

A Gang, by Any Other Name ...

Perhaps the least settled issue in gang research is the age-old question: “What is a gang?”

It seems that the majority of academic authorities can agree on only one point in this regard: that there is no agreement—neither among the criminologists who study gangs nor among the cops who police them. The picture becomes no clearer when we narrow the issue by asking, “What is a youth gang?” or “What is a street gang?”

In an essay on gang research published in *Crime and Justice*, John Hagedorn says that the definitional debate about gangs has been “long and rancorous” (Hagedorn 1998). He proposes that, in thinking about what gangs are, a good place to start is with the godfather of gang research, Frederic Thrasher, who pointed out that “ganging” is a normal peer activity for adolescents within a continuum of behaviors that range “from conventional to wild.”

In *American Street Gangs*, a popular college textbook, Tim Delaney poses a set of questions drawn from current media depictions to illustrate the problem of defining gangs:

In fact, there is no single definition, although every definition includes some mention of the word, *group*. For example, is a group of young people hanging out together a gang? What if this group is hanging outside a convenience store talking loud and acting proud? What if this group creates a name for itself, starts identifying members with specific clothing, and uses secret hand signals and handshakes and intimidating nicknames such as “killer” and “assassin”? But the group just described could actually be a sports team! Add to this description the commission of a number of deviant acts and fraternities and sororities would also fit this profile. (Delaney 2005)

For many influential experts (such as Malcolm Klein and Irving Spergel), criminal activity is intrinsic to the definition—but equally influential experts (such as James Short) think otherwise. In his *Crime and*

Justice essay, Hagedorn says he prefers Joan Moore’s definition:

Gangs are unsupervised peer groups who are socialized by the streets rather than by conventional institutions. They define themselves as a gang or “set” or some such term, and have the capacity to reproduce themselves, usually within a neighborhood.

More recently, Hagedorn—who believes that gangs are reproducing themselves across a world that is increasingly urbanized—has adopted a more global, “postindustrial” characterization of what gangs are:

Gangs are organizations of the street composed of either 1. the socially excluded or 2. alienated, demoralized, or bigoted elements of a dominant racial, ethnic, or religious group.

While most gangs begin as unsupervised adolescent peer groups and remain so, some institutionalize in barrios, favelas, ghettos, and prisons. Often these institutionalized gangs become business enterprises within the informal economy and a few are linked to international criminal cartels. Others institutionalize as violent supporters of dominant groups and may devolve from political or conventional organizations. Most gangs are characterized by a racialized or ethno-religious identity as well as being influenced by global culture. Gangs have variable ties to conventional institutions and, in given conditions, assume social, economic, political, cultural, religious, or military roles. (Hagedorn website)

At the opposite end of the continuum, legal definitions intended to prohibit gang activity focus almost entirely on intentional criminal activity and are typically spare in defining distinct elements of association. California Penal Code §186.22 (e)(f) defines a “criminal street gang” as “any ongoing organization, association, or group of three or more persons, whether formal or informal, having as one of its primary ac-

tivities the commission of one or more of the criminal acts enumerated in paragraphs (1) to (25), inclusive, of subdivision (e), having a common name or common identifying sign or symbol, and whose members individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal gang activity.”¹

After many years of fielding squadrons of specialized “gang” units to combat criminal gangs and compiling lists of hundreds of thousands of people in an effort to identify and target gang members and their associates for harsh treatment in the criminal justice system, American law enforcement agencies have not been able to agree upon a common definition. Perhaps the least of the problems posed by this failure is that accurate tracking of gang-related crime statistics is difficult, if not impossible.²

Given the lack of consensus about how and when groups of people do or do not constitute a gang, classification of gangs by type is understandably a fuzzy area. Delaney says that while there are many types of gangs, his textbook (2005) is focused on “street gangs,” and he includes only brief discussions of some “non-street gangs”: motorcycle gangs, organized crime, the Ku Klux Klan, skinheads, and prison gangs.

Malcolm Klein similarly asserts that prison gangs, skinheads, “stoners,” and motorcycle gangs are not street gangs (Klein 1995). Klein says that skinhead groups do not qualify as street gangs because they are usually inside, and when they go out they are “looking for a target, not just lounging around.” And bikers are usually focused on their motorcycles, out cruising or selling drugs. He says both types of gangs are narrowly focused in their criminality, “always planning something”—while street gangs are more aimless and casual about the trouble they get into. He

1 Subdivision (e) enumerates the following offenses: assault with a deadly weapon or by means of force likely to produce great bodily injury; robbery; unlawful homicide or manslaughter; the sale, possession for sale, transportation, manufacture, offer for sale, or offer to manufacture controlled substances; shooting at an inhabited dwelling or occupied motor vehicle; discharging or permitting the discharge of a firearm from a motor vehicle; arson; the intimidation of witnesses and victims; grand theft; grand theft of any firearm, vehicle, trailer, or vessel; burglary; rape; looting; money laundering; kidnapping; mayhem; aggravated mayhem; torture; felony extortion; felony vandalism; carjacking; the sale, delivery, or transfer of a firearm; possession of a pistol, revolver, or other firearm capable of being concealed upon the person; threats to commit crimes resulting in death or great bodily injury; and theft and unlawful taking or driving of a vehicle.

