Peers and Delinquency: Juvenile Gangs and Groups

CHAPTER OUTLINE

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CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter you should:

1. Be familiar with the development of peer relations.
2. Know the various views of peer group cohesiveness.
3. Be able to define the concept of the gang.
4. Be familiar with the history of gangs.
5. Know the nature and extent of gang activity.
6. Recognize the various types of gangs.
7. Understand how gangs are structured.
8. Be familiar with the racial and ethnic makeup of gangs.
9. Discuss the various theories of gang development.
10. Know how police departments undertake gang prevention and suppression.
On May 8, 2003 Saul Dos Reis was sentenced to thirty years in prison for killing a young girl—thirteen-year-old Christina Long of Danbury, Connecticut, in 2002. Long and Dos Reis had developed an online relationship, and when they met in person the twenty-five-year-old man strangled the girl and left her body in a stream. Though Long was described by friends and family as a “sweet girl” who was captain of the cheerleading team and an altar girl at her local church, the police found evidence indicating that she regularly visited Internet chat rooms and was using provocative screen names to set up meetings with older men. Some of her peers described her behavior as sexually aggressive. Because of her unusual behavior, Christina was an outsider with few close friends who may have turned to the Internet for companionship.

The Long case illustrates the need for teens to bond with a positive peer group. When teens fail to connect they may seek out damaging social relationships. Some, like Christina Long, may get involved with predatory adults. Others may join with deviant peers and form law-violating youth groups and gangs.

Few issues in the study of delinquency are more important today than the problems presented by law-violating gangs and groups. Although some gangs are made up of only a few loosely organized neighborhood youths, others have thousands of members who cooperate in complex illegal enterprises. A significant portion of all drug distribution in the nation’s inner cities is believed to be gang-controlled; gang violence accounts for more than a thousand homicides each year. There has been an outcry from politicians to increase punishment for the “little monsters” and to save the “fallen angels,” or the victimized youths who are innocent.

The problem of gang control is a difficult one. Gangs flourish in inner-city areas that offer lower-class youths few conventional opportunities, and members are resistant to offers of help that cannot deliver legitimate economic hope. Although gang members may be subject to arrest, prosecution, and incarceration, a new crop of young recruits is always ready to take the place of their fallen comrades. Those sent to prison find that, upon release, their former gangs are only too willing to have them return to action.

We begin this chapter with a discussion of peer relations, showing how they influence delinquent behavior. Then we explore the definition, nature, and structure of delinquent gangs. Finally, the chapter presents theories of gang formation, the extent of gang activity, and gang-control efforts.

**ADOLESCENT PEER RELATIONS**

Although parents are the primary source of influence and attention in children’s early years, between ages eight and fourteen children seek out a stable peer group, and both the number and the variety of friendships increase as children go through adolescence. Friends soon begin to have a greater influence over decision making than parents. By their early teens, children report that their friends give them emotional...
support when they are feeling bad and that they can confide intimate feelings to peers without worrying about their confidences being betrayed.\(^3\)

As they go through adolescence, children form **cliques**, small groups of friends who share activities and confidences.\(^4\) They also belong to **crowds**, loosely organized groups of children who share interests and activities such as sports, religion, or hobbies. Intimate friends play an important role in social development, but adolescents are also deeply influenced by this wider circle of friends. Adolescent self-image is in part formed by perceptions of one’s place in the social world.\(^5\)

In later adolescence, acceptance by peers has a major impact on socialization. Popular youths do well in school and are socially astute. In contrast, children who are rejected by their peers are more likely to display aggressive behavior and to disrupt group activities by bickering or behaving antisocially. Another group of kids—**controversial status youth**—are aggressive kids who are either highly liked or intensely disliked by their peers. These controversial youths are the ones most likely to become engaged in antisocial behavior. When they find themselves in leadership positions among their peers they get them involved in delinquent and problem behaviors.\(^6\)

