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INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL CONTEXT: RISK FACTORS FOR JOINING GANGS

We begin our consideration of the recent substantive literature on gang issues by focusing upon the individual-level context: what distinguishes youth who join gangs from similarly situated youth who don't? Recent studies have identified risk factors for joining gangs by thoroughly investigating the circumstances and histories of these two types of adolescents. Whether the characteristics selected for testing are integral to a theoretical model or reflect likely candidates derived from prior research on the correlates of gang membership, identified risk factors lend practical direction to prevention and intervention efforts. While we've labeled this chapter "individual-level" context to distinguish it from the group and community levels to be addressed in subsequent chapters, risk factors derive from the nested environments in which youths live. Typically, risk factors are grouped within the five ecological domains of individual, family, peer, school, and neighborhood. In this chapter, we consider the research on these characteristics as they are reflected in youths' reports of their circumstances. Our focus here is on *individual gang joining* and not on the process of the emergence of gangs in a community (which will be discussed in chapter 6).

In our terms, a risk factor for gang joining is any characteristic that predicts, or is associated with, gang affiliation. In addition to identifying risk factors, researchers also have searched for protective factors. One approach that has been commonly used is to employ the term *protection*

as the opposite position on the continuum of risk. In this usage, youth who don't display a risk factor, or have less of a risk factor, are protected. We prefer the term *low risk* for these youth. Referring to two different poles of the same dimension by different terms does not identify new factors or new directions for practice and also tends to obscure findings. More useful from our point of view is the consideration of protective factors as characteristics or processes that counteract risk. In this usage, the effect of a risk factor on gang joining might be diminished by some other circumstance in an individual's life, which by definition is not an identified risk factor. For example, youth at high risk for joining gangs due to the influence of delinquent peers may be less likely to join if bonded to a positive adult outside the family. Technically, the presence of a positive role model would be a protective factor only if the absence of such a model were not directly predictive of gang joining (i.e., a risk factor). This logic has guided our analyses of juvenile violent offending, but has not been thoroughly tested on the issue of gang joining. With one exception, the published work on gangs reports characteristics that have direct effects, statistically distinguishing joiners from nonjoiners. We refer to these as *risk factors*. The exception is work by Monica Whitlock (2004) that analyzed family characteristics, including both direct and indirect effects on joining.

The risk factors that are investigated are drawn from the broader literature on prediction of delinquent involvement, or more specifically, involvement in serious and chronic offending. While this is a good place to start, we argue that identifying gang-specific risk factors is crucial for the development of good gang intervention policy. Obviously, not all delinquents are gang members. While we've shown that gang members commit a lot of crime, and some very serious crime, not all serious and violent offenders are gang members. Gang programs should be modeled from solid research on the specific factors that predict gang membership and not the conventional wisdom of generic applicability of findings from analyses of crime patterns.

We enter methodologically risky territory in our systematic attempt to synthesize the results of the recent work on gang risk factors. The studies from which we draw have research designs that are particular to each study (see Table 1.1), and these design differences may place limits on our ability to detect general patterns from this body of research. All of the studies we use compare the characteristics of youth who join gangs with those who do not. Thus, we limit this discussion to studies that focus on adolescents rather than adults. Information about the characteristics is

derived directly from youths and family members via personal interviews or questionnaires and not from police records. Other methodological issues to keep in mind are:

1. Gang definition and status. As discussed in chapter 1 and illustrated in Table 1.1, the threshold for self-identified gang membership varies from one study to the next. Placement of youths in the "gang" comparison category is affected by the particular definition adopted by each investigator. Comparisons across studies require that we suspend our concerns about these differences in order to distill out generic patterns. Most studies we include here rely on youths' self-identification of gang membership. In addition, studies vary as to whether analysis is limited to current gang members or also include those who exited gangs prior to the study. Since our emphasis here is on differences between those who join and those who don't, we include both types of studies.
2. Nongang comparison groups. Risk factor approaches require that gang members be analytically separated from subjects in a larger sample. In some studies, the sample is representative of all youth who live in a neighborhood or city or attend public schools. In other cases, the sample is limited to high-risk neighborhoods and may not be representative of all youth in those neighborhoods. We include studies that permit appropriate comparisons among youth who live in the same neighborhoods and attend the same schools: comparing gang youth from inner-city slums to upper-class suburban youth reveals more about race, class, and employment levels than about the risks of joining gangs. Furthermore, we rarely include studies that draw their sample from incarcerated populations. Finally, some studies report findings by subcategories of nongang youth, such as gang associate or "wannabe." We include these only when more general gang-nongang differences can be assessed.
3. Cross-sectional versus longitudinal analysis approaches. Several studies employ longitudinal designs that permit the assessment of youth characteristics prior to gang membership, thereby establishing causal ordering or risk. Cross-sectional designs might conflate causes of membership with the effects of gang participation, as if, for example, a youth's participation influences relationships among family members or school performance. We

include both types of studies in order to expand the scope of our analysis and to address the issue of whether risk factor findings in cross-sectional studies differ from those derived from more costly and less frequent longitudinal studies.

4. Measurement of risk characteristics. There is no standardization in the way researchers measure important risk constructs. To simplify our analysis, we have combined similar indicators in several broad categories within each domain, thus sacrificing detail and specificity to provide a more general depiction of the findings from the recent gang risk factor literature. We employ a minimum threshold of three studies that assess a risk characteristic for inclusion in the analysis. We focus here on dynamic risk factors rather than the individual, social, demographic characteristics that are reported in chapter 1 (see Table 1.3). Finally, we exclude consideration of individual delinquent offending as we have already discussed the offending profiles of gang and nongang youth in chapter 2.

Characteristics Associated with Joining Gangs

We identified 20 studies since 1990 that met the desired criteria. The studies are listed in Table 4.1, with study identifiers that link to the summary of findings displayed in Table 4.2.¹ The reader will want to refer back to other study characteristics shown in Tables 1.1 and 1.3, especially the descriptions of samples, gang definitions, and gang prevalence.² Surveys of adolescents from the United States, Canada, and a few countries in Europe are included in this rich array of studies.

A quick glance at Table 4.2 reveals the following:

1. Individual, family, and peer characteristics are more often the subject of study than are school and neighborhood characteristics.
2. Although less frequent than cross-sectional designs, longitudinal research results confirm those derived from cross-sectional studies.
3. Multivariate analyses are less common than bivariate analyses. We could learn about the relative strength of specific risk factors if researchers reported multivariate results more often.
4. We've learned a lot about risk factors for joining gangs, but

TABLE 4.1. *Studies Included in the Gang Risk Factor Synthesis*

Study ID	Reference	Sample Type	Research Design	Analysis Design
1	Bjerregaard & Smith (1993)	representative	cross-sectional	multivariate
2	Bradshaw (2005)	representative	cross-sectional	bivariate
3	Cox (1996)	nonrepresentative	cross-sectional	bivariate
4	Craig et al. (2002)	representative	longitudinal	bivariate
5	Dukes et al. (1997)	representative	cross-sectional	bivariate
6	Eitle et al. (2004)	representative	cross-sectional	bi & multivari
7	Esbensen & Deschenes (1998)	representative	cross-sectional	bi & multivari
8	Esbensen, Huizinga, & Weiher (1993); Huizinga, Weiher, et al. (1998)	representative	longitudinal	bivariate
9	Esbensen & Weerman (2005)	representative	cross-sectional	bivariate
10	Esbensen, Winfree, et al. (2001)	representative	cross-sectional	bi & multivari
11	Pagan (1990)	nonrepresentative	cross-sectional	bivariate
12	Gatti et al. (2005)	representative	longitudinal	bivariate
13	Hill et al. (1999)	representative	longitudinal	bivariate
14	Kent & Felkenes (1998)	nonrepresentative	cross-sectional	bi & multivari
15	Lahey et al. (1999)	representative	longitudinal	bi & multivari
16	Maxson et al. (1998); Whitlock (2004); Maxson & Whitlock (2002)	nonrepresentative	cross-sectional	bi & multivari
17	Maxson Whitlock & Klein (1997)	nonrepresentative	cross-sectional	bi & multivari
18	J. Miller (2001)	nonrepresentative	cross-sectional	bivariate
19	Thornberry et al. (2003)	representative	longitudinal	bi & multivari
20	Winfree et al. (1994)	representative	cross-sectional	multivariate

TABLE 4.2. Gang Risk Factors in Self-Report Studies

Risk Factor	# Studies	Findings*	Cross	Long	Bi	Multi	Results Summary
<i>Individual (6 longitudinal, 13 cross-sectional)</i>							
Negative life events	3	3 S: 16, 17, 19	✓	✓	✓	✓	Consistently support
Self-esteem	10	3 S: 7, 16, 17 7 NS: 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 14, 19	✓	✓	✓	✓	Mostly not support
Internalizing behaviors (anxiety, withdrawal)	6	2 S: 7, 19	✓	✓	✓	✓	Mostly not support
Nondeviant problem behaviors	12	1 I: 4 3 NS: 11, 13, 16 12 S: 2-4, 7-9, 12, 13, 15-17, 19	✓	✓	✓	✓	Consistently support
Delinquent beliefs	9	6 S: 7-10, 13, 19	✓	✓	✓	✓	Mostly support
Involvement in conventional activities	6	2 S: 5, 17 2 NS: 17, 20	✓	✓	✓	✓	Mostly support
Attitudes toward the future	5	1 I: 16 3 NS: 8, 13, 16 1 S: 5 2 I: 16, 17 2 NS: 8, 14	✓	✓	✓	✓	Inconclusive
Inconclusive			✓	✓	✓	✓	Inconclusive
<i>Family (6 longitudinal, 13 cross-sectional)</i>							
Poverty/disadvantage	10	2 S: 2, 13 2 I: 6, 19 6 NS: 1, 12, 15-18	✓	✓	✓	✓	Mostly not support
Structure (single parent)	11	4 S: 2, 7, 17, 19 1 I: 13	✓	✓	✓	✓	Mostly not support
Attachment	12	6 NS: 6, 10, 12, 15, 16, 18 4 S: 3, 7, 9, 16 2 I: 17, 19	✓	✓	✓	✓	Mostly not support
Parental supervision	12	6 NS: 1, 6, 8, 11, 13, 14 8 S: 2, 7-9, 12, 13, 16, 19 4 NS: 1, 4, 15, 17	✓	✓	✓	✓	Mostly support
Parenting style/hostile family environment	10	3 S: 2, 13, 18	✓	✓	✓	✓	Mostly support
Inconclusive			✓	✓	✓	✓	Inconclusive
Family deviance	5	4 I: 3, 16, 17, 19 3 NS: 4, 14, 20 2 S: 16, 17 1 I: 18	✓	✓	✓	✓	Inconclusive
<i>School (5 longitudinal, 9 cross-sectional)</i>							
Commitment/educational aspirations	11	5 S: 2, 4, 7, 9, 13 2 NS: 6, 13	✓	✓	✓	✓	Inconclusive
Inconclusive			✓	✓	✓	✓	Inconclusive
<i>(continued)</i>							

there is work yet to be done; of the 21 categories, the most frequent conclusion is "inconclusive."

Substantive outcomes of the analysis vary by the domain assessed. Risk factors for gang involvement can be identified in all five domains, as noted by most researchers who conduct such studies. However, the five domains are not equally implicated, as suggested by the weak evidence of risk among school and neighborhood characteristics. While relatively few studies assess neighborhood features, most studies find mixed or no support for these as gang risk factors. It may be that different design and analytic approaches are needed to capture neighborhood risk adequately, and we return to this issue later in this chapter as well as in chapter 6.

Unsurprisingly, the characteristics and dynamics of peer networks receive consistent support in the gang risk factor literature. Developmental researchers have noted that adolescent peer influences exert a strong proximal effect on youth attitudes and behavior during this life stage. Having delinquent friends is a noted risk factor for gang joining and exerts an influence net of other risk factors. Yet, as we noted in chapter 3, gang participation promotes individual delinquency even beyond the effects of having delinquent friends. Researchers continue to parse out the effects of delinquent peer networks and gang membership on offending, but for our purposes here, we emphasize that delinquent peer networks and negative peer influences are consistent predictors of joining gangs. Vigil emphasizes the pervasive socialization effect of delinquent peers:

When street socialization replaces socialization by conventional caretakers, it becomes a key factor in developing not only different bonds but different aspirations for achievement, levels and intensity of gang participation, and belief patterns. Whom you associate with, what you strive for, how you spend your time, and why you embrace a belief system are strongly connected to street culture. (2002: 2)

Like neighborhood characteristics, youths' experiences in school have not received the same level of attention as peer, family, and individual constructs. Assessments of the school bonding dimensions of commitment and attachment, and academic achievement, yield mixed results. Youths' perceptions of their school environments as safe or unsafe do not surface in most studies as gang risk factors.

Some will be surprised about the lack of importance of family char-

*"S" refers to findings of statistically significant ($p < .05$) differences in gang-nongang comparisons; "NS" = not statistically significant; "I" = inconclusive since multiple indicators of the same construct within the same study yield different results. Numbers following colon refer to study ID listed in the first column of Table 4.1.

Risk Factor	# Studies	Findings*	Results Summary
Attachment	6	2 S: 13, 19 2 I: 8, 16 2 NS: 14, 17	✓ ✓ ✓ Multi
Academic achievement	7	4 S: 13, 16, 17, 19 3 NS: 8, 12, 18 1 S: 7	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ Inconclusive
Unsafe school environment	5	4 NS: 11, 14, 16, 17 1 S: 7	✓ ✓ ✓ Multi
Peers (6 longitudinal; 10 cross-sectional)	14	14 S: 1, 2, 4, 6-11, 13, 15-17, 19 6 S: 2, 5, 7, 10, 13, 16 2 I: 8, 17 3 NS: 3, 11, 14	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ Mostly support
Characteristics of peer networks	14	14 S: 1, 2, 4, 6-11, 13, 15-17, 19 6 S: 2, 5, 7, 10, 13, 16 2 I: 8, 17 3 NS: 3, 11, 14	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ Mostly support
Affective dimensions of networks	11	6 S: 2, 5, 7, 10, 13, 16 2 I: 12, 19 3 NS: 11, 14, 15 3 S: 13, 14, 16	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ Inconclusive
Criminogenic neighborhood indicators	9	3 S: 13, 14, 16 2 I: 12, 19 3 NS: 11, 14, 15	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ Inconclusive
Area crime measures	7	2 S: 13, 16 2 I: 12, 19 3 NS: 11, 14, 15	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ Inconclusive
Neighborhood (3 longitudinal, 6 cross-sectional)	7	2 S: 13, 16 2 I: 12, 19 3 NS: 11, 14, 15	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ Inconclusive
Mostly not support	1	1 I: 18 5 NS: 1, 11, 14, 17, 19	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ Mostly not support

acteristics in youth joining gangs. In the six family categories, only parental supervision and monitoring of the youth's activities receives support. Family poverty or economic disadvantage, having a single parent, and affective attachments among family members are not identified as gang risk factors in most of the studies. Inconclusive results were generated in assessments of parenting styles (including hostile or violent relationships between parents, harsh and inconsistent punishment) and family deviance (primarily parent crime, gang, and substance abuse histories). These findings are confirmed by longitudinal analyses, suggesting that the immediate effects of peer networks might overwhelm perceived family risk factors. These research findings might provoke a reconsideration of the strong emphasis on family issues in many gang programs.

Within the individual domain, three of the seven categories receive support as gang risk factors. Two individual-level dimensions receive uniform positive support from all studies. Nondelinquent problem behaviors, such as reactivity, aggressiveness, and impulsivity (also referred to as externalizing behaviors), consistently emerge as risk factors for gang joining. The second consistent predictor—although captured in just three studies to date—is a youth's experience of a series of negative life events. These stresses are measured across the ecological spectrum and include serious illness, school suspension, and disruption in intimate social relationships. The third individual characteristic that the majority of studies find to be a gang risk factor is youth attitudes toward delinquent behavior.

Self-esteem is often included in studies of gang membership but does not appear to be an important risk factor. There is no firm evidence either supporting or not supporting three other individual characteristics: psychological traits such as anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (also referred to as internalizing behaviors), attitudes toward the future, and participation in conventional activities. Some studies find them to be risk factors, while others do not.

This synthesis of the risk literature has identified peer factors as important, along with a handful of characteristics from the individual and family domains. There is certainly a need for further research that attempts to resolve the many categories with inconclusive findings and for more multivariate analyses. But what have we learned that is relevant to gang practice? The rich variety of characteristics that have been the subject of many studies can suggest both positive and negative directions for gang prevention and intervention.

First and foremost, characteristics of peer networks are important and should receive attention in most gang programs.

Second, programs that focus exclusively on individual or family risk likely will miss important risk processes deriving from other ecological domains. Within these two domains, externalizing behaviors, positive attitudes toward delinquency, and parental supervision practices are promising areas for intervention.

Our review also points to less-promising directions for gang reduction. Youth self-esteem, family-level poverty, parent-child attachment, school safety, and neighborhood social disorganization/integration do not appear to be fruitful avenues to prevent youth from joining gangs, at least not based on the existing research to date.

We find little evidence to support neighborhood characteristics as predictors for individual-level gang joining. We contend throughout this book, particularly in chapters 6 and 8, that neighborhood and community features deserve more attention from both researchers and practitioners. We argue that communities spawn gangs, and it is these gang-spawning characteristics that should be targeted. Our analysis of the gang risk factor literature does not support this argument at the individual level, and it appears that neighborhood characteristics may be more relevant to understanding the emergence or persistence of gangs in communities. The lack of support for neighborhood influences on individual gang joining may result from the nature of this research. First, as mentioned previously, this is the least-studied aspect of risk factor research, and hierarchical analysis methods might generate more insight. The second issue goes back to the sampling designs of many of the studies we included in our analysis. Some studies sample youths from the same neighborhoods—"similarly situated" youth is our term in the first sentence of this chapter—and other studies sample high-risk neighborhoods disproportionately. This has the effect of reducing the neighborhood variance that might be explained. Our own work suggests that gang and nongang youth view their own (the same) neighborhoods somewhat differently, but perhaps not to a magnitude that overcomes these sampling issues. Hence, we continue to embrace our perspective on the import of neighborhood and community but acknowledge the lack of available evidence in the gang-joining risk factor literature to support this view. This does not, in any way, vitiate the importance of neighborhood and community factors in understanding why gangs emerge (independent of who their members may be).

A Note on Cumulative Risk

A handful of researchers have examined the effect of cumulative risk in both longitudinal (Thornberry et al., 2003; Huizinga et al., 1998; Hill et

al., 1999) and cross-sectional (J. Miller, 2001; Whitlock, 2004) samples. Each study has determined that risk of joining gangs increases as risk factors pile upon one another. All five studies find that youth who join gangs appear disproportionately in the highest cumulative risk category. For example, Thornberry and colleagues (2003) calculated a high-risk group that manifested at least 21 of 40 possible characteristics. Among males, 43.5% of subjects falling in this high-risk group are gang members, which exceeds the 32.4% sample gang prevalence. Less emphasized in the work on cumulative risk is the observation that more than half of the youths experiencing a very high magnitude of risk factors from many ecological domains (and even higher proportions in other studies) were *not* gang members. Such analyses remind us that most "gang" risk factors are not particularly strong predictors of gang involvement, either individually or in the cumulative measure. Researchers generally draw from the literature on the prediction of violent and serious delinquency to test candidates for gang risk; the factors indicated in Table 4.2 as the most frequently supported risk factors enjoy broad support in this larger literature (see Hawkins et al., 1998, for a synthesis). However, as we have shown, several predictors of youth violence do not seem to predict particularly well to gang involvement (e.g., family poverty and attachment). Interventions that aim to reduce gang involvement specifically should avoid targeting risk factors that conflate violence and gang membership inappropriately.

Different Risk Factors by Sex or Ethnicity

The 20 studies discussed above provide a reasonable starting point for identifying those features of youths' nested ecological environments that place some youth at higher risk for joining gangs than other adolescents. A far smaller number of studies provide directions for understanding features that might differentiate gang risk for girls, as compared with boys, or for youths from different ethnic or race backgrounds. While it is clear from our discussion in chapter 1 that boys more often join gangs than girls and that there are ethnic differences in participation as well, what can be said about different ecological influences on these patterns of gang participation? Supplemental analyses of risk factors within demographic categories might suggest different programmatic directions or, alternatively, that programs need not customize interventions for girls or for different ethnic groups. Unfortunately, the empirical knowledge accumulated to date is insufficient to direct program specialization in these areas.

