

Bringing the Study of Street Gangs Back into the Mainstream

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Abstract

Criminology's evolution, from early roots in sociology through claims of autonomy and specialization within the field, has become more global in its reach. Study of street gangs, once imbedded in sociology, has become a specialized field within criminology and more closely identified with law enforcement and control. The immediacy of control concerns had the effect of virtually removing gangs as a focus of the basic social and behavioral sciences, an effect exacerbated by law enforcement's primary focus on individual gang members, thus obscuring the importance of historical, organizational, and group contexts and processes that are associated with gangs and their behavior. Historical research, network and group process analyses, and studies of genocide and human rights violations suggest that the study of gangs by mainstream social and behavioral sciences is important to these sciences as well as for better understanding of gangs. Examples from recent studies, including our research agenda, are provided as a basis for optimism in this regard.

INTRODUCTION

Street gangs attracted little scholarly attention before Frederic Thrasher's classic book, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*. Editor Robert E. Park's Preface placed the work solidly in sociology's mainstream by emphasizing the generic nature of gangs as "a specific type or variety of society," spontaneous in origin, formed by and responsive to their environments (Thrasher, 1927, no page; abridged edition, 1963, p. vii). As criminology became a special field in its own right, it also became more interdisciplinary and more closely associated with crime control (Short & Hughes, 2007). Within criminology, studies of gangs became more specialized, more focused on control, and more peripheral to the basic social and behavioral sciences.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Even as Thrasher was surveying Chicago gangs, Clifford Shaw and colleagues were studying delinquency rates in the city's communities and conducting case studies that were fundamental to the "Chicago School's" theory of urban life and development (Shaw & McKay, 1931; Short, 1971). Empirically, "delinquency areas" were characterized by poverty, rapid population turnover, and ethnic heterogeneity. Within such areas, foreign- and native-born boys, whites and blacks, and recent and newer immigrants had similar patterns of delinquency. In addition, case studies demonstrated the influence of companions on youthful behavior.

Tying these phenomena together, the theory of social disorganization argued that delinquency rates were high in inner-city communities *because* delinquency areas lacked effective social control capabilities. Mechanisms by which disorganization hindered social control were missing in the theory, however, and William Foote Whyte's (1937) documentation of elaborate organization among "corner" and "college" boys in inner-city Boston exposed further problems.

As research concerning the *nature* of organization in neighborhoods accumulated, modification of social disorganization theory emerged in recognition of variations among and between local networks, and between local networks and outside institutions and organizations that control resources related to social control and the quality of life in neighborhoods (Bursik, 2000; Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). This "systemic model" subsequently was challenged and extended by research based on the Project for Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN) that adds a cultural component with strong elements of process, that is, *collective efficacy*, which involves social capital based on active involvement of community adults with one another in the control of child behavior (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Collective efficacy is associated with lower rates of violent behavior in Chicago neighborhoods, holding constant factors such as race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Subsequent research based on these and other data finds that collective efficacy increases effective parenting and reduces homicide and delinquency rates and association with deviant peers (Sampson, 2012; Simons, Simons, Burt, & Brody, 2005).

The basic principle of the PHDCN is a relentless "focus on context" and study of "*dynamic processes* of neighborhood structural change," including the "social mechanisms of city life" that "link cause and effect," for example, collective efficacy (Sampson, 2012). Recognizing that neighborhoods have legacies that carry over and influence each other, emphasis also is on the significance of *place* for social life and for study of *spatial mechanisms that cross neighborhood boundaries*. The PHDCN is at once a compendium of what

is known concerning the dynamics of urban growth and development, and consequences for individuals, groups, organizations, and neighborhoods. It exemplifies what “big social science” can accomplish, drawing on the logic and methods of inquiry, and the theoretical frames, of basic social and behavioral science disciplines.

“HARD PROBLEMS,” STUDIES OF GANGS, AND THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO YOUTH STUDIES PROJECT

It is axiomatic that science typically advances by steps that fill in gaps left in the wake of large-scale projects and theoretical breakthroughs. Following publication of *Great American City*, Sampson (2013) identified several “hard problems” raised by the PHDCN, two of which are of special significance for the theme of this paper:

Understanding how historical events and processes influence present circumstances at different levels of organizational and community life.

Challenges posed by the persistence of race/crime relationships and impacts of ethnic changes.

Our research underscores an additional problem, viz., the nature and consequences of *group processes* associated with crime and delinquency, concerning which knowledge remains in a primitive state. Data from the University of Chicago’s Youth Studies Program (YSP) are useful for furthering this line of inquiry, as well as for addressing Sampson’s “hard problems.”¹

After Thrasher, gang research languished until the mid-twentieth century when control programs were initiated in response to the eruption of gang wars in several cities. New theoretical perspectives introduced at that time included Albert K. Cohen’s invocation of reaction formation to explain “The Culture of the Gang” (1955), Richard A. Cloward and Lloyd E. Ohlin’s (1960) explanation of alternative delinquent subcultures in terms of opportunity structures, and Walter B. Miller’s argument that lower-class culture was “a generating milieu of gang delinquency” (1958). Guided by these perspectives, the University of Chicago’s YSP began field operations in the summer of 1959. With access provided by the Chicago YMCA’s Program for Detached Workers (PDW), the YSP “kept a window open” on gangs located throughout many of Chicago’s Community Areas, all of which were undergoing, or

1. YSP data are relevant, as well, to another hard problem, relationships between police and street gangs. While previously published work wrestles with this problem (Short & Hughes, 2010), more systematic analysis of ethnographic-type data remains to be done. YSP ethnographic data and contacts we have had with gang workers and supervisors of the current version of the program with which the YSP was associated also are of continued relevance to another hard problem identified by Sampson, for example, how to bring “ex-offenders into the process of building collective efficacy” (2013, p. 22).

in the path of, rapid and substantial demographic, ecological, and institutional change. Impacts on young people and their families were profound but varied.

YSP research papers culminated in publication of *Group Process and Gang Delinquency* (Short & Strodtbeck, 1965). A second edition (1974) listed additional papers based on the project and briefly placed gang behavior in the context of massive social changes under way in Chicago and elsewhere, for example, the “war on poverty,” black militancy, and the emergence of “super-gangs.” Short and Strodtbeck concluded that fundamental group processes and characteristics of individual gang members remained much like those in the early 1960s, but they recognized that this conclusion was speculative, absent further research.

Much as in the past, it appears today that most gangs begin in local neighborhoods, most do not become institutionalized, and few, if any, have succeeded in becoming legitimate organizations. Those that have attempted to do so have experienced great difficulty establishing their legitimacy for many reasons, including continued criminal behavior by gang members, massive fraud in some instances, and active opposition and repression from authorities. Much relevant YSP ethnographic data remain to be systematically analyzed, along with historical data concerning the interplay of major institutions and gangs in which PDW personnel were involved.

The remainder of this essay is devoted to discussion of the manner in which our research agenda addresses Sampson’s “hard problems.” Identifying social mechanisms and dynamic processes associated with urban growth and development, the PHDCN set the stage for study of interactional processes *among local residents, groups, and organizations* in neighborhoods, and of adaptations to *historical, social, and ecological changes* by those groups, organizations, and communities. We begin with a brief example from our study of the nature of street gangs under changing conditions at the local community level. YSP narrative data constitute an unparalleled opportunity to study these changes through the lens of history, noting both similarities and differences in consequences for gangs and their communities.

CHANGING GANGS AND GANGLANDS: WHEN RACIAL TRANSITION IS NEARING COMPLETION

The period of most active YSP data collection (1959–1962, with a limited follow-up study in the early 1970s) were years of tumultuous change (Cohen & Taylor, 2000; Diamond 2009; Drake & Cayton, 1962; Grossman, 1989; Lemann, 1991; Pattillo, 2013).² While the forces of economic and political change gathering in Chicago were evident elsewhere in the nation, the tools

2. Our research agenda includes historical inquiries of more than 20 Chicago communities and neighborhoods in which YSP gangs were located.

that ensured segregation, isolation, overcrowding and deteriorating housing were forged in Chicago (Hirsch, 1983). Those tools changed old ganglands and brought into being new gangs and ganglands.

The Dukes, the lone PDW white gang in the summer of 1959, were one of several gangs and youth clubs located in Grand Crossing Park (Chicago Community Area 69). The park reportedly had been the site of a “prearranged ‘gang fight’” between blacks and whites just 2 years earlier (Diamond 2009, p. 222). Grand Crossing had changed rapidly from 94% to 13.8% white between 1950 and 1960; changes in black residency were equally dramatic, from 5.8% to 85.9%. Until then, population density had been stable. As whites continued to leave the area, total population declined by nearly a third over the next two decades.³

Excerpts (edited) from the first interview (July 13, 1959) of the detached worker assigned to the Dukes described clear status distinctions in Grand Crossing’s ethnic history:

Up until the Negroes began to move in, the Italians were looked down upon as the inferior people of the park area, the downtrodden, the poor slobs. Since the Negroes have begun to move in, the Italians have new status. They have a chance to ridicule a people lower than themselves. The park groups are a mixture ... the majority are lower-class working people.

The Dukes and other park groups also had clashed with a Mexican gang, the Chevels, once with dynamite exploding near an automobile filled with members of the latter.⁴ However, the bulk of the gang’s attention was focused on “invading” black residents. Expressions of hostility toward blacks and community support of resistance to blacks in community life took several forms. An observer’s report, dated September 15, 1959, captures the spirit of such resistance among young people.

Fifteen minutes after we arrived, two guys ... Larry, who had finished practice with his charges in the park talked to the boys present, many of whom were Dukes. He really laid into them for getting involved in gang warfare. He talked in a matter of fact way, not preaching, so they listened to him without getting mad. Among Larry’s comments “on the senselessness of the boys from the park fighting the Chevels”; they should save it for the “niggers”; after all, they were

3. Census tract data suggest that in-migrants were of somewhat higher socioeconomic status than the remaining white residents: median family income, years of school completed, percentage white collar workers, family income less than \$3,000 and over \$10,000, unemployed in male labor force, and 1960 home ownership and rentals (median values) favored predominantly black tracts.

4. Detached worker interviews and an observer’s report provide detailed accounts of this clash and its aftermath. Gunfire had been exchanged, but no one apparently had been hit.

the real enemies.⁵ Why fight each other when someday you will be fighting together against someone else?⁶

Among non-Hispanic white boys and girls, ethnicity and gang membership clearly mattered less than being white.⁷ One consequence was that teen hanging patterns commonly involved members of more than one group, gang, or club. Larry's hypercritical interactions with the boys typified relationships between generations not far removed from one another.

By the end of 1960, only a few of the Dukes lived in Grand Crossing, most having moved further south, many to Avalon Park, which remained virtually all-white.⁸ PDW services to the Dukes ceased midway in the research program, but the worker maintained his contacts through a new position with a city-wide youth commission. His final interview (July, 1961) is a revealing commentary on the effect of such changes on local institutions and young people.

While many gang members continued their association with Grand Crossing Park, white residents of CA 69 were either fleeing or struggling to maintain white neighborhoods and home values, and park and school authorities and Catholic Church leaders were struggling to serve both white and black constituencies. The park supervisor, a young "old-country Irishman" whose "attitude was that priority should be given to the original citizens of the area," was replaced by a college student who initiated programs for blacks as well as whites, "segregated" but "staggered"; blacks were programmed on Monday and Wednesday nights, whites on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The worker predicted, "There won't be any white leagues next fall. The park is going to be solidly Negro, and (after a period of intense resistance) the white kids have accepted that."

Two local business hangouts favored by white teens had removed some or all booths "to get away from the teenagers," and another had been sold to a black man who "doesn't particularly care for ... the teenage trade, because they don't bring in money ... white kids don't congregate there anymore." In addition, St. Francis DePaul Catholic church was:

5. By 1960 "Mexicans had become the leading nationality among the foreign stock, followed by the Irish and the Italians" who had arrived much earlier (Kitagawa & Tauber, 1963, p. 152).

6. Short and Strodbeck (pp. 112-113) quote at length a September 1959 worker's "incident report" in which members of the Dukes chased unsuccessfully after a single black teenager who was seen sauntering into the park. The chase was aided by nearby adults who shouted encouragement in their pursuit. The worker noted that some of the Dukes present did not pursue the black teen, and that the President of the Dukes said "that his guys reacted like a bunch of kids whenever they saw a colored guy, and openly expressed his wish that the Negro boy would get away."

7. "Whiteness studies" flourished in the 1990s. For a review, see Diamond, 2009. Grand Crossing is a relevant case study.

8. Chatham (C.A. 44) immediately south of Grand Crossing, also had experienced white flight but was more than one-third white in 1960. Avalon Park was southeast of Grand Crossing, and immediately east of Chatham.

in the process now of cutting out the (Saturday night) dance. Previously, the dance was on Friday night. They had as good as 200 kids when I first came into the area. Last summer they changed the night of the social from Friday to Saturday night because they intended to initiate religious instructions to the new citizens of the area, predominately Negroes, and they didn't want these Negroes coming into the church auditorium to be exposed to the white kids. This killed quite a bit of the interest in the dance (because) if they date a girl, it's usually on Saturday night, and Saturday is show night. All through the winter, the attendance kept dropping. Kids would drop in and look around and see the big auditorium kind of empty and leave.

Although by 1962 the Dukes and other white gangs in Grand Crossing ceased to exist as organized groups, some former members began associating with an amorphous coalition of old and new gangs that the YSP called the *80th & Halsted gang*. Through 2 years of observation, this large gang consisted of overlapping cliques with widely varying behavior patterns ranging from fighting to theft and heavy substance abuse. Located in the contiguous Auburn-Gresham Community Area southwest of Grand Crossing, the 80th and Halsted groups came together from time to time for a variety of activities, including PDW programming and an abortive attempt to resist racial integration at "Rainbow Beach," a widely publicized confrontation between civil rights protestors of a well-known segregated public beach.

While historian Andrew Diamond (2009) argues that street gangs played a major role in crystallizing black consciousness and political awareness, and were key to sustaining conflicts between races and ethnicities over civil rights, criminological research on gangs fails to address these issues. John Hagedorn's (2007, 2008) review of research and his impressionistic observations in many countries is a rare exception. However, his conflation of gangs with "alienated groups socialized by the streets or prisons, not conventional institutions," explains by definition much that requires explanation and is so broad as to defy systematic analysis. Diamond's and Hagedorn's documentation of the participation of young people in civil rights protest and violence is impressive, but evidence of the role of street gangs is less so.

Short and Strodbeck addressed these issues only indirectly. Later inquiries by Short and Moland (Short, 1974; Short & Moland, 1976), however, found little support for political consciousness or militancy among YSP gangs during this early period. Nonetheless, a decade marked by increasing population density followed by decline dramatically changed the racial and ethnic character of many neighborhoods, not only in Greater Grand Crossing but in many other Chicago communities. Street gangs and other youth groups changed accordingly, as racial issues replaced ethnicity as the basis for organization. Further study of how this "present" transformed the immediate "past" is an important part of our research agenda.

THE GROUP PROCESS PERSPECTIVE: CONTEXTS AND MECHANISMS

A hard problem not identified by Sampson concerns the nature and consequences of *group processes* associated with crime and delinquency. Despite the significance of large-scale social changes in the lives of gangs and gang members, historical and community-level variables “cannot explain the emergence of particular instances of aggressive delinquency from the ongoing, largely nondelinquent, behavior of gang boys” (Short & Strodbeck 1965, p. 185). On the basis of analysis of YSP data, Short and Strodbeck concluded that, “at the moment of truth,” the behavior of gang boys is governed not by short-run hedonism but by a utility-risk calculus in which potential status gains and losses within the immediate context of the gang are weighed against one another and the more remote possibility of negative societal responses. James Diego Vigil (1988, p. 42) observed a similar pattern in Southern California, noting that “socialization to cholo ways,” itself a function of multiple marginalities (e.g., poverty and discrimination) among Latino/a populations, underlies a gang climate in which aggressive behaviors come to be normative, valued, and rewarded. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, Malcolm Klein (1969, 1971; see Klein, 1995) has continued to emphasize *gang cohesiveness* as another group process associated with gang member violence and delinquency—an insight Scott Decker and colleagues build upon in stressing the role of symbolic enemies and threats in drawing gang members together in a cyclical process of violent escalation and retaliation (Decker, 1996; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; see also Decker, Melde, & Pyrooz, 2013).

Knowledge of group dynamics has been slow to accumulate in the era of “big gang research” (since the early 1990s), in part owing to “disciplinary wrangling” and a shift in focus from gangs *as groups* to individual gang members (Pyrooz & Mitchell, 2015; see also Short, 1998). Pyrooz and Mitchell note several reasons for optimism, however, including technological advances, expanding research networks, and “integration of social network theory and method into the gang literature, as well as insights offered by social psychology, [which] will help tackle the primary—yet typically unmeasured—culprit in the explanation of gang delinquency” (p. 35). Indeed, social network analyses of YSP data are among a handful of recent studies focusing on the group nature of gangs and the role of gang organization, friendship ties, rivalries, and retaliatory motives in “compelling individuals to engage in what appear to be nonrational behaviors (going on a mission into enemy territory, being beaten into a gang by a large number of individuals, putting themselves at risk by wearing certain colors ...)” despite “doubts about the prudence of such behavioral choices on the part of members” (Decker, Melde, & Pyrooz, 2013, p. 383; see also

Bouchard & Spindler, 2010; Hughes, 2013; Hughes & Short, 2005, 2013; Pyrooz, Fox, Katz, & Decker, 2012).

Understanding these dynamics has implications beyond gangs and gang members, extending to collective processes and behaviors on a broader, even global, scale. John Hagedorn's *A World of Gangs* (2008; see also Dowdney, 2005; Hagedorn, 2007) explores the significance of "hip-hop and gangsta' culture" for youth worldwide. Similar to Diamond (2009), Hagedorn raises important issues regarding processes related to politics, popular culture and racial, ethnic, and group identity among disadvantaged young people in many contexts. His argument—that gangs represent *rebellion* against established authority and that the state is the primary culprit in suppressing efforts by institutionalized gangs to become legitimate—warrants additional attention, requiring further consideration of group processes contributing to the development of resistance identities, as well as to the nature and consequences, both positive and negative, of external threats.

Study of gang dynamics may contribute as well to the global reach of historical, group and organizational processes associated with genocide and human rights violations (for genocide, see Owens, Su, & Snow, 2013). Vast literatures exist on these topics, but only recently have sociologists begun to devote systematic efforts to their study. John Hagan and Wenona Rymond-Richmond's (2009) study of genocide in the Darfur region of Africa documents collective processes among the aggressors that are similar to those found among youth gang aggressors. Joachim Savelsberg's (2010) survey of research on human rights violations and humanitarian law also highlights the collective nature of such behavior. Like Hagedorn, these studies suggest the increasing scale and relevance of *general processes* across historical, cultural, and group contexts for understanding special aspects of the human condition, bolstering the case for bringing the study of street gangs back into the mainstream.

CONCLUSION

Andrew Abbott argues that "Social life is no more ... than recurrent patterns of action in recurrent structures" (Abbott 1999, p. 220; see also Hughes 2006); Robert Sampson notes that social causation is, above all, "*contextual causality*" (Sampson 2013, p. 5). As sociologists and others are discovering, gangs represent important opportunities for studying contexts and processes of more general interest (see, e.g., Diamond 2009; Papachristos, 2009; Papachristos & Kirk, 2006; Pattillo, 2007, 2013). Gangs are products of, and contributors to, these contexts and processes. Building on foundational studies of gangs and on more recent work that expands the boundaries of criminological inquiry,

our hope and our aspiration is to reclaim the study of gangs for the basic social science disciplines, as well as a special field within criminology.⁹

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9. Pyrooz and Mitchell's review of turning points in gang research underlines both diversity and specialization of interest in gangs. Their review, and ours, are different ways of looking at the elephant. The very existence of a *handbook of gang research* is further evidence of specialization and the need for engagement by all of the social and behavioral sciences.

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RELATED ESSAYS

Neighborhoods and Cognitive Development (*Psychology*), Jondou Chen and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn
Peers and Adolescent Risk Taking (*Psychology*), Jason Chein
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