It is clear that peer status during childhood is an important contributor to a child’s social and emotional development that follows the child across the life course.\(^7\) For example, girls who engage in aggressive behavior with childhood peers later have more conflict-ridden relationships with their romantic partners. Boys who are highly aggressive and are therefore rejected by their peers in childhood are also more likely to engage in criminality and delinquency from adolescence into young adulthood.\(^8\) Peer relations, then, are a significant aspect of maturation. Peer influence may be more important than parental nurturance in the development of long-term behavior.\(^9\) Peers guide each other and help each other learn to share and cooperate, to cope with aggressive impulses, and to discuss feelings they would not dare bring up at home. Youths can compare their own experiences with peers and learn that others have similar concerns and problems.\(^10\)

### Peer Relations and Delinquency

Research shows that peer group relationships are closely tied to delinquent behaviors: delinquent acts tend to be committed in small groups rather than alone, a process referred to as **co-offending**.\(^11\) Youths who report inadequate or strained peer relations are the ones most likely to become delinquent.\(^12\) Adolescents who maintain delinquent friends are more likely to engage in antisocial behavior and drug abuse.

Some kids are particularly susceptible to peer influence. In one recent study Richard Felson and Dana Haynie found that boys who go through puberty at an early age were more likely to later engage in violence, property crimes, drug use, and precocious sexual behavior. The boys who matured early were the most likely to develop strong attachments to delinquent friends and to be influenced by peer pressure.\(^13\) The conclusion: the earlier youngsters develop relationships with delinquent peers and the closer those relationships get, the more likely they will become delinquent.

### Impact of Peer Relations

Does having antisocial peers cause delinquency, or are delinquents antisocial youths who seek out like-minded companions because they can be useful in committing crimes? There are actually four independent viewpoints on this question.

1. According to the control theory approach articulated by Travis Hirschi (chapter 4) delinquents are as detached from their peers as they are from other elements of society.\(^14\) Although they appear to have close friends, delinquents actually lack the social skills to make their peer relations rewarding or fulfilling.\(^15\) Antisocial adolescents seek out like-minded peers for criminal associations. If delinquency is committed in groups, it is because “birds of a feather flock together.”
2. Delinquent friends cause law-abiding youth to “get in trouble.” Kids who fall in with a “bad crowd” are at risk for delinquency. Youths who maintain friendships with antisocial peers are more likely to become delinquent regardless of their own personality or the type of supervision they receive at home. Even previously law-abiding youths are more likely to get involved in delinquency if they become associated with friends who initiate them into delinquent careers.

3. Antisocial youths join up with like-minded friends; deviant peers sustain and amplify delinquent careers. As children move through the life course, antisocial friends help them maintain delinquent careers and obstruct the aging-out process. In contrast, nondelinquent friends moderate delinquency. If adulthood brings close and sustaining ties to conventional friends, and marriage and family, the level of deviant behavior will decline.

4. Troubled kids choose delinquent peers out of necessity rather than desire. The social baggage they cart around prevents them from developing associations with conventional peers. Because they are impulsive, they may hook up with friends who are dangerous and get them into trouble. Deviant peers do not cause straight kids to go bad but they amplify the likelihood of a troubled kid getting further involved in antisocial behaviors.

Although each of these scenarios has its advocates, the weight of the empirical evidence clearly indicates that delinquent peers have a significant influence on behavior: youths who are loyal to delinquent friends, belong to gangs, and have “bad companions” are the ones most likely to commit crimes and engage in violence. Furthermore, the friendship patterns of delinquents may not be dissimilar from those of nondelinquents; delinquent youths report that their peer relations contain elements of caring and trust and that they can be open and intimate with their friends. Warm intergroup associations contradict the control theory model, which holds that delinquents are loners, and support the cultural deviance view that delinquents form close-knit groups that sustain their behavior.

**YOUTH GANGS**

As youths move through adolescence, they gravitate toward cliques that provide them with support, assurance, protection, and direction. In some instances the peer group provides the social and emotional basis for antisocial activity. When this happens, the clique is transformed into a gang.

Today, such a powerful mystique has grown up around gangs that mere mention of the word evokes images of black-jacketed youths roaming the streets in groups bearing such names as the Latin Kings, Crips, and Bloods. Films, television shows, novels, and even Broadway musicals have popularized the youth gang.

Considering the suspected role gangs play in violent crime and drug activity, it is not surprising that gangs have recently become the target of a great deal of research interest. Important attempts have been made to gauge their size, location, makeup, and activities.
What Are Gangs?

