic concentration) in the host country. Therefore, in the contemporary period, the immigrant experience has produced gangs that have been primarily, although not exclusively, predatory on their community.

### ***Gangs in a Time of Blue Collar Expansion.***

In communities where there remains the opportunity to secure a working class job gangs have assumed a particular character. In these communities the youth have grown up seeing and talking to those family members, relatives or friends that have been working in these jobs. The youth have come to know the social conditions that exist in the factories and the life that such work provides. On a personal level, many of the youth have found these jobs to be unattractive. Even when they talk about blue-collar jobs in the primary sector they believe that the work is boring and the hours are long. When they discuss the blue-collar jobs in the secondary labor market, their views are even harsher concerning the actual working conditions and the chances of getting what they want out of life. The comments of Albert and Luis are typical of those who see factory work this way. Albert is a sixteen year old African American whose father works in a factory that makes auto parts for General Motors:

I definitely don't want to do what my dad does. He is always complaining about how fast the production line is. He is always tired and even though he makes good money he never has anything to say about the job cause he does the same thing everyday. No wonder he drinks all the time.<sup>26</sup>

Luis is a fifteen year old Mexican whose father works in the garment industry:

My dad is like in a daze around the house. He comes home from work and he is dead tired. He works twelve hours a day, six days a week doing the same job. He has that dust from the machine all over him, and he coughs from not wearing a mask. I hope there is something more for me than a job like he's got.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ko-Lin Chin, *China Town Gangs: Extortion, Enterprise, and Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> This quote is taken from the field notes of a research project that I completed (from 1978-1989) on gangs. The study involved participant-observation of 37 gangs

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The fact is that they want to prolong, as much as possible, the time before they will enter that particular job market and life style. Gangs in such conditions are organizations that provide a social haven for the young to have fun and pleasure before assuming the jobs and concomitant lifestyle they so much want to avoid.<sup>28</sup> In this structural situation, the gang's primary actions as an organization will be to secure the financial resources necessary to provide leisure for its members. They will, with extreme resolve, pursue this through both legal (getting part time jobs and paying dues to the gang organization) and illegal means (selling drugs and stolen contraband).<sup>29</sup> However, they will not be focused on accumulating profit to disperse to their members as they do under other structural conditions.

### ***Gangs in the Time of Drug Deregulation.***

In the past the Italian Mafia had monopolized the drug industry. This monopoly had included control over both production and distribution. However, the Italian Mafia's total control of production and distribution evaporated. This occurred for two reasons. First, as ethnic antagonisms became more hostile between Italians and African Americans, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, Italians in general, including the Mafia, found it nearly impossible to be physically safe in the neighborhoods of these groups. This cut the Italians off from retailing drugs to the communities that had been their biggest consumers. Secondly, with the introduction of cocaine into the market, the Italians found it impossible to control access to the sources of production. This is because Latin America was a big producer of cocaine and there were various Latin American immigrants in the United States that had, because of ethnic affinity, access to these sources of production. As a result of these changes, the Italian Mafia was forced to withdraw their retail operations from most of these ethnic areas and simply wholesale drugs to local retailers. This opened up opportunities for segments of the low-income community to become involved in the retail drug industry.<sup>30</sup> During this time, gangs became involved in different capacities of this drug retail trade. They distributed drugs and also became involved in the production of crack cocaine and other drugs. Some gangs had drug mills that produced synthetic hallucinogens. As a result of their development more poor boys wanted to be involved in gangs because the opportunities to make money had increased substantially.<sup>31</sup> The gangs could not only recruit people with the pitch that they could make substantial money, but they would also have the

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<sup>28</sup> On the issue of level-aspirations for low-income youth and the desire to avoid the occupations that their fathers/mothers had, see Jay MacCloud, *Ain't No Making It: Leveled Aspirations in a Low-Income Community* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987); and Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

<sup>29</sup> See Frederic Thrasher, *The Gang*; Clifford Shaw, *Jack-Roller: The Boys Own Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930); Martin Sánchez Jankowski, *Islands in the Street*.

