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Street gang patterns and Policies

Malcolm W. Klein
Cheryl L. Maxson

Street Gang Patterns and Policies

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To Father Gregory Boyle, S.J., and the others like him whose perseverance in attempting to change gang lives deserves our appreciation

And to all those police officers who also have persevered in their attempts to control gangs and reduce gang crime

We have little solid evidence to substantiate the positive effects of either approach, but we believe such evidence could be developed, and that is a major goal of this book.

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Acknowledgments

A volume like this could only have been written after many years of careful work by other scholars had led to a broad accumulation of knowledge. It could only have been written after many attempts to control street gang problems across the nation had revealed the complexities of the enterprise. We acknowledge with admiration the work of the many gang researchers and practitioners who have brought us to this point, where some integration seems possible. While the names of our predecessors are myriad, we wish to single out a few gang experts who have made the most explicit contributions to our thinking: Scott Decker, Arlen Egley, Finn-Aage Esbensen, Sergeant Wesley McBride, Jody Miller, John Moore and the National Youth Gang Center, James F. Short, Jr., Irving A. Spergel, Terence Thornberry, James D. Vigil, and Elmar G. M. Weitekamp.

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Cheryl Maxson can't skip this opportunity to acknowledge three people

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No one is more aware than we of our debts to the many named and unnamed colleagues whose work is in one form or another included in this volume. We express our gratitude and our hope that we have used their work wisely and well.

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Street Gang Patterns and Policies

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INTRODUCTION

This is a book about important patterns that characterize street gangs in contemporary America. It is also a book about important experiments in gang policy, as seen in major programs to reduce or control gang problems. In addition and somewhat uniquely, this is a book about how gang patterns and policies are—or can be—interrelated. This interweaving of patterns and policies, as we will demonstrate in the three chapters of part I, is critical so that we can as a society, as our colleague James D. Vigil has requested, “begin to put to rest the contemporary politically tainted dialogue that interferes with a balanced consideration of the problem. Society needs objective investigations and evidence, not ‘moral panic’—in short, facts, not fears” (Vigil, 2002: 14).

As we will note later, the plan of the book is to take the reader through three stages. In part I, we present updated information that strongly suggests that we must revisit our programs and policies for gang control. In part II, we present the information—much of it new—that we believe can provide the foundation for reconsidering programs and policies. Then, in part III, we present a set of program and policy goals and a paradigm for selecting among the many gang control programs that have been offered in the past.

We start this exercise, as we must, with the difficult definitional issue: what is a street gang? Does it really matter how we define it? We answer, quite readily, that yes, it does matter. And to be as succinct as possible, we offer the following nominal definition of the street gang with an explanation of how we came to it:¹

A street gang is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity.

Point 1: *Durable* is a bit ambiguous, but at least an existence of several months can be used as a guideline. Many gang-like groups come together and dissipate within a few months. The durability refers to the *group*, which continues despite turnover of members.

Point 2: *Street-oriented* implies spending a lot of group time outside home, work, and school—often on streets, in malls, in parks, in cars, and so on.

Point 3: *Youth* can be ambiguous. Most street gangs are more adolescent than adult, but some include members in their 20s and even 30s. Most have average ages in adolescence or early 20s.

Point 4: *Illegal* generally means delinquent or criminal, not just bothersome.

Point 5: *Identity* refers to the group, not the individual self-image.

This is the consensus nominal definition agreed to by a consortium of more than 100 American and European researchers and policy makers from more than a dozen nations meeting in a series of eight workshops between 1997 and 2005 (the Eurogang program). It represents a minimal approach—the necessary and sufficient defining characteristics—that for most purposes allows us to distinguish street gangs from other troublesome youth groups (of which there are many more).