Few studies report risk factor analyses separately for girls and boys (Esbensen and Deschenes, 1998; Maxson and Whitlock, 2002; Thornberry et al., 2003).³ But three findings are consistent across all three studies. First, fewer factors distinguish girls who join gangs from their uninformed counterparts. This finding may be due to the lower number of gang girls available for analysis: smaller numbers make it more difficult to detect statistically significant differences. It may be that researchers have failed to capture important influences on girls' joining patterns; much academic attention has been focused on boys. On the other hand, it may be that few risk factors have been identified because gang girls are less distinct from other girls than gang boys are from other boys. The increased scholarly and practitioner attention to gang girls may yield a more nuanced understanding in the future.

A second general finding from these studies is that most of the risk factors identified for girls also differentiate boys who join gangs.⁴ For example, six of the nine gang girl risk factors identified by Thornberry and his colleagues (2003) also differentiated gang boys from other boys.

The third pattern is that each study produces risk factors unique to girls, which might suggest the need for gender-specific programs. However, we find that none of these special risk factors emerge in more than one study. Risk seeking, lower school commitment, and fewer prosocial peers characterize girl gang members but not boys, according to Esbensen and Deschenes (1998). Maxson and Whitlock (2002) find lower involvement in community sports activities, less attachment to teachers, and less likelihood of receiving an award in school to be related to gang involvement among girls, but not boys. More social disorganization in the neighborhood and lower college aspirations and expectations are risk factors for girls only in Rochester (Thornberry et al., 2003). It is noteworthy that school characteristics surface as unique predictors for girls in each study and also that no family variable emerges as a unique risk factor for girls.

While additional studies are needed to examine this issue further, the research thus far suggests that girls and boys share common risk factors for gang involvement, but that exceptions might be found in the general realm of school experience. The studies completed thus far do not provide compelling evidence for gender-specific intervention.

We have even less to offer regarding the issue of ethnic differences in gang risk factors. Just one cross-sectional study with a nonrepresentative sample of young adolescent males compares risk factors between Latino and black gang and nongang youth (Maxson, Whitlock, and Klein, 1997). In this study, we conducted bivariate analyses on 43 variables sep-

arately for the two ethnic groups and found just 2 gang risk factors in common: exposure to violence in the neighborhood and street orientation (i.e., gang youths more often report they enjoy hanging out on the street). We detected 11 risk factors for black youth, but just 6 for Latinos. Again, sample sizes and the cross-sectional design limited our conclusions but offered preliminary evidence that gang risk processes may differ for these two ethnic groups. Further evidence of ethnic difference is offered in a study that tracked level of gang involvement over a school year for a cohort of ninth graders (Walker-Barnes and Mason, 2001). These researchers found that parenting style, specifically higher levels of behavioral control and lower levels of lax and psychological control, was particularly salient in decreasing gang involvement for black—but not Hispanic or white—youths. Other studies have investigated the characterizations of gangs and gang experiences among youth of different ethnic backgrounds (Freng and Winfree, 2004; J. Miller, 2001), but these do not inform our interest in differential risk factors.

Do Risk Characteristics Vary across Level or Type of Membership?

With little assistance available from the risk literature to support customizing programs by sex or ethnic background, are other categories of gang membership more useful for this purpose? Do youths who join gangs at younger ages display different risk characteristics than those who form their gang connections later? Are “core” gang members distinct from other gang members? Do youths who sustain gang membership for longer periods of time display different risk characteristics than more transient gang members? An affirmative answer to any of these questions would help to guide prevention and intervention efforts.

The rate of gang joining varies by age, with the highest levels evident in the early to midteen years (see Table 1.3). We might expect that risk factors would be different for youths who join gangs earlier rather than later because youths experience different social developmental stages throughout adolescence. However, we found no empirical studies that have investigated differential gang risk factors by age.

The next question refers to differences between core and fringe (or peripheral) gang members. Do youth whose behavior and identity are tightly bound to the gang have different risk constellations than those for whom gang membership is less central to their identity? A longitudinal research design is critical to ferreting out characteristics that unambigu-

ously predict these levels of gang membership, but such studies have thus far not addressed this question. Klein (1995a) reviews his earlier work on core and fringe levels of membership and notes little distinction between the two types on sociodemographic variables such as age, family status, economic level, parents' education, and immigration status. However, several psychological and behavioral deficits characterize core members: lower measured intelligence, impulse control, school performance, and desire for change as well as higher group dependence. While these data are cross-sectional, some of these character dimensions likely precede gang joining and may be predictors of core membership.

More recent, although also cross-sectional, data reported by Esbensen, Winfree, and colleagues (2001) confirm the pattern. Youths who placed themselves in the two inner circles of a five-ring concentric circles diagram posed by the researchers as “your gang” were designated as core gang members. Core gang youths reported more antisocial attitudes and behaviors than other gang members, but the two types of gang youth were not different demographically (i.e., sex, race, family structure, or parents' education status). Core and fringe gang youth appear to have different risk constellations, although longitudinal analyses are needed to sort out which social and psychological characteristics precede gang membership, which therefore would be the useful focus of intervention efforts. However, youth likely move in and out of the inner circle of a gang so customizing intervention on this dimension may not be advisable.

Conventional wisdom portrays gang membership as a lifetime affiliation: “Once you're a Crip, you're a Crip for life.” The age distribution of gang membership and virtually every study of gangs belies this conventional wisdom, but Decker and Lauritsen (2002) note that active gang members perpetuate the notion because “the viability of their gang depends on the ability of active gang members to maintain the perception that leaving the gang is nearly impossible” (2002: 61). Responding to consistent findings in major longitudinal studies that more than half of youths who join gangs sever these ties within one year (Thornberry, Hui-zinga, and Loeber, 2004), researchers have conducted risk factor analyses on different samples to see whether transient and stable gang members have distinct risk characteristics. A separate risk profile for short-term versus long-term gang members would permit practitioners to target different strategies to appropriate risk subgroups.

The results from Rochester (Thornberry et al., 2003), Seattle (Battin-Pearson, Guo, et al., 1998; Hill, Lui, and Hawkins, 2001), and Montreal (Craig et al., 2002) are quite consistent. Few variables that were tested

distinguish transient from stable gang members, while the two types of gang members are consistently different from youth who don't join gangs. These studies find earlier involvement with antisocial peers, engaging in antisocial behavior (including externalizing and internalizing behaviors, disruptive behavior in school, early violence and drug use, and early dating), and family economic disadvantage to be markers for stable gang membership, but no other family, school, or neighborhood characteristics predicted to length of gang membership. The vast majority of characteristics that predict to gang joining don't appear to affect the durability of gang association.

These findings are confirmed by cross-sectional studies that compare the characteristics of current gang members with those who report prior gang membership at the interview. Few differences are detected in risk characteristics in current and former gang members (Winfree et al., 1992; Dukes et al., 1997; Esbensen, Winfree, et al., 2001), especially in light of the substantial differences between both groups and nongang youth.

Surprisingly little research has been conducted on gang desistance and the processes of leaving gangs. Interviews with former gang members conducted by Decker and Lauritsen suggest that the experience of violence may be a "triggering event" for many, while others simply "drift out" (2002: 66). Youths' experience in the gang may be a more important determinant of when they leave than their attitudes or life circumstances prior to joining. While Katz and his colleagues caution us that "combining past and current gang members into one group [for analysis purposes] might mask important attitudinal and behavioral differences according to the extent of gang association" (2005: 83), we find little evidence of important differences between these two groups in risk factor research. Most gang members do not remain gang members; membership is a transitory status.

Findings from Protective Factor Research

The contributions of risk factor research may be limited by the typical method of investigating only main effects. Researchers argue that risk operates in multiple ecological domains, and attempts have been made to combine or accumulate risk factors to gain better predictive power. The problem is that most risk factors do not individually—or as a group—predict gang joining that well. Dukes and his colleagues put it well:

Additional analyses . . . revealed that a major difficulty in predicting which respondents were gang members was the fact that many

students had characteristics of gang members but they were not members. From the nucleus of the model emerged a process by which some at-risk students become mainstreamers and more pro-social. They feel good about their abilities as students, and they translate this self-confidence into educational bonds and an orientation toward education as a ladder to a successful career as an adult. These students generally are not interested in becoming gang members, and their behaviors are less deviant. (1997: 158–159)

Our own research team (Maxson, Whitlock, and Klein, 1997) adopted a different approach. We reasoned that the explanatory power of risk characteristics may be limited by the failure to take into account interactions between variables, and we proceeded to test variables that were directly related to youth violence in combination with characteristics that had no direct predictive value. Our objective was to identify protective factors, which we defined as characteristics that reduced the probability of violence, despite the presence of a risk factor. Our ultimate goal was to inform the development of programs that could increase protection by buffering risk-laden youth. Our results were not encouraging. We detected a modest number of significant interactions—more than one would expect by chance but, given the large number of analyses required by the many combinations of variables available, far fewer than we hoped. Even less encouraging was the subsequent investigation of each significant interaction. The protection dynamic we sought (i.e., the violence probability generated by a high score on a risk factor reduced by a high score on a protective factor) was discernible in a handful of variable pairings, but the interpretation of these "true" protection processes was rarely meaningful at a conceptual level. Moreover, we found protective factors that reduced the probability of violence only among lower-risk youth—not a great help to program providers. Furthermore, we found that several pairings of risk factors with other protective variables appeared to *increase* the probability of violence in a pattern that our group labeled "risky protection." As we continue this work in the youth violence arena, we are humbled by the complexity of risk-protective dynamics.

Whitlock (2004) replicated this procedure, but with gang membership as the outcome, and limited her investigation to family characteristics encompassing structure, management, and deviance. She identified 10 of the 21 variables tested as risk factors, and 5 of these risk factors interacted with 7 other family variables to produce reduced probabilities of joining

gangs. For example, a youth at risk for joining gangs due to low parental monitoring is less likely to join if his parents discipline him consistently (i.e., parents do not punish or punish for the same things), but discipline consistency has no effect on youth at low risk for joining gangs due to high parental monitoring. Whitlock identified the same protective pattern for the reliability of punishment (punishment doesn't change with parents' mood) when coupled with the risk factor of low parental monitoring. Punishment consistency also emerged as a protective factor, reducing the risk of gang membership for youths whose family members had a history of incarceration.

In all, Whitlock identified just 8 pairs of variables that produced significant interactions from 110 regression equations. Three of these pairs produced reductions of risk only at the low end of the risk continuum. She notes the limitations of her sample and cross-sectional design as possible barriers to uncovering additional protective factors. The importance of this work rests not on the particular pairings of risk and protective factors but in the demonstration that a protective effect is not simply the absence of risk. This approach to identifying protective factors to buffer risk for gang joining should continue with other samples and longitudinal designs, as it holds some promise for prevention and intervention practice. In the meantime, both researchers and practitioners should exercise more precision in their use of the term *protection*. Labeling lower risk as higher protection does not increase our knowledge about the complex dynamic of joining gangs, or of any other outcome measure.

What Reasons Do Gang Members Give for Joining Gangs?

At its best, risk factor analysis utilizes sophisticated statistical techniques to sort out various contextual influences on youths' participation in street gangs. Many researchers also take the approach of asking gang youths directly for the reasons they join gangs. In our overview of the findings from the current research on this topic, we are most interested in the consistency of results from different studies: are there certain reasons for participation that predominate in different samples of youth? We are interested in patterns of results within subgroups of gang members. For example, do girls express different reasons for joining gangs than boys? Do different ethnic groups offer similar reasons? Are the motivations for joining gangs wholly distinct from the reasons that youths participate in social groups more generally? The answers to these questions could pro-

vide guidance to the development of prevention and intervention programs.

Most researchers offer a list of reasons for joining gangs and ask gang members to select which apply to them. In contrast, Thornberry and his colleagues (2003) took the free-form responses of Rochester gang members and classified them into general categories. More than half of these gang youths specified family or friends in the gang as the primary reason they joined. Fewer than one in five gang members voiced the need for protection or attraction to fun or action.

Only "it's my neighborhood" garnered endorsement by a notable majority (65%) of current gang members in St. Louis studied by Decker and Curry (2000). The five other reasons (including family members belong, meet/impress girls, important among my friends, makes me feel important in my neighborhood, and nothing else to do) offered by these scholars were selected by less than one-third of these youths as having anything to do with their joining gangs. Decker and Curry also pursued more qualitative responses and found that "a large number of members of the sample stated that they joined their gang to seek physical protection or to participate in violence" (2000: 476). It would appear that Rochester gang members join due to the influence of friends and family gang associations, whereas St. Louis youths feel threatened and join to find safety or to protect their neighborhoods. As the two studies approached the question in different ways, we can't be sure if the reasons for gang joining would be more similar if the question were asked the same way.

Esbensen and Lynskey (2001) note marked differences in reasons for joining in the 11 diverse research sites included in their national G.R.E.A.T. study: Gang members were asked to circle each separate reason for why they joined, and among all gang members, protection was selected most often (54%), but near-majorities also indicated respect, money, or a friend in the gang as reasons. The range by site on protection varied from 37% to 74%, for money from 29% to 65%, and other common reasons showed comparable ranges.

Do male gang members cite different reasons than do females? Few sex differences were identified among Rochester gang youth (Thornberry et al., 2003) or in the combined G.R.E.A.T. research sites (Esbensen, Deschenes, and Winfree, 1999). In contrast, our own research found that associational ties (family and friends) were the most commonly endorsed reasons among female gang members in San Diego, while gang boys most often joined for excitement, territory, or protection reasons (Maxson and Whitlock, 2002).

Just two studies have examined ethnic patterns in the reasons for joining gangs. In Rochester, Hispanic youth were less likely than black or white youth to join due to family or friends' participation and were more likely to be attracted to the fun or action presented by gangs (Thornberry et al., 2003). Among G.R.E.A.T. gang members, Freng and Winfree (2004) detected significant ethnic differences in five of the six reasons and concluded that white youth more often endorsed all of the motivations except having a sibling in a gang.

In sum, the most common reasons offered by gang members vary by research location, ethnic background, and, perhaps, by sex but not in a patterned way that leads us to generalized explanations. One thing that most of the studies have in common is the relatively low rate at which gang members cite being forced to join as a reason. Unlike the risk factor literature, where we have identified convergence across studies on the importance of some factors, we find no overarching reason expressed by gang youths, nor do we find consistent patterns among subgroups by sex or ethnicity. Until we are better positioned to understand these variegated patterns in the reasons that gang members offer for joining, practitioners should investigate the dynamics within their own communities.

One further question remains regarding the reasons for joining gangs. How different are they from the reasons that any youth might participate in a peer social group? As we've argued throughout this volume that gangs are qualitatively different from other youth groups, we expect the reasons offered by youths to be quite different, although meeting opposite-sex peers or other associational influences might be expected to motivate all adolescents. We tested for differences between gang and nongang youths in the reasons they selected for joining their primary peer groups. We investigated this issue in our studies in San Diego and Long Beach with comparable youth samples and study designs, although Hispanic and black males were sampled in Long Beach while only black males were included in the San Diego data. All youths in both studies were offered the same list of 25 reasons; youths could select as many reasons as they liked. Table 4.3 lists the reasons that generated statistically significant differences between gang and nongang boys in both cities.⁵

The first thing to be noted in Table 4.3 is the number of items; 16 of the 25 reasons generated gang-nongang differences in the two samples, suggesting that gangs and other groups do indeed offer distinct attractions to youth. Just 6 items (not included in Table 4.3) differentiated the two groups in one city but not the other, suggesting more stability between

TABLE 4.3. *Reasons for Joining Primary Peer Groups That Significantly Differentiate Gang and Nongang Boys in Both San Diego (Maxson & Whitlock, 2002) and Long Beach (Maxson, Whitlock, & Klein, 1997) Study Samples*

Reasons More Common for Gang Boys	Reasons More Common for Nongang Boys
Protection	Make friends
Have a territory	Participate in (other than illegal) group activities
Feel a sense of belonging	Keep out of trouble
Get money or other things	Meet girls easily
Friend was a member	Prepare for the future
Family member had joined	Share secrets
Feel important	Get parents' respect
Do illegal activities	
Get money from drugs	

these two cities than observed in other studies. The cross-site stability is further confirmed by the relatively close frequencies of these items in the two cities; all but 3 of the 16 reasons were endorsed by a similar percentage of that group in each city, and many were within just a few percentage points. Thus, it was easy to rank the reasons by frequency, and each list has the most common reasons listed first. In these two samples, protection and having a territory and a sense of belonging were the most common reasons offered by gang members for joining these groups. While even the least-frequent gang-joining motive—to get money from drugs—was endorsed by at least a quarter of gang members, protection was mentioned by three-quarters of gang members.

Nongang youths say that they join their social groups to make friends, to participate in group activities, and to keep out of trouble. We found that nongang boys more often join groups to meet girls than do gang boys, showing that occasionally the reasons attributed to gang joining are actually more common among nongang youth. The three reasons that did not distinguish the two groups in either city are noteworthy: joining groups for support or loyalty, to avoid home, or to participate in a group the youth can feel proud of were selected in equal numbers by gang and nongang members. Practitioners have mentioned each of these as a major attraction for gang youths, yet we find that they are more generic social

inclinations for youth, regardless of gang affiliation. However, most of the reasons listed in Table 4.3, whether more common for gang or nongang youth, are quite consistent with the previous literature.

Conclusions: Implications for Policies and Programs

What have we learned from the recent research on factors that distinguish youth who join gangs from similarly situated youth who do not? We find convincing evidence of the importance of delinquent friends, nondelinquent problem behaviors, and youths' experience of a series of negative life events. Favorable attitudes about breaking the law, lack of parental supervision and monitoring, and commitment to negative peers also receive considerable support in the gang risk factor literature. Conversely, youths with low self-esteem, family economic disadvantage, a single parent or low attachment to parents, or who live in disorganized neighborhoods or attend unsafe schools do not appear to experience higher risk for joining gangs. Prevention and intervention programs should place emphasis on delinquent peer networks and their socializing influences. Early signs of such problem behaviors as reactivity, aggressiveness, and impulsivity should be addressed with effective programs. Parenting monitoring skills should be developed. Programs and policies should avoid interventions on those characteristics that do not distinguish gang from nongang youths if gang reduction is the primary goal.

Girls and boys appear to share many of the gang risk factors, although girls' experience of school requires greater scrutiny. We found little evidence in the risk literature for building specialized programs for girls and boys or for youth from different ethnic backgrounds. Few a priori characteristics separate out youth who participate in gangs for only a brief period of time from those for whom gang membership is more enduring.

Notwithstanding the above implications that we draw from this recent research, our review has uncovered a large number of conflicting results. As researchers continue to investigate these possible gang risk factors, programs that emphasize these should be carefully scrutinized. The protection factor research suggests that intervention on some risk factors may elevate risk or reduce the risk of gang joining only among those youth who are unlikely to join in any case.

Regarding the content of programs, our risk factor review falls squarely within Thornberry's lament: "As is true of virtually all findings from basic research, the present ones identify some of the issues that effective programs need to address but they do not by themselves provide a detailed

blueprint of what those programs should look like" (Thornberry et al., 2003: 193). In concluding their study, these scholars argue that the "way forward" is found not in customizing gang programs but in drawing from risk factor research to identify and target the most appropriate program clients. "Our proposal is straightforward: we should steer gang members and youths who are at elevated risk for gang membership into programs that have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing delinquency and promoting social competencies" (2003: 199). The programs we describe in chapter 3 and chapter 8 yield little evidence of effective gang control and notable deficiencies in the appropriate targeting of program clients. Gang risk factor research provides a practical and useful tool for client selection: service providers should use the strongest gang risk factors to develop a screening instrument for potential program clientele in order to ensure that high-risk youth are targeted. We know that not all risk factors for delinquency apply equally to gang membership. Targeting by gang risk factors would lead us beyond "regular youth" and beyond mere delinquents to youths who could benefit the most from effective prevention and intervention practice.

then discuss some problems presented by the transformations of gang structures over time and present some cautions about generalizing about the nature of street gangs from data limited to any one time period. The overall theme of this material is as simple as it has been widely ignored: to understand street gangs, one must appreciate *both* their common elements *and* their diversity. Science is built on general principles and reasonable qualifications to them.