2 Wes McBride, the dean of U.S. gang investigators, warned the authors not to believe gang statistics from any source: “They are *all* wrong.”

doesn’t explain why “heavy metal–influenced stoners,” “punks,” “satanic cults,” and “terrorist gangs” don’t qualify. And he dismisses “low riders” and kids who hang out on street corners without comment.

Brenda Coughlin and Sudhir Venkatesh say that while the popular image of gangs is synonymous with African American and Latino youth in poor urban neighborhoods, this may be “an artifact of definitional boundaries” (Coughlin and Venkatesh 2003). They maintain that evidence of ethnic diversity among street gangs, as well as the existence of delinquent white groups not conventionally considered to be gangs (“fraternities, motorcycle and ‘biker’ outfits, militias, skinheads, or the Ku Klux Klan”), need more research attention.

Studies based on self-reports as well as localized ethnographic research have documented that white and black gangs are *both* present in urban areas, and that white gangs are *also* involved in serious violence. Yet people of color predominate in law enforcement estimates of gang membership, and most of those arrested for gang offenses are African American and Latino.

“Street gangs” versus whatever

There does not seem to be a consensus on how to distinguish between “drug gangs” and “street gangs.” The literature suggests an increasing overlap of these categories. Malcolm Klein differentiates drug gangs on the basis of characteristics that he says street gangs largely lack: “clear, hierarchical leadership; strong group cohesiveness; a code of loyalty and secrecy”; and a narrow focus on drug dealing to the exclusion of other crimes. Most experts agree that drug trafficking is a secondary interest for street gang members, yet they also agree that significant numbers of street gang members are very much involved in drug sales, and that drug profits often play a vital role in keeping street gangs in operation. Felix Padilla has described the evolution of a violent Puerto Rican street gang in Chicago into an organized drug trafficking and distribution enterprise (Padilla 1992).

Tim Delaney says that the “drug gang” concept is relatively new, formulated to account for the increasing number of gangs involved in the sale of drugs. He says that we should not be surprised to find that “street gangs” are actively involved in drug trafficking since it constitutes “the number-one criminal enterprise in the world,” and the growing popularity of “crack” cocaine produced new opportunities for

urban youth to make money around the same time that legitimate job opportunities were disappearing in their neighborhoods.

John Hagedorn says that gang participation in a growing global underground economy is the central mechanism whereby gangs “institutionalize on the streets” (Hagedorn 2005). The economic restructuring that has curtailed access to jobs for unskilled urban men means that gangs become an increasingly important source of employment, retaining membership of many individuals into adulthood. He sees drug-dealing gangs as “the main street-level employer of youth in the poorest areas of cities forsaken by industrial jobs.”

A typology of youth violence

Mercer Sullivan finds the definitional ambiguities in gang research a distraction from more vital inquiries:

Youth violence takes many organizational forms. Lumping these together as “gang” phenomena carries distracting baggage. The perennial fascination with gangs is partly, overly romantic. It can, and sometimes does, cloud our view of what we should be placing front and center, the problem of youth violence. (Sullivan 2005)

Sullivan proposes using more neutral analytic terms to make important distinctions among group criminal activities that may—or may not—be related to gang membership: action-sets, cliques, and named gangs:

An *action-set* is simply an aggregation of individuals cooperating together in a coordinated

line of activity. They need not continue their coordinated activity over any specified period of time or share any explicit recognition among themselves or in the view of others that they are associated on any permanent basis.

A *clique* is an aggregation of individuals with some form of diffuse and enduring bonds of solidarity, at least for the near term. They engage in a variety of activities together on some kind of regular basis. They need not have a name or leader or share ritual symbols of group membership.

A *named gang* has the properties of a clique, along with a name and explicit criteria of membership recognized by members and others. Gangs are far more likely than cliques to have designated leadership, formalized rules and codes of conduct, and ritualized symbols of membership, but they do not have to have all or any particular combination of these.

Sullivan points up an “odd and oddly little-noticed contradiction” resulting from a lack of careful distinction between youth gangs and group criminal activities—that membership in youth gangs was widely reported to have climbed to unprecedented high levels by the later half of the 1990s, yet youth violence decreased sharply during the same period:

If gang membership becomes far more prevalent and gang membership is strongly related to youth violence, how can youth violence decline while gang membership remains at historically high levels? Given the choice, who would not prefer more gangs and less youth violence to the opposite combination?