Gangs are groups of youths who engage in delinquent behaviors. Yet gang delinquency differs from group delinquency. Whereas group delinquency consists of a short-lived alliance created to commit a particular crime or violent act, gang delinquency involves long-lived institutions that have a distinct structure and organization, including identifiable leadership, division of labor, rules, rituals, and possessions.

Delinquency experts are often at odds over the precise definition of a gang. The term is sometimes used broadly to describe any congregation of youths who have joined together to engage in delinquent acts. However, police departments often use it only to refer to cohesive groups that hold and defend territory, or turf.28

Academic experts have also created a variety of definitions. The core elements in the concept of the gang are that it is an **interstitial group**—one falling within the cracks and crevices of society—and that it maintains standard group processes, such as recruiting new members, setting goals, assigning roles, and developing status.29

Malcolm Klein argues that two factors stand out in all of these definitions:

- Members have self-recognition of their gang status and use special vocabulary, clothing, signs, colors, graffiti, and names. Members set themselves apart from the community and are viewed as a separate entity by others. Once they get the label of gang, members eventually accept and take pride in their status.
- There is a commitment to criminal activity, although even the most criminal gang members spend the bulk of their time in noncriminal activities.30

How Did Gangs Develop?

The youth gang is sometimes viewed as uniquely American, but gangs have also been reported in several other nations.31 Nor are gangs a recent phenomenon. In the 1600s, London was terrorized by organized gangs that called themselves “Hec-tors,” “Bugles,” “Dead Boys,” and other colorful names. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, English gang members wore distinctive belts and pins marked with serpents, animals, stars, and the like.32 The first mention of youth gangs in America occurred in the late 1780s, when prison reformers noted the presence of gangs of young people hanging out on Philadelphia’s street corners. By the 1820s New York’s Bowery and Five Points districts, Boston’s North End and Fort Hill, and the outlying Southwark and Moyamensing sections of Philadelphia were the locales of youth gangs with colorful names like the Roach Guards, Chichester, the Plug Uglies, and the Dead Rabbits.33

In the 1920s, Frederick Thrasher initiated the study of the modern gang in his analysis of more than thirteen hundred youth groups in Chicago.34 He found that the social, economic, and ecological processes that affect the structure of cities create cracks in the normal fabric of society—weak family controls, poverty, and social disorganization—and referred to this as an **interstitial area**. According to Thrasher, groups of youths develop to meet such needs as play, fun, and adventure, activities that sometimes lead to delinquent acts. Impoverished areas present many opportunities for conflict between groups of youths and adult authority. If this conflict continues, the groups become more solidified and their activities become primarily illegal, and the groups develop into gangs.

According to Thrasher, adult society does not meet the needs of lower-class youths, and the gang solves the problem by offering excitement, fun, and opportunity. The gang is not a haven for disturbed youths but an alternative lifestyle for normal boys. Thrasher’s work has had an important influence. Recent studies of delinquent gang behavior also view the gang as a means for lower-class boys to achieve advancement and opportunity as well as to defend themselves and to attack rivals. For example, the National Youth Gang Center defines gangs this way:
A youth gang is commonly thought of as a self-formed association of peers having the following characteristics: three or more members, generally ages twelve to twenty-four; a gang name and some sense of identity, generally indicated by such symbols as style of clothing, graffiti, and hand signs; some degree of permanence and organization; and an elevated level of involvement in delinquent or criminal activity.35

Gangs in the 1950s and 1960s  In the 1950s and early 1960s, the threat of gangs and gang violence swept the public consciousness. Newspapers featured stories on the violent behavior of fighting gangs like the Egyptian Kings, the Vice Lords, and the Blackstone Rangers. Movies such as The Wild Ones and Blackboard Jungle were made about gangs, and the Broadway musical (and later movie) West Side Story romanticized violent gangs.

