

Islands in the Street

Gangs and American Urban Society

Martín Sánchez Jankowski



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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
BERKELEY LOS ANGELES LONDON

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jankowski, Martín Sánchez, 1945-
Islands in the street : gangs and American urban society
/ Martín Sánchez Jankowski.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographic references and index.

ISBN 0-520-07434-3 (alk. paper)

1. Gangs—United States—Cross-cultural studies. I. Title.

HV6439.U5J36 1991

364.1'06'0973—dc20

90-48641
CIP

Printed in the United States of America

7 8 9

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum
requirements of American National Standard for Information
Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials,
ANSI Z39.48-1984. ∞

ISLANDS IN THE STREET

To my wife
Carmen Carrasquillo
por su apoyo, entendimiento, y los regalos brindados

Will you, surrounded as you have been all these years by all the appurtenances of civilization . . . grasp that the deathlike loneliness of our lives and the misery-laden air of the catacombs we have been breathing for so long have made our eyes terribly clear-sighted? May it not be, in the first moments after your return, that the visions these eyes can now see in the distance will frighten you?

Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen,
Diary of a Man in Despair
(September 1937)

Preface

Among the meanings given for the word *gang* in *Webster's New American Dictionary* is that of "a journey." The ten years and five months that I have spent on this research project have indeed been a journey. A journey not only through time but also into the lives of gang members and various other individuals who live in the low-income areas of New York, Boston, and Los Angeles. Ironically, it has also been a journey back into my youth, where the actors were different, but the stage and play were quite similar—a journey *Down These Mean Streets*, as Piri Thomas said about his own life in Spanish Harlem. In brief, it has been a journey with many benefits and some costs, a journey that has, irrespective of these emotional highs and lows, allowed me the opportunity to gain an understanding of one of the oldest and most important institutions that exists within the American low-income urban community—the gang. Throughout this journey I have met some wonderful people, whom I shall always remember with fondness, and I have met some not-so-wonderful people, whom I shall also not forget. Though the journey has had some important costs in terms of personal injury and the sorrow I felt for the tragedies that have beset some good people I liked, for me it has been worthwhile.

The origin of this gang project can be located in a study I was conducting in the 1970s on the political attitudes of Chicano youth. At that time, I wanted to compare my findings concerning Chicanos in Los Angeles with Puerto Ricans in New York and Boston. In the process of pre-testing the interview schedule in New York and Boston, I noticed that an enormously high number of young Puerto Ricans were involved in gangs, an observation identical to one I had made of Chicano youth in Los

Angeles. It then occurred to me that if one wanted, as I did, to have a sociological understanding of low-income communities in the United States, it would be necessary to understand why the gang phenomenon had persisted in the United States for more than one hundred years. So after completing my study of political attitudes, I embarked on developing a research project that focused on urban gangs. I knew that to develop a full understanding of the gang phenomenon, I would need to spend a great deal of time interacting with gangs. Thus, right from the start I committed myself to what I understood was a multi-year research project. The publication of this book marks the culmination of this ten-year commitment.

Over the more than ten years that I have been involved in this project, I have been the recipient of much support. Of all the things that comprise a book, it is the acknowledgement of support given me that brings me the most pleasure.

First, and foremost, I want to thank those gang members and their families who allowed me the opportunity to experience a part of their lives. Remarkably, all of those that I studied never once tried to influence my analysis of them. I am deeply appreciative of their cooperation. I also want to thank all of those people who in various official and unofficial capacities interact with gangs for allowing me the opportunity to interview them while they were in the process of executing their duties.

In addition to the gang members and the people who interact with them, I am indebted to four of my colleagues at Berkeley: David Matza, Claude Fischer, Ann Swidler, and Mike Rogin. They all read the entire manuscript and gave me thoughtful comments that helped me clarify my ideas. Mike Rogin deserves a very special acknowledgement because he tirelessly read two drafts of the manuscript and provided detailed comments on both.

I would also like to thank James F. Short, Jr., and Ruth Horowitz for their detailed comments on the manuscript; and Jameson Doig, who provided me with some insightful comments after a lecture I gave at Princeton.

Now let me turn my attention to the support I received while I was doing fieldwork. First, I would like to acknowledge the financial support that was given to keep me in the field. In this regard, I am indebted to the Ford Foundation, the Weatherhead Foundation, the Joint Center for Urban Studies of M.I.T. and Harvard University Fellowship Program,

and the Minority Post-doctoral Fellowship Program at the University of California at Berkeley.

Second, there was the encouragement that emotionally sustained me while I was in the field. For this, I would like to thank Sam Cohn, Julia Sheehan, Andres Jimenez, Maria Martinez, Adriana Jimenez, Troy Duster, Michael Hout, my brother and his family, and the Carrasquillo family. Terry Kemper and Joel Krieger deserve special thanks for their continual support over the full length of the project.

Next, I would like to express my gratitude to Nizam Fatah for his friendship and the opportunity to “hang” at his ICRY office for periodic R & R from the rigors of the street. I would also like to thank J.C., Father Divine, Bobcat, and Crazy Cat. While all of these individuals belonged to gangs, neither they nor their gangs were a part of my study; yet their friendship, like Nizam Fatah’s, provided me with some good times and periodic shelter from the storms associated with the fieldwork.

I would also like to thank Lewis Anthony Dexter, whom I was fortunate to have as a professor and friend during and after my graduate training. He provided me with many of the tools that I use to pursue my work, and for that I am very grateful. While he might not agree with some of my conclusions in this study, he will recognize his continued influence.

Although mere acknowledgment of this help cannot accurately portray how much assistance those mentioned provided me with, it is my hope that this acknowledgement will be taken by them as an indication of the fact that they and their deeds remain an important part of my memory.

At this point it is appropriate to state that none of the people or institutions mentioned are in any way responsible for the interpretations found in this book. Simply stated, their help made this a better book. Whatever defects still exist must be attributed solely to me.

Now for two personal notes. I would like to thank my mother and father for their unceasing support of my work, even though they worried, much as they did when I was young, the whole time I was in the field.

Finally, and most especially, I would like to thank my wife Carmen for all the understanding, support, and gifts that she provided me while the study was in progress. Although she was not a part of my life for the entire ten-plus years of the study, she was for a good part of it; and during that time she never once put pressure on me to stop my fieldwork. Nor did she express concern about the dangers of the work, or the time

away from home. Remarkably, each time I went to the field, she simply said good-bye in the same manner as if I were on my way to the university to give a lecture. In addition, and more important, during this period she provided me with two sons, Javier and Julian—two gifts that have given me incalculable pleasure. Thus, while this book is dedicated to her, it is in fact a grossly inadequate expression of my appreciation.

Before ending this preface, I would like to say something about my choice of a title for this book. There were many titles that would have been appropriate, but *Islands in the Street* seemed the most suitable. This is because the concept of an island has many of the symbolic meanings that I found fitting for what I discovered about gangs. First, there is the symbolism of being isolated, alone and yet self-sufficient, and this certainly applied to the gang members I studied. Then there is the symbolism involving the relationship between the island and the ocean. In this regard, islands are defined by the ocean they are in, and yet they also give definition to that same ocean. Likewise, gangs are defined by the social environments in which they operate, and yet they give definition to them as well. Finally, the use of the plural form of the word *island* in the title provides the additional symbol of an archipelago. Thus, just as groups of islands form aquatic archipelagos across the seascape, gangs form social archipelagos across the urban landscape.

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Introduction

The gang, in short, is life, often rough and untamed, yet rich in elemental social processes significant to the student of society and human nature.

Frederic Thrasher, *The Gang* (1928)

Gangs. The word has meant a number of things throughout history, but inevitably most people have used it with a negative connotation. Looking at the history of the word *gang* in the United States, one finds that the term has perennially been used of certain social groups considered to be major social problems of the time. The social science academy's research on gangs has had its own history, and the focus of this research has in turn been influenced largely by what society has considered the major social problems of the period.

In the United States, the history of applying the term *gang* to describe certain groups active in the economy starts with the western outlaws of the nineteenth century. All kinds of gangs were active in robbing stagecoaches, banks, mines, and saloons; some of the more famous were the Doolin, Dalton, and James gangs. There was no question that society, particularly western frontier society, considered these groups a social, economic, and moral problem. They posed a particular threat to social control, and people were concerned with understanding who these men were and what led them to become outlaws. Of course, to most of the residents of those areas in which outlaws were active, it undoubtedly was hoped that answers to these questions might be helpful in aiding the authorities to control them; while to those who resided in areas where outlaws were not active, the answers to the questions simply fueled the ro-

mance they had developed with the symbol of the outlaw. A romance, it might be added, that has carried forward today.

A formalized social science as we know it today did not yet exist, but various people made efforts to inquire into these questions and report their findings in books and the tabloids of the day. Interestingly, a problem researchers face today also presented itself to the researchers of the nineteenth-century outlaws—namely, accessibility to (and the cooperation of) the outlaws themselves. Outlaws, after all, had little reason to cooperate with a researcher, whose presence had the potential to raise the risk of their being captured, and most researchers surely judged the outlaws and their life-style to be too dangerous for field study. In the absence of direct observation, it is not surprising that the vast majority of their reportage was based on impressionistic, sensationalized second-hand accounts.¹ Likewise, it should not be surprising that such reportage was instrumental in building the outlaw mythology in the United States.²

As the nineteenth century moved toward its end, American society was faced with a new social problem: the social and economic assimilation of millions of immigrant workers from numerous countries into its cities. Within this group of immigrant workers, there was, of course, great variation in the quality of jobs secured and the degree of socioeconomic mobility.³ Some members of these groups saw an opportunity for socioeconomic mobility in crime and pursued those opportunities.⁴ This led to what has since become known as organized crime—that is, the establishment of organizations designed to operate in various illegal economic markets. To the general public's alarm, these organizations became increasingly successful, and by the 1920s and 1930s they were often considered the primary social problem of the time, the Great Depression notwithstanding. Although these forms of collective behavior were business organizations, they were labeled *gangs* by those who studied them.⁵ Thus it was that the word *gang*, originally used to refer to western outlaws, moved with the end of the frontier into the city, from the frontier wilderness to the urban wilderness.⁶

Although it is true that during this time the term *gang* was associated with organized crime, an analytic separation was also introduced between organized adult groups and those groups consisting primarily of young adolescents. This new conceptual framework was adopted out of an awareness that different individuals and groups experienced slower rates of integration into the economy, and a concern with identifying who among the immigrant population were most likely to be potential

recruits for the various organized crime syndicates. Both Herbert Asbury and Frederic Thrasher identified youth gangs as the socialization agents for the graduation of young delinquents to organized crime. Without doubt, the work of Frederic Thrasher was the most important study of gangs at the time. He was the first to treat the gang as an organizational phenomenon, and he focused primarily on adolescent gangs in order to understand both the conditions under which they began and the stages of their development. This approach illuminated the effects of the city on the immigrant community, gangs as an organizational phenomenon, and the process by which certain individuals were socialized into organized adult gangs (organized crime). Thus, Thrasher was both a product of his time and an innovator. His concern for the problems of the time (immigrant assimilation and the antecedents of organized crime) led him to conceptualize the gang in an innovative way. The gang phenomenon for Thrasher was not simply associated with adults; it had a youth component as well.

Because Thrasher's research on the gang was a general survey of all its aspects, his work was not only the most important of the time, it has remained the major influence on gang research ever since. After all, it was Thrasher who asserted: (1) that gangs emerge from poor and socially disorganized neighborhoods; (2) that boys join them because there is a lack of opportunity to do other things; (3) that the boys who do join gangs lack skills and the drive to compete with others for jobs; (4) that gangs are differentiated by age; and (5) that gangs facilitate delinquency. This is only a small sample of Thrasher's observations, and each of them (as well as many others) has been addressed by subsequent researchers, including all those researchers considered to have made important contributions to the theoretical and empirical study of gangs.

As time moved on from Thrasher's publication, *mob* became the term used for organized crime groups, and *gang* gradually became associated with adolescent boys. This trend was owing in part to the desire to separate analytically what Thrasher had identified as two social groupings involved in two related, but distinct, social problems—organized crime and delinquency. Given this new analytic distinction, subsequent research focused on two different aspects of gangs. In the first set of research involving delinquency,⁷ some researchers seized on Thrasher's observation that the gang facilitated delinquency and attempted to theorize the nature of the relationship. For example, Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin theorized that limited opportunity structures influence gang in-

volvement and delinquency;⁸ Albert Cohen posited that lower-class youths blocked from status within the larger society become involved with gangs to create their own subculture (primarily based on delinquency) in which they can achieve status;⁹ Herbert Bloch and Arthur Niederhoffer proposed that gang involvement and delinquency are the result of the process of psychological development among lower-class boys;¹⁰ and Walter Miller argued that gang involvement and delinquency are simply an extension of lower-class culture.¹¹ What all these theories have in common is that they attempt to explain the gang's role in lower-class youth delinquency.

In addition to theoretical studies on the relationship between gangs and delinquency, a number of researchers attempted empirically to examine (by different methods) how and why the gang facilitated delinquency. These investigations, most notably those of Yablonsky, Short and Strodtbeck, Miller, and Spergel, produced important evidence, as well as theoretical contributions, about the gang's impact on delinquent behavior.¹²

The second set of research focused on Thrasher's contention that gangs are "an interstitial element in the framework of society, and gangland [is] an interstitial region in the layout of the city." Gangs, in this approach, are simply part of the "poverty belt" of communities populated by ethnic peoples who live in the socioeconomic "zone of transition."¹³ These researchers' main concern was not with understanding how the gang related to delinquency, but rather with how the gang related to the low-income (primarily ethnic) community. Since the focus of these studies was on the community, the gang occupied only a limited part of their analysis. Although these studies do provide a good deal of rich information about the gang, it is located within the context of understanding the social construction of the communities under investigation.¹⁴

More recently, there has emerged a series of gang studies combining the interests of both the community and delinquency studies. These studies seek to explain gang behavior and crime as an outgrowth of the persistent and pervasive poverty that has afflicted certain black and Latino communities. Part of a growing number of investigations of what has come to be known as the urban underclass, these gang studies also address an issue raised by Thrasher, that of assessing the role of poverty (particularly the condition of having limited skills to compete in the job market) in stimulating criminal behavior among gang members.¹⁵ More will be said about these important studies later, but in essence, they un-

dertake to explain gang behavior in the context of the more general problems facing people who have been classified as part of an urban under-class.

In all of these studies of gangs, Thrasher's legacy is evident. All these researchers have attempted either to test his conclusions or to provide more current data for them, and most have made significant contributions to that end. However, most studies have more or less ignored one very important area that Thrasher discussed: the analysis of the gang as an organization. Despite all the research that has been done on the gang, the project of the gang itself has not been the primary focus of the vast majority of these investigations. Thus, although researchers have an intuitive understanding that the gang has organizational traits, for the most part, studies of gangs have not closely examined the nature, dynamic, and impact of the gang's organizational qualities.¹⁶ I believe that one of the reasons that society does not understand gangs or the gang phenomenon very well is that there have not been enough systematic studies undertaken as to how the gang works as an organization.¹⁷ We all associate the individual gang member with the organization, but we do not have much evidence at all as to what it is about the organization that makes his/her behavior different from what it would be if he or she were not in an organization. That is to say, what are the micro-dynamics associated with gang organizations. Of course, the primary reason for the paucity of studies with this focus is not simply one of conceptual oversight; it is, interestingly enough, the same problem as that faced by nineteenth-century researchers seeking to study outlaws—namely, the potential danger involved in systematically studying gangs and getting the gangs to cooperate. Through means that are described in some detail later in this introduction, I was able to overcome these two obstacles and systematically observe the internal dynamics and structure of gangs, and how they operate within society. In placing emphasis on the organization, however, the study does not neglect the gang as a collective of individuals. Indeed, one of the important features of this research is the investigation of the interplay between the behavior of the individual and that of the collective (organization). Thus, the present analysis begins the process of distinguishing individual acts from collective ones. This approach will help to explain why individuals come and go in gangs, why certain gangs succeed in their goals and others fail, and why one gang is able to persist and another vanishes.

The Nature of the Study: Setting, Methods, Analysis, and Presentation

The overall goal of the research project was to understand the gang phenomenon in the United States. In order to accomplish this goal, I thought it necessary to understand what was similar in the way all gangs behaved and what was idiosyncratic to certain gangs. In addition, I thought it was also necessary to understand why certain gangs grew, others declined but lingered on, and others declined and died. What follows is an explanation of the research design, the method of data gathering, the method of data analysis and presentation, and some ethical issues related to the research.

Past research on gangs had for the most part focused on gangs in one section of a city, gangs in one city, or gangs of one ethnic group. In order to understand the nature of the gang as an organization and the gang phenomenon in general, I believed it was necessary to undertake a comparative study. This was the only way to understand what gangs have in common with each other and what is idiosyncratic to particular gangs.

The Research Design and the Sample

Because it was deemed necessary for the research to be comparative on many levels, it was first essential to investigate gangs in different cities in order to control for the different socioeconomic and political environments that they operate in. Second, in order to determine if there were any differences associated with ethnicity, it was critical to compare gangs composed of different ethnic groups. Three metropolitan areas were therefore chosen for the study: the greater Los Angeles area, various boroughs of New York City, and the greater Boston area. These three areas were chosen because all three had a long history of gang activity and each had gangs operating within it when the research first began in 1978. In addition, each of the cities had a variety of ethnic groups involved in gangs.

These three cities were also ideal for comparisons because they were so different from each other. Two were eastern cities with certain weather patterns; the other was western with a completely different weather pattern. (Weather has often been thought to have an impact on gang activity, with colder weather restricting activity and warmer weather encouraging it.) Two have a vertical landscape with incredible density, the other