The components—durable, street oriented, youth group, identity with illegal activity—are definers of street gangs. They are the minimal necessary and sufficient elements to recognize a street gang. Many other characteristics are common descriptors but not definers. One thinks of leadership, cohesiveness, ethnicity, gender, and distinctive argot, clothing, tattoos, or hand signs, for instance. These are variables that help us to capture variations across gangs, but they are not necessary definers of a street gang as we shall deal with it in this book.

A Brief Review of the Definitional Problem

The definitional issue has probably been the stickiest one that gang scholars have had to confront in the almost eight decades since Frederic Thrasher's pioneering efforts in Chicago (1927). All of the attention paid to it has not until now yielded much consensus, a fact which in itself testifies to the complexity of the issue and the need felt by all gang scholars to find a useful and acceptable approach.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that we were to assess the size and location of America's street gang problems and implicitly lay out the rationales for national gang policy by using a definition of gangs that had essentially no form, which said, essentially, that a gang is any group that you or other responsible people think is a gang. Using such an amorphous definition would make it very difficult to grasp our subject matter, wouldn't it?

Yet this is precisely what has happened. The National Youth Gang Center, on behalf of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, has carried out several national, annual surveys of thousands of police and sheriff's jurisdictions. In doing so, they have noted the locations of most gangs and provided a national estimate of the number of gangs and gang members in the United States. Relatively recent figures (National Youth Gang Center, 1999) put these numbers at 30,818 gangs and 846,428 gang members, a level of precision that defies credulity. The instructions to the law enforcement respondents to the gang survey are to include as a youth gang "a group of youths or young adults in your jurisdiction that you or other responsible persons in your agency or community are willing to identify or classify as a 'gang'" (1999: 45).

What sorts of problems does such a nondefinition yield? According to the NYGC report on the 1996 survey (National Youth Gang Center, 1998), 58% of respondents included taggers, 24% included satanic groups, 22% included "posses" and "crews," 20% included stoners, and 5% included terrorist groups. Further, many respondents explicitly failed to exclude "unsupervised youth groups," a term that would include almost any friendship group at some point in its members' adolescence. Twenty-eight percent of respondents in large cities included these friendship groups, as did 33% in suburban counties, 38% in small cities, and 49% in rural counties.

Given these figures, it seems inevitable that the NYGC figures provide a substantial overestimate of gangs and gang members.² One would predict that the figures would be particularly suspect in small jurisdictions where minority populations are smaller and would therefore yield unusually high proportions of nonminority gangs. And this is exactly what happened: the figure for white gangs is 14%. Having been alerted to this problem, the NYGC added an item to its third annual national survey. At the very end of the questionnaire, NYGC asked its respondents how many of their gangs would fit under a modified definition that read as follows:

A group of youths or young adults in your jurisdiction whose involvement in illegal activities over months or years marks them in

their own view and in the view of the community and police as different from most other youthful groups. Do not include motorcycle gangs, hate or ideology groups, prison gangs, or other exclusively adult gangs. (NYGC, n.d.: 7)

This alternative definition adds durability and criminal identity. NYGC's preliminary analysis of the effect of adopting this modified definition suggests that its previous estimates were somewhat off base. The new data indicated that the number of jurisdictions with gangs was overestimated by 12%, and the number of gangs was overestimated by 26%. These are not trivial differences, and they alert us to the major effects that definitional disparities can yield.

There have been no other, comparable national surveys of the gang situation, although Miller (1980), Spergel (1995), Spergel and Curry (1990), and Maxson and Klein (1995) have used nonrepresentative samples for other research purposes. Thus we cannot know what figures might result from a more narrowly constructed definition of street gangs. Leaving aside antiscientific suggestions that the definitional problem is simply too difficult to merit attention (Horowitz, 1990), we offer what have probably been the most influential attempts to define gangs. Five, in particular, will set the stage for adopting the consensus Eurogang definition as a way to move forward.

The earliest of the five definitions was Thrasher's characterization of a gang as "an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict" (1927: 57). Thus marginalization, organizational informality, and violence (*conflict* meant intergang fighting here) were seen as central by Thrasher. All three themes are recurrent in more recent gang descriptions.