By the mid-1960s, the gang menace seemed to have disappeared. Some experts attribute the decline of gang activity to successful community-based programs.36 Others believe gangs were eliminated because police gang-control units infiltrated gangs, arrested leaders, and constantly harassed members.37 Another explanation is the increase in political awareness that developed during the 1960s. Many gang leaders became involved in social or political activities. In addition, many gang members were drafted. Still another explanation is that many gang members became active users of heroin and other drugs, which curtailed their group-related criminal activity.38

Gangs Reemerge  Interest in gang activity began anew in the early 1970s. Bearing such names as Savage Skulls and Black Assassins, gangs began to form in New York’s South Bronx neighborhoods in the spring of 1971 and quickly spread to other parts of the city. By 1975, there were 275 police-verified gangs with eleven thousand members.39

Gang activity also reemerged in other major cities, such as Chicago and Los Angeles. In addition, large urban gangs sent representatives to organize chapters in distant areas or to take over existing gangs. Members of the two largest gangs in Los Angeles, the Crips and the Bloods, began operations in midwestern cities. Even medium-size cities, such as Columbus, Ohio, saw gangs emerge from local dance and “rap” groups and neighborhood street-corner groups.40
**Why Did Gangs Reemerge?** One reason for the increase in gang activity may be involvement in the sale of illegal drugs. Early gangs relied on group loyalty to encourage membership, but modern gang members are lured by the quest for drug profits. In some areas, gangs have replaced organized crime families as the dominant suppliers of cocaine and crack. The traditional weapons of gangs—chains, knives, and homemade guns—have been replaced by automatic weapons.

Drug trafficking is by no means the only reason for gang activity. Gang formation is the natural consequence of the economic and social dislocation that occurred when the economy shifted from a relatively high-paying manufacturing economy to a low-wage service economy. Some U.S. cities that required a large population base for their manufacturing plants now face economic stress as these plants shut down. In this uneasy economic climate, gangs flourish, while the influence of successful adult role models and stable families declines. The presence of gangs in areas unaccustomed to delinquent group activity can have a devastating effect on community life.

While this social dislocation was occurring the media fell in love with gang images, which appeared in films and music videos. Gangsta rap became a national phenomenon. Because there has been a diffusion of the gang culture through the popular media, in which gang boys are made to appear as successful heroes, urban kids may find the lure of gangs and law-violating peer groups irresistible.

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**CONTEMPORARY Gangs**

The gang cannot be viewed as a uniform or homogeneous social concept. Gangs vary by activity, makeup, location, leadership style, and age. The next sections describe some of the most salient features of contemporary gangs.

**Extent**

The most recent National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) sponsored by the federal government illustrates the rise in gang activity over the past twenty years. It is now estimated that youth gangs are active in over twenty-three hundred cities with populations over twenty-five hundred. Gang activity is notably prevalent in the largest cities (over one hundred thousand population): over 90 percent of these cities reported gang activity in each year between 1996 and 2001. As of 2000, an estimated 24,500 gangs containing about 772,500 gang members were active in the United States.

The widespread presence of gangs is not surprising considering that local surveys indicate that a significant number of American youths are now or at one time have been gang members. One survey of nearly six thousand eighth-graders found that 11 percent were currently gang members and 17 percent said they had belonged to a gang at some point in their lives.

**Location**

While some people think of gangs as a purely urban phenomenon, an estimated fifteen thousand gangs with three hundred thousand members are located in small cities, suburban counties, and even rural areas. Traditionally, gangs have operated in large urban areas experiencing rapid population change. In these transitional neighborhoods, diverse ethnic and racial groups find themselves in competition with one another. Intergang conflict and homicide rates are high in these areas, which house the urban “underclass.” However, these neighborhoods eventually evolve into permanently disorganized neighborhoods, where population shifts slow down, permitting patterns of behavior and traditions to develop over a number of years. Most typical are the poverty-stricken areas of New York and Chicago and the Mexican American barrios of the southwestern states and California. These
areas contain large, structured gang clusters that are resistant to change or control by law enforcement agencies.

The growth of gangs in suburban and rural areas has been attributed to a re-structuring of the population. There has been a massive movement of people out of the central city to outlying communities and suburbs. In some cities, once-fashionable neighborhoods have declined, while in others downtown areas have undergone extensive renewal. Previously impoverished inner-city districts of major cities such as New York and Chicago are now quite fashionable and expensive, devoted to finance, retail stores, high-priced condos, and entertainment. Two aspects of this development inhibit urban gang formation: (1) there are few residential areas and thus few adolescent recruits, and (2) there is intensive police patrol.

