THE Youth Gang Problem

A COMMUNITY APPROACH

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New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1995

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland Madrid

and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
200 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Spergel, Irving A.
The youth gang problem : a community approach / Irving A. Spergel.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and indexes.
ISBN 0-19-507066-6.
ISBN 0-19-509203-1 (pbk.)
1. Gangs—United States.
2. Juvenile delinquency—United States.
3. Juvenile delinquents—United States.
4. United States—Social conditions—1980–
5. United States—Social policy—1993–
I. Title.
HV6439.U5S64 1995
364.1'06'0973—dc20
94-8227

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

Preface

This book is an attempt to rethink general gang policy and program experience as well as research findings, particularly in light of my four decades of observation of gang youths and gang problems especially in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and elsewhere in this country and abroad. Many of the ideas in the book were developed in the course of a recent four and half year research and development program in which I was principal investigator (supported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Bureau of Justice Programs, U.S. Justice Department), and a Gang Violence Reduction Program with older hard-core gang youths in Chicago, which I am currently coordinating and researching (funded by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority).

I believe that while there has been much continuity over the years as to the causes and responses to the problem, gangs and gang violence have become increasingly complex, lethal, and resistant to prevention and control. A promising approach must be based on careful description and theoretically relevant understanding of gang phenomena, as well as on systematic testing of a range of interventions in particular social situations. Theory, research, and program experience must interact if we are to do a better job of dealing with gang problems. Neither social disorganization, underclass, nor poverty theory alone explains the scope and nature of delinquent or criminal gang association and gang crime. Social disorganization or lack of integration of essential elements of a local community system provides the basic stimulus for the formation of youth gangs. Lack of legitimate opportunity and the presence of alternate criminal opportunities are more likely to explain the character and scope of gang behavior.

Media reporting has also not adequately reflected the character of the problem, for example that Latino gangs are generally more violent than African-American gangs and that gang violence and gang-member drug trafficking are not necessarily closely related. Gang violence also is largely intraracial or intraethnic. There is evidence, however, that racism acts indirectly and powerfully on the creation and development of the gang problem, particularly the African-American problem. While racism can contribute directly to minority group segregation and poverty, and to conditions of social disorganization that in turn more directly precipitate development of gang behavior, desegregation or disruption of racist patterns in housing and educaiton may under conditions of inappropriate social policy and programming also lead to gang formation and gang violence.

Why one youth becomes a gang member and another, from the same family or community, does not is far from clear. What distinguishes the delinquent gang from delinquent group adaptation must be addressed. Also, not all delinquents are gang members, and not all gang members are delinquents. Of special consideration for purposes of policy and program development is the function that gangs play in satisfying social needs for structure and control and psychological needs of gang youths for personal identity and self-esteem. A coherent conceptual and policy basis must be created so that communities, their organizations, and citizen groups can better understand, prevent, and control the gang problem. Development of this basis is a central purpose of the book.

Key strategies of local community mobilization and the sufficient provision of social and economic opportunities in appropriate interactive form must be devised relevant to the nature and severity of the problem and the structure of social institutions in particular communities. However, local policy and programs are inevitably related, directly and indirectly, to larger national issues of racial segregation, immigration, illegitimate values, lack of jobs, defective educational systems, and increased access by youths to sophisticated weaponry. Furthermore, specific types of gangs, gang members, and gang incidents need to be targeted, and appropriate resources and integrated organizational arrangements created distinctively in different communities. There is no single strategy and no easy solution to the gang problem. Different strategies must be combined in meaningful ways, and they must be honestly and systematically tested.