The second definition was offered by Klein (1971), based on his study of five large clusters of gangs in Los Angeles and on a review of gang structures described in the literature to that date. The definition is of juvenile gangs, specifically, and stresses a social-psychological framework:

[A juvenile gang is] any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name), and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or enforcement agencies. (1971: 13)³

Twenty-five years later, Klein (1995a) admitted to so much controversy over this or any other definition that he backed off from his earlier stance to approach the problem in two ways. Emphasizing the term *street gang*, he first excluded certain groups—terrorists, football hooligans, motorcycle gangs, and prison gangs, for instance—and then simply characterized gangs in terms of common descriptors: age, gender, ethnicity, territoriality, and criminal patterns and orientation.

The third much-cited definition was offered by Walter Miller (1980) based on his interviews with police officials, media, and others across the country in the mid-1970s. This definition was basically a distillation of the gang dimensions offered by his informants, almost a popularity poll to determine the most common elements:

A youth gang is a self-formed association of peers, bound together by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership, well-developed lines of authority, and other organizational features, who act in concert to achieve a specific purpose or purposes which generally include the conduct of illegal activity and control over a particular territory, facility, or type of enterprise. (1980: 121)

This definition captures many of the descriptors of gangs noted by various scholars in addition to Miller's respondents but attributes more formal organizational properties than most scholars might accept. The question of how well organized street gangs are has become one of the more contentious issues between scholars and practitioners.

The reader will note that Thrasher, Klein, and Miller all include involvement in illegal activities as one of their definitional components. This contrasts with the fourth of the commonly cited definitions, that of James F. Short, Jr.:

Gangs are groups whose members meet together with some regularity, over time, on the basis of group-defined criteria of membership and group-defined organizational characteristics; that is, gangs are non-adult-sponsored, self-determining groups that demonstrate continuity over time. (1996: 5)

Short emphasizes one element common to the Thrasher, Klein, and Miller definitions—self-determination of the group by its members—but significantly and deliberately avoids any connection to illegal activities. The rationale for this exclusion is that retaining illegal behaviors in the defi-

inition creates a tautology, a circular argument, in studying gangs in order to understand and predict their illegal behavior. Further, it overestimates the centrality of criminal activity to gang life and concerns.

We can accept the second of these concerns: gangs normally form for reasons of identity, status, need for belonging, and perceived protection, not primarily to commit crimes. But we cannot accept the tautological argument. First, because gangs vary so widely in their criminal orientations and involvement, these can be studied without circularity; i.e., one can readily predict to levels, types, and circumstances of criminal involvement. Second, crime is *not* the only aspect we study and predict. The dependent variables of gang research often include cohesiveness, leadership, organizational sophistication, size, gender, ethnic variations, community embeddedness, and so on. Including criminal involvement or orientation in the definition facilitates rather than hinders such research.

Common to all four of these attempts was a process of deriving definitions inductively from observations and experience with gangs. Each was concerned with specifying critical elements of *informal* groups: gangs don't normally come to us with constitutions and bylaws, charters, organizational charts, or written credos to which members subscribe. Thus, definitional approaches must to some extent be ad hoc and reflective of the definer's experience.

This contrasts starkly with the fifth definition, which was carefully crafted in the late 1980s to serve a specific purpose, the establishment of a *legal* category of gangs in order to enhance the ability of law enforcement to suppress gangs and incarcerate gang members. This definition has become widely accepted by public officials and the media as "real," with some unfortunate consequences. Since copied in many states, that law enforcement definition was originally embodied in the California Penal Code (section 186.22) and legislation known as the Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention (S.T.E.P.) Act (enacted January 1, 1993). It referred specifically to "the criminal street gang" as

any ongoing organization, association, or group of three or more persons, whether formal or informal, having as one of its primary activities the commission of one or more of the criminal acts enumerated in paragraphs (1) to (8), inclusive, of subdivision (E), which has a common name or common identifying sign or symbol, whose members individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal gang activity.