Migration

Because of redevelopment, gangs in some areas have relocated or migrated. A recent National Gang Survey found that about 20 percent of gang members were migrants from another jurisdiction. In rural areas, about a third of members had come from elsewhere; in suburban counties, 20 percent were outsiders. Larger cities had the smallest percentage of migrants (17 percent), indicating that the flow of gang members was from more to less populated areas, and not vice versa.48

About seven hundred U.S. cities have experienced some form of gang migration during the past decade. The most common reason for migrating is personal and social—that is, family relocation causes gang boys to move or stay with relatives. Some migration may have a specific criminal purpose, such as expanding drug sales and markets.

Most migrators are African-American or Hispanic males who maintain close ties with members of their original gangs “back home.”49 Some migrants join local gangs, shedding old ties and gaining new affiliations. Although some experts fear the outcome of migration, it appears the number of migrants is relatively small in proportion to the overall gang population, supporting the contention that most gangs actually are “homegrown.”50

Types

Gangs have been categorized by activity: some are devoted to violence and to protecting neighborhood boundaries, or turf; others are devoted to theft; some specialize in drug trafficking; others are concerned with recreation rather than crime.51

In their early work, Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin recognized that some gangs specialized in violent behavior, others were **retraitists** whose members actively engaged in substance abuse, and a third type were criminal.52

It has become increasingly difficult to make these distinctions because so many gang members are now involved in all three behaviors, but experts continue to find that gangs can be characterized according to their dominant activities. For example, Jeffrey Fagan found that most gangs fall into one of these four categories:

1. **Social gang.** Involved in few delinquent activities and little drug use other than alcohol and marijuana. Members are more interested in social activities.
2. **Party gang.** Concentrates on drug use and sales but forgoes most delinquent behavior. Drug sales are designed to finance members’ personal drug use.
3. **Serious delinquent gang.** Engages in serious delinquent behavior while eschewing most drug use. Drugs are used only on social occasions.
4. **Organized gang.** Heavily involved in criminality. Drug use and sales are related to other criminal acts. For example, violent acts are used to establish control over drug sale territories. This gang is on the verge of becoming a formal criminal organization.53
Cohesion

The standard definition of a gang implies that it is a cohesive group. However, some experts refer to gangs as near-groups, which have limited cohesion, impermanence, minimal consensus of norms, shifting membership, disturbed leadership, and limited definitions of membership expectations.54 Gangs maintain a small core of committed members, who work constantly to keep the gang going, and a much larger group of affiliated youths, who participate in gang activity only when the mood suits them. James Diego Vigil found that boys in Latino barrio gangs (Hispanic neighborhood gangs) could be separated into regular members and those he describes as "peripheral," "temporary," and "situational."55

Current research indicates that, although some gangs remain near-groups, others become quite organized and stable. These gangs resemble traditional organized crime families more than temporary youth groups. Some, such as Chicago’s Latin Kings and Gangster Disciples, have members who pay regular dues, are expected to attend gang meetings regularly, and carry out political activities to further gang ambitions.

Age

The ages of gang members range widely, perhaps from as young as eight to as old as fifty-five.56 However, members of offending groups are usually no more than
a few years apart in age, with a leader who may be a few years older than most other members.57

Research indicates that youths first hear about gangs at around nine years of age, get involved in violence at ten or eleven, and join their first gang at twelve. By age thirteen, most members have (a) fired a pistol, (b) seen someone killed or seriously injured, (c) gotten a gang tattoo, and (d) been arrested.58 Gang experts believe the average age of gang members has been increasing yearly, a phenomenon explained in part by the changing structure of the U.S. economy.59

**Why Are Gang Members Aging?** Gang members are getting older. Relatively high-paid, low-skilled factory jobs that would entice older gang members to leave the gang have been lost to overseas competition. Replacing them are low-level drug-dealing opportunities that require a gang affiliation. William Julius Wilson found that the inability of inner-city males to obtain adequate jobs means that they cannot afford to marry and raise families. Criminal records acquired at an early age quickly lock these youths out of the job market; remaining in a gang becomes an economic necessity.60