<sup>30</sup> See Francisco Ianni, *Black Mafia: Ethnic Succession in Organized Crime* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974); and Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>31</sup> Felix Padilla, *The Gang as an American Enterprise*.

organization to protect them from other competitors.<sup>32</sup> This structural situation has caused changes in the length of time that individuals participate in gangs. In the past gang participation would have been primarily in a young boy's teens, but now participation has been extended to age thirty and beyond.<sup>33</sup>

### ***Gangs in the Time of Incarceration.***

As a result of the increases in crime, the United States has embarked on a policy of incarcerating more people who have broken the law. This policy has included the building of more prisons, increasing the time of incarceration for particular crimes, and the increased treatment of juveniles as adults in the courts.<sup>34</sup> In turn, this has resulted in the United States becoming first in the world in the number of people imprisoned. It has also affected the situation of gangs. As gangs have become more involved in the drug industry there has been a marked increase in the number of gang members becoming incarcerated. This has resulted in street gangs becoming more integrated with prison gangs. In the past, the prison gangs, which had been adult organized crime syndicates, had tried to organize the street gangs under their control. The street gangs, in part because they were younger in age and did not want older boys controlling them (i.e. part of adolescent rebellion), resisted these efforts. As more of the youths from street gangs went to prison they were forced by the stark reality of the prison structure to affiliate with one of the prison gangs or else risk being vulnerable to the hostile predators within the prison population.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, individual gang members have entered an environment structured both by the state authorities and the prison gangs. What is more, they have entered a system with the realization that it is likely that they will do more than one stint and spend a considerable amount of their life in prison. This has, particularly over a period of time in California, influenced individuals in street gangs to become either members of prison gangs, or to make formal alliances with them. For example, among Chicano gangs in California, this process has resulted in the prison gangs dividing the state in half, with those who live south of Bakersfield being identified as *sureños* (and they wear blue colors) and those living to the north being identified as *norteños* (and they wear red colors). Thus, in the past what gang an inmate affiliated with in prison was not transferred to the outside, but now the state's policy of more intense incarceration, has produced the unintended consequence of unifying the various street gangs with the two dominant Mexican prison gangs, *La Familia* and the Mexican Mafia, making them more organized with greater resources to persist.

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<sup>32</sup> Jeffrey Fagan, "The Social Organization of Drug Use and Drug Dealing Among Urban Gangs" *Criminology*, vol. 27, no. 4 (November, 1989), pp.633-70.

<sup>33</sup> Martín Sánchez Jankowski, *Islands in the Street*, pp.323-324.

<sup>34</sup> Steven R. Donziger, ed., *The Real War on Crime: The Report of the National Criminal Justice Commission* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> For a good description of predatory nature of prison life, see Jack Henry Abbott, *In the Belly of the Beast: Notes From Prison* (New York: Vintage Books 1991).

### *Gangs and the Structure of Violence*

There is no issue that has concerned the general public or academics more than the issue of gang violence. What has been missing from these analyses is a more general understanding of the structural conditions that influence gang violence. Before discussing the structural conditions that impact gang violence, it is necessary to clarify the concepts of “violence” and “gang violence.” “Violence” should be understood as the use of force to achieve some desired end.<sup>36</sup> “Gang violence,” therefore, must be separated from individuals who are in gangs and commit acts of violence, because the former involves individuals committing violence as agents of the organization, whereas the latter involves individuals in gangs committing violence as independent agents.<sup>37</sup>

The violence associated with gangs has been structured by three conditions. The first has to do with the socioeconomic condition that gang members find themselves in. Gangs have consistently emerged from low-income communities where there has been a scarcity in resources. The resources that do exist in these communities must be competed for. Thus, individuals brought up in such an environment learn that they must be aggressive in their efforts to secure these resources, because if they are not, others will get them. This socialization process influences individuals to be particularly prejudice in their approach to others and to employ maximum power in their efforts to secure or maintain a possession or goal. Therefore, individuals who are in gangs, like other individuals from these environments, use violence to obtain their own individually oriented objective. It is this individual-oriented type of violence that has been misrepresented by law enforcement, the media, and some academics.<sup>38</sup> This type of violence has nothing to do with gangs. It would have occurred whether the individual was in a gang or not.

The second structured condition that impacts gang members in their use of violence has to do with the informal codes that are internal to the organization itself. These informal codes have to do with the expectations that exist among gang members as to what and how much force should be used in a given situation. When gang members are in a social situation and they engage in violence, it is governed by the social norms and internal codes of the gang regarding the use of force. This is most clearly operative when individuals in a gang are using force against each other to achieve an objective, and when the organization has decided on the use of violence to gain an objective. The comments of Hector and Knife are representative of this dynamic of social control. Hector is a twenty-one year old member of a Puerto Rican gang:

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<sup>36</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970).

<sup>37</sup> For a more full discussion of these differences, and the empirical difference they have on gang behavior, see Martín Sánchez Jankowski, *Islands in the Street*, pp. 137-177.