Arrangement of Chapters

The book is divided into two parts, I. *Description and Analysis* (Chapters 1 through 9), and II. *Policy and Program* (Chapters 10 through 17). Chapter 1, *Introduction: Comparative and Historical Perspectives*, is a brief review of the problem across time, cultures, and societies. Chapter 2, *Research Limitations: Data Sources and Definitions*, is concerned with the development of a satisfactory empirical and definitional framework for the problem being described and analyzed. Chapter 3 describes the *scope and seriousness of the gang problem*. It provides best estimates, with special emphasis on violent gang activity. Chapter 4, *Gangs, Drugs, and Violence*, examines the complex relationship of gang violence and sale and use of drugs by gangs and gang members. Chapter 5 focuses on *gang member demographics and gang subcultures*. Distinctive race and ethnicity, age, and gender characteristics of gang problems are described. Chapter 6 deals with *the structure of the gang* as it appears to be evolving over time, and Chapter 7 is concerned with *the gang member experience*, that is, the character and process of gang life between the time gang members join and leave the gang. Chapter 8, *The Ecological Context*, examines the institutional environment that creates and facilitates gang development, with special attention to family, school, local politics, and prisons. Chapter 9, *Youth Gangs and Organized Crime*, points to the processes by which youth gang behavior and adult criminality become interrelated over time and sometimes interdependent in different contexts.

The second part of the book begins the analysis of what has been and what should

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be done about the problem. Chapter 10, *Theoretical Perspectives*, develops a bridge between the descriptive and analytical materials and policy and program issues. Chapter 11, *Planning for Youth Gang Control and Violence Reduction*, is a framework for action and analyzes five key strategies, emphasizing community mobilization and social and economic opportunities provision. Chapter 12, *Criminal Justice System: The Police*, is a discussion of traditional police suppression policy and practice, but also of evolving community policing and social outreach approaches relevant to the problem. Chapter 13, *Prosecution, Defense, and the Judiciary*, centers attention on three important units of the ciminal justice system and especially on evolving procedures and issues of effectiveness and politics. Chapter 14, *Probation, Corrections, and Parole—After Care*, continues the discussion with emphasis on the creative use of both justice system sanctions and social support or service procedures, after adjudication, required to deal with gang youths. Chapter 15, *Social Intervention*, analyzes past programs and evolving policies and procedures of social support and supervision by community-based agencies, with special attention to their effects, on the basis of evaluation research. In Chapter 16, *Social Opportunities: Education and Jobs*, emphasis is on the need to develop more appropriate educational, training, and employment contexts for socializing gang youths and young adults and thereby more effectively mainstreaming them into conventional society. Finally, Chapter 17, *Local Community Mobilization and Evolving National Policy*, summarizes policies required for a more promising approach to the gang problem, at both local community and national levels.

Chicago I. A. S.
March 1994

Acknowledgments

I owe debts of gratitude to many persons whose ideas, research, policy suggestions, program experiences, and special moral and financial support have influenced the development of this book. My early obligations are for the thoughts and guidance of Lloyd E. Ohlin and Richard A. Cloward, as well as the ideas of Frederic M. Thrasher and Clifford R. Shaw. For many years, the empirical findings, program critiques, and policy recommendations of Malcolm W. Klein and Walter B. Miller have provided a reality test of my own observations and analyses. Some recent researchers and theorists to whom I am indebted are Joan Moore, John Hagedorn, Terry Williams, Jeffrey Fagan, Ko-Lin Chin, Martin Sánchez Jankowski, Carl S. Taylor, and James F. Short.

Dr. Candice Kane, a criminal justice policy expert and associate director, Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, has been an extraordinary and longtime supporter of my research and field efforts. I am indebted to James C. Howell, Pamela Swain, Douglas Donahue, Douglas Dodge, and Leonard Johnson of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Justice Department. Many of the ideas in this book stem from earlier versions of documents produced as part of the Juvenile Gang Suppression and Intervention Program sponsored by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Many hard-working colleagues in our various projects have made me the beneficiary of their experiences, insights, and analyses. They include especially C. David Curry and Ron Chance. Recent mentors and colleagues in the struggle to understand and do something about the problem have included Lawrence Bobrowski, Phil Chomiak, Carolyn Block, Robert Dart, Wesley McBride, Miguel Duran, Michael Genelin, Robert Jackson, Edward Pleines, Roberto Caldero, James Rosado, Frank Perez, Alvin Delk, Angelo Torres, Roy Martinez, Javier Avila, Susan Grossman, and Josh Levy, among others.

I could not have persisted in the development of this complex and exhaustive work without excellent administrative and technical assistance from Keith Madderom, Louis Arata, Elizabeth McGiffin, Betty Bradley, Laura Anderson, and especially from Edwina Simmons, at the School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago. Special thanks for their patience and editorial help are also owed to David Roll, Melinda Wirkus, Leslie Reindl, and Susan Hannan at Oxford University Press.

Finally, this book would not have been written without the loving support of my sons, Barry, Mark, and Danny, and my very close friend, Annot Littleton.

The projects on which this work was based were supported in part by awards from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions contained within this book are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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I

Description and Analysis

1

Introduction: Comparative and Historical Perspectives

This chapter provides a brief set of reference points for designating gang phenomena across contemporary societies and their course in our own urban history. Gangs function as a socializing institution when other institutions fail; they are defined as problems when they engage in violent and criminal activities. The youth gang is most likely to develop into a problem in social or organizational contexts, local communities, or societies that are undergoing extensive and precipitous change, often under deteriorating (but sometimes under improving) economic conditions. During such change social institutions are weak and unstable, and organizations may be poorly integrated and in conflict with each other. Basic youth socializing functions, especially those of social control and provision of economic opportunities or social status for males, cannot be carried out. Gangs then provide a certain degree of order, solidarity, excitement, and sometimes economic gain for their members. The costs, however, usually exceed benefits for the surrounding community and society, as well as for the youth themselves.

Gang Problems in Other Countries and Times

Youth gangs have existed in Western and Eastern societies for centuries. Most recently they have been reported in England, Scotland, Germany, Italy, Russia and other republics of the former Soviet Union, Bosnia (formerly part of Yugoslavia), Albania, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Mexico, El Salvador, Brazil, Peru, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand, the People's Republic of China, and Papua New Guinea (see, for example, Oschlies 1979; Specht 1987; Burns 1993). Youth gangs are present in socialist and free-market societies, in developing and developed countries.

In the 1600s, London was "terrorized by a series of organized gangs calling themselves the Mims, Hectors, Bugles, Dead Boys . . . who found amusement in breaking windows, demolishing taverns, assaulting the watch . . . The gangs also fought pitched battles among themselves dressed with colored ribbons to distinguish the different factions" (Pearson 1983, p. 188). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, English gangs wore belts and metal pins with designs of serpents, hearts pierced with arrows, animals, and stars. More recently, gangs of youths set cars and a post office ablaze

and stoned police in a wave of urban violence and vandalism in northeast England. The rioting, which involved 500 youths, was variously attributed to "poverty, hardened criminals, and unseasonably hot weather" (*Chicago Tribune*, 1991).

During the Russian revolution of 1917, and particularly its aftermath, bands of children and youths roamed the countryside and urban centers, foraging for food, thieving, competing and in conflict with each other for the means to survive. In the course of recent upheavals, reports indicate the presence of gangs of youths and sometimes adult criminal organizations in Russia: "Ethnic violence has left at least 35 people dead in the Republic of Kirghizia . . . on Wednesday, with gangs of youths marauding on horseback . . . Soviet media . . . blamed the violence on widespread unemployment among youths in the region and general poverty. . . . " (Associated Press, 1990).

A 1992 report indicates that with the "crumbling" of law enforcement and radical change of the economic structure in the former Soviet Union, gangs are proliferating:

> There are dozens of criminal gangs in Moscow, and the most effective are highly organized and violent. . . . Gangs work in many areas, including gambling, prostitution, rackets and narcotics . . . some have acquired a stranglehold on the distribution of essential goods and services. Many police are on gang payrolls; some officers even have quit the force to work for gangs full time. (Gallagher 1992)

An observer of the radical transition of Russian society from communism toward democracy and a free market economy concludes that control has shifted to a new criminal network, replacing the old communist structure. Russian crime, he claims, is organized in three large circles:

> The first is characterized by street fighting and gangsterism. . . .
>
> The second circle . . . is made up of well-organized groups who aim higher than street robberies and burglaries. They trade in arms, narcotics and raw materials like plutonium at home and abroad. . . .
>
> A third circle . . . a network of shady high-rolling entrepreneurs—often referred to as the Russian mafia [is] in league with corrupt officials. . . . This group might sometimes employ the services of the other two. (Zlobin 1994)

The 1990s resurgence of right-wing youth gangs in Germany is associated with rapid social and political changes, weakening social institutions, and growing poverty. Nevertheless, it is important to make distinctions between a neo-Nazi movement and frustrated violent youth or street groups. Lack of a stable political structure and absence of career routes and job opportunities seem largely to account for the development of youth gangs.

> Conversations with rightist youths here suggest that while most of them are frustrated, angry, and prepared for violence, they are largely without political ideology. Many are unemployed and come from families whose lives have been thrown into upheaval by the jarring changes that have followed German unification.
>
> But a small number of young people here, perhaps only a few dozen, have schooled themselves with neo-Nazi propaganda and emerged as leaders of amorphous gangs that harass and beat foreigners.

> In the old East Germany, kids had a path clearly laid out for them. They went to school, they were given a career, they were trained and then they went to work. . . . (Kinzer 1992)

Furthermore, an attack by one group—whether of the same or a different ethnicity or race—may call for a retaliatory attack: "Berlin-Germany's tough young Turks hang out in vigilante gangs with names like 'The 20 Boys' and the '36ers,' but it's a street variant of Newton's law of physics they observe: For each and every action by neo-Nazis, there will be an equal and opposite reaction by Turkish street gangs" (Shankar 1993).

The skinheads are present in many European countries, and their development is related both to a lack of adequate employment opportunities for lower-class youth, an influx of immigrant groups, and large-scale population increase in a particular area. "The growth of skinhead movements is partly a reaction to the presence of North and West Africans, who came to peddle their wares in the summer beaches and who inspire resistance, even hatred among some Italians. . . . The region has already changed markedly since the war. From 8,000 in 1944, Anzio's permanent population has risen to 37,000" (Cowell 1994).

The Yakuza gangs of Japan may be of special relevance for governmental and community response to the future development of youth and adult gangs in countries undergoing rapid social change. The Yakuza are structured to provide an opportunity for marginal persons to participate in society. They draw youths from the lowest strata of Japanese society, including "the failures and dropouts who refuse to accommodate themselves" to the very competitive and rigid structures of Japanese life, and those "who have been rejected by the broader society and who find it difficult to find jobs" (Westerman and Burfeind 1991, p. 40).

The presence or extent of gang problems may be only partially related to the scope and severity of crime in general. The level of youth and adult crime activity is much lower in Japan than in America, but gangs—both youth and adult— in Japan probably commit a larger relative proportion of total serious crime than in the United States. The rate of violent crime in the United States is about thirty times greater than it is in Japan. The Japanese Ministry of Justice estimates that 3,197 Boryokudan groups existed in 1988 with membership totaling 86,552, or about 0.07 percent of the total population (Westerman and Burfeind 1991, p. 31).

According to Westerman and Burfeind, in 1988 this small proportion of the total population was involved in 25.3 percent of all arrests for homicide, 22.8 percent of all assault, and 64.3 percent of all arrests for intimidation. Gang members were also responsible for 45.2 percent of all arrests for violation of stimulant drug laws and 31.1 percent of all arrests for firearms and sword violations (ibid.).

Of greatest concern to Japanese society, however, are the well-established adult Yakuza gangs. For example, in 1991 the largest of these gangs, Yamaguchi-gumi, consisted of over 100 gangs with subordinate gangs to total over 750 gangs in all, with an average of twenty-five to thirty members per gang. The total income of all Yakuza gangs in 1989 was estimated by the police to be 9.6 billion yen, generated from the sale of drugs, gambling and protection, and intervention in civil disputes. "Japan may be unique in the centrality of organized crime and the extent to which

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