John Hagedorn also found that economic change has had an impact on the age structure of gang membership. Whereas in the past older members could easily slip into the economic mainstream, less than one in five founding members of the youth gangs Hagedorn studied were able to find full-time employment by their mid-twenties. “Old heads”—older members with powerful street reputations—were held in high esteem by young gang members. In the past, ex-members helped steer gang members into conventional roles and jobs. Today, young adults continue their relationships with their old gangs and promote hustling, drug use, and sexual promiscuity. As a result, gang affiliations can last indefinitely, and it is not unusual for the children and even grandchildren of gang members to affiliate with the same gang.61

Hagedorn and his associates found that there are actually four types of adult gang members:
- **Legits** have left the gang and “hood” behind.
- **Dope fiends** are addicted to cocaine and need drug treatment.
- **New Jacks** have given up on the legitimate economy and see nothing wrong in selling cocaine to anyone.
- **Homeboys** are adult gang members who work regular jobs, but when they cannot make enough money they sell cocaine. They wish to have a “normal” life but believe ganging is the only way to make ends meet.62

**Gender** Traditionally, gangs were considered a male-dominated enterprise. Of the more than a thousand groups included in Thrasher’s original survey, only half a dozen were female gangs. Females were involved in gangs in three ways: as auxiliaries (or branches) of male gangs, as part of sexually mixed gangs, or as autonomous gangs. Auxiliaries are a feminized version of the male gang name, such as the Lady Disciples rather than the Devil’s Disciples.

Today the number of female gang members and female gangs is rapidly increasing. An analysis of Denver youths found that approximately 25 percent of the gang members were female.63 A recent survey of almost six thousand youths in forty-two schools in eleven cities found that almost 40 percent of the gang members were female.64 It has been estimated that between one-fourth and one-third of all youth gang members are female.65

**Girls in the Gang** What benefits does gang membership offer to females? According to the “liberation” view, ganging can provide girls with a sense of “sisterhood,”
independence, and solidarity, as well as a chance to earn profit through illegal activities. Although initial female gang participation may be forged by links to male gang members, once in gangs girls form close ties with other female members and engage in group criminal activity.66

In contrast, the “social injury” view suggests that female members are still sexually exploited by male gang boys and are sometimes forced to exploit other females. Girls who are members of male gang auxiliaries report that males control them by determining the arenas within which they can operate (for example, the extent to which they may become involved in intergang violence). Males also play a divisive role in the girls’ relationships with each other; this manipulation is absent for girls in independent gangs.67 When criminologist Jody Miller studied female gangs in St. Louis, Missouri, and Columbus, Ohio, she found that girls in mixed gangs expressed little evidence of “sisterhood” and solidarity with other female gang members.68 Rather, female gang members expressed hostility to other women in the gang, believing, for example, that those who suffered sexual assault by males in the same gang actually deserved what they got. Instead of trying to create a sense of sisterhood, female gang members tried to identify with males and view themselves as thereby becoming “one of the guys” in the gang.

Why then do girls join gangs if they are exploitive and provide little opportunities for “sisterhood”? Miller found that even though being a gang member is not a walk in the park, most girls join gangs in an effort to cope with their turbulent personal lives, which may provide them with an even harsher reality; they see the gang as an institution that can increase their status and improve their lifestyle. The gang provides them with an alternative to a tough urban lifestyle filled with the risk of violence and victimization. Many of the girl gang members had early exposure to neighborhood violence, had encounters with girl gangs while growing up, had experienced severe family problems (violence or abuse), and had close family members who were gang-involved.69 Did they experience life benefits after they joined the
The evidence is mixed. Miller found that female gang members increased their delinquent activities and increased their risk of becoming a crime victim; they were more likely to suffer physical injury than girls who shunned gang membership. The risk of being sexually assaulted by male members of their own gang was also not insignificant. However, female gang membership did have some benefits: it protected female gang members from sexual assault by nongang neighborhood men, which they viewed as a more dangerous and deadly risk.