<sup>38</sup> For law enforcement see Martín Sánchez Jankowski, *Islands in the Street*, pp. 137-177; Cheryl Maxson and Malcolm W. Klein, “Street Gang Violence: Twice as Great, or Half as Great?” in C. Ronald Huff (ed.) *Gangs in America*, pp. 71-100. For the media see Martín Sánchez Jankowski, “Les Gangs Et La Press: La Production D’Un Mythe National” *Actes De La Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 101/102 (Mars 1994), pp. 101-17.

When I get in a fight with someone from the gang, I know what is cool and what ain't cool. One time one of the dudes (gang members) took out a gun on another member and that was a big violation, so he got severely beaten by all the members. Everybody knows what the rules are and tries to keep them.<sup>39</sup>

Knife is an eighteen year-old member of an African American gang in Los Angeles:

Ain't nobody do anything crazy when we out making a hit (a shooting of someone). I mean we got our orders, so we don't do any more than the plan was. If we do we in big trouble because the rules is to follow the orders exactly.<sup>40</sup>

The third way in which violence associated with gangs is structured has to do with the market environment that gangs, as organizations must operate in. As mentioned earlier, gangs often use force in advancing the interests of the organization. The increased level of gang violence in recent years has been associated with the structure of the economic market that gangs operate in. With the opening of the drug market, gangs have behaved like any other capitalist-oriented organization. They have attempted to monopolize the various drug products and their distribution markets. This behavior has been, and will continue to be, particularly aggressive and violent because contrary to other markets, the state can not regulate the activity of the competitors. Thus, in a market that has no outside actor to regulate the principle competitors, the regulatory dynamic becomes physical power. Those who possess the most physical power and are willing to use it are the most successful in their efforts to monopolize the various product markets. When one of the competitors has considerably more physical power than the others, there tends to be less violence. However, when there is roughly equal power between competitors more violence will be present because there will be persistent initiatives to determine who will emerge as the dominant force. In all these situations, the structure of the market (type of products, amount of supplies, and demand) and the structure of the organization (strength of internal structure and its power resources), along with the structure of the field of competition (physical environment) determines the type and level of violence that will occur.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the relationships between some of the structural conditions of society and gangs. It is important to point out that many of the structural conditions discussed here have developed over time, and some date as far back as the

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<sup>39</sup> This quote is taken from data gathered by the author on a research project (1989-1992) investigating the phenomenon of violence involving gangs.

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establishment of the republic itself. For example, the United States was founded on the image of being a revolutionary society. By this I mean it was founded on a political and social break with its historical origins. The new nation that emerged out of this break not only established “the American” as a new identity, but it also created new structures to help support this new identity. One of the factors that helped to shape the new identity of “the American,” and the concomitant social structures that supported it, was the large and unsettled nature of the American geography. America was a “frontier nation” that taught people that there was unlimited opportunity, but that one must depend on themselves.<sup>41</sup> This emphasis on the individual was also affected by the fact that the state was seen as a potential threat to individual liberty and thus should not be involved in people’s lives even if it was doing so with the intent of being good.<sup>42</sup> What evolved was the belief that the state was incapable of being good because whenever it intervened it altered the very basis of what produced a productive society by destroying the exact individual spirit necessary to survive and overcome individual hardship and defeat. In essence, one of the fundamental tenants of what would become the social ideology of America was the principle that individual defeat was a very important force in the dynamic that made for a great society because people who work to either overcome it (defeat), or avoid it, become better and more productive citizens. In turn, it was believed that it is the fruit of these people’s labors that provide the continuing contributions that make a great society.

These beliefs about inequality provided the basis for the social ideology that over time produced a political culture where the state was seen as undermining the very essence of what made the society great when it provided social welfare to its citizens. Most citizens in America have learned these aspects of the political culture, and this is especially true for members of the lower class. Individuals in the lower class know they must depend on themselves and that if they are to improve their position in life, they must be creative and enterprising. As conditions among the lower class have declined (particularly among the lower class in inner cities),<sup>43</sup> and the state has retrenched from intervening to improve them,<sup>44</sup> young males (especially non-white males) have developed strategies to become more enterprising. One of the strategies employed by some of the

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<sup>41</sup> See Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization* (New York: Atheneum Press, 1985).

<sup>42</sup> On this point it is instructive to take a look at the politics and the final version of the United States Constitution. See Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (New York: New American Library, 1961 [1778]).

<sup>43</sup> For a general discussion of the rise in inequality in the United States, see the papers in *Demography*, vol. 33, no. 4 (November 1996), pp. 395-428; as well as, Micahel Hout, (with Claude S. Fischer, Martin Sánchez Jankowski, Samuel R. Lucas, Ann Swidler, and Kim Voss), “Inequality By Design: Myths, Data, and Politics,” Working Paper # 104, Russell Sage Foundation, 1996; and for that related to the inner cities, especially the African American population in the inner cities see William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Knopf, 1996)

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion of state retrenchment see Joel Krieger, *Reagan/Thatcher and the Politics of Decline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, “Redrawing the Color Line: The State and Fate of the Ghetto in Post-Fordist America,” in Craig Calhoun, (ed.) *Critical Social Theory: Culture, History, and the Challenge of Difference* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 231-276.

lower class has been to form gangs and become involved in the underground economy.<sup>45</sup> Thus, instead of being deviants from the prevailing economic culture, gangs have accepted the principles of the dominant social ideology and economic culture, and adapted their strategies to the opportunities and resources they have available to them.

This situation has precipitated a structural response on the part of the state. In an effort to control the economic activity of gangs (and other groups), the state has increased the number of law enforcement personnel responsible for gang activity,<sup>46</sup> they have passed legislation that increased the amount of time individuals associated with a gang will serve in prison,<sup>47</sup> and they have built more prisons.<sup>48</sup>

These statutory changes have caused the gangs to react. Since more boys are becoming incarcerated for longer periods of time, local street gangs have reacted by integrating themselves into the organized crime syndicates associated with prison. Thus, instead of lessening the organizational structure of gangs through the policy of increased incarceration of gang members, the state's policy worked to strengthened them. Ironically, despite the marginal, if any, results in affecting the gang phenomenon, the state's continued structural response is to build even more prisons and pass even more harsh rules.<sup>49</sup>

In sum, the present paper has attempted to highlight the relationship between gangs and the social structure of American society. The contemporary gang problem must be understood as a result of certain structural conditions that exist in the United States, or any society for that matter, but in particular, those structural conditions that have caused societal inequality to grow.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, the gang must not be seen as a

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<sup>45</sup> Felix Padilla, *The Gang as an American Enterprise*; Martín Sánchez Jankowski, *Islands in the Street*; and Carl Taylor, *Dangerous Society*, and *Girls, Gangs, Women and Drugs* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1993).

<sup>46</sup> The Federal Bureau of Investigation has, as a result of the ending of the cold war, transferred those agents that in the past had been assigned to counter-subversive units (anti-Communist units), to anti-gang units.

<sup>47</sup> California has passed as part of the state's penal code, 186.20-27 the "Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act" which provides an automatic addition of one to three years in prison for those who have been convicted of a crime and are members of a street gang.

<sup>48</sup> See Steven R. Donziger, editor, *The Real War on Crime: The Report of The National Criminal Justice Commission*, pp. 73-98. For a discussion of the general policy approach taken by the state to deal with inequality by incarcerating more of those at the bottom of the society, see Loïc J. D. Wacquant, "De L'Etat Charitable a L'Etat Penal: Notes sur le Traitement de la Misere en Amerique," *Regards Sociologiques*, 11 May, 1996, pp. 30-38.

<sup>49</sup> On the state level, California has passed the "Three Strikes and You Are Out" law which has a number of technical points all of which can not be described here. However, generally it provided for those adults convicted of three felonies a sentence of a minimum of twenty-five years to life in prison without the chance for parole before they served at least 20 years. The prior felonies had to be considered violent in nature and could include robbery and burglaries along with the more traditionally thought of acts that involve bodily harm. On the federal level, the Justice Department has decided to use Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act ("RICO"), 18, U.S.C. 1962 which was established to combat the organized crime associated with the Italian/Sicilian Mafia, to combat street gangs. It is presently being used in a case involving a number of defendants in New Mexico.

<sup>50</sup> See Claude S. Fischer, Michael Hout, Martín Sánchez Jankowski, Samuel R. Lucas, Ann Swidler, and Kim Voss, *Inequality By Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

collection of deviants, or a deviant form of collective behavior. Rather, it must be seen as both an organization composed of people who have the values and goals of the mainstream of American society, and in terms of collective behavior, a specific type of organizational response to a particular socioeconomic condition. As such, the gang is a response rationally consistent with the social, political, and organizational culture of the dominant society. At its basic core, the gang phenomenon is both a response to the structural conditions of the society and an integral part of them.