The criminal acts referred to included felony assault, robbery, homicide, narcotics offenses, shooting into an inhabited dwelling, arson, witness (or victim) intimidation, and vehicle theft. The legal haziness of “youth gang” or “street gang” is replaced by the critical term *criminal street gang*, and this in turn is defined by reference to the most serious offenses and those that are stereotypical of gang activity. Thus the gang has become reified by police and prosecutors’ aims and concerns, with little reference to depictions accumulated over decades by gang research.⁴

As the public has come to accept this definition, street gangs have become demonized as purposefully criminal conspiracies, as violent organizations, and lost their informal, street-corner characterization. Further, any sense of the variations in gang structures and activities is lost in the definition in the S.T.E.P. Act. Reality is replaced by the goals of law enforcement: to label youth as gang members and to incarcerate them for as long as possible. Gangs may not have changed much, but their depiction most certainly has.

As a case in point, consider the suburban California county prosecutor in the case of three white boys who assaulted another during a confrontation at the beach in 1999. The prosecutor offered a plea bargain to the defendants, reducing the charges in exchange for an admission that they were members of a gang. To fit under the rubric of the criminal street gang, the prosecution had to invent a new term—“bully gang”—since the relationships among the defendants did not otherwise fit either the legal or scholarly depictions of street gangs.

These five definitional approaches are far from exhaustive. There are scores of attempts in the professional literature to define street gangs. These five, however, have probably been the most influential and illustrate the very broad dimensions that definitions can take. The consensus Eurogang definition, we think, captures the necessary minimal elements and avoids the complications of a myriad of gang descriptors. This is particularly important as we lay the groundwork for describing variations in gang structures and for encouraging cross-jurisdictional, comparative research and policy. Further, it is our experience to date that this definition, emphasizing durability, street orientation, youth, and self-identity involving illegal behavior, is largely acceptable to research scholars and working practitioners alike. This consensus among both researchers and policy folks is important to our purposes in this book. In this respect, it is our best answer to Ball and Curry (1995), who express their concern about these potentially divergent perspectives as follows:

Theorists may seek a definition that will provide a term logically integrated into a larger postulatory framework, while researchers seek sufficient standardization to guide them toward the same phenomena and allow for comparisons of findings. Administrators may care less about the theoretical power or empirical applicability of a definition than the fact that it is simple enough to impose bureaucratic standardization for purposes of record keeping, and police may be interested primarily in an expedient definition allowing them to hold the collectivity responsible for criminal acts of individual members or vice versa. (1995: 227)

Street Gang “Control”

Throughout the book, we will for the sake of convenience use the phrase *gang control*, or just *control*, to stand for the myriad of programs and policies designed to reduce street gang problems. It is simply too much of a mouthful to speak each time of gang prevention, intervention, enforcement, and suppression; too much continually to repeat primary prevention, secondary prevention, and tertiary prevention as in public health terminology; too cumbersome to refer always to opportunities provision, social intervention, organizational change, community mobilization, and suppression, these being the five basic strategies implemented nationally as part of the Spergel Model supported by the U.S. Department of Justice. When we speak of gang control, we refer to all of these concepts, to the wide swath of approaches so far undertaken in the United States with, at best, mixed results.

Further, we will use gang control loosely to refer to attempts at individual change, group change, neighborhood or community change, and even societal change. Admittedly, we sacrifice precision for convenience, but we will return to the panoply of program and policy approaches with somewhat more precision in part III of the book. Until then, we beg the reader’s indulgence.

Generalizing about Street Gangs

It is our contention, based upon personal field experience and extensive reviews of the gang literature, that street gangs comprise a class of phenomena, that they are more similar to each other than different. This is not to say that “if you’ve seen one gang, you’ve seen them all”: far from it. There are differences attendant upon structure, gender, ethnicity, ge-

ographic location, and social class. But the durable, street-oriented, youthful, illegally toned self-identity of these groups trumps the differences among them. Most comparative gang researchers, though they have been few, have come to a similar conclusion (Fagan, 1989; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; J. Miller, 2001; Huff, 1998; Klein, 1995a; Klein, Kerner, Maxson, and Weitekamp, 2001).

This is a critical point. If street gangs did not have enough in common, we could not study them as a class, nor attempt to formulate general policies to respond to them. Further, if they were not sufficiently distinct from other youth groups, we could not reach gang-specific knowledge and policy. Street gangs, in our view, are qualitatively different from other youth groups. The consensus definition we have used here is an attempt to capture this fact. Gangs have reached a “tipping point” in their evolution; they have separated themselves from other groups and are generally seen in their communities as different entities.

The reasons for this are several, and they were captured succinctly by Joan Moore who, earlier in her career as a student of Hispanic gangs only, concluded that Hispanic gangs were different from others. In her foreword to Vigil’s 2002 book, *A Rainbow of Gangs*, she recognizes the commonalties across gangs as a function of “street socialization”:

[T]here is an additional factor in the gang that makes street socialization particularly powerful. Actual delinquency—breaking the law—gives gang members an additional reason to keep their activities secret. Each gang cohort develops a deep commitment to secrecy and to the protection of its members from all adults, not just the police, and from outsiders in general. A sense of loyalty becomes a paramount value. Almost all young gang members in this book talk about the gang as family. This implies that the gang commands a much heavier commitment on the part of its members than does the ordinary clique of adolescent friends. Street socialization, then, is probably more intense than is peer socialization in less all-encompassing groups. But the basic point is that the gang, like other adolescent peer groups, is a special group. (2002: xii)

Although the authors of this book have been located in southern California, often dubbed “the gang capital of the nation,” the content is not based on that region. To the data from Los Angeles, Long Beach, and San Diego, we will add more from Chicago, Denver, Rochester, Seattle, and a

host of other jurisdictions across the country. Indeed, we will on occasion make reference to similar gang problems in various European countries. This is not a book about Crips and Bloods, but about street gangs in general, most of which depart significantly from the stereotypes associated with Crips and Bloods, or with Latin Kings or Gangster Disciples, or with the Jets and Sharks of *West Side Story*. Seventy years of gang research by scores of scholars have finally yielded a fund of generalizable knowledge, and we attempt here to make use of much of it.

Patterns and Policies: Goals

We base this book on several important considerations. First, there is finally a sufficient database about the nature of street gangs so that generalizable patterns can be described. Second, past efforts at gang control have been demonstrably ineffective or—at best—untested for their effectiveness. Third, current gang knowledge, drawn from reliable and valid research, can provide guidelines for useful policies, going beyond the “don’t do that” conclusions in which researchers have indulged to date. Fourth, we can serve two important masters: (a) we can update and contextualize pivotal issues of concern to gang researchers at the individual, group, and community levels; and (b) we can also demonstrate to the policy and practitioner audience that accumulated gang knowledge can be joined with experience in gang programming to provide guidelines for more effective gang control.

In part I, we will pull together current data (our own and others’) on street gang proliferation and migration, on gang crime patterns both general and specific to violence and drugs, and on the relative ineffectiveness of major gang prevention, intervention, and suppression programs. These three topics will provide more than ample empirical evidence that new thinking about gang control is required.

In part II, we will summarize program-relevant data on individual, group, and community issues. These will include risk and protection factors for joining gangs, data on different forms of gang structure and on the group processes that make gangs qualitatively different from other groups, and data on the city characteristics of gang areas and the community contexts that spawn gangs.

For gang scholars, the data in parts I and II will constitute the most recent compilation of these findings and their importance for understanding the street gang phenomenon. For policy makers and practitioners, they will provide the rationale for more informed gang programming efforts.

In part III, we will lay out alternative goals for gang programming, which are normally not well articulated in the plans for gang control efforts. Then a general model will be presented, and examples of approaches will be offered that respond to these goals, to levels of gang control, and to the issues covered in the data reports in parts I and II. The result will be a panoply of approaches to gang control and attention to how one might select among these or, hopefully, combine some of them.

The content of this volume comes from several sources. The first of these is the authors' own research over several decades. These data will be found principally in the chapters on gang proliferation and migration, crime patterns, program effectiveness, gang structures and group processes, and risk factors.

The second source is the research data from other scholars, with particular emphasis on the longitudinal projects in Rochester, Denver, and Seattle. These will be most relevant to the chapters on crime patterns, group processes, and risk factors.

A third source is the survey data available from the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC), which is most pertinent to the gang proliferation issues and the city contexts. We have had special access both to the longitudinal projects and to the NYGC work as members of their advisory committees. We have employed much of the same interview protocols found in these projects.

Other data supplement these three major sources, but the emphasis is on data from the 1980s on, since this has been the most productive era in gang research, with an increased panoply of research methods applied to an ever-expanding catalog of gang-involved communities.

Both of us, it should be noted, have been involved in intensive gang programming by running programs, evaluating programs, and serving on technical advisory committees for some of the largest gang control efforts. These experiences will inform the volume in ways not readily available to other gang writers.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 will describe and summarize what is known about the proliferation of street gangs across the country and how that relates to the migration of gang members and will suggest some of the implications for thinking about broad-based gang programming.

Chapter 2 will describe and summarize what is known about gang

crime patterns, especially their versatility and the realities of gang violence and involvement in drug trafficking. These patterns have implications for many current gang control practices that miss the mark due to failures to appreciate the patterns.

Chapter 3 will take a close look at some of the largest and most prominent attempts at prevention, intervention, and suppression of gang activities. Included will be the Illinois attorney general's program, the L.A. Bridges program in Los Angeles, the national Gang Resistance, Education, and Training program (G.R.E.A.T.), a series of suppression projects mounted in southern California, and the application of the Spergel Model to the national Comprehensive Community-wide Approach to Gang Prevention, Intervention and Suppression program and to the SafeFutures program (both sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice). The approach here will be to discuss the program failures—in implementation or effectiveness—in terms of political and ideological conventional wisdoms rather than their use of basic gang knowledge.

These three chapters comprise part I of the book, setting the stage for greater attention to the data here and in part II. The seriousness of gang proliferation and crime patterns requires approaches to policy significantly different from those discussed in chapter 3, most of which have demonstrably failed to achieve needed changes in gang activity.

Chapter 4 speaks primarily to the level of the individual gang member. It describes and summarizes data on gang joining, the risk and protection factors that relate to joining, and data on different levels of youth commitment to the gang. Implications for prevention and intervention can be easily identified (and illustrated by reference back to the L.A. Bridges and G.R.E.A.T. programs).

Chapter 5 will describe in some detail our research in developing a typology of gang structure and how the results can inform approaches to gang control. We have published some of this material in several places, but pull it all together here for the first time. Chapter 5 will also include extended discussion of group processes (especially group cohesiveness) in street gangs as these place almost insurmountable barriers to some forms of gang control.

Chapter 6 will discuss both city and community contexts. The distinction between “chronic” and “emergent” gang cities is important here, especially as it relates to gang structures. Ethnicity and other data will be reported. At the community level, the discussion will of necessity be more conceptual than data based and will also describe the use of community-based antigang injunctions and abatements.

The sets of data presented in part II will set the stage for moving to the part III model of approaches to gang programming.

Chapter 7 will discuss the various goals of gang programming, with examples to illustrate the differences between individual versus group change; reducing joining versus encouraging desistance; prevention versus intervention versus suppression. Reference again to the Spergel Model will clarify some of these issues.

Chapter 8 will present a heuristic model, which combines elements of the Spergel Model with the data summaries from chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6. The model will then be expanded to cover both individual and group levels of change. The result will be two tables with 12 (3×4) cells each, and the discussion will use these models to elaborate on available and conceivable program approaches. Specific program examples will be offered. At the same time, the complexity of a multilevel approach will become obvious. This chapter, then, will be a combination of specific approaches and guidelines to choosing among programs. Gang control is necessarily very complex, so the greater clarity provided in chapter 8 should be helpful to policy makers anxious to leap into programming.

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Part I

Major developments in the growth of street gangs and gang crime, along with the results of large-scale gang control programs, are reviewed and point to the need to rethink our approaches to gang control.

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One

GANG PREVALENCE, PROLIFERATION, AND MIGRATION

Since 1980, no single aspect of street gang existence has captured more attention than the emergence of gangs in literally thousands of previously unaffected communities. This chapter addresses the available research information on four types of questions: (1) What do we know about the distribution of gangs in the United States and elsewhere? (2) How have these patterns changed over time? What are the patterns of gang proliferation and desistance? (3) Is proliferation related to gang migration? and (4) How might what we know about new patterns of prevalence, proliferation, and migration inform better gang intervention program and policy choices? We will report the relevant data in the following pages, but first let us suggest some of the implications of a growth in gang-involved cities from fewer than 50 prior to 1960 to an estimated high of 3,850 in 1996, which declined to 2,300 in 2002 (Klein, 1995a; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1999; Egley, Howell, and Major, 2004):

- Hundreds of thousands of people have been reduced in life efficiency by membership in street gangs.
- Hundreds of thousands of victims, ranging from homicide victims to those in fear of walking in their own neighborhoods, have suffered grief and discomfort, as have their families.
- Thousands of city councils, mayors, and county supervisors have

had to devise political responses and devote precious resources to gang control and victim services.

- Thousands of police departments, prosecutors, and correctional officials have had to develop new organizational units and new strategies for gang problems; state legislatures have had to devise new antigang legislation and build new correctional facilities to aid in the process.
- Thousands of public and private youth service agencies have had to consider the needs and costs of modifying their programs to do gang prevention and intervention programming—or have had to justify avoiding this new clientele.
- Numerous federal agencies—justice, education, health and welfare, housing, and others—have had to accept street gangs as a national phenomenon, requiring either national-level research and action or the enabling of state and local responses.

In short, gang proliferation has changed important aspects of our society and seldom in desirable ways. Thus the extent to which responses are based on inappropriate, conventional wisdom versus accumulated fact-based understandings takes on special importance. We start our journey, therefore, with a review of recent data about this proliferation.

In this chapter, we focus on broad trends in the United States (and occasionally elsewhere). Much research has been devoted to examining individual-level processes and the socioecological features of the environment that might explain why some youth join gangs while others do not. The chapters in part II cover the accumulated knowledge on this issue. In particular, chapter 4 looks at the features of individuals and their family, peer, and school situations that are related to gang involvement. Chapter 6 takes this question to the community level, asking what features about places might generate gangs, including the ebbs as well as the flows of gang proliferation. Studies about gang joining often report the rate of gang membership in the study sample. Before turning to the distribution patterns in gang cities, which constitute the remainder of this chapter, we review the available information on the proportion of youth who join gangs.

Individual Gang-Prevalence Studies

Although studies occasionally use police records to identify an individual's gang membership status (e.g., Katz, Webb, and Schaefer, 2000; Reiner,

1992; Maxson, 1995), police gang files necessarily reflect agency organizational characteristics and recording practices. A far superior method for addressing the prevalence of gang membership within a specific population is the strategy of self-report: asking youth directly, for example with the question: are you a member of a street gang? While there is some concern about whether subjects are totally honest in replying to such a question, and there is considerable variety in the way in which the gang membership question is asked, there is a consensus that valid responses can be obtained when proper research practices are observed in confidential settings.

Two recent studies offer national prevalence estimates. In one representative survey of youth who were 12 to 16 years old at year end 1996, 5% of U.S. youth reported that they had ever belonged to a gang and just 2% belonged in the year prior to the survey (Snyder and Sickmund, 1999). Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) surveyed students in a nationally representative sample of secondary schools. Although only 37% of the schools agreed to participate, the prevalence estimate derived is similar to the other national study: 7.1% of males and 3.6% of females reported that they had "belong[ed] to a gang that has a name and engages in fighting, stealing, or selling drugs" in the last 12 months. Every other study we reviewed reported higher levels of gang prevalence, some far higher. Why? As we discuss later in this chapter and in chapter 6, gangs are not evenly distributed in neighborhoods and communities throughout the United States, and researchers often conduct gang studies in areas that have higher concentrations of gangs and risk characteristics for gang activity. It can be difficult to compare one self-report study to the next to get an overall picture of what proportion of youth join gangs because studies often capture different types of samples and use somewhat different research procedures and definitions.

We've selected for review relatively recent studies that employ large samples of youth and that use research methods that are considered by scholars to be appropriate to the question of individual gang member prevalence.¹ The study samples sometimes are drawn from schools, other times from high-risk neighborhoods, and occasionally from arrested or incarcerated populations and may therefore be more or less representative of the general youth population. As noted above, the best estimate of the general U.S. youth gang prevalence is 5% ever-joined, 2% current gang members. How do the more-targeted studies compare with this baseline, and what can we learn from them about patterns of gang participation?²

Our first pass through the current literature on gang prevalence asks

what should be a straightforward question: what proportion of individuals in any given study population, by their own admission, joins a gang? Table 1.1 lists each study that reports gang prevalence among youth or young adults in community (nonincarcerated) settings, as well as the study characteristics that might help us to compare findings across studies. Nineteen studies are included (analyses of different subsamples within the same study are counted separately), and with one exception (Johnstone, 1981), all derive from work published since 1990. The approaches to measuring gang membership vary in whether current or any (i.e., ever) gang membership is reported, whether restrictions are placed on the nature of the group (i.e., group engages in illegal activity, has a name or has other identifying symbols),³ and whether the sample design increased risk (disproportionate levels of males, minority subjects, or high-crime areas). Notably, these studies produce 33 different gang prevalence rates.

Clearly, gang definitions and study samples matter a great deal. Three general patterns of variation are evident. Risk-targeted samples report higher rates than the more general samples. Also, restricting the type of group by name or criminal activity considerably decreases the gang prevalence rate (see same-sample comparisons in Bradshaw, 2005; Esbensen and Winfree, 1998; Lahey et al., 1999; Winfree et al., 1992). Particularly in places that don't have a long tradition of gang activity, youth may identify less delinquent and organized social groups as gangs, whereas such friendship groups may not be labeled as such by youth in Los Angeles and Chicago. Finally, and quite obviously, studies that capture movement in and out of gangs throughout adolescence report higher gang prevalence than those that limit the question to current gang membership (see same-sample comparisons in Dukes et al., 1997; Snyder and Sickmund, 1999; Winfree et al., 1992).

If we group the studies by current versus any membership, group definitional restrictions, and sample risk targeting, the range of gang prevalence is narrowed somewhat, but is still considerable. For example, six studies that employ unrestricted definitions in risk-selected populations report ever-involved prevalence of 6% (Eitle et al., 2004, but note that these are retrospective reports of adults), 10% (Johnstone, 1981, data gathered in 1974), 19% (Gordon et al., 2004), and around 30% (Lahey et al., 1999; Thornberry et al., 2003; Winfree et al., 1992). Conversely, the five studies that use restricted definitions among risk-targeted populations (Hill et al., 1999; both Bremen and Denver samples in Huizinga and Schumann, 2001; Lahey et al., 1999; Winfree et al., 1992) reveal more consensus in findings that between 13 and 18% are gang members at some