We point out elsewhere in this book that ethnic differences among gangs—white, black, Hispanic, Asian—are useful to note but not as important as is often suggested by the media (or law enforcement). The similarities among various categories of ethnic street gangs are far more common than are the differences (Klein, 1995a; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Vigil, 2002). Gang structure and group process trump ethnicity.

Similarly, Hall, Thornberry, and Lizotte (forthcoming) have tested whether the group processes that lead to crime amplification in gangs is mediated by the kind of neighborhood in which the gangs exist. Comparing gangs in more- versus less-disadvantaged neighborhoods in their Rochester longitudinal study, these researchers found no differences. Group-induced crime amplification took place at high rates regardless of the character of the gang neighborhood. Group process trumps neighborhood. Therefore, in the second section of this chapter, we return to the point made in the introduction: there is, overall, a class of phenomena called street gangs, the members of which show common characteristics. Most of all, they share important group processes. These processes must be understood in the development of gang control policies and programs.

The Importance of Structure

The importance of understanding gang structures derives in large part from considering the dimensions of the structures and the relationships of these to other issues of concern. Let us consider several of these dimensions and issues.

Levels of Organization

It is assumed by most laypersons, public officials, and a surprising number of law enforcement officers that street gangs are well organized—cohesive, hierarchically led, with clear codes of conduct. While this may be an accurate depiction of a small proportion of street gangs, it is not true for the large majority. We are misled by the images of such dramatic, fictional accounts as *West Side Story* (great musical, poor social science). In most

Five

GANG STRUCTURES AND GROUP PROCESSES

In chapter 1, we described the far-flung dispersion of street gangs across the country and pointed out that most gangs are *local* phenomena. That is, most street gangs are indigenous developments not generally attributable to criminally motivated migrations or “invasion” from such gang centers as Los Angeles and Chicago. One might anticipate, then, that the forms that gangs take would reflect local or regional characteristics. And, it turns out, this is indeed the case to some extent. There is not one kind of street gang, but several distinguishable kinds within the overall class of the groups we define as street gangs. As Wyrick and Howell have noted, “Gangs in any given locality may be more or less sophisticated in their organization or criminality, but it is critical that communities not attempt to treat all gangs equally based on untested assumptions” (2004: 21). The differences among them have important implications for both research and policy. Unique local forms, however, may be less important than the more-general patterns within which they fit.

In this chapter, we start by discussing why the understanding of the variety of gang structures is important and describe past attempts to develop typologies of street gangs. We note in particular some problems with typologies of gangs by their criminal patterns. We discuss issues in the measurement of gang structure types and then present data on our own foray into this area, which is based on U.S. national surveys (with a brief look at the results as applied to the European gang situation). We

street gangs, leadership is ephemeral, turnover is often high, and cohesiveness only moderate. Codes of conduct often exist in rhetoric but are easily avoided or broken. Many street gangs are more a loose collection of cliques or networks than a single, coherent whole. Further, in the majority of gangs, median individual membership lasts only about a year. This high level of turnover challenges any notion of stable structure (Essensen and Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry et al., 2003).

A classical description of limited gang cohesiveness was provided by one of the authors more than 30 years ago (Klein, 1971: 109–123). Little has changed since that time. Decker and Curry have most recently (2000, 2002a) described gangs' organization in St. Louis with respect to leadership, formal meetings, rules, subgroupings, connections to other gangs, and gang versus nongang friends. With the exception of generally accepted rules for behavior, the authors conclude that their street gangs are not well organized. Similar findings are reported by Hagedorn (1988) and Fleisher (1998), among others. In a separate analysis, Decker (2001) compared the two most-organized gangs (according to the police) in San Diego, St. Louis, and Chicago. He found that only one of these, Chicago's Black Gangster Disciples, fit the "organized gang" stereotype.

For the social services worker attempting to establish rapport with a gang, this somewhat amorphous structure of street gangs will require extensive observation and interview before any individual interventions are possible. Detached worker programs often require literally years of work before gangs become responsive (which is often long after worker burnout takes over). Examples are found in the heyday of detached worker programs in New York (New York City Youth Board, 1960), Chicago (Carney et al., 1969; Spergel 1966), and Los Angeles (Klein, 1971).

For the gang cop, this loose organization makes intelligence gathering quite idiosyncratic and defeats gang control via the arrest of hardcore leaders or the general harassment of members. Indeed, evidence suggests that concerted efforts at gang dissolution by social services workers or police may inadvertently increase gang cohesiveness through understandable mechanisms introduced elsewhere (Klein 1971, 1995a) and discussed later in this chapter.

For the researcher, perhaps the most unrecognized but common problem raised by this loose gang structure is that gang informants, those willing and interested in bringing the researcher into their world, are likely to be atypical of the general membership. Failure to obtain observations or interviews with a representative sample of a gang's members or relying on archival data on those arrested or convicted are factors guaranteed to

yield distorted images of gang structure and behavior. Many of the gang case studies in the criminological literature suffer from these faults.

Heterogeneity of Gang Structures

Later in this chapter, we will describe several different street gang structures that illustrate structural variability. But even within each of these, the range is wide along a number of important dimensions both structural and behavioral, to say nothing of the variations across gang communities and the institutions (social services, police, courts, schools) responding to them. There are generalizations that can fairly be made about street gangs—that's what science is for—but they are of value only as we understand the variability that qualifies them. Within each category of street gangs, there can be wide differences in size, age ranges, gender proportions, centralized leadership, accepted codes, criminal behaviors, and so on. And across structures, these vary measurably.

The practitioner who ignores the structural variations, who thinks gangs are pretty much alike, will inevitably fail in attempting to intervene in multigang settings. The researcher who fails to seek the structural differences or who studies but one gang or one gang type will publish false generalizations and mislead his or her colleagues. The responses of many gang ethnographers to the narrow depictions offered by Yablonsky (1963), Taylor (1990), and Sanchez-Jankowski (1991) reveal that the levels of violence and of drug entrepreneurialism described by these authors have manifestly misled major public policy initiatives. We don't need more of these errors.

Structures and Functions

Groups persist in part because they fulfill certain needs of their members. In the case of street gangs, most prominent of these needs are the status, sense of identity, and perceived protection from rival groups that derive from membership. Secondarily, street gangs provide access to and social legitimization for antisocial attitudes and behaviors.

For the moment, however, the point to be made is that gang structure and function are interrelated, enough so that to ignore structural differences also yields misunderstanding of functional differences. Some gang structures, most notably the "traditional" and "compressed" forms to be described later, exist more for social than for criminal reasons. Especially in the case of traditional gangs, intergang rivalries and territorial disputes, whether violent or merely rhetorical, are often the hallmarks of gang existence, with criminal behaviors an important but secondary function. To

attempt gang control in these instances merely through the enforcement of legal codes clearly misses the point; to attempt an understanding of these gangs through their variegated criminal patterns similarly overlooks the principal sources of their origin and persistence. That is, arrests and convictions usually do little to affect gang structure and function. It is the gang as a *unit* that requires intervention and control: gang structure and function should be the targets.

In a similar but contrasting fashion, there are "specialty" gangs, to be described later, whose principal function originated in or evolved into a primary focus on a narrow criminal pattern. Drug gangs, burglary rings, skinheads, and the like come to exist principally around these more-narrow antisocial interests. This type of gang *can* be effectively controlled through selected enforcement procedures, and they can be understood and described by research using these interests as the focal point (Padilla, 1992; Hamm, 1993; Bjorgo, 1997; Valdez and Sifaneck, 2004). As we will demonstrate later, the contrasting functions bring with them important differences in gang size, leadership, duration, and other structural dimensions often overlooked in both practice and research.

It is our intent in this chapter to go beyond the consensus nominal definition offered in the introduction to more of an operational definition in which the measurement of gang patterns defines their nature. The patterns we choose here are those that reflect the *structural* characteristics of gangs—things like their age distribution, longevity, size, internal subgroupings, and crime patterns. We emphasize these structural components because other attempts to find gang patterns—gang typologies—have not done so and have failed in part due to this omission.

If we are successful in developing a structural typology of street gangs, we can offer an additional useful approach to gang definition. We want to attempt comparisons of gang situations across time and between cities and nations; such a typology might allow us to make progress in these directions. A recent example is the application of the structural typology to gangs in a dozen European cities. Where definitional consensus initially proved to be a barrier, the typology revealed much about the common and disparate gang patterns in these cities and many in the United States (Klein, 1996).

One final note: we recognize full well that in adopting this operational stance, we have not "solved" the definitional problem but merely surmounted it for our particular interest in facilitating street gang comparisons over time and space. For us, such comparisons are pivotal to drawing reliable generalizations about gangs and how to control them. It is a

major goal of science, after all, to be able to draw forth generalizations about the phenomena it studies. Be these laws, principles, or patterns, science can neither summarize nor predict without them.

Past Efforts at Gang Typologies

Public images of gangs take some common forms. These include

- a group of youths lounging on the street corner, harassing passersby and disrupting local businesses
- the *West Side Story* image of cohesive, tightly organized rival collectivities whose principal concerns are minor crimes and territorial challenges
- super-gangs, Chicago-style, with memberships in the thousands, in control of neighborhoods and tightly entwined with organized-crime groups
- marauding cliques of a half dozen youths moving freely about other people's neighborhoods, randomly targeting people and facilities in almost senseless attacks "for the fun of it"
- bands of drug-selling, gun-toting thugs

So what does a street gang look like? Most thoughtful scholars have answered, first, that there is no one, single form of gang. Rather, gangs pattern themselves in stable and recognizable forms. It is this pattern of forms that has led to the attempts to typologize gangs. In a sense, the purpose of these typologies, and most certainly the one we shall describe as the result of our recent research, is to achieve an "ostensive definition" as described by Ball and Curry: "Although one has a clear or vivid idea of a thing when one can recognize examples of it immediately, the idea is not yet distinct until one can enumerate one-by-one the features that distinguish the thing from others" (1995: 226).

Attempts at gang typologies fall roughly into two time periods, which we will call the "classical" and "modern" periods of gang study. The former starts with Thrasher's 1927 work and ends with Klein's 1971 review of the classical works. The modern period starts with Walter Miller's mid-1970s national surveys and continues through the present.¹

These attempts also fall roughly into two descriptive forms: gang typologies that are primarily behavioral and those that are primarily structural. Although some mixing of the two forms can be seen, they are usually quite distinct. The contrast is critical to our exposition later of our

own research results. Behavioral typologies typify gangs by their purported tendency to manifest a predominant form of behavior. The most influential of these typologies was that of Cloward and Ohlin (1960), to which we will refer below. It was also typical of the behavioral typologies in that the behaviors noted were specifically criminal rather than more broadly social. The structural typologies, by contrast, largely bypass gang behaviors to find patterns in the social characteristics of the groups. Examples of structural dimensions are race and ethnicity (often used by police and the media), size (from small cliques to the super-gangs of Chicago), and type or level of organization (emphasizing leadership patterns or role differentiation).

The Classical Period

Serious attempts at typologizing started with Thrasher's 1927 work, *The Gang*, a monumental exercise in Chicago to catalog more than 1,000 youth groups through observations, interviews, secondhand reports, and other processes that seem loosely constructed in the hindsight of modern methods. The distinctions made were among (1) diffuse, (2) solidified, (3) conventionalized, (4) criminal, and (5) secret society groups. Four of these, at the least, may be seen as structural, although many of the groups subsumed under them would not today be classified as street gangs, many indeed being little more than common boys' play groups.

The only other original classification of gangs as structural entities during the classical period was that of the New York City Youth Board (1960), which mounted a major detached worker program on the streets of several boroughs. These gangs were (1) vertical, (2) horizontal, (3) self-contained, or (4) disintegrating. Here, the structure had to do principally with organizational features and emerged from the experiences of the street workers rather than any a priori conceptual stance.

Four other classical period depictions, derived inductively from the researchers' observations in the field, stress behavioral rather than structural properties. Thus Cohen and Short (1958) reported a pattern of theft, conflict, and addict gangs based on the predominant crime orientations within the groups. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) followed with their highly influential depiction of criminal, conflict, and retreatist subcultures and gangs with the same emphases within them. Spergel (1964), a student of Ohlin, found a fourfold variation of racket, theft, conflict, and retreatist gangs. His was the only one of a half dozen early attempts at replication to confirm the basic behavioral/criminal pattern noted by his predecessors. Finally, we find Yablonsky's (1963) distinction among social, delinquent,

and violent gangs in New York, although his emphasis was clearly on violent gangs as the major problem.

In his 1971 review of these major attempts and other gang writings of the classical period, Klein attempted to summarize the gangs described in both structural and behavioral typologies. He found the gang descriptions to be principally structural, with four dominant patterns: (1) traditional (age-graded subgroups, self-regenerating territorial gangs); (2) spontaneous (age-integrated short-term gangs); (3) specialty (short-term groups with specific rather than general criminal focuses, such as drug involvement); and (4) horizontal (short- or long-term alliances of gangs, usually manifest in times of extreme challenges by rival gangs, as in Chicago's early super-gangs).

Of the various typologies of the classical period, two had major influence. The Cloward and Ohlin typology, being theoretically integrated and based on social and cultural descriptions of lower-class urban life, was very appealing to scholars as a conceptual package. Failures to locate the pattern in other settings (e.g., Short and Strodtbeck, 1965; DeFleur, 1967; Vaz, 1962; Monod, 1967; Sherif and Sherif, 1967; and Downes, 1966) did little to discourage the acceptance of the criminal-conflict-retreatist typology.

The other influential attempt was Yablonsky's, although his social and delinquent gangs quickly faded in memory as his violent gang captured media and lay attention. Tiding his dramatically written book *The Violent Gang* helped to solidify the image of street gangs not only as violent, but also as large, marauding congregations held together by megalomaniacal, sociopathic leaders. Focusing on the most feared of the behavioral patterns has set a pattern against which almost all future behavioral gang research has had to do battle. Most writers citing Yablonsky's descriptions have failed to note his exaggerations and the fact that the few gangs he observed were short-lived anomalies whose description has seldom if ever been replicated in any other time or place.

In a point to which we will return later, attempts to define gangs by dominant behaviors—violence, theft, graffiti, or other narrow criminal patterns—raise two problems. First, most gang members' crime is versatile; the members (and thus most of their gangs) engage in a wide variety of crimes. Thus the "violent gang" or the "theft gang" is an inaccurate depiction. Second, if one bases a gang control program on one type of crime, for example, violence, one will miss the true target of crime versatility. False assumptions can lead to misguided programming.

The Modern Period

Walter Miller entered into gang research in the 1950s with an anthropological thrust that distinguished his work from that of the dominant sociological paradigm. He viewed street gangs as reflections of lower working-class culture, rather than as distinct social entities, although his behavioral depictions are more those of traditional, territorial gang structures. Returning to gang work some 20 years later, Miller eschewed the ethnographic methods and undertook a survey of officials in many cities across the nation. He was led by this process to the need to distinguish gangs from other groups that he called "law violating youth groups."

In a strictly ad hoc procedure, W. Miller (1980) offered a list of 20 such groups of which only 3 are labeled "gangs": turf gangs, gain-oriented gangs, and fighting gangs. Most others are called rings, cliques, bands, or crowds, although they would by most scholars also be included as gangs. The arbitrariness of the system is obvious, yet the purpose is laudatory as Miller hoped to delineate group differences that would facilitate comparisons across cities.

The labels applied by Miller to most of his other groups are almost solely behavioral rather than structural: disruptive, looting, burglary, robbery, larceny, extortion, drug dealing, and assaultive. The level of criminal specialization is highly unusual, and as we will indicate later, totally opposed to what has been almost universally demonstrated about gang crime, which is that it is versatile rather than specialized.

Several other behavioral typologies have been suggested during the modern period. Taylor's (1990) scheme for the development of gangs in Detroit, highly related to drug sales, claims an evolution from scavenger gangs to territorial gangs to corporate gangs. Others, such as DiChiara for Hartford, Connecticut (1997), and Salagaev for Kazan, Russia (2001), have similarly described case studies of criminal gang evolution from less- to more-organized states.

Huff (1989) and Fagan (1989) have also offered behavioral typologies. Huff described hedonistic, instrumental, and predatory gangs, while Fagan found younger members to form social, party, conflict, and delinquent gangs. Neither Taylor's, nor Huff's, nor Fagan's schemes articulate well with Miller's types—nor with each other's.

One can well ask how this can be. Especially given the three-city research undertaken by both Huff and Fagan (six cities in all), some general patterns should begin to emerge. That each behavioral typology provides a unique pattern raises two fundamental problems. The first of these is the suspicion that the typologies do *not* emerge naturally from systematic

observations and analyses, but rather from some combination of different researcher perspectives, different methods, and unique gang locations. To surmount such problems would require the sharing of data and the coordination of research designs, a process almost unknown in American gang research. Without such coordinated, multisite research, we can expect to continue to see "unique" depictions of common phenomena.

The second problem with the behavioral, mostly crime-driven, typologies—as noted earlier—is that they fly in the face of what is known about crime patterns specifically. Klein's (1971) analysis of 1960s data, expanded from gangs to general delinquency in a later review (Klein, 1984), has since been replicated many times by other scholars to show that most offenders show a versatile rather than a specialized pattern of offending. Gang-specific studies of crime profiles are uniform in finding versatility patterns (Thornberry et al., 2003; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Battin et al., 1998). Typically, youthful offenders *and* gangs show a variety of acts, including status offenses, theft, vandalism, burglary, robbery, drug use and selling, fighting, weapons possession, and assault. Klein referred to it as "cafeteria-style offending" (1995a: 68). Given this absence of specialization, it is illogical to propose that gangs be delimited by any predominant crime pattern. Most gangs cannot be of that sort, although we will indicate later one specific but uncommon form of street gang, the "specialty" gang, that does fit that pattern.

It is precisely these sorts of problems of uncoordinated typologies that have led us to our own work on the structural typology reported in these pages. Interestingly, only one other structural attempt has appeared in the modern period, and it is one that gives us some trouble. From his observations in three major cities, Sanchez-Jankowski (1991) proposed the existence of three street gang structures: vertical, horizontal, and influential. The distinctions were based principally on forms of gang leadership or authority structure. Included as well are member rules and duties and codes of behavior, resulting in the author's claims of three *distinct* models.

One of our problems is that we can't find such distinct models in Jankowski's descriptions. More fundamentally, Jankowski has described rational, planned, organized, sophisticated gangs that defy almost all other researchers' findings, but he does not provide any data to support his position. We are, frankly, not convinced by Jankowski's descriptions that the gangs he observed would be similarly observed by others.

We should add that other researchers certainly have been aware of some of the structural dimensions of street gangs. Recent examples include James D. Vigil, Jody Miller, Scott Decker, and Finn-Aage Esbensen. How-

ever, their analyses did not refer to the gangs as *units* and did not attempt to delineate differences among gangs. Thus their descriptions do not help us to typologize gangs.

We are left, in sum, with two basic typological approaches that invite further work. The behavioral approach, despite its popularity, seems illogical given one of the few fully accepted generalizations about delinquency and gang crime: that it is versatile rather than specialized. Further, various scholars seem unable to arrive at common types. The structural typologies seem to us even less data based and, with the exception of Jankowski's proposal, have not emerged during the modern period.

Toward a Structural Typology

To develop a structural street gang typology that is clearly data based, one needs ready access to data on structural dimensions. These might include gang size, age ranges, gender, ethnicity, locations, leadership, subgroupings, cohesiveness, duration over time, and organizational norms. Further, one needs such data on many gangs in many settings in order to develop patterns and generalizations. Where could such data be located?

Ideally, a very large series of planned, coordinated ethnographies of street gangs would yield the structural data needed. A few single ethnographies or groups of long-term field observations have, in the past, provided some structural depictions (Klein, 1971; Moore, 1991; Padilla, 1992; J. Miller, 2001; Fleisher, 1998). But one needs far more than these, based on reasonably representative samples of street gangs, not the convenience samples that have been the rule until now. Such a major enterprise, for now, does not seem realistic.

Alternatively, one could undertake an archival analysis of already reported field studies, such as those listed above. But few of those deliberately collected data on structural dimensions, so that the results would at best be rather haphazard. But we shall return to them later to see what might emerge.

A third procedure would be to undertake large-scale, multisite interview or questionnaire surveys of gang-age respondents. Either household or school-based surveys would suffice, although each approach has problems of access and sampling. At this point, we are aware of only two such surveys. In the research undertaken by Esbensen and his colleagues to evaluate the G.R.E.A.T. program, its formulation did not include a deliberate gang structure investigation. Still the Esbensen model could be at some point adapted to our purpose. Surveys of St. Louis, Chicago, and

San Diego gang members (Decker, 2001; Weisel, Decker, and Bynum, 1997) reveal very ambiguous perceptions of the members' own gang structures, even the highly structured Latin Kings and Black Gangster Disciples. Gang members are often poor informants on their own groups; they know their own cliques far better than the overall gang structure.

A fourth procedure would be to take advantage of the observations of street gang workers at various locations. Where they have existed (W. Miller, 1962; Short and Stroudbeck, 1965; Carney et al., 1969; Klein, 1971; New York City Youth Board, 1960; Spergel, 1966), gang workers have provided rich and often detailed pictures of relationships among gang members and the general characters of their gangs. (As with the ethnographic approach, one would have to mount a very large, planned program, in this case a multigang, multisite gang intervention program with the inclusion of gang workers as both interviewers and data providers. One model in five sites has recently been provided by Spergel, as noted in chapter 3, but that model, for our purposes, would have to be greatly expanded at enormous financial cost.)

While our search for a structural street gang pattern could not be accomplished in any of these forms with our limited resources, another source of appropriate data did seem available, namely, police observations. Clearly, one must approach police gang data with great caution. There are built-in biases, sampling problems, and limited perspectives to be recognized and overcome. Police roles and functions make the task difficult, but these same roles and functions are also unique in providing the data access needed. In every city, the police are the only group with broad exposure to street gangs. Officials in other social services agencies may be familiar with one or several gangs in their catchment areas, but they cannot have close-at-hand, citywide exposure. This is especially true when contrasted with those many police departments that have special gang units or gang officers.

Even with knowledgeable gang officers as respondents, two problems have to be surmounted. The first is that gangs are *informal* groups. They do not provide the police with membership rosters, time cards, dues payment lists, membership cards, organizational charts, or constitutions and bylaws. The police data have to be observational, not inherently organizational. Second, some structural dimensions are more obvious than others; e.g., cohesiveness is less immediately observable than the existence of subgroups. Further, police perspectives sometimes ignore some dimensions—gender ratios is one example—and stereotype others, such as leadership. Thus the structural dimensions to be derived from police experts

cannot be comprehensive but must be carefully selected. This is a limitation but not an insurmountable barrier.

Methods

We start by noting several dimensions *not* sought from our police respondents. Earlier interviews with 260 police gang experts across the country had made it clear that their style of thought did not yield consistent or realistic views of several matters. One of these was gang leadership. This tended to be stereotypic in form, stressing serious criminal involvement and older age, and thus missing age-graded leadership and leadership based on verbal capabilities, organizational skills, and athletic or social skills.

A second dimension was level of membership, again yielding rather stereotypical categories, such as core or hardcore and peripheral; actives, associates, and wannabes; confirmed, rostered, or certified. The terminology was not consistent, nor were the criteria for the differences very clear beyond the level of involvement in serious crime.

Most important, a direct question about gang structure proved fruitless. While many police experts correctly noted that street gangs tended to be loosely structured and poorly organized, others reported a dominant pattern of hierarchical structure and clear group rules. The notion of assessing gang cohesiveness, so critical to scholarly depictions of street gang structure, was foreign to many of our experts.

Two additional patterns became clear. In the absence of prior guidelines, police tended to think of street gangs in terms of two characteristics, ethnicity and violence. As to the first, it seemed to our experts that Hispanic gangs differed substantially from black gangs; both were different from Asian gangs; and white gangs were all but nonexistent. Most research data on street gangs did not support these clear distinctions.² For instance, Freng and Winfree (2004) found remarkable similarities overall among white, African-American, and Hispanic gang members with respect to their attitudes toward gangs, reasons for joining gangs, gang characteristics, illegal activities, and victimization rates. As we have noted elsewhere, group process trumps ethnicity.

The same is true of the violence issue, in that research data dispute the existence of predominantly violent gangs or violence as a meaningful dimension. Levels of gang violence are strongly correlated with the levels of the *amount* of gang offending. The more they offend, the more the pattern includes the less-common violent acts. This is a statistical pattern rather than a qualifying distinction among types of gangs. That police stress

violence is certainly understandable, given their societal role, but it reflects a narrow view of what street gangs are all about.

For our purpose, this discussion meant two things. First, we could not ask police gang experts—"gang cops" in common parlance—to respond *directly* to questions about street gang leadership, levels of membership, structure and cohesiveness, ethnicity, or crime patterns. It also meant, however, that if we could establish gang types by reference to *other* dimensions, then we might be able to correlate these with some of the excluded dimensions in other ways. As will be seen in our data, this was indeed possible to some extent. We turn now to phase I of the research.

The Phase I Sample

Using as a database 792 cities with street gangs identified in our 1992 survey on gang proliferation and migration, a stratified sample of 60 cities was selected. Stratification was by period of gang onset in the cities (1970 and earlier, 1971–1984, and 1985–1992) in order to ensure adequate representation of older gang cities. Fifty-nine of the 60 cities yielded responses to our request for interviews with their best gang experts (some of whom had been our respondents in earlier research). We report here only the data that led to the street gang typology; other questions merely corroborated the problems of stereotypical or inconsistent perspectives alluded to above when questions about the many gangs in each city were posed.

The procedure which succeeded with the gang cops was to ask each to describe the single gang with which he or she was most familiar. Consistently useable responses were obtained on the dimensions of subgroups, size, age range, duration, territoriality, and crime versatility versus specialization. In other words, respondents described their best-known street gang as to whether or not it included significant subgroups, the size of its known membership, the range between youngest and oldest members, how long the gang had been in existence, whether it was a territorial gang or not, and whether its members engaged in a wide variety of offenses or mostly one or two types (and if the latter, what types).

These data came from the experts in the 59 cities, both new and old in their exposure to gangs, and were taken from all sections of the country. They included small, medium, and large jurisdictions, in rough proportion to the data set of 792 cities previously identified in our research. Thus we have some confidence in their national representativeness.

We undertook an analysis of the six dimensions across the 59 cities, looking for patterns of relationships among the dimensions. Five types of street gangs emerged from this analysis, as noted in Table 5.1.

TABLE 5.1. *Characteristics of Five Gang Types*

Type	Sub-groups	Size	Age Range	Duration	Territorial	Crime Versatility
Traditional	yes	large (> 100)	wide (20-30 years)	long (> 20 years)	yes	yes
Neotraditional	yes	medium-large (> 50)	no pattern	short (< 10 years)	yes	yes
Compressed	no	small (< 50)	narrow (< 10 years)	short (< 10 years)	no pattern	yes
Collective	no	medium-large (> 50)	medium-wide (> 10 years)	medium (10-15 years)	no pattern	yes
Specialty	no	small (< 50)	narrow (< 10 years)	short (< 10 years)	yes	no

The labels—traditional, neotraditional, compressed, collective, and specialty—represent our attempt to capture the more-distinguishing features of each pattern.³ The traditional, compressed, and specialty gang patterns correspond well to case descriptions already available in the scholarly literature about street gangs. For example, Weisel's (2002) violent gangs resemble our traditional and neotraditional gangs. Her delinquent gangs resemble our compressed gangs, while her income-generating gangs are similar to our specialty gangs. The neotraditional and collective gang patterns have been alluded to on occasion, but emerge more clearly here. In order to provide more meat to the bones of Table 5.1, we developed the five "gang scenarios" below, which also served in the second research phase to be reported next.

Five Street Gang Scenarios

THE TRADITIONAL GANG Traditional gangs have generally been in existence for 20 or more years: they keep regenerating themselves. They contain fairly clear subgroups, usually separated by age. O.G.s ("Original Gangsters") or Veterans, Seniors, Juniors, Midgets, and various other names are applied to these different age-based cliques. Sometimes, the

cliques are separated by neighborhood rather than age. More than other gangs, traditional gangs tend to have a wide age range of their members, sometimes as wide as from 9 or 10 years of age into the 30s. These are usually very large gangs, numbering a hundred or even several hundred members. Almost always, they are territorial in the sense that they identify strongly with their turf, hood, or barrio and claim it as theirs alone.

In sum, this is a large, enduring, territorial gang with a wide age range and several internal cliques based on age or area.

THE NEOTRADITIONAL GANG The neotraditional gang resembles the traditional form, but has not been in existence as long—probably no more than 10 years and often less. It may be of medium size—say 50 to 100 members—or number its members in the hundreds. It probably has developed subgroups or cliques based on age or area, but sometimes may not. Like traditional gangs, it is also very territorial, claiming turf and defending it.

In sum, the neotraditional gang is a newer territorial gang that looks to be on its way to becoming traditional in time. Thus, at this point it is subgrouping, but may or may not have achieved territoriality, and its size suggests that it is evolving into the traditional form.

THE COMPRESSED GANG The compressed gang is small—usually in the size range of up to 50 members—and has not formed subgroups. The age range is probably narrow—10 or fewer years between the younger and older members. The small size, absence of subgroups, and narrow age range may reflect the newness of the group, in existence less than 10 years and maybe for only a few years. Some of these compressed gangs have become territorial, but many have not.

In sum, compressed gangs have a relatively short history, short enough that by size, duration, subgrouping, and territoriality, it is unclear whether they will grow and solidify into the more-traditional forms or simply remain as less-complex groups.

THE COLLECTIVE GANG The collective gang looks like the compressed form, but bigger and with a wider age range—maybe 10 or more years between younger and older members. Size can be under 100 but is probably larger. Surprisingly, given these numbers, it has not developed subgroups and may or may not be a territorial gang. It probably has a 10- to 15-year existence.

In sum, the collective gang resembles a kind of shapeless mass of ad-

olescent and young adult members and has not developed the distinguishing characteristics of other gangs.

THE SPECIALTY GANG Unlike the other gangs, which engage in a wide variety of criminal offenses, crime in this type of group is narrowly focused on a few offenses; the group comes to be characterized by the specialty. The specialty gang tends to be small—usually 50 or fewer members—without any subgroups in most cases (there are exceptions). It probably has a history of less than 10 years but has developed a well-defined territory. Its territory may be either residential or based on the opportunities for the particular form of crime in which it specializes. The age range of most specialty gangs is narrow, but in a few others is broad.

In sum, the specialty gang is crime-focused in a narrow way. Its principal purpose is more criminal than social, and its smaller size and form of territoriality may be a reflection of this focused crime pattern.

The two traditional types share subgroups and a strong territorial orientation. The compressed structure can be distinguished somewhat from the traditional types by smaller size and, most commonly, by more recent onset. The compressed, collective, and specialty types have no subgroups and have briefer durations (except the collective type). The reader will note that we have explicitly avoided mentioning crime patterns except in the case of the specialty type. In fact, crime specialization is what defines this type, and it's important for our research concerns to be able to distinguish drug gangs, burglary rings, and the like from other gang types.

We had some concern about the foundation of these scenarios, as they are built upon the "best-known" gangs. We couldn't assume that they are typical of the gangs in the country, and yet the content of the scenarios seems to make sense and have face validity. One exception is the collective type. Collective gangs are fairly large in size and age range and have been around for 10 to 15 years, yet have no subgroup structure. This was a residual category and that may explain some of the ambiguity in the structural characteristics of this type. Should data collection validate this as a meaningful gang type, it would certainly be interesting to know more about the organizational features that keep these gangs together.

The critical methodological problem with the phase I data was the need to fall back on our respondents' knowledge of the single gang that each knew best. If the attempts to measure the prevalence of the five structures nationally were to yield dissent, we wouldn't know whether to attribute this to structural variability or to the biases inherent in our phase I pro-

cess. Thus the importance of a second research phase becomes obvious; we needed to validate these five types of groups in a totally independent sample of cities.⁴

The Phase II Sample

If consistent handling of the scenarios were to emerge in phase II, and if the five types did indeed encompass a good proportion of the gangs under the purview of our respondents, then we could feel more secure about the validity of the structural depictions. The phase II interviews allowed for data to invalidate our phase I finding of only five major types, because they sought not only the prevalence of the five types, but explicitly sought the existence of alternative structures as well.

We start our report of the phase II data with two promising results. First, while our phase II respondents did indeed offer descriptions of alternative structures, we found in coding these by the characteristics listed in Table 5.1 that the majority of the "alternative" structures were not alternatives at all; they fit neatly into the five structures. Return phone calls to the respondents revealed that these alternative listings were merely the result of some confusion about our instructions.

The second result is that the remaining alternative structures comprised only 5% of the total numbers of gangs enumerated by our respondents. In other words, the five scenarios representing types of street gangs seemed to have captured the vast bulk of gangs across the nation. We were surprised by how well the typology worked; we are no longer concerned about its derivation from the initial 59 best-known gangs.

The data on gang structure prevalence in phase II are taken from the 201 returns from a random sample of police gang experts in 250 cities out of the almost 800 identified in our earlier research. This return rate of 80%, although below the 90–95% return rate we have had in our prior law enforcement research, is nonetheless very substantial and not a source of concern. The instructions were as follows:

The enclosed survey should take only a few minutes to complete. The first two pages describe five types of gangs, based upon information we have received from law enforcement gang experts throughout the country. Please read all five descriptions first; then consider which type or types generally describe the gang forms in your city. The fit need not be perfect, but should be substantially correct. Then, answer the questions on page three. If some gangs do not fit any of the five descriptions, the questions on page four

request information about these alternative gang forms. We'd like you to focus on the form or structure of your city's gangs first, without regard to crime. After you have completed page four, please turn the page and respond to the questions about crime on page five and about your records (page 6). Then, return the survey to us in the enclosed envelope.

Table 5.2 provides a summary of gang structures prevalence data for 2,860 gangs in 201 cities. We call attention to the following:

- In row 1, cities containing compressed gangs are the most common, and those with collective structures the least. Since most of the classic gang literature of the 1950s and 1960s was based principally on traditional, not compressed structures, it is immediately clear that a reconsideration of gang "knowledge" is called for in the modern era.
- In row 2, cities that are *predominantly* of one type of gang reveal an even stronger pattern of compressed gang prevalence. Both rows 1 and 2 reveal that most cities will typically be more familiar with non-subgrouped gangs.
- In row 3 (reading the percentages horizontally), we see that this general pattern also applies to the number of gangs. Gangs with age-graded or geographically based subgroups are less common than the three more homogeneous structural forms, particularly the compressed type.

- In the five subrows on ethnicity (now reading the percentages vertically), we see that, in line with most scholarly reports, the vast majority of gangs are composed of minority groups, principally and equally Hispanic and black. The marginal percentages (i.e., the final column) are 30% Hispanic, 31% black, 10% white, 13% Asian, and 16% mixed. The largest single percentage is for Hispanics in the traditional structure (57%), yet even here other ethnic groups are found in this structure. Neotraditional and compressed structures, the two most common types, show fairly similar patterns of ethnic composition, with Hispanics and blacks predominating as they do generally. Clearly the common stereotype among police and media reports of a generalized "black gang" or "Hispanic gang" form is incorrect and misleading. As we note repeatedly, group process trumps ethnicity in the world of street gangs.

TABLE 5.2. Gang Structures in 201 Cities*

	# cities	# cities with predominance**	# of gangs across cities
Traditional	75	15	316 (11%)
Neo-traditional	100	24	686 (24%)
Compressed	149	86	1,111 (39%)
Collective	40	6	264 (9%)
Specialty	76*	14	483 (17%)
Totals			2,860

	Hispanic	black	white	Asian	mixed & other
Traditional	179 (57%)	63 (20%)	38 (12%)	15 (5%)	21 (7%)
Neo-traditional	229 (33%)	191 (28%)	34 (5%)	73 (11%)	159 (23%)
Compressed	292 (26%)	340 (31%)	152 (14%)	156 (14%)	171 (15%)
Collective	62 (23%)	125 (47%)	10 (4%)	49 (19%)	18 (7%)
Specialty	95 (20%)	155 (32%)	49 (10%)	85 (18%)	99 (20%)

*Specialty focus: drugs (24), graffiti (20), assault (17). Others included burglary, auto, theft, robbery. **Fifty-six cities showed no predominance of one gang structure, defined as a type appearing twice as often as any other.

• In the first table note (*), we list for cities with specialty gangs what their predominant crime type was (asked only with respect to specialty structures). Drug gangs, while a bit more prominent than other specialty types, certainly do not dominate the picture to the extent that law enforcement and media reports would suggest. Respondents in the 24 cities with drug gangs were asked how many such gangs there were; the result is an estimated maximum of 244 gangs with a drug focus, or about 8.5% of the 2,860 gangs reported in total. These data are at considerable variance with widely circulated reports in the media and many public statements made by prominent law enforcement officials and legislative members, state and federal, to the effect that street gangs have taken over much of the drug trade. They are in line, however, with other data produced by our earlier national surveys.

Not shown in Table 5.2 but of some interest is the relative "purity" of cities with respect to the five types of gang structure. Only one city reported having none of the five structures (but having an alternative structure). Fully a third of all cities reported having only one gang form, and another third reported two of the forms. Thus two-thirds of all 201 cities were relatively homogeneous with respect to the structural types. An additional 1 in 6 reported three types, and the rest reported four or all five types. A search for common pairings or groupings of structural types was not revealing, i.e., no pattern of combinations occurred that would not be predictable from their overall totals.

The five scenarios presented to our respondents, which encapsulate the "definers" of the five gang structures, do not include leadership patterns, because we had little confidence in police views of gang leadership. They do not include the important dimension of group cohesiveness, because police responses on this dimension proved ambiguous; cohesiveness was not a common conception for our officers. Yet, other data were gathered that give us confidence that the five types are different in meaningful, indeed in validating, ways.

The ethnic differences, as suggested in Table 5.2, are in some cases very substantial. As we noted above, traditional gangs are more likely to be Hispanic while the collective and specialty gangs are more commonly composed of black members. We also noted that the two most common types—neotraditional and compressed—show far less ethnic or racial pre-dominance.

Average gang size is another differentiating variable, as seen in Table 5.3. We note in particular the predicted large size of traditional gangs and small size of specialty gangs. Year of gang emergence in the city is somewhat differentiating (traditional gangs tend to be located in early onset cities), although not fully at the level we expected. The explosion in gang onsets in the 1980s probably puts limits on these differences. Size of the city shows some differences, but the common existence of two or more structures in the same city sets limits for these differences. The ambiguous collective gang is significantly a product of the largest cities.

The volume of crime attributed to the structures is also important, with the traditional and neotraditional gangs contributing the most, and specialty gangs contributing the least. Of course, this is a function of average gang size. If we control for size as in the last row of Table 5.3, we see a considerable reversal; the average traditional gang member contributes the lowest number of reported arrests and the specialty gang member the highest. Specialty gangs, it should be remembered, are very much organized around their preferred crime type, be it drug sales, burglary, or some other, and are subjected to specialized law enforcement surveillance and pursuit. By contrast, the more crime-versatile traditional gang members engage in many activities which are of relatively little concern to the police. Thus, the reversed patterns of gang volume and per-member arrest rates are quite understandable and help to validate the nature of these gang structures.

We should draw special attention to the subgrouping that is typical of traditional and neotraditional gangs. In his studies of traditional gangs in Los Angeles in the 1960s, Klein (1971) based his conclusions on data describing 5 large gangs. He noted, however, that he preferred the term "gang cluster" because each contained several subgroups. If these separate cliques had been enumerated (each had its own separate name), Klein could have claimed the study not of 5 gangs but of 24 gangs.³ Thirty years later, Alonzo's comprehensive report on the Crips and Bloods in Los Angeles, one of the very few studies of the modern era to note the special subgrouping nature of traditional gangs, noted the same, continuing pattern:

As a first step in identifying and counting gangs for this study, I identified general identities that were aligned with one of the two broad gang affiliations in Los Angeles; the Bloods or the Crips. . . . There were more specific identities observed within the gang called *clicks*. These subgroups were part of the larger gang or set.

The territoriality of this analysis is based on the gang or set, not the individual subgroups or clicks. In Black gang culture of Los Angeles, a gang will develop subgroups within the gang to either distinguish different groups based on age in a hierarchical structure or based on geographic areas within the one gang. This analysis did not identify the subgroups or clicks as separate gangs and they should not be, but from reading the graffiti of these clicks, it would appear to the novice that multiple gangs were operating in any given area, when in fact all the different specific identities fall under one gang. For example the Grape Street Crips in Watts are the same gang as the Watts Baby Loco Crips, but the latter represents a subgroup that is based on a younger group of members. The Park Village Crips in Compton have a click of younger members that operate under the name Original Tiny Gangsters that is also a part of the same gang. Gangs with large territories will also form subgroups to identify different geographic areas in the gang. For example the Eight Tray Gangster Crips divided their territory into four areas in the winter of 1980; the North Side, South Side, West Side and East Side. These specific identities were part of the larger gang and are not counted as independent groups. Similarly the East Coast Crips in Carson had different clicks based on streets, such as Tillman Ave Crips, and Leapwood Ave Crips, but these represent clicks in a non-hierarchical structure within the main gang of the Del Amo Block East Coast Crips. In some cases law enforcement will count a sub-click as a gang because it has reached a level of notoriety, and for this reason my gang counts may not be consistent with what the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) or the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department (LASD) have determined. (Alonso, 1999: 61-62)

We should also report that several variables do *not* reveal differences in our data. Most important, perhaps, is that our respondents did not report much of a difference in average arrests for serious crimes. We omit the data because, as we learned later in this project, their reports are necessarily based on inadequate data, as noted already in chapter 2. Region of the country did not differ; more gangs are to be found in the West and fewest in the Northeast, but this is true of all five gang types.

Additionally, we must recognize that with some of the variables noted above, including those we list as differentiating among the five types, statistical significance is not always achieved. We report the larger differ-

TABLE 5.3. Selected Structural Dimensions

	Average size	Year of onset*	Through 1970	1971-1984	1985 & beyond	City size > 100,000	Average monthly arrests	Average monthly per member arrests
Traditional	182	24%	28%	49%	35%	10.9	.16	
Neotraditional	72	13%	18%	68%	36%	9.2	.20	
Compressed	35	9%	16%	75%	28%	6.1	.22	
Collective	56	15%	28%	56%	52%	7.4	.17	
Specialty	24	7%	15%	78%	33%	5.7	.29	

*Year of onset refers to the year any gangs first appeared.

ences because this is an exploratory study overall, which clearly calls for further cross-validation of its findings. Equally important, many of the data are taken from police expert reports—these are *perceptions* of gang size, ethnicity, crime patterns, and so on. An officer reporting 5, 50, or 500 gangs in his jurisdiction cannot be close to a lot of the raw data at the street level. Differences that emerge do so over a miasma of informational noise and uncertainty. Those that emerge seem to “make sense”; they have construct validity, but they call for validation with other forms of data—gang by gang. Such validation will prove to be expensive.

To say this does not mitigate the distinctions among the five gang structures. Rather, it calls attention to the need to assess what variables *reliably* characterize those structures. It also calls for considerable thought about the policy implications that derive from the very fact that there is a variety of structures. We will return to such implications in chapter 8. Suffice to say at this point that to label a group a street gang does little to advance understanding of its nature or its impact in the community. Variety, not homogeneity, is the hallmark of the modern American gang. For further clarification, it is worth noting certain kinds of gangs that do not fit within this typology of street gangs. Prison gangs do not; motorcycle gangs do not; terrorist groups do not; organized crime groups do not.

We emphasize this last group in particular because enforcement officials and the media too often place street gangs in the same category as drug cartels, La Cosa Nostra, the Mafia (Sicilian or Russian), and expanded prison gangs such as the Mexican Mafia (“la EME”). Street gangs are for the most part incapable of behaving like organized-crime groups, although there are a few large street gangs that occasionally bridge this gap, most notably Chicago’s Black Gangster Disciples, Vice Lords, Latin Kings, and Black P Stone Nation or El Rukn (see Chicago Crime Commission, 1995, for a sensationalized version of these street gangs as organized-crime groups).

Organized-crime groups require mature, professionalized members—at least in the higher echelons—with organizational skills, well-defined leadership and specialized group roles, codes of conduct with clearly understood sanctions, and financial treasuries or other locations for profits to be used for group purposes; to survive, such crime groups often develop special relationships with legitimate businesses as well as political and legal institutions. Decker’s (2001) comparison of street gangs and organized crime mentions a series of such characteristics of organized criminal gangs and how poorly they apply to street gangs in San Diego, St. Louis, and

even Chicago. A common orientation to crime is, despite the narrow enforcement viewpoint, hardly sufficient to classify street gangs as organized criminal groups or to suggest that forms of intervention or control for the latter are appropriate to the former.

Further Validation

Without developing new data on gangs to assess how well they are described and encompassed by our fivefold typology, we can provide tests by reviewing existing descriptions of street gangs. We do so by reference to two sets, the first from the United States and the second from Europe.

The first of these sets of descriptions are to be found in various American studies in which the authors have provided sufficient *structural* detail to allow an *ex post facto* categorization. Our reading of the descriptions by Klein (1971) in Los Angeles, Moore (1978) in East Los Angeles, Vigil (1988) in East Los Angeles, Short and Strodbeck (1965) in Chicago, W. Miller (1962) in Boston, the New York City Youth Board (1960) in New York, Sanders (1994) in San Diego, and Hagedorn (1988) in Milwaukee all yield the common features of the traditional gang. The picture provided by Decker and Van Winkle (1996) in St. Louis suggests neotraditional gangs. Fleisher’s (1998) ethnography of Kansas City male and female gang members provides a rare glimpse at a collective gang. Padilla’s depiction of a Puerto Rican drug-selling gang in Chicago (1992), the Brightwood Gang in Indianapolis described by McGarrell and Chermak (2003), the description of a small group of Dominican drug sellers by Williams (1989), the depiction of drug gangs in south Texas offered by Valdez and Sifaneck (2004), and the unique financial analysis of a drug gang’s operations in Chicago over four years presented by Venkatesh (1999b) and Levitt and Venkatesh (1999) clearly illustrate the structure of specialty gangs. Jody Miller (2001), describing female-involved gangs in Columbus and St. Louis, deliberately applied the typology to the groups in those two cities to very good effect. Thus, where descriptions permit it, the typology seems applicable and useful. It is worth noting, nonetheless, that compressed gangs have not been described despite their ubiquitousness and are probably the forms from which the Rochester, Denver, and Seattle longitudinal data are taken (see Thornberry and Porter, 2001, on gangs in traditional and emergent gang cities).

Two recent applications of the typology offer further support. Scott (2000) presented the typology to officials in 887 Illinois police agencies. Returns were received from 88% of these. Seventy-four percent of the street gangs in these jurisdictions fit within the typology⁶ without further

analysis. Similarly, the National Youth Gang Center (2000b) analyzed data from a nationally representative sample of police jurisdictions. This sample of 265 agencies placed 74% of their gangs within the typology, in this case with neotraditional types accounting for 39% of the total and compressed following closely with 35%. In neither study were the 26% non-fitting gangs further analyzed, but our experience with our own 201 respondents suggests that some number of the nonfitters might well have fallen into the typology as well. In any case, these two applications of the typology provide evidence for its utility.

The second validation comes from views of street gangs in Europe. Perhaps the most famous of the European studies is James Patrick's 1973 ethnography, *A Glasgow Gang Observed*, in which the traditional structure is well illustrated. Klein's more recent review of reports and observations (Klein, 1996) found traditional gangs reported in Kazan, Berlin, and Brussels; specialty (drug) gangs in Manchester, Berlin (skinheads), and Stockholm; compressed gangs in Stockholm, Zurich, Frankfurt, and Stuttgart; and neotraditional gangs in Berlin. None of the cities visited reported gangs not fitting the typology, although various cities of course, reported not having street gangs of any sort.

An additional opportunity is provided by Weitekamp (2001) in his review of reports on European gangs in a compendium of gang reports by various European authors in 1998 and 1999. This reading of these reports yields traditional gangs in Kazan; neotraditional gangs in Manchester; compressed gangs in Manchester, Copenhagen, Frankfurt, Oslo, and Paris; and specialty gangs in the Hague and Rotterdam. Descriptions not yielding data for placement in the typology came from Bremen and Slovenia. This review, like those above, is an after-the-fact exercise and has to be considered more as illustration than as proof. Nonetheless the fact that the exercise "works" provides further confidence in the utility of the structural typology, far more so it seems to us than in the case with the earlier behavioral and structural typologies offered in the gang literature.

Gang Transformations

Simple logic tells one that gangs come and go; note the different years of onset in Table 5.3 and the periods of duration in Table 5.1. Without the self-regeneration capacities of age-graded subgroups within traditional and neotraditional gangs, the others must die out, be replaced by new gangs, or continue in name only but with new members. The stability of "gangging" probably lies more in the characteristics of the particular community

than in the particular group of young people who comprise the gang (Valdez and Sifaneck, 2004).

Additionally, gangs may be transformed from one type to another. Drug gangs are often spin-off cliques of other, larger forms. Traditional gangs by definition must have been of another type to start with; several age-graded subgroups can seldom emerge simultaneously. Further, we have descriptions from Taylor (1990) for Detroit, DiChiara for New Haven (1997), and Salagaev (2001) for Kazan of the transformation of smaller, territorial gangs into large, pseudocorporate criminal gangs. Bjorgo (1999) has provided descriptions of evolutions into and out of racist gangs in Scandinavia. Additionally, Weisel's findings from gang members' own reports in San Diego and Chicago were that her gangs "reflected patterns of consolidation (primarily through merger with, or acquisition of, smaller gangs), reorganization, and the splintering of larger gangs into spin off gangs" (2002: 48).

We note all this to remind the reader that the gangs used by our respondents in reporting to us, which yielded our structural typology, were taken at one slice of time. The typology is hopefully more stable than the particular gangs subsumed within it at the time the research was done. We were able to look at this stability issue by returning to our 59 police experts about four years after the phase I interviews. Fifty-three of the original 59 were still in place and able to report the status of their earlier best-known gangs. Of the 53 gangs, 10 were inactive or had been disbanded, leaving 43 or 81% stability—more than one might have expected given that only 14 had been of the traditional form. More interesting, perhaps, is the lower stability of form, where only 18 of 43 remained constant, at least as seen by our respondents.

- Of 14 original traditional gangs—all of them still active—8 were still reported to be true to form while 6 now were described as neotraditional, compressed, or collective forms.
- Of 8 neotraditionals, only 1 remained so, while 3 reportedly had progressed to traditional gangs and 2 each had become compressed and collective.
- Of 8 still-active compressed gangs, 5 remained in that form, and 3 had changed.
- Of 8 collective gangs, only 1 retained that most-elusive, unstructured form while 7 had moved to the other four categories. This suggests that the collective form is the most transitional of all.

- Finally, of 5 specialty gangs still in existence—4 were not—3 retained their form while 2 had “advanced” to traditional gangs.

While it would be nice to have a larger study of gang transformation over different periods of time, these data strike us as useful. The traditional and compressed gangs, by report of our police gang experts, are the most stable. The neotraditional and collective types, which we had originally thought to be transitional in nature, turned out indeed to be just that; 2 remained in class, while 14 changed to another form. Specialty gangs were most likely to disband, perhaps because they are most easily subjected to police suppression and undercover efforts. Only 2 gangs of the four other types transitioned into specialty gangs. Both had been collective gangs. Fleisher’s description of his collective gang in Kansas City, the Fremont Hustlers, describes them as heavily involved in drug sales, as is common in specialty gangs.

How much gang transformation and of what type takes place? These data suggest that there is a good deal of instability, with traditional and compressed gangs being the most constant in form. Of the changes reported, transformations from one form to another were far more common than gang dissolution—25 cases compared to 10. The typology, we note, still works. Our respondents had little trouble reporting the necessary data, and we were able to recreate the typology with the dimensional data provided. But change was clearly evident, and gang researchers would be well advised to study both gang form *and* transformations, especially if translations to policy and practice are undertaken.

One further note is in order. In the case of the 10 gangs that were reported inactive or disbanded after four years, it would be nice to know how permanent that situation is. Does this mean that 10 neighborhoods are now free of gangs? Or is it more likely that communities that once spawned gangs will do so again? We are inclined, unfortunately, to suspect the latter, but we know of no research on this topic. A census of ex-gang neighborhoods and reactivated gang neighborhoods could provide an interesting research window on the gang-community interface and the natural epidemiology of gang problems.

This shifting and varied nature of street gangs can also result in well-intentioned but misleading descriptions. In an OJJDP bulletin on “hybrid gangs” (Starbuck, Howell, and Lindquist, 2001), it is claimed that “traditional gangs” have been supplanted by hybrid gangs. These are loosely defined as

- mixed race or ethnicity
- individual memberships in more than one gang
- use of indicia (colors, tattoos, etc.) of more than one gang
- cooperation between rival gangs
- mergers of small gangs
- unclear conduct norms
- borrowing of traditional gang names (Bloods, Latin Kings, etc.)

Our impression from this article, which suffers from a lack of data on these issues, is that “hybrid” is a catchall term that probably captures, in uncounted ways, our four structures other than the traditional gang. The stereotyping that allows this traditional versus hybrid dichotomy does little to advance our understanding of gang structures. However, the emphasis given by the article’s authors to the wide variations in gang patterns over time and location is most welcome and appropriate. We hope it will be attended to, even as the reification of “hybrid gangs” recedes in popular parlance.

Where are the girls? The perceptive reader will by now have noted that the five scenarios and accompanying data do not include any mention of female gangs and gang members. Police generally gather data on female gang members far less reliably than on males. Because our data were taken from gang cops, we could not properly represent female involvement. While almost all research confirms that street gangs are predominantly male, those studies that include attention to females consistently report female involvement greater than is reported in official statistics or assumed by the general public. A reasonable estimate of the level of female gang involvement would place it close to 25%—one in four members is a girl (Klein, 1971; Moore, 1991; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; J. Miller, 2001; Decker and Curry, 2000). Female membership, as noted earlier, is higher among younger members, as the girls tend to desist from gang activity earlier than do boys.

We are not alone in failing to include data on females in a typology; none of the studies cited earlier do so either. We can think of no more fruitful further research on our typology than an investigation of how male-female relationships tend to differ among the five gang structures. We can note, however, that studies of traditional gangs have generally reported a typical pattern of “auxiliary” female gangs (Klein, 1971; W. Miller, 1973; Campbell, 1984; Moore, 1991). The auxiliary female gang is one of three logical forms of female participation. These are, generally,

independent or autonomous gangs (e.g., Brown, 1977; Campbell, 1984), integrated membership (J. Miller, 2001; Fleisher, 1998), and auxiliary (Klein, 1971, reported 8 of 24 subgroups within his traditional gangs to be female). An unpublished survey in three cities recently found integrated forms in 57%, auxiliary forms in 36%, and autonomous forms in 6% of reports from gang girls (Curry, Williams, and Koenemann, n.d.). Jody Miller's (2001) recent study of integrated female members in Columbus and St. Louis suggests that "integrated" must be taken with a grain of salt, as the girls' reports of equal status with the boys is belied by numerous behavioral differences indicating a gender hierarchy favoring the males. Fleisher's ethnography of the Fremont gang in Kansas City—a collective gang to judge by his description—suggests that the loose structure of that gang form may allow for greater independence of female behavior than is likely in the more-traditional structures. From these few reports and from the fact that so little information is available on gender makeup of various gang structures, we can do no better here than to assert again the importance of this issue for further investigative efforts.

A particularly insightful glimpse at the role played by female gang members is presented by Peterson et al. (2001). Although limited by its use of eighth graders only in 11 schools across the nation, this report includes data from 464 gang members of whom 37% are female.⁷ The authors compare responses from members of all-male gangs, majority-male gangs, all- or majority-female gangs, and sex-balanced gangs. Perhaps surprisingly, they report somewhat lower levels of organization in all-male and majority-female gangs, with organization being measured by leadership, meetings, and group symbols. These groups report more pro-social and less delinquent behavior. Conversely, the sex-balanced gangs report somewhat higher levels of organization and greater delinquency. The authors suggest that sex-balanced gangs pose more "gender threat" for the males, leading to more acting out. Then, it is suggested, the females in these sex-balanced gangs have more viable criminal role models to emulate.

Implicit in these findings are some obvious policy implications. The roles of females in gangs, long overlooked by many researchers and almost all social and justice agencies, must be reassessed for their impacts on both female and male gang members. The gender balance within gangs needs to be noted by police and social interveners, since this balance relates to group organization and crime leadership. Finally, it is time for the police and courts to stop ignoring the existence of female gang mem-

bers, because they are "less serious" or "just immature" and will grow out of it. Why would one ignore 25% of a social problem?

For researchers, the implication may be less clear with respect to our structural issues. We have come a long way from the days that female gang members were reported only to be weapons carriers and sex objects ("toys for boys") for male members. But most comments on female gang structures have not advanced beyond the trichotomy of member-auxiliary-autonomous forms. Indeed, it is not clear to us that our five structures apply very well to these forms of female gang membership. In their recent and very reasoned summary of female gang research, Moore and Hagedorn (2001) call for new research on a number of topics, but gang structure is not one of these—perhaps an unintended but meaningful omission.

Summary

In this research, we have developed a structural gang typology which has proven applicable in the vast majority of a random sample of cities with reported gang problems. We have learned that

- traditional gangs, those most subject to prior gang research, are not the most common or typical gang form;
- some of the ethnic differences described in the literature do not hold up well;
- drug gangs, so much the subject of public pronouncements and some criminological research, comprise a relatively small proportion of street gangs; and
- differences among gang types do not readily correspond to the characteristics of their cities or regions in the country.

We caution the reader, also, that the gang typology which emerged from our data is time limited. The data collection period of the early 1990s follows by relatively few years the major gang proliferation across the nation that took off in the 1980s. We may have captured a brief movement in a period of major gang evolutionary change. We know, for instance, that drug gangs have gained their prominence only since the mid- to late 1980s.

It is reasonable to suggest that the collective gang, having such an amorphous form, may be a product of this evolutionary phase and will soon become even less common than it is now. It is also reasonable to

suggest that compressed gangs, now so common but with a relatively short history, will evolve over time into neotraditional and traditional forms if they continue to exist. This is logical, since current members will grow older, and the gangs can only regenerate themselves via recruitment of new, presumably younger replacements. This could well result in the age-related cliques that typify the traditional gang.

Revisiting this issue in 5–10 years, using the same research methods, would seem very much in order to solidify our understanding of gang structures. Perhaps by that time, a sufficient number of police departments will have developed gang rosters and crime statistics appropriate to establishing valid relationships between gang structures and gang crime patterns.

The last point to be made here refers to an issue discussed earlier: the problem with finding a single, acceptable definition of street gangs. In addition to the consensus definition in the introduction, we believe that the five street gang structures provide an acceptable *operational* definition: a street gang is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose own identity includes involvement in illegal activity *and* is substantially described by the data in Tables 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3 or by the gang scenarios presented in this section. Such an operational definition is not as easily carried around in the head as would be the consensus nominal definition alone. Yet it would seem that most groups defined as street gangs do fit within the five structural descriptions. For now, the typology contributes to the definitional need.

The Importance of Group Processes

Street gangs generally are alike, and yet there is much difference among them. It is in finding and demonstrating the balance between likeness and difference that some of the “art” of gang research resides.

We opened this book by defining gangs in a few phrases that suggested their existence as a single class of groups, distinguishable from other classes of groups. Yet, in this chapter, we have distinguished among five forms of street gangs. Can we have it both ways: gangs are different and alike? We can, because they are.

Gang structures differ, depending on such variables as size, duration, age range, and the like. But these differences are trumped, covered over, by group processes. It is their peculiar nature as *groups* that make gangs alike despite their different structures. There is in this a strong policy message, we believe. To state it overgenerously, differences in structure

provide clues for different strategies of gang control, whereas similarities in processes provide warnings of control strategies to be avoided. We will return to these policy differences in part III of the book; for now, we need to spell out some of the important group processes to be found in most street gangs, whatever their structural form. If it is the structures that suggest how gang controllers might act, it is the processes that determine how the gang members will react. The controllers send the messages; the members distort the messages to their own group purposes. In the street gang, normal group processes tend to be greatly exaggerated, making gangs a qualitatively different phenomenon. As one of our colleagues put it, “When street socialization takes over, a remarkably similar street orientation and culture emerges for each group, irrespective of ethnic traditions, and, with only slightly greater variation, regardless of gender.”⁸

It is in the study of group processes that social psychologists have influenced gang research. Gang leadership, one of these processes, may well be the most-recognized concern among members of the public, who are understandably much influenced by media and police reports. Yet among gang scholars, few have found gang leadership to be a stable or predictable facet of gang activity. The exceptions, such as Yablonsky writing in the 1950s and 1960s and Sanchez-Jankowski writing in the 1990s, have built structural gang typologies on the bases of their reported observations of leadership patterns. Yet other scholars have been unable to find these reported patterns, and neither Yablonsky nor Sanchez-Jankowski produced objective data to buttress their assertions.

Most gang scholars (see summaries in Klein 1971, 1995a) have found leadership to be functional, shifting, unstable, and shared among many gang members. It often depends less on physical strength or criminal prowess than on verbal skills, opportunism, social capacities, and—in the case of traditional gangs—various age levels. Except in specialty gangs, leadership is usually not the hierarchical, command-oriented positional concept stressed by popularizers of gang matters. Forget *West Side Story*: think more in terms of playground politics where different goals and types of skills lead to impermanent levels of influence.

In most recent street gangs, leadership and influence are often so diffuse that attempts at gang control through the targeted arrest of “leaders” may most directly lead to the emergence of new leadership. Americans are admirers of leadership and tend to seek it out as the principal explanation of group movement. But as in politics, business, and the professions, it is more often the system than the person that dictates the principal action as well as the resistance to change. And so it is with street

gangs, driven more by the group and its context than by charismatic leaders. Gangs may huddle, but there are few quarterbacks calling signals for them (e.g., Klein, 1971, 1995a; Short and Strodbeck, 1965; Moore, 1991; Decker, 2000; Vigil, 2002).

Klein (1971: 95–96) quotes several of his influential gang members in response to his inquiries about leadership:

Nobody speaks for an area. I don't give a damn who he is. Nobody. Or for a gang.

We got no leaders, man. Everybody's a leader, and nobody can talk for nobody else.

Y'understand, I can't talk for them other dudes. I'm saying it for me.

Decker and Van Winkle provide similar denials of leadership from their interviews in St. Louis and then conceptualize the issue as follows:

Leadership within the gang has a situational character that is dynamic. Few gangs have a single identifiable individual who occupies the role as leader for an extended period of time. In part, this reflects the fact that subgroups within the gang more effectively set priorities and direct behavior than does the gang as a whole. Because allegiance to a small number of friends is stronger than that to the gang, the ability of a leader to control gang members is diminished. But the values of the street also prohibit a leader from effectively assuming control of gang members. The autonomy from authority so highly prized on the street inhibits effective leadership. (1996: 275)

Some clarity on the issue is achieved by shifting research focus toward members' levels of commitment to their gangs and to the internal, informal friendship cliques that underlie gang structures. Gang structures and functions come together as we look at clique structures, commitment to the gang, and how these both foster and limit gang cohesiveness. We preface these remarks by offering the reader our very strong opinion that levels of gang cohesiveness correlate directly with levels of gang crime and with gang responses to our efforts at gang control. Greater cohesion leads to greater crime involvement and greater resistance to gang control. This,

more than anywhere, is where we derive the title of this book: *Street Gang Patterns and Policies*.

Consider first the simple logic of clique formation: can 20 young people, or 50, or hundreds of them affiliate with each other over time without forming smaller units based on friendship, or common residence, or school attendance, or shared interests, or similarities in age, gender, or ethnicity? The obvious answer is no: such cliques, however ephemeral, will form. Even in the amorphous collective gang, cliques will form. Fleisher illustrates this in his conversation with the girls in the Fremont Hustlers gang in Kansas City. His report deserves extensive quotation:

"Membership" in the Fremont Hustlers is a peculiar idea. Wendy, Cara, and Cheri listed 72 males and females on the Fremont Hustlers membership roster; however, Fremont kids don't refer to one another as members, nor do they think of themselves as having "joined a gang."

"Member," "membership," "join," and "gang" are static notions which fit neither the natural flow of Fremont social life nor the perceptions of Fremont kids. Even the question, Are you a member of the Fremont Hustlers? doesn't match these kids' sense of social logic. The question Do you hang out on Fremont? makes sense to them, but this question didn't bring me closer to understanding the kids' meaning for "joining a gang" and "gang membership." Fremont kids' perceptions of these issues are more complex than I had imagined. (1998: 39)

Kids' vocabulary helps to describe how they perceive Fremont's social arrangements. Generally speaking, Fremont kids differentiate themselves into one category defined by "time" and another by "tightness." *Tightness* refers to the intensity of the relationship. Kids who hang out together much of the time are said to be tight, and kids who are tight "do shit" (commit crimes, use drugs) together. (1998: 40)

Fleisher then offers a listing of the cliques in the Fremont Hustlers, as reported by his most frequent informant, Cara:

"Bloods": 3 members

"Used to visit a lot": 5 members, including 2 sisters

"Grew up on Fremont": 5 members, brothers

- "In prison": 7 members, including 3 crime partners
- "La Familia": 8 members, including 3 cousins
- "Hang together (A)": 7 members
- "Hang together (B)": 10 members, including 2 brothers and 3 cousins
- "Hang out (tight)": 9 members, including 2 sisters and their step-sister, a brother and sister, and several cousins
- "Hardly come around": 7 members, including one set of 2 brothers and another of 3
- "Southside": 5 members, including a set of twins

This is not an elegant statement of clique structures, but it does illustrate the informant's sense for different bases underlying the cliques, and it also reveals the familial tightness that can set severe limits on attempts to reduce gang cohesiveness.

Fleisher has also developed clique structures among themselves and their friends reported by 74 female members across three large and four small gangs. A diagram of the cliques is shown in Figure 5.1,⁹ where social

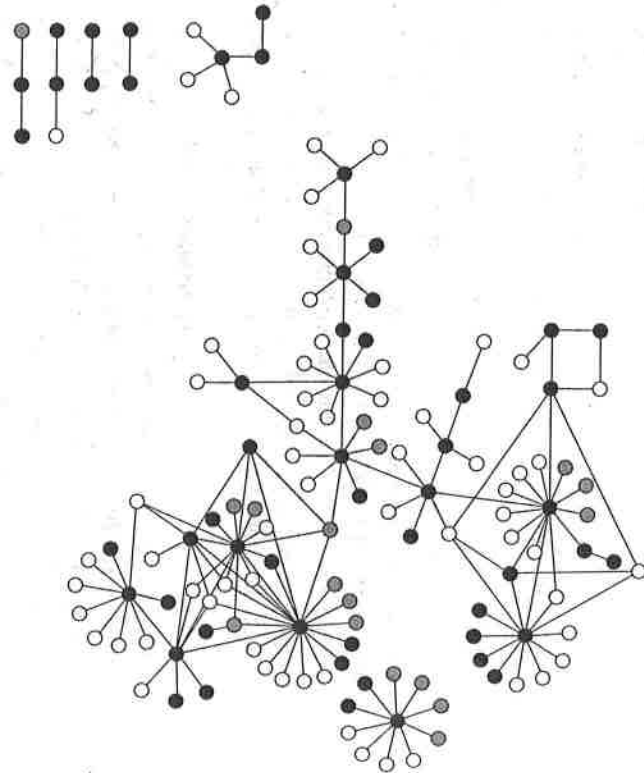


FIGURE 5.1. Clique structures across seven female gangs. Reported by Mark Fleisher.

networks are variously based on social friendships, monetary connections, and criminal connections. The shadings of gray, too complex to describe here, are based on the several gang affiliations and on the females' nominations of "friends, close friends, and best friends." As can be seen, the internal cliquing in a gang can become very complex: group processes are not simple. One ignores them at peril.

Klein's (1971) report on the Latinos gang in East Los Angeles noted that over 50% of the members were siblings and first cousins. Klein's depiction of the several cliques within the Latinos gang and the 21 cliques within four large black gangs joins with Fleisher's as some of the very few research attempts to ferret out the internal structures of gangs in the United States. They were joined recently by Lien's report (2005a) of the clique structures in three immigrant gangs in Oslo, Norway. Two of the gangs have cross-overs of friends or siblings, while the third is fully independent of the other two. Most important in the depictions is the several bases of the nine cliques indicated within the cores of the three gangs. There include familial connections—brothers and cousins, including a family of seven brothers—crime partners, and common village backgrounds in the country of origin. Lien also shows a number of nongang peers, reminding us that gang members often have friends and relatives outside their groups. Finally, Lien's data reveal that cohesiveness as expected is stronger within cliques than across cliques.

This last point, about cohesiveness and clique structures, takes us back to Klein's data (1971), which are still the most detailed available on clique structures, cohesiveness, and commitment to the gang. In 4 large, traditional black gangs, he described 21 subgroups based either on age or gender; 7 of the 21 were female auxiliary gang structures. He cites similar data from W. Miller's analysis of 2 white gangs showing 8 male and 4 female subgroups. In all cases, the traditional groups averaged about 200 members but, because of the numerous subgroups, seemed to have only moderate levels of cohesiveness overall. The tightness is in the cliques or subgroups, not in the overall gang structure, a finding confirmed by Decker and Curry (2000) among St. Louis gangs.

Klein provided a particularly close look at the clique structure of 112 male members of the Latinos over a six-month period of direct street observations and recording who was seen with whom and how often. If we define a clique as consisting of at least 3 members, then his data include six cliques, ranging in size from 3 to 26 (and the largest clique could in turn be broken further into three smaller groups based separately on school attendance, residential proximity, and criminal orientation).

Thanks to an independent assessment of which of the 112 were core and which were fringe members of the Latins, Klein was able to relate commitment to the gang to location in these cliques.

Of 59 core members of the Latins, 38, or 64%, were clique members during the six-month observation period. Of 53 fringe members, only 14, or 26%, were clique members. This also means that 60 members, over half the total, did not participate in gang activities sufficiently to be noted as a clique member. Clearly, the data illustrate the loose structure of such a traditional gang, more so than the neotraditional, compressed, collective, and specialty gangs. Traditional gangs are too large and too segmented to constitute the stereotypical organizational structure usually attributed to them. They are large and complex, but not well organized.

Beyond the clique structures, the distinction between male core and fringe members turned out in Klein's analysis to be of major importance. Core members, as nominated by gang workers, were up to two and a half times more active in formal gang activities. They had 70% more arrests. They were more violent, and their delinquent careers started earlier and lasted longer. It is, of course, the core members who are more often seen by police and local residents as active gang members, and thus they contribute disproportionately to general impressions of the "typical" gang member. Klein's further analysis of the core-fringe distinction provides an additional window onto what leads to core status. Surprisingly, it is not the usual demographic profile expected. Core members did not differ importantly from fringe members with respect to residential origin, family structure, family education, or family income. Even intelligence test scores were essentially the same for both groups.

However, a factor analysis of a mass of variables taken from probation records and gang worker reports did reveal two principal factors differentiating core from fringe members.¹⁰ The first of these, labeled the "deficient-aggressive" factor, consisted of the following 12 variables (listed in order of the factor loadings):

- lower school performance
- lower judged intelligence
- lower impulse control
- more likely to get others in trouble
- higher recorded delinquency
- more often truant
- lower desire for rehabilitation
- more psycho- or sociopathic

- needs more help
- more dependent on group
- fewer outside interests
- more willing to fight

Boys scoring higher in this factor were significantly more likely to be core rather than fringe members. Individual deficiencies and aggressiveness constitute a route to core gang status. School help, personal counseling, and anger management seem to emerge as reasonable intervention modalities to reduce the drive toward core membership and the consequent greater involvement in criminal pursuits.

The second factor, labeled "group involvement," seems even more definitional of core membership, although it accounts for only 13% of the variance as compared to the 34% associated with the first factor. The variables, listed according to their factor scores, were

- more often participates in spontaneous activities
- more clique involvement
- greater total contribution to the group
- greater desire to lead
- more acceptance by core members

One can move to core membership as a function of individual deficiencies and aggressiveness as described by the first factor or as a function of the second, far more socially oriented group involvement factor, or both. Conversely, fringe members are gang affiliated through lower placement on either or both factors. Fringe members face less need for gang affiliation to compensate for individual problems or to satisfy peer group connections. The contrast clearly suggests that individual intervention with fringe members will be more effective. Their ties to the gang and therefore their resistance to intervention are lower than is the case with their core peers. Decades ago, Yablonsky (1963) suggested thinking of the gang as an analogy to an artichoke; one can peel off the outer leaves (fringe) in order to concentrate on the heart (core). The analogy seems appropriate and was confirmed by Klein's intervention with the Latins, where fringe members were the easiest to affect, and core members were both more pivotal and more difficult.

When people think of gangs as being highly cohesive, they are really responding to the core membership only, yet core membership may well be in the minority. It is the core membership that is tight, self-reinforcing,

and the most resistant to intervention and control. It is to this core that Vigil refers in his description:

Learning to back each other up during times of trouble cements the bonds between youths in a gang, creating a type of fictional kinship network. The development of this emotion-charged network is a core aspect of gang life. The gang begins as an alternative control system but over time becomes rooted as a competing, sometimes dominant socialization institution. (Vigil, 2002: 24)

For those readers whose attention is focused on the crime issues in gangs and who may find these group process matters a bit tangential, we hasten to point out that, in fact, data suggest there is a *direct* tie from gang cohesiveness to gang delinquency. We illustrate this by reference to three studies undertaken in the 1960s. The first of these is Klein's (1971) early 1960s research on the impact of an intervention program on four large African-American gangs in south-central Los Angeles. The second is Klein's (1971) late 1960s follow-up with an intensive intervention on a large Mexican-American gang in East Los Angeles. The third is Jansyn's 1966 report on group changes in a Chicago gang, also in the 1960s. Each project relates changes in cohesiveness and crime levels. More recent studies with similar care for objective data analysis of this topic unfortunately do not exist to our knowledge.

The first of these studies evaluated a four-year intervention with the use of gang workers; heavy group programming via weekly gang meetings, many outings, social and sports activities; special education, employment, and court interventions; and consistent clashes between program workers and the police. Data analysis on almost 600 male gang members revealed consistent indications that higher levels of programming led to higher levels of gang cohesiveness, while lower levels of programming were associated with lower levels of cohesiveness. Further analyses yielded the following:

- As gang cohesiveness increased, so did overall levels of recorded delinquency. When cohesiveness decreased, so did delinquency levels. These relationships held up in each of the four large groups, even though the reasons for the changes in cohesiveness varied among them.
- Some criminal offenses are more commonly committed with

companions, while others are more commonly committed alone or with only a few companions. High-companion offenses should be more affected by gang cohesiveness than low-companion offenses. As gang cohesiveness increased in response to the intervention program, analysis revealed that typically higher-companion offenses did indeed increase, while there was no such change in lower-companion offenses. This was not related to the measured seriousness of the offenses involved. The same effect on higher-companion offenses was revealed in a separate analysis of W. Miller's Roxbury gang project in Boston (1962).

- Since gang cohesiveness is generally thought to be a function of territorially based rivalries with opposing gangs, one would expect intergang incidents to be related to cohesiveness. Analysis of such violent incidents between gangs revealed their occurrence to be significantly more common among the more-cohesive gangs. Retaliation and "paybacks" were more common among the more-cohesive groups. In a revealing incident, the public stabbing death of a member of a less-cohesive gang yielded no attempt at retaliation, and "there was practically no discussion of it" (Klein, 1971: 116).

The second study reported by Klein (1971: part III) involved his very intensive attempt to test the cohesion-delinquency hypothesis in the field. The notion was to reduce as many sources of cohesiveness as possible in a traditional Mexican-American gang with a 30-year history in the community. The first test was to achieve cohesiveness reduction and the second to measure any consequent reduction in gang crime. Klein's team reduced and then eliminated all formal gatherings (meetings, outings, sports activities, etc.). Then, various alternative activities were offered: individual tutoring, individual counseling, individual mentoring, and most particularly job seeking. Over a period of 18 months, more than 100 jobs were procured, engaging 45 of the gang members. Equally important was the targeting of individuals for more and less attention strictly on the basis of their relationships to the gang in terms of their contribution to gang cohesiveness.

Depending on the measure employed, gang cohesiveness over the project period was reduced by a low of 11% and a high of 40%, most of this in the first six months and sustained thereafter. Recruitment of new mem-

bers ceased altogether after the first year. Thus the first test, cohesiveness reduction, was well accomplished (even in the face of sibling and cousin relationships accounting for more than half of the gang membership).

As to the second test, delinquency reduction, the number of recorded offenses attributed to gang members was reduced by 35%, again mostly during the first six months when cohesiveness was most notably reduced. Overall nongang juvenile arrest rates reported by the two police stations serving the area showed no overall change during the period, suggesting more strongly that the observed gang delinquency reduction was project related. However, in contrast to the first four-year study, these changes were less related to accumulated individual changes in delinquency rates and more directly to the reduced size of the gang as cohesiveness and recruitment were reduced.

The third study is perhaps less convincing because it involved only one small gang in Chicago and was reported over a one-year period, which might therefore be subject to a simple seasonal interpretation. However, we are skeptical of its seasonal pattern and more inclined to accept the view of the author, Leon Jansyn (1966). It is important because Jansyn offers the other side of the coin in the cohesiveness-delinquency nexus. What he observed was a natural decline in gang cohesiveness to the point that the gang culture and image were threatened. It was at that low point that pivotal members of the gang became especially active and threatening, serving thereby to create an increase in gang cohesiveness. This interpretation fits well with the Short and Strodtbeck (1965) depiction of gang leadership reassertion after a fallow period and with the Decker and Van Winkle (1996) hypothesis about the cohesion-building function of threat.¹¹ Thus while higher cohesion yields higher delinquency, decreasing cohesion may reach an ebb that also calls forth an increase in delinquency—especially of a violent or dramatic nature. In either case, policy initiatives to reduce gang delinquency *must* take group processes such as cohesiveness into account, both to promote positive ends and to avoid unanticipated, negative consequences.

Osgood and Anderson, considering group-amplified delinquency generally, offer a routine activities theory orientation to the crime-amplification process that seems quite relevant:

[O]pportunities for deviant behavior are especially prevalent when adolescents come together. There are two ways that a high average rate of unstructured socializing among a group of youth could increase opportunities for offending for all of them. Both of these

processes are foreshadowed by Felson and Gottfredson's (1984) discussion of concentration effects that would arise with increases in the proportion of unsupervised youth.

One reason to expect a contextual effect of unstructured socializing is that a higher mean-level of unstructured socializing may increase the pool of potential companions. In other words, it may be easier to find co-offenders when many adolescents spend lots of time hanging out. Ease of finding companions should both raise individual rates of unstructured socializing (feeding into the individual-level causal process) and increase the average number of companions. A larger number of companions could increase opportunities for deviance both by heightening the interactional processes among adolescents that support delinquency (see Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews, and Patterson, 1996) and by discouraging adults from attempting to exercise control over their behavior (Sampson and Groves, 1989). In both cases, a contextual effect is produced in that the average rate of unstructured socializing affects the delinquency of everyone in the group.

Second, a high rate of unstructured socializing in a population would raise the rate of encounters among groups of adolescents. In this circumstance, there would be more chances of coming across rivals who are targets for assault or theft, of running into someone who has drugs or stolen goods for sale, or of learning about an unchaperoned party where trouble is likely. These patterns would produce context effects because the general level of unstructured-socializing affects the number of opportunities for deviance available to everyone. (2004: 522–523)

This discussion brings us to a pivotal point in our understanding of street gangs, one that combines two elements of our definitional stance. The very last phrase in the consensus nominal definition introduced in the introduction to this book reads “whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity.” Crime and group identity are not merely fellow travelers in the gang world: they are mutual reinforcers. As a group becomes more gang-like, with an increasing orientation to illegality or to intergroup rivalries, it recognizes this in itself. Even the police, school officials, and family members note and comment on the process. The gang reaches a tipping point beyond which its identity becomes entwined with its community. It is no longer just a play group, a team, a peer group, a rowdy crowd—it is a *street gang*. It is the advancement into a delinquent

or criminal or retaliatory mentality that brings the gang into its self-realization.

Lien notes the same process in her Oslo gangs: "we should examine in greater detail crime situations and their consequences in producing a specific mentality among gang members and a specific form of social bonds between members" (2002: 69). Later in the same work, Lien amplifies the point:

Criminal thinking occurs as an after effect of crime, and it then develops and matures and becomes more and more motivating, the more that it is perpetrated. Finally, it may reach a point of no return that alters the whole structure of thinking and motivation. This is a tipping point theory of mind based on the aggregate outcome of a series of behavior[s] that needs to be interpreted and justified. (2002: 91)

Joan Moore, in her foreword to Vigil's 2002 book, *A Rainbow of Gangs*, makes much the same point about the function of illegal behavior in gang unity or cohesion. She notes:

However, there 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 permanent value. . . . This implies that the gang commands a much heavier commitment on the part of its members than does the ordinary clique of adolescent friends. (xii)

Moore and Vigil in an earlier collaboration (1989) provided an addendum to this tipping-point nature of the crime-cohesion connection. They referred to an "oppositional culture" that develops in the gang. The oppositional culture sets the gang up against society's institutions—the police, schools, discriminatory employers, and the like—such that each rejection of the gang merely reinforces its cohesiveness and its dependence upon itself. The war on gangs justifies the warring gang. Lien's observation of her Oslo gangs yields much the same conclusions. But she goes further in noting that part of the process includes the gang members' coming to

view themselves as the victims of oppression, the unfair targets of racism, inequality, and suppression: "a reaction formation takes place turning the offender [gang member] into both a victim and a good guy" (2002: 82). She adds later, "He develops ideas of compassion, love, and sacrifice in relation to his friends, and he explains his acts through a construction of himself as a victim of society. The victimization point is necessary in order to justify the criminal act. He cannot be blamed, and the act is heroic rather than evil, and the victims get what they deserve" (2002: 89).

There is so much going on here:

- Crime and cohesiveness build upon each other.
- Gangs develop "group esteem" in place of self-esteem (Vigil, 1988).
- Territoriality serves to separate in-group from out-group, reinforcing all of the "specialness" of one's gang.
- When a member of his territory is attacked, there is a "demand character" to the event that calls for a payoff; if the attack is with firearms, in particular, the demand is at its highest.

The dynamics of these group processes can become almost totally resistant to efforts at intervention. Indeed, any intervention may send a message that is contorted by the gang to reinforce its own status. Whether in the form of gang worker assignment, or special program activities for gang members, or suppression by police gang units, or enhanced court sanctions for convicted gang members, control attempts reinforce gang status and amplify the oppositional culture. These are *not* positive outcomes; let the intervener beware.

Given the foregoing, there is little surprise in the gang ethnographers' understanding for many years or the results of the Rochester, Seattle, and most recently the Montreal and Edinburgh longitudinal research projects about crime amplification we noted in chapter 2. The process of joining a street gang *ipso facto* results in a major increase in the member's level of illegal activity and especially of violent activity. When the member leaves the gang, the activity level recedes: the group processes lose their potential. All of this points to a bleak feature for any intervention into the ongoing processes of street gangs. It does, however reinforce some alternative emphases to which we will return in chapter 8, namely, early prevention on the one hand (before group processes work their magic) and reinforced gang desistance on the other (as group processes are waning).

One other positive note is also worth mentioning. The group processes we have emphasized are not monolithic. They do not apply equally to all gangs, nor equally to the five gang structures we have discussed, nor equally to all members of a gang. There is great diversity across gangs and across gang members. Group norms are not single standards, but ranges of expectations and behavior with various levels of fragility. We don't all come to equally slow or stop points at the red light. We don't all support our favorite sports teams with equal fervor. And we don't all blame each other when we feel neglected or oppressed.

Within any gang, and among many gangs, there are variations in the holds that group processes maintain on resistance to change and control, broadly conceived. There is room for intervention, even successful intervention, if we are willing to diagnose the situation carefully before we act. One can contrast, notes criminologist LaMar Empey (1967), a "strategy of activity" with a "strategy of search" or, as one wag stated it at the extreme, "Don't just do something; stand there."

Six

COMMUNITY CONTEXTS

The individual experiences and group dynamics discussed in chapters 4 and 5 occur in the broader context of the communities in which youths live, go to school, hang out with their friends, and interact with shopkeepers, community service providers, clergy, and other adults in their neighborhoods. What are the community features that help us to understand the emergence and persistence of gangs and the nature of gang activity? Some communities provide fertile soil for the growth of gangs; others clearly do not. Were we to craft a wildly successful gang intervention, such an effort would be doomed were it not to confront the elements in the surrounding community that foster and reinforce gang activity. It is just this inattention to the community factors that spawn gangs that we argue in chapter 8, comes back to haunt those well-meaning and sincere attempts at gang control. It is as if the community context is taken as a given, as an unalterable element in the panoply of gang risk. To attempt gang prevention or intervention without attending to community dynamics seems foolhardy. Yet this is precisely the approach of failed program after failed program. There are of course, exceptions to this pattern, and we've described several in chapter 3. But by and large, programs have not integrated effective community interventions with individual and group strategies. In this chapter, we review the current state of knowledge about the community characteristics that foster gang development. In doing so, we recognize several key issues and limitations within this relatively undeveloped but growing body of literature.

Issues in Community Gang Research

First, despite the emphasis we place on community context in this chapter, it is critical to recognize that even in the most gang-torn communities, most youths don't join gangs. Even among those youths who do join, there is a wide variation in commitment to the gang and to those gang activities of most concern to gang practitioners and policy makers: crime and violence. Thus, the individual (including family, school, and peer) risk factors we described in chapter 4 and the group dynamics discussed in chapter 5 are likely to be more powerful in explaining gang participation within a given neighborhood. These individual and group characteristics provide important guidance to intervention on an *individual* or *group* level. While not addressing gang membership specifically, a recent multilevel analysis of contextual effects on self-reported serious juvenile offending in Germany concludes that "adolescents actively and individually shape the relevance of their neighborhood contexts" (Oberwittler, 2004: 228). Pending the type of multilevel analyses that could explain the variance in gang activity in relation to community versus other levels, we contend that community variation also provides an important vector of gang control.

Second, youths' experiences of their neighborhoods—the few blocks that surround their homes—are nested in an expanding array of geographic contexts: several neighborhoods comprise a community, several communities a city, or county. In research and popular writing, *neighborhood* and *community* are often used interchangeably, as are *community* and *city* and other geopolitical entities. Both conceptual and methodological challenges lie beneath the sloppy terminology.

There is much variation among U.S. cities regarding the definition of neighborhood. Chicago, St. Louis, and some eastern cities seem to have well-defined and articulated neighborhood boundaries recognized by all: Los Angeles does not. A recent transplant from Los Angeles to the southern California community of Irvine, 50 miles south, would note the well-defined neighborhood boundaries of that latter city, as crafted by developers and city planners. Each new section of development is marked by signs (if not walls and gates) attesting to its individual character, be it Sienna or Chambord, following the ground rules set by the early developments of Woodbridge and Oak Creek. In 1993, the Los Angeles Police Department embarked on a process to redesign its basic car-patrolling areas to reflect such "natural communities," defined on the basis of com-

mon characteristics or interests, such as culture, lifestyle, language, religion, and demographic similarity (Greene, 1998). One can imagine officers grappling with the challenge of defining a community within the polyglot of demographic changes and identities that characterize Los Angeles. The culmination of this exercise was a basic car grid that rarely bisected extant reporting district or census tract boundaries.

Like public agencies, researchers must confront the challenge of defining communities. In practice, researchers usually must accede to the existing geographic boundaries devised for some purpose other than representing the subjective entities of neighborhoods: census tracts or block groups, police reporting districts or divisions, city and county boundaries, or SMSAs (standard metropolitan statistical areas). These are artificial devices and a poor proxy for representing the ambiguous and abstract construct of *community*, the context of common interests and characteristics that defines the parameters of individual agency and behavior. Scholars of neighborhood effects argue that this strategy is a major limitation to understanding the social processes related to problem behavior among young people (Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley, 2002).

These difficulties are aggravated in gang research and particularly for our specific goals in this book. While recognizing the contributions of ethnographic researchers who describe the nature of the communities in which the individual gangs studied are embedded, our goal here is the search for general patterns that might inform gang programs and policy. One could piece together the neighborhood descriptions of Ruth Horowitz's study of the Lions on 32nd Street in Chicago and John Hagedorn's founders of Milwaukee gangs with Mark Fleisher's environs of the Fremont Hustlers in Kansas City and Diego Vigil's four ethnic gang communities in Los Angeles, among others. A systematic review of these selected areas would likely produce a picture of severe economic disadvantage, resource deprivation, and deteriorated physical environments. While such descriptions point to elements we'd like to measure in a broad sample of communities, these individual studies don't yield sufficient variation in types of communities studied to capture the more-generalized patterns.

In order to do that, we need a comprehensive data bank with community characteristics and gang information. If we are flexible about the meaning of the unit defined as a "community," our choices of sources yielding area-level data are promising. We have U.S. Census data in various forms (city, block group), official crime data from the Uniform Crime

Reports (city or county, often available in smaller units) or individual police agencies, and other government-sponsored data series. Far more elusive is systematically reported, reliable information about gang prevalence and activity. The National Youth Gang Center's annual survey series is the only nationally representative, systematic data source available. The National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) is far from perfect for our purposes, however, since it is limited to police respondents reporting on gang matters without benefit of a systematic definition of *gang*, over a relatively brief time series (beginning in 1996). Moreover, the NYGS covers large geographic units of cities or counties, rather than neighborhoods or communities. Studies that are limited to broad, city-level characteristics could be supplemented by other research that captures a range of neighborhood-level characteristics within individual cities, but gang research on this scale has not yet been conducted.

Finally, the aspects of communities that are substantively important to capture are a matter of considerable debate. Here, theory is critical, and the gang arena is a leg up because early theorists emphasized community features as important components in explaining delinquent groups and gangs. Social disorganization, strain, opportunity, and subcultural deviance theory all have promoted attention to aggregated features of communities. Theories less explicitly focused on gang or delinquent groups—routine activities, control, interactional, and underclass theory, for example—also influenced gang research. This diversity of theoretical orientations has provided a rich grab bag of community aspects thought to influence gang emergence and persistence, as well as individual-level gang participation. Theory and research have not yet melded into one overarching explanatory framework but, for our purposes, offer some direction for community intervention.

The pertinent research on community factors generally falls within two broad categories: structural conditions and community processes. We also will consider three other community features: The racial or ethnic composition of communities is an important aspect of gang research. Second, variation in gang patterns between rural and urban communities has only recently received attention by researchers. Finally, we close our review of the community contexts relevant to gangs with a community-level construct that uses the period of onset of gang problems as a means of categorizing communities: the emergent versus chronic distinction (Spergel and Curry, 1993).

Structural Conditions

In their review of the recent research literature on neighborhood effects related to problem behaviors and health-related outcomes, Sampson et al. (2002) confirm the associations among neighborhood economic and social disadvantage—concentration of poverty, racial isolation, single-parent families, and rates of home ownership and residential stability—with crime, adolescent delinquency, and other indicators of social malaise. Given the consistent finding of a relationship between structural disadvantage and crime, is there a case to be made for the pernicious effect of disadvantage on gangs or gang crime beyond that which we observe for crime in general? This is an important issue for the discussion of the development of gang control policies, since as we've seen in chapter 3, gang targeting often gets co-opted to the more-general outcome indicators of crime or delinquency reduction.

City size is probably the most commonly considered structural variable in studies of gang emergence. Dating back to the early surveys of gang prevalence (W. Miller, 1982; Needle and Stapleton, 1983), researchers have observed the positive relationship between city population size and reported gang presence. The advent of more-sophisticated and thorough survey operations, culminating in the current annual surveys conducted by the National Youth Gang Center, haven't changed this conclusion: there is a direct, linear relationship between the number of people living in a place and the probability that that place has street gangs. As we have seen in chapter 1, many small towns and cities have generated gangs, but all large U.S. cities have them. However, population size, in and of itself, tells us very little about the community context that fosters gang emergence. Therefore, we limit the discussion that follows to those studies that consider community features in addition to population size.

Pamela Jackson (1991) attempted the first national analysis of the effects of the transformation from a manufacturing-based to a service-based economy on the emergence of gangs. This is a key application of W. J. Wilson's (1987) underclass theory to the gang setting. In the wake of Wilson's notion that economic restructuring with the consequent loss of manufacturing jobs led to the increased segregation of minorities in inner cities, several gang researchers argued that economic *decline* and *changes* in economic opportunity, not just economic deprivation, promoted gang proliferation (Hagedorn, 1988; Fagan, 1996; Klein, 1995a). Jackson drew on U.S. Census data for 1970 and 1980 and UCR data on index offenses reported to the police in 1980 to predict the impact of structural disad-

vantage and economic transformation on the existence of gangs in a representative sample of 51 U.S. cities. In an earlier study, other researchers had surveyed gang control and youth services personnel regarding the existence of gangs in these cities in 1981 (Needle and Stapleton, 1983), and Jackson used these gang prevalence data for her analyses. Looking at each variable independently, Jackson found that gangs were more likely to be present in cities characterized by large populations, density, large proportions of Hispanic residents (although percentage of black residents was negatively related), declines in population size, and declines in the number of jobs in wholesale, retail, and manufacturing trades, but not, importantly, characterized by poverty or serious crime rates. Subsequent multivariate analyses of 15 demographic, economic, and crime measures identified only the percentage change in wholesale and retail positions and the proportion of the population aged 15 to 24 years to be significant in explaining gang presence. Although this study did not address neighborhood variations, it suggests that the types of economic transitions important to underclass theory may be more important to understanding gang emergence than poverty, ethnic distribution, or overall crime.

A decade later, two researchers built on the foundation laid by Jackson's work. Wells and Weisheit (2001) used the NYGS data from 1996 to 1998 to study the influence of a broad range of structural factors on gang emergence and persistence. These scholars are primarily interested in gangs in rural locations, but in contrasting metropolitan to nonmetropolitan areas, they provide data that can be compared to the earlier work by Jackson. Wells and Weisheit report on the associations among 21 variables and metropolitan areas' gang status (stable nongang, transitory gang, and chronic gang), as derived from the reports of 1,333 NYGS law enforcement agency respondents. Taken individually, 16 structural indicators were significantly related to urban area gang status. Many of these confirm the findings from Jackson's analysis, but contrasting results on two economic dimensions are noteworthy. Three indicators of economic deprivation in the Wells and Weisheit study were predictive of gangs. Also, while increases in unemployment rate were positively related to gangs, change in the proportion of service jobs was not, and declines in manufacturing jobs fostered less, not more, gang presence. The authors note that these findings contradict the expectations advanced by advocates of economic decline and deindustrialization as major factors in gang emergence (Wells and Weisheit, 2001: 811). Both studies find the higher proportion of Hispanics in the population to be predictive of gangs. However, black residents were negatively correlated with gangs in the Jackson study,

but unrelated to gangs in the Wells and Weisheit analysis. Wells and Weisheit do not report multivariate analyses of the metropolitan area data nor do they include crime rates. The variables they studied are related to one another, making it impossible to determine the unique structural features associated with gang status. Their findings point to economic deprivation and social instability in a region as important structural elements in explaining gang presence.

Other researchers have investigated the role of structural characteristics in explaining the variation in gang activity between neighborhoods within the same city. Rosenfeld, Bray, and Egley (1999) sought to identify the specific features of neighborhoods that promote what they termed the "social facilitation" of gang violence. They classified 707 homicides that occurred in St. Louis between 1980 and 1995 within the gang crime distinctions we discussed earlier in chapter 2: gang-motivated, gang-affiliated, and nongang youth homicides, with suspects between the ages of 10 and 24 years. They constructed composite measures of neighborhood disadvantage (primarily poverty, public assistance income, and female-headed households with children) and neighborhood instability (owner-occupied housing and residential stability of five years or more) for 588 census block groups. They found no differences in the measures of neighborhood context for the three types of homicides, concluding, "both gang and nongang youth homicides are concentrated in disadvantaged areas with moderate levels of instability" (1999: 505).

Curry and Spergel (1988) find differential effects of poverty and ethnicity in their investigation of gang homicides and juvenile arrests for serious crimes in Chicago's 75 community areas. In this study, the distribution of poverty, but not minority populations, explained the delinquency rate. Poverty also explained the gang homicide rate, but the relationship held only for certain ethnic communities. They found that poverty was positively related to gang homicides in black and white neighborhoods, but not in Hispanic neighborhoods. Controlling for poverty, the percentage of Hispanic residents was positively related to gang homicides. We will refer back to these findings on ethnic variations later in this chapter but observe the following policy implications of this research. Curry and Spergel have offered a community-level analysis that provides only mixed support for a poverty explanation of gang homicide. Their study suggests that interventions that address economic disadvantage may be an appropriate measure to reduce serious juvenile offending, but their effect on gang violence should vary by other community characteristics, in this case, ethnic composition.

This interpretation of the implications of community structure research resonates with Klein's review of prior research relevant to his model for explaining the onset and maintenance of gangs. "Thus it may turn out, although we're grasping at straws with the current data, that the underclass hypothesis will be more pertinent to black gang situations" (1995a: 204). Nevertheless, he proposes a series of underclass variables (i.e., industrial shift, education system failure, minority segregation, and outmigration of the middle class) that form the preconditions for gang emergence in a community, given the activation of a host of more-proximal community factors: a sufficient number of minority youths, the absence of appropriate jobs, the absence of acceptable alternative activities, concentrated minority populations, a comparatively high crime rate; and the absence of community and informal controls (1995a: 198, Figure 7-1).

The Jackson and Wells and Weisheit studies on gang emergence in cities highlight economic transitions or disadvantage, ethnic composition, and social instability. The St. Louis study suggests that these community descriptors are less useful in explaining differential patterns of gang and nongang violence, while the Chicago study finds important interactions between poverty and ethnicity. Studies of the characteristics of youth who join gangs help to elucidate the role of structural factors. Thornberry and colleagues (2003) argue that structural characteristics contribute only indirectly to whether or not a youth participates in a gang. According to their interactional theory, structural disadvantage reduces important social bonds to family and school, which promote antisocial learning environments, such as social networks of delinquent friends, and norms supportive of crime. Gang membership is fostered more immediately by high levels of stress and early involvement in violence that is promoted by these enhanced antisocial influences.

Analysis of the interview series of Rochester youth conducted by Thornberry and his colleagues generally confirms this theory. The impact of being African American or Hispanic, or having poorly educated parents, on joining a gang is due primarily to the way these conditions influence school performance and social learning environments. Family structure—whether a youth lived with two biological parents—retained a persistent direct effect on gang membership, even when social bonds, learning environments, and early involvement in violent behavior were considered. Interestingly, community disorganization—in this study, the parents' views of crime, deterioration, and disorder in their neighborhoods—had no effect on whether youth joined gangs.

Taken together, these studies of community structure reveal several

important contexts for the development of gangs: poverty, economic transitions, ethnic and age composition of the population, and social stability. As Sampson and his colleagues observed, while some studies reveal mediating effects of community process variables on the relationship between structural factors and crime, "concentrated poverty and structural characteristics still matter" (2002: 465). Public policies that reduce economic and social disadvantage should net improvements in gang prevalence and violence, at least under some conditions. As we learned from the St. Louis study, effective economic policy should help both gang and nongang lethal violence. The Chicago study suggests that fewer benefits of antipoverty programs would accrue in Hispanic communities. Moreover, the toll of structural disadvantage on individual gang membership seems to weave a path through social bonds and adolescent peer environments. These attachments to primary social institutions—family, school, and friends—may be more amenable to manipulation than community structural conditions.

Community Processes

Alberta Gordon lives in a Chicago neighborhood studied by Mary Pattillo. Gordon describes how social relationships among community residents can be activated to exert informal social control with neighborhood youths:

It was a respect and extended family [kind of thing]. So there are a lot of young people that I do know that call me Mama G. And I have no problem in telling them that they're wrong about doing something. And no problem in going to their parents because I know their parents. . . . [And I] have told their parents in return, if [my son] Michael is doing something and you know it's wrong, correct him and then let me know so that I can deal with it. (Pattillo, 1998: 762)

Mama G.'s willingness to call neighborhood youth on the carpet for misdeeds, and her expectations that her neighbors will do the same, illustrates the concept of neighborhood collective efficacy introduced by Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls (1997) in an influential article in *Science*. Collective efficacy is a process whereby the social cohesion, or mutual trust, among neighbors forms the foundation for a mutual expectation that neighbors will intervene to confront incipient crime problems, especially those often

committed by youth. Sampson et al.'s study of Chicago neighborhoods uncovered lower levels of crime and violence in communities with more collective efficacy, effects that withstood the competing influence of the structural variables of social instability and disadvantage. The structural aspects of community conditions provide a backdrop for the community processes that may affect more directly the nature of gang activity in a neighborhood.

Community processes are the social relationships among neighborhood residents, the informal and formal social ties that bind them to one another and to neighborhood social institutions like schools, churches, community groups, local political agencies, and public services. Bursik and Grasmick (1993) categorize these networks of social relationships and their implications for social control as private (relationships among friends), parochial (casual relationships among neighbors that link to local groups or associations), and public (the activation of ties to secure goods and services, especially police services, that are allocated by agencies located outside the neighborhood). These ties form the social capital that allows neighborhood adults to exert influence over youths, but these social relationships can be eroded by broad economic or political dislocations. For example, Fagan (1996) cites the loss of intergenerational job networks generated by the decline in manufacturing jobs as a catalyst for the disruption of effective social control and socialization from the private and parochial sectors. Gangs quickly replaced the waning influence of community adults as the dominant force of informal social control and socialization. This dynamic is echoed in the descriptions of diverse ethnic communities offered by Vigil (2002) that enumerate the social and economic marginalization of immigrant neighborhoods with attendant disruption of informal social control in family, school, and police authority. Like Fagan, Vigil locates gang persistence with the street socialization and development of street identities that react to, and further aggravate, the erosion of a community's mechanisms for informal social control.

The social ties and sources of informal social control discussed by Fagan and Vigil span the range of the private, parochial, and public spheres, but a missing element seems to be the social cohesion aspect of collective efficacy. Sampson et al.'s (2002) review of the neighborhood effects on crime literature finds that the relationship between social ties and crime is mediated by collective efficacy, not informal social control alone, but the combined effect of mutual trust among neighbors with shared expectations that neighbors will intervene on behalf of the neighborhood. Likewise, Bursik (2002) argues that the systemic model of neighborhoods and

gang activity that he and Grasmick proposed must be reformulated to incorporate the salience of oppositional cultures. Such oppositional cultures represent competing social networks that promote values favorable to violence and gang activity, as well as informal "antisocial" control. Pattillo describes the pivotal role that a gang leader resident of a middle-class neighborhood played in crime control, as well as the reluctance of neighbors to use police resources due to thick kin and friendship ties among neighbors:

One woman at a beat meeting complained of young men "gang-banging" (i.e., congregating) on her corner and of one man in particular who she thought was in charge. But, she said, "I didn't wanna give this young man's name [to the police] because his mama is such a sweet lady." (1998: 763)

Historically strained relationships with law enforcement further drive residents to call on alternative resources to respond to the dangers they perceive in their immediate environment. Anderson (1999) documents the "code of the street" as one such resource; the protection offered by an established gang is clearly another (Zatz and Portillos, 2000; Hagedorn, 1988; Vigil, 2002). Effective collective control of neighborhood crime problems rests on complex social relationships and shared values of informal intervention. In some neighborhoods, gangs are an intrinsic element of the social fabric and undermine the healthy community processes that support crime control.

An ecological study of characteristics associated with gang "set space"—the places that gang members spend most of their time—confirms the importance of informal social control. Tita, Cohen, and Engberg (2005) assessed measures of guardianship and abandonment, social disorganization, and economic deprivation and a composite indicator of underclass to identify the aspects of local areas (smaller than neighborhoods or census tracts) that attracted violent black gangs in Pittsburgh. Diminished social control, indicated by the absence of guardians and the physical abandonment of place, most consistently differentiated set space from non-set space areas. The underclass construct received some support, but poverty and unemployment were not related to set space, once other factors were controlled.

The appreciation of neighborhood processes is central to efforts to produce effective policies and programs for gang control. As we have seen in chapter 3, gang intervention programs often embrace a "comprehen-

sive" formula, incorporating a melding of law enforcement and community efforts in their design, if not always fully in their execution. To these other program descriptions, here we can also add civil gang injunctions as particularly relevant to this discussion of community processes. A civil gang injunction is an order issued by a civil court judge, prohibiting identified members of a particular gang from engaging in a series of specified activities, including associating with one another, carrying pagers, making gang hand signs, signaling drug sales, and being in public after an established curfew. The gang is sued as a public nuisance, with evidence provided by law enforcement and, sometimes, community declarations. Violation of any of the provisions of the injunction can net targeted gang members a hefty fine and/or up to six months in jail. Spawned in the gang communities of southern California in the 1980s, gang injunctions have become increasingly popular with law enforcement, community residents, and public officials. Nationally, more than 100 police agencies reported use of injunctions in their jurisdictions, but further examination found that only one-fourth fully understood the term; the primary locus of injunction activity is in California (Maxson, 2004).

Injunction program documents and law enforcement practitioners frame this intervention within the tradition of community policing/prosecution. Injunctions are pitched as a strategy to engage community involvement with law enforcement and improve the quality of life in neighborhoods, presumably via the activation of social ties in the parochial and public spheres. A study of southern California injunction practitioners by Maxson, Hennigan, and Sloane (2003) and an expansion to a national sample by Maxson (2004) found few indicators of direct community participation in the selection of the targeted gang, in development of the evidence for the suit, or in its enforcement. However, there is some evidence that injunctions can reduce crime (Grogger, 2002).

A recent study by Maxson, Hennigan, and Sloane (2005) found relative improvements (i.e., reductions) in the visibility of gang members, gang intimidation, fear of gang confrontation, and fear of crime following the implementation of an injunction, though not in indicators of neighborhood efficacy, social cohesion, or informal social control. The positive findings were evident in the part of the injunction area that was most disordered; the less-disordered portion of the neighborhood experienced negative effects—more gang visibility and property victimization and less belief that the neighborhood could solve its own problems. The evaluation studies provide both caution and promise to injunction practitioners. The promising aspects derive from the strategy's apparent ability to effect, pos-

itively and relatively quickly, residents' views and experiences of the immediate threats presented by gang members. Over time and with vigilant attention to ongoing implementation, this immediate impact could evolve into increased collective efficacy and the buttressing of social control via expanded social linkages in the parochial and public spheres.

However, this optimistic outcome appears unlikely in the face of a lack of investment in the social fabric of communities. If we had seen resident groups form in the injunction area; if there were evidence of increased access to public resources; if new services for promoting social, educational, or vocational skills among youth had emerged in the injunction area, we might be more hopeful of long-term, salutary effects on this community. Years ago in Philadelphia, we were told of grandmothers canvassing their neighborhoods, carrying brooms in a unified symbolic gesture to sweep their streets of gang violence. Such expressions of collective efficacy could reflect a sea change in community regeneration following a targeted gang intervention. This injunction was largely a one-man show, and that man was the police, employing the new injunction penalties in a suppression operation. To do otherwise would have required law enforcement to engage community members in a process that promoted social ties, provided a forum for the development of mutual trust or social cohesion among neighbors, and reactivated the mechanisms for informal social control. Admittedly, this is a lot to ask of law enforcement, but community engagement is the sole parameter that distinguishes injunctions as an innovative strategy for improving gang neighborhoods from a run-of-the-mill gang suppression strategy.

Other Community Characteristics

Ethnicity

Ethnicity is one of the most widely discussed, and little studied, aspects of gangs. Conventional wisdom, and some research, considers black gangs to be more entrepreneurial and more instrumental in their gang activity (Skolnick, 1990). Law enforcement reports often depict Hispanic gangs as more expressive and more turf oriented. Asian gangs are routinely portrayed as the most organized and mobile, with stronger ties to adult organized crime groups (Chin, 1990). Most ethnographic gang studies are sited in just one ethnic community, and survey research rarely addresses the community contexts that might illuminate different ethnic patterns. In essence, there are very few gang studies that provide systematic comparative ethnic data on communities; we described in chapter 4 the few

studies that have sufficient numbers of youth of different ethnic identities to compare patterns of risk or gang characteristics among ethnic groups in the same study location. The discussion of ethnic patterns below draws from those studies that provide comparative data on ethnicity as a dimension of the community context of gangs, but we recognize the varying community contexts within some ethnographic studies that include just one group. For example, Anderson's (1999) description of the street and decent codes of the streets of Philadelphia portrays these distinct orientations coexisting within the same community. Our own work in several southern California communities finds that youths living in the same neighborhoods report different levels of gang awareness and neighborhood danger.

The structural studies discussed above that include the proportion of particular ethnicities in the population unit studied suggest that the concentration of Hispanic residents, in particular, may be an important pattern. Gang homicide rates are highest in Chicago Hispanic communities, and poverty does not seem to influence levels of gang violence there (Curry and Spengel, 1988: Figure 2). Both the Jackson and the Wells and Weisheit studies found that the proportion of Hispanic residents in a city predicted to gang presence. These three studies fail to identify the features in communities with high proportions of Hispanic residents that foster gangs. Although Curry and Spengel contend that "gang violence stemming from the social disorganization of immigrant life overshadows the visible impact of poverty on gang violence rate" (1988: 396), their study does not include independent measures of social disorganization or immigration; these community-level processes are operationalized, "simply and grossly" (1988: 387), as the concentration of Hispanics in a community.

Two other studies provide comparative information about the ethnic character of communities relevant to this discussion of community contexts. Anthropologist Vigil (2002) investigated the patterns of immigration and processes of financial and social marginalization in four ethnic communities in Los Angeles: Mexican, Salvadoran, Vietnamese, and African American. This study reveals quite different immigration experiences among the four communities, yet an overarching similarity in the four ethnic groups of gang norms and behavior. Vigil argues that, despite different experiences, members of marginalized communities must adapt and adjust to the dominant culture, often in ways that erode prosocial bonds and the influence of social control institutions like the family, school, and law enforcement. For each group, this paves the way for the emergence of a street culture and street socialization that foster and perpetuate gangs.

Rather than identifying a unique aspect of a particular ethnic subculture that produces a unique gang form, this study reinforces the view that generic social processes derive from social inequality and marginalization, processes that affect many communities in predictable ways. Sanchez-Jankowski (1991), in his much-debated study of three ethnic gang communities, also concludes that particular minority ethnicity and race do not make much difference in gang characteristics. Neither study supports the notion of differential interventions for different ethnic communities. Our own work leads us, as well, to conclude that gang processes trump ethnicity. While programs should be sensitive to the unique cultural or ethnic experiences within communities, interventions might better address the processes of marginalization, weakened bonds, and depleted institutional control mechanisms in a generic way.

Rural Gang Communities

As a consequence of the patterns of gang proliferation described in chapter 1, researchers have begun to look more closely at gangs in rural communities. The differences in the natures of rural and urban communities could produce contrasting patterns of gang emergence, organizational structures, and activities—and such differences would suggest different approaches to gang prevention and intervention. We know little about gang-joining patterns and gang structures in rural areas, but the survey data gathered by the National Youth Gang Center has proved a useful starting point for exploring the prevalence and characteristics of rural gang communities.

The NYGS series for a large sample of rural counties reveals declining levels of gang prevalence. In 1996, 26% of rural counties reported gangs, a figure that dropped steadily to about 12% in each of the 2000–2002 surveys (Egley et al.; 2004). Gang problems emerged later in rural counties: the majority (65%) of rural gang counties in 1996 said that gangs had surfaced no earlier than 1993 (Howell, Egley, and Gleason, 2002).

Wells and Weisheit (2001) combined NYGS data with other data sources to study gangs in rural or nonmetropolitan areas.¹ Thirty-seven percent of police agencies in their categorization of rural communities reported gangs in the 1996 survey (versus 66% in metropolitan areas). These prevalence estimates declined to 30% and 60%, respectively, in 1998. These researchers wanted to know which indicators of social and economic stability, economic deprivation, and population characteristics were associated with a persistent gang presence (22.6% of agencies), a transitory gang presence (20.4% of agencies reported gangs in one survey

but not the other), or a persistent lack of gangs (57% of agencies) in rural areas. Economic factors (instability or deprivation) were not related to gang status, except for the surprising finding that rural communities experiencing economic growth were more likely to report gangs. Further, proximity to urban areas did not predict gangs in rural communities, challenging those who would argue that gang migration from urban areas "causes" rural gang problems (see chapter 1). The presence of gangs in rural areas was linked to the ecological indicators of social disorganization and with higher risk conditions in the population.

As we reported earlier in this chapter, these researchers also studied gangs in metropolitan areas. Their analysis of the two types of areas revealed similar effects of social stability and population composition. However, economic deprivation was important to understanding gang status in metropolitan areas, but unrelated to gang presence in rural areas. Thus, somewhat different models predict gang situations in the two types of areas. This research suggests that gang strategies that address economic disadvantage are less likely to be relevant in rural areas.

We have already noted the declining trend in gang prevalence in rural areas, and it appears that the transitory nature of gangs increases with the level of rurality. Weisheit and Wells (2004) find that just 14% of rural agencies reporting gangs in 1997 still had them in 2000, as compared to 58% of nonmetropolitan areas with an urban population of 20,000 or more. These researchers observe that gangs are hardly pervasive and persistent in rural areas.

raising questions about the commonly held belief that once gangs have a foothold in the community it is rare for them to leave or disappear. Indeed, most rural gangs are so small and unstable that the loss of one or two members—through arrest, movement out of the area, or maturation—can easily mean the end of the gang. (2004: 4)

While still in its infancy, the available research on gangs in rural communities suggests caution in exporting programs developed in urban settings. More-recent gang onset, lower prevalence, the fluid nature of gang membership, and different community risk factors make many gang interventions inappropriate to rural communities. It is noteworthy that in telephone interviews with these law enforcement agencies, Weisheit and Wells report that "rural agencies appear to be ready to deal with gangs"

(2004: 6), and most frequently respond to gangs with suppression through strict enforcement, hardly a strategy customized for rural settings.

Onset of Gangs

A final community context that is increasingly studied in national surveys of gang cities is the time period when gangs first emerged. Spengel and Curry (1993) drew an analytic distinction based on the year of onset of gang problems. Working with data from their 1987 national survey of more than 100 cities, these scholars observed that the 45 gang cities in their sample (defined by the recognition of a gang problem and an organized response by law enforcement or services practitioners to it) fell roughly evenly into two categories. Chronic gang cities were those with a long history of serious gang problems, whereas emerging gang cities had confronted gang problems only since 1980. Emerging gang cities were often smaller and reported less-serious gang problems. Spengel and Curry determined that intervention strategies vary by these two types of communities. Although suppression strategies were used most often in both types, emerging gang-cities more often employed community organization as a primary strategy, whereas chronic gang cities were more likely to use social intervention and, to a lesser extent, opportunities provision strategies.² This study is often recalled for Spengel and Curry's finding that the primary strategies used by communities to respond to gangs bear no observable relationship to the measured perceptions of the primary causes of gangs nor to the perceived effectiveness of the strategies used. Nevertheless, analysis of survey responses led Spengel and Curry to identify strategies with some promise of efficacy in the two community types: community organization in emerging gang cities and opportunities provision in chronic gang cities.

In our discussion of gang proliferation in chapter 1 and of community structural characteristics earlier in this chapter, we have seen that cities with larger populations are more likely to have gangs. The pattern of gang emergence, or gang onset, in U.S. cities is closely related to population size. Not only are larger cities more likely to have gangs, but gangs were more likely to surface in those cities earlier than in smaller cities. The different onset patterns by city size are readily observable in Figure 1.3. It is noteworthy that less than 20% of the largest cities and less than 10% of midsized (populations of 50,000–99,999) identified gang problems by the Spengel and Curry chronic gang city benchmark of 1980. As we approach the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, a city

with a 20-year history of gang problems would seem to qualify as a chronic gang city. The precise temporal distinction that separates chronic from emergent gang cities has changed as we track gang problems over time, but as Spergel and Curry (1993) noted, the chronic-emergent distinction is important for understanding both the nature of gang problems and the appropriate attempts to control gangs. Whether we mark the dividing line in 1980, or 1985, or 1990, locales with chronic gang conditions seem to share some important considerations for gang intervention.

First, chronic gang cities are larger, have more gangs and gang members, and are more likely to have entrenched gang traditions than more recent gang cities. The sheer numbers suggest more varied gang structures and more diversity in gang activities, requiring a more-complex array of intervention strategies. Longer histories of gang rivalries, intergenerational transmission of gang values, and communities infused with gang cultures make some of the gangs in chronic gang cities far less vulnerable to intervention.

Second, the patterns of gang forms and activities seem to vary with the stage of onset of gang activity in a city. Writing in the mid-1990s, we observed that the specialty and compressed gang structures were far more common in emergent cities: about three-fourths of these gangs were located in cities with gang onset in 1985 and thereafter (Klein and Maxson, 1996: Figure 5). Conversely, about one-fourth of traditional gangs were located in cities that identified gang problems by 1970, and half were in cities with onset before 1985. Newer gang cities may have different constellations of gang structures that require different interventions than chronic gang cities.

A recent analysis of NYGS data suggests that characteristics of gang members in newer gang cities may be different as well. Howell, Moore, and Egley (2002) find distinct demographic and crime patterns in cities and counties reporting the onset of gangs during the 1990s. These jurisdictions report younger members, slightly more females, more Caucasians, and gangs with a racial/ethnic mixture. The police respondents in these localities also report far lower levels of gang involvement in violent crimes, including homicide, assault, robbery, and use of firearms, as well as in property and drug trafficking offenses.

Third is the pattern of gang persistence related to the onset of gang problems we described in chapter 1. Egley et al. (2004) found that 82% of cities with variable gang problems (that is, reports of gang problems in only one year of the survey and no gang problems in the other survey

years, 1996–2001) had a year of gang onset during the 1990s. Variable gang problems typified half of the small cities (populations up to 50,000) and none of the cities with population of 100,000 or more.

Taken together, studies that address the onset of gangs in a community suggest that different approaches to intervention in chronic and emergent gang cities may be required. The types of gangs, characteristics of gang members, and gang activity in more-recent onset cities call for innovative strategies, and yet we also note that the perceived gang problems in smaller cities and rural areas can also disappear as quickly as they emerge. Thus, the warnings about misdirected and ineffective gang programs that we offered in chapter 3 may be particularly important for emergent gang cities. Gang intervention can backfire and perhaps disturb the natural processes of extinction already occurring in many places.

The research on other community contexts also proved relevant to program development. Economic disadvantage and instability seem to place communities at risk for gangs and gang violence in urban but not rural areas. However, we have noted discordant findings as to the effects of poverty and economic decline on gang emergence in urban areas and also differential effects by race and ethnicity. Community dynamics, social disorganization, and in particular collective efficacy may have more direct influences on gang development. Finally, it appears that the dimensions of community contexts we've discussed may well be overshadowed by more-compelling or immediate aspects of adolescents' environment and experiences in their families, schools, and peer social networks. As we observe in chapter 8, this is indeed where a lot of the intervention action is sited.

Our final chapters present a framework for understanding the array of program efforts to control gangs and for identifying notable gaps in program activity. This exercise makes clear the opportunity for practitioners to integrate more fully important features of the community context in gang programs.