**Formation**

Gang formation involves a sense of territoriality. Most gang members live in close proximity to one another, and their sense of belonging extends only to their small area of the city. At first, a gang may form when members of an ethnic minority join together for self-preservation. As the group gains domination over an area, it may view the area as its own territory, or turf, which needs to be defended from outsiders.

Once formed, gangs grow when youths who admire the older gang members “apply” and are accepted for membership. Sometimes the new members will be given a special identity that reflects their apprenticeship status. Joan Moore and her associates found that *klikas*, or youth cliques, in Hispanic gangs remain together as unique groups with separate names, identities, and experiences; they also have more intimate relationships among themselves than among the general gang membership. She likens *klikas* to a particular class in a university, such as the class of ‘05.

Moore also found that gangs can expand by including members’ kin, even if they do not live in the neighborhood, and rival gang members who wish to join because they admire the gang’s way of doing things. Adding outsiders gives the gang the ability to take over new territory. However, it also brings with it new problems because it usually results in greater conflicts with rival gangs.

**Leadership**

Delinquent gangs tend to be small and transitory. Youths often belong to more than a single group or clique and develop an extensive network of delinquent associates. Group roles can vary, and an adolescent who assumes a leadership role in one group may be a follower in another.

Those who assume leadership roles are described as “cool characters” who have earned their position by demonstrating fighting prowess, verbal quickness, or athletic distinction. They emphasize that leadership is held by one person and varies with particular activities, such as fighting, sex, and negotiations. In fact, in some gangs each age level has its own leaders. Older members are not necessarily considered leaders by younger members. In his analysis of Los Angeles gangs, Malcolm Klein observed that many gang leaders deny leadership. He overheard one gang boy claim, “We got no leaders, man. Everybody’s a leader, and nobody can talk for nobody else.” The most plausible explanation of this ambivalence is the boy’s fear that his decisions will conflict with those of other leaders.

There appear, then, to be diverse concepts of leadership, depending on the structure of the gang. Less-organized gangs are marked by diffuse and shifting leadership. More organized gangs have a clear chain of command and leaders who are supposed to plan activities and control members’ behavior.

**Communications**

Gangs seek recognition, both from their rivals and from the community. Image and reputation depend on the ability to communicate to the rest of the world.

One major source of communication is *graffiti* (see Figure 8.1). These wall writings are especially elaborate among Latino gangs, who call them *placasos* or *placa*, meaning *sign* or *plaque*. Latino graffiti usually contain the writer’s street name and...
the name of the gang. Strength or power is asserted through the terms rifà, which means to rule, and controllo, indicating that the gang controls the area. Another common inscription is “p/v,” for por vida; this refers to the fact that the gang expects to control the area “for life.” The numeral 13 signifies that the gang is loco, or “wild.” Crossed-out graffiti indicates that a territory is contested by a rival gang.

Gangs also communicate by means of a secret vocabulary. Members may refer to their crew, posse, troop, or tribe. Within larger gangs are “sets,” who hang in particular neighborhoods, and “tips,” small groups formed for particular purposes. Flashing or tossing gang signs in the presence of rivals often escalates into a verbal or physical confrontation. Chicago gangs call this representing. Gang members will proclaim their affiliation and ask victims “Who do you ride?” or “What do you be about?” An incorrect response will provoke an attack. False representing can be used to misinform witnesses and victims.

In some areas, gang members communicate their membership by wearing jackets with the name of their gang on the back. In Boston neighborhoods, certain articles of clothing (for example, sneakers) are worn to identify gang membership. In Los Angeles, the Crips are identified with the color blue and will wear some article of blue clothing to communicate their allegiance; their rivals, the Bloods, identify with the color red.

**Ethnic and Racial Composition**

The 2001 National Youth Gang Survey found that the race/ethnicity composition of gangs is as follows: nearly half of all gang members are Hispanic/Latino; about one-third are African American/Black; 10 percent are Caucasian/White, 6 percent are Asian, and the remainder are of some other race/ethnicity (Figure 8.2). Racial composition of gangs varies considerably by locality and in some areas there are a larger
proportion of Caucasian/White gang members than any other racial/ethnic group. Most intergang conflict appears to be among groups of the same ethnic and racial background. However, upwards of 40 percent of all gangs are reportedly of mixed race and ethnicity.

The ethnic distribution of gangs corresponds to their geographic location; the racial/ethnic composition of gangs is an extension of the characteristics of the larger community. For example, in Philadelphia and Detroit the overwhelming number of gang members are African American. In New York and Los Angeles, Latino gangs predominate. Newly emerging immigrant groups are making their presence felt in gangs. Authorities in Buffalo, New York, estimate that 10 percent of their gang population is Jamaican. A significant portion of Honolulu's gangs are Filipinos.

African-American Gangs

The first Black youth gangs were organized in the early 1920s. Since they had few rival organizations, they were able to concentrate on criminal activity rather than defending their turf. By the 1930s, the expanding number of rival gangs spawned inner-city gang warfare.

In Los Angeles, the first black youth gang formed in the 1920s was the Boozies. This gang virtually ran the inner city until the 1930s. In the next twenty years, a number of black gangs, including the Businessmen, Home Street, Slauson, and Neighborhood, emerged and met with varying degrees of criminal success. In the 1970s, the dominant Crips gang was formed. Other gangs merged into the Crips or affiliated with it by adding “Crips” to their name, so that the Main Street gang became the Main Street Crips. The dominance of the Crips has since been challenged by its archrivals, the Bloods. Both of these groups, whose total membership exceeds twenty-five thousand youths, are heavily involved in drug trafficking.

In Chicago, the Blackstone Rangers dominated illicit activities for almost twenty-five years, beginning in the 1960s and lasting into the early 1990s, when its leader, Jeff Fort, and many of his associates were indicted and imprisoned. The Rangers, who later evolved into the El Rukn gang, worked with “legitimate” businessmen to import and sell heroin. Earning millions in profits, they established businesses that helped them launder drug money. Though many of the convictions were later overturned, the power of El Rukn was ended.

The Rangers’ chief rivals, the Black Gangster Disciples, are now the dominant gang in Chicago. They have a structure, activities, and relationships similar to traditional organized gangs like the Mafia. Members are actively involved in politics. They meet regularly, commit crimes as a group, and maintain ongoing relationships with other street gangs and with prison-based gangs. The Gangster Disciples have extensive
ownership of “legitimate” private businesses. They offer “protection” against rival gangs and supply stolen merchandise to customers and employees.78

African-American gang members have some unique characteristics. They frequently use nicknames. “Little 45” might be used by someone whose favorite weapon is a large handgun. Although TV shows portray gangs as wearing distinctive attire, members usually favor nondescript attire to reduce police scrutiny. However, gang members frequently have distinctive hairstyles, such as shaving or braids, that are designed to look like their leaders’. Tattooing is popular, and members often wear colored scarves or “rags” to identify their gang affiliation. It is also common for black gang members to mark their territory with distinctive graffiti: drawings of guns, dollar signs, proclamations of individual power, and profanity.

Hispanic Gangs

The popularity of gangs and gang culture is relatively high among youth of Hispanic background, explaining in part their disproportionate participation in gang membership.79

Hispanic gangs are made up of youths whose ethnic ancestry can be traced to one of several Spanish-speaking cultures. They are known for their fierce loyalty to their “home” gang. Admission to the gang usually involves an initiation ritual in which boys are required to prove their machismo. The most common test requires novices to fight several established members or to commit some crime, such as a robbery. The code of conduct associated with membership means never ratting on a brother, or even a rival.

In some areas, Hispanic gangs have a fixed leadership hierarchy. However, in Southern California, which has the largest concentration of Hispanic youth gangs, leadership is fluid. During times of crisis those with particular skills will assume command.80 For example, one boy will lead in combat while another negotiates drug deals.

Hispanic gang members are known for their dress codes. Some wear dark-colored caps pulled down over the ears with a small roll at the bottom. Others wear a folded bandana over the forehead and tied in back. Another popular headpiece is the “stingy brim” fedora or a baseball cap with the wearer’s nickname and gang affiliation written on the bill. Members favor tank-style T-shirts that give them quick access to weapons.

Members also mark off territory with colorful and intricate graffiti. Hispanic gang graffiti has very stylized lettering and frