

# Introduction

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Gangs have a long history, with documentation dating from at least the Middle Ages in Europe and from colonial times in the United States (Haskins 1975; Hay et al. 1975; Pearson 1983). In the United States, youth gangs have burgeoned since the nineteenth century, along with the rapid urbanization and increase in immigrant populations in many American cities (Delaney 2006; Haskins 1975; Sanders 1970). They proliferated further, and evolved in different ways, during the latter half of the twentieth century, along with the increasing concentration of urban poverty shaped in part by migratory patterns, shifts in the structure of economic opportunity, and policies and practices (from redlining to the design and location of public housing) that fostered racial and economic segregation (Delaney 2006; Massey and Denton 1998; Wilson 1987). Over this time, our focus on gangs—as a phenomenon in our communities, a subject of sociological investigation, a concern of law enforcement, and a social problem to be addressed—has grown and changed. Youth gangs in the United States are a frequent topic in the news, whether with respect to occasional, sensational themes (e.g., the advent of a gang war, the emergence of “super-gangs,” the spread of gang activity to suburban and rural communities) or quotidian tragedy (e.g., another drive-by shooting). They are a fixture in the public imagination, shaping aspects of popular culture (for example,

gangsta rap), and providing a theme for films (*Boyz n the Hood*) and video games (*The Warriors*). And they are an important focus of research, policy, and front-line intervention.

The gang as a topic of research emerged in the United States with the young discipline of sociology in the early part of the twentieth century, with the most notable early contribution being Frederick Thrasher's systematic investigation of street gangs in the city of Chicago, first published in 1927. This was followed by a number of important ethnographic explorations of the social structure of poor urban neighborhoods (Whyte 1943) as well as systematic efforts to map and explain patterns of delinquency and gang involvement (Shaw and McKay 1942). Research on gangs continued to grow beyond this, exploding with particular force in the late 1950s and 1960s, on the heels of a set of competing theories on the sources of delinquency directly applicable to the problem, and followed shortly by a public policy interest in gang intervention (Klein 1995). Youth gangs have remained a vibrant area of investigation to the present day, and research on gangs has covered, among other issues, mapping the scope and nature of the gang problem, shifts in the conditions that contribute to gang formation and activities, the nuances of gang structure and functioning, the dynamics of gang proliferation and gang crime, the globalization and institutionalization of gangs, and the impacts of gangs on individuals and communities (Hagedorn 2007; Jankowski 1991; Klein 1995; Klein et al. 2001; Klein and Maxson 2006; Short and Hughes 2006).

Along with research on gangs, a number of different kinds of interventions and policies have been developed to address juvenile delinquency, gang formation, and gang activities (particularly, in the current context, violence and drug trafficking) as social problems, from the launching of the Chicago Area Project on the heels of Shaw and McKay's work in the 1940s, to programs in the 1960s like Mobilization for Youth in New York City, informed by Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) differential opportunity theory, to a range of contemporary programs concentrating to varying degrees on prevention, intervention, or suppression, or a combination of these orientations (Klein and Maxson 2006). Such efforts have, over the years and at different periods of time, evidenced shifts in their major focus, from preventive and promotive efforts seeking to provide alternatives for youth involved in or at risk of gang involvement, to a greater emphasis on monitoring, suppression, and punishment of gang-involved youths, to more comprehensive approaches that seek to combine aspects of these different

orientations. There have also been shifts in the extent to which such interventions dealt largely with individual and group behavior and intervention versus concentrating on more collective, community-based orientations.

Thus there is a rich history of, and a substantial literature on, various aspects of the phenomenon of youth gangs. Much of this literature seeks to build theory that explains or provides empirical evidence of the sources and determinants of delinquency; the influences that foster the emergence of gangs as social groupings; the attractions, incentives, and pressures that draw particular young people to become involved in gangs; the specific organization and behavior of particular gangs (their membership, structure, economy, activities); or the emergence of new dynamics in the proliferation of gangs, the nature of gang violence, and the effects of gang activities on young people and the communities in which they live. Some, though a good deal less, of this literature deals explicitly with intervention (Curry and Decker 2003; Klein 1971; Klein and Maxson 2006; Spergel 1966, 1995, along with a set of program-specific evaluations of particular interventions)—on what works, what has failed, and what policy directions should be considered to more effectively address the conditions that shape gang formation and the detrimental effects of gang behavior. There is, however, much more ground to cover on this front—on how to think about, implement, understand, and apply knowledge about the effects of gang prevention and intervention policy and practice.

## The Volume

This volume contributes to filling that gap by bringing together current scholarship that explicitly targets the ideas behind, approaches to, and evidence for the relative effectiveness of community-based youth gang interventions. It is not meant to provide a comprehensive assessment of gang intervention approaches, and although critical attention is paid to policies and initiatives that rely, for example, on suppression strategies, the emphasis of the chapters that follow is more fundamentally about multifaceted, community-based approaches in which suppression is (or may be) one component.

The rationale for this focus on community-based interventions as responses to gangs and gang violence is straightforward: Although there now exists a range of different kinds of program and policy responses to

youth gangs (Klein and Maxson 2006), most responses to the gang problem are based largely on suppression and implemented by criminal justice agencies (particularly the police). Less attention and fewer resources have been directed to prevention and local intervention strategies (for example, by schools, social service agencies, community groups) in the neighborhoods where gangs operate, and even less examination has been devoted to integrating such approaches at the local level. The chapters in this volume investigate key ideas behind, approaches to, and evidence about the effectiveness of such efforts and some of the lessons they suggest for effective responses to youth gangs in the communities in which they operate.

The volume is organized in three parts. Part I sets the stage by briefly framing the youth gang problem in the context of historical roots and approaches to practice. Chapter 1 draws on some of the foundational work of “the Chicago School” as a basis for discussion of three core issues that are further explored in subsequent chapters: the nature of “community” and its potential role as a unit of analysis and action; the relationships among community, young people, youth gangs, and approaches to community-based intervention; and the relationship between research and social intervention, including issues revolving around knowledge development and utilization in the context of community interventions. The chapter raises a set of questions about the possibilities, limitations, and enduring tensions that inhere in many community initiatives and community-based youth interventions, including those focused on gangs.

Following this foundational discussion, chapter 2 charts the evolution of policy responses to youth gangs, with particular attention to the shifting dynamic between a focus on suppression and one on intervention, especially within the context of community-based programs and efforts to “balance” intervention and enforcement approaches. Authors George Tita and Andrew Papachristos review the history of community-based efforts focused on youth gangs, with particular attention to the development, refinement, decline, and reemergence of “street worker” and community self-help approaches. They then turn to a similar review of the kinds of suppression approaches that have dominated gang responses over the past thirty years (and particularly during the 1980s and 1990s) and to an investigation of a set of “hybrid models” that seek to shape more comprehensive responses that strike a balance between suppression and punishment, on the one hand, and intervention and problem solving, on the other. In doing so, they explore the theoretical, institutional, and historical factors that con-

tributed to these different emphases, the empirical evidence about their effectiveness, and the enduring challenges to enacting gang responses that reflect what has emerged as a reasonably clear “consensus” regarding the value of hybrid approaches.

Part II then looks more specifically at the evidence on both program effectiveness and the broader issues of evaluation and knowledge utilization that can be brought to bear to inform interventions. In chapter 3, James Howell reviews the evaluation literature and draws program implications from evaluation findings across a range of programs that sought to reduce delinquency, with a particular emphasis on gang prevention, intervention, and suppression programs, and with attention to the nature of the evidence available for making claims of effectiveness. After reviewing the evidentiary base for each class of efforts in turn, Howell provides an extended review of Spergel’s Comprehensive Gang Model, exploring both the empirical evidence provided by outcome evaluations of its implementation and the lessons learned regarding model fidelity and addressing implementation challenges.

Chapter 4 also seeks to tease out claims about the impact of particular gang programs and anti-violence strategies in order to draw lessons about effectiveness. Here, Charlie Ransford and his colleagues make an argument for understanding the effects of Chicago’s CeaseFire violence prevention program, changes in police policy and practice, the introduction of Project Safe Neighborhoods, and the dynamics of population displacement in the city by examining the dramatic reduction in homicide in a single year in Chicago. After reviewing and marshaling evidence against a set of factors sometimes invoked in explaining such a reduction, the authors seek to leverage this dramatic change over such a short period of time in order to limit confounding variables and enable the comparison of changes in inputs from various sources in a single city and their relevance for explaining the change and for informing responses to gangs and youth violence.

Chapters 5 and 6 shift the focus on evidence to consider more broadly the role of evaluation and ways to reorient our approaches to the evaluation of policy and programmatic responses to youth gangs. In chapter 5, G. David Curry examines the (potential and actual) relationships among theory, program design, and evaluation in shaping, refining, and improving responses to youth gangs. Through a review of several influential programs with varying connections to theory and varying levels of evaluation associated with their implementation, he makes the case for the essential

integration of theory, research, and program implementation to build both knowledge and effective programs.

In chapter 6, James Short and Lorine Hughes frame an argument for rethinking our approach to intervention research concerning youth gangs. They assert that we need to reorient our understanding of gangs and rethink the kinds of measures and evidence that we rely on to evaluate interventions that seek to address them. First, they interrogate the “problematic nature of gangs” and the similarly problematic relationship between scientific observation and measurement, on the one hand, and gangs and gang programs, on the other. Then, partly on the basis of a new analysis of some early research on youth gangs in Chicago, they argue that research integrity regarding gangs and gang intervention needs to take into account an understanding of social capital and collective efficacy, and the role that these constructs play (and could potentially play) within the context of youth gang interventions. Although they point out that additional work is needed to test the viability of this approach, they make a strong case that these constructs are justifiable both theoretically and empirically, and potentially generative of important insights that can improve intervention and our understanding of effectiveness.

In Part III, the volume moves from a review of evidence and consideration of knowledge building to a reconsideration of contexts, orientations, and intervention strategies in light of the current state of knowledge, and suggests additional potential directions for shaping future youth gang interventions. In chapter 7, James Diego Vigil argues for an ecological and developmental approach to engaging young people who are at risk of or involved in gang life. Building on the concept of “multiple marginality” that he developed in earlier work, Vigil draws on decades of ethnographic work with Latino gang youth to explore the processes through which young people are socialized into the gang lifestyle. He then outlines an orientation to gang intervention that takes into account the particular social and cultural circumstances under which such socialization occurs and that tailors intervention to the particular developmental stage at which different young people are confronted with choices regarding gang involvement.

Chapter 8 also argues for a developmental and community-embedded orientation to considering youth gang intervention. Here, Jeffrey Butts and Caterina Gouvis Roman focus on the importance of prevention and early-intervention strategies and lay the foundation for a conceptual framework that builds on comprehensive community approaches to addressing

youth gangs by integrating the insights of positive youth development and community justice approaches. Positive youth development, they argue, provides a set of “practice principles” that can usefully guide the identification and provision of a range of developmental supports that may promote protective factors and counter risk factors faced by young people who are susceptible to gang involvement, and may encourage their positive development. Similarly, community justice models offer insight into the effective development of participatory, deliberative processes at the community level that can contribute to the effective implementation of comprehensive gang models.

In chapter 9, David Kennedy fundamentally reorients our consideration of youth gangs and intervention strategies to think about the critical ways in which “norms, narratives, and networks”—the essential underlying understandings, expectations, accounts, interpretations, and relationships that shape the interaction of youth, gangs, communities, law enforcement, and others—condition both our understanding of youth gangs and our responses to them. First, Kennedy shows how implicit norms and unspoken narratives play out among those on different sides of the youth gang issue and how the lack of examination and critical engagement across them creates barriers to understanding and moving past them. Drawing on the experience of, among other programs, a recent drug-market intervention, he then explores the possibility of using group processes to surface competing narratives and come to a collective understanding that allows communities to move beyond these institutionalized impasses and toward common ground.

Finally, Irv Spergel provides the last word. In chapter 10, he considers the implications of the chapters in this volume as a whole, and points to future directions toward more effective, evidence-based youth gang intervention. Framing his analysis with an overview of the scope of the youth gang problem (including the increasingly globalized nature of gang activity and gang proliferation), Spergel provides a critical review of explanations for the emergence of youth gangs, theories behind youth gang interventions and programs, and the three prevailing models guiding community-based youth gang programs—those focused on youth social development, deterrence and suppression, and integrated approaches. Finally, he discusses the challenges of evaluation within this realm and offers a set of recommendations, particularly for the implementation of large-scale demonstrations and effective partnerships among researchers, policymakers, and community actors at both the local and the national level.

Although pursuing different questions and drawing on different material to build their respective cases, the chapters reflect some recurring themes. One of these concerns the importance of community both as a context to be taken account of (shaping opportunity and providing conditions that may, in part, foster gang involvement or offer alternatives to it) and as a unit of action to be mobilized. Community processes—deliberative planning, relational networks, collaborative action—and community resources—programs, opportunities, organizations, institutions—play a central role here. Thus there is recognition in this work of the “embeddedness” of youth and gang activity in community, as well as the fact that community is itself contentious. This focus remains largely local. There is much here that moves beyond the individual (including tailoring intervention to individual needs within the context of community dynamics), but relatively little that moves beyond the community level to institutional factors and players (e.g., prisons) or broader factors that fundamentally shape the circumstances in which these communities find themselves, such as racism, structural changes in the economy, federal policy, broader dynamics of investment and disinvestment, and the distribution of public resources (e.g., for schools or affordable housing). This essentially local focus raises a question about the extent to which we may also need to address the broader “causal story” (Stone 1989) that lies behind the “gang problem” in particular communities, and its implications for both assigning responsibility and considering intervention. Although the local community is of central importance to understanding youth gangs and acting to address the problems associated with them, and although it is important to “engage” the community in such solutions, we need also to recognize the power of these broader structural forces that are at play and the limitations of relying completely on local intervention in light of them.

Another recurring theme concerns a particular focus on youth and the need to understand the role and circumstances of young people in all their complexity as both agents and objects, responding, at a particular stage of life, to differential opportunities, constraints, and pressures. This emphasis concerns, in part, how youth are perceived in general, and the nature of and assumptions about gang involvement among (some) youth in particular. One way in which these perspectives may play out is through a perceived predisposition among some—especially law enforcement—to make broader assumptions about gang involvement among youth in some communities than are warranted, and to view gang membership as an

overarching condition that characterizes young people's social life, fundamentally shapes their interactions, and defines their existence. In contrast, many young people in these communities who may be perceived as gang members are not gang-involved, and many others may be involved only tangentially and temporarily, in the meantime engaging in a broad range of normative activities and relationships in school, with family, and with non-gang-involved peers. Further, this "stage of life" is itself graduated, entailing different opportunities and challenges as young people grow through adolescence. Thus we need to understand gang involvement in the broader context of youth development, relationships, and choices. Such an orientation suggests that a focus on gang-involved or at-risk youth needs to be grounded in an understanding of young people, not just an orientation toward gangs. It is also connected, as David Kennedy points out, to a focus on justice, not as a framework for retribution but more broadly as having to do with engagement, understanding, and responsible action.

Finally, there is a theme about knowledge and knowledge use—the limitations to it, ways to rethink it, the need to better connect it to intervention, policy, and practice—in the service of youth and communities and in response to the gang problem. This theme emphasizes, on the one hand, the ability and limitations of current research knowledge to provide the kinds of evidence needed to inform policy and practice and, on the other, the frequent disconnect between theory and program, between evidence and policy, and between producers of knowledge and those who might use such knowledge in deciding on policy priorities, resource distribution, and practice on the ground.

Taken together, the chapters in this volume synthesize current knowledge and provide new insight into what works, what might work, and what enduring challenges remain in addressing youth gangs and in building (and applying) knowledge to improve such approaches.

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## Youth Gangs and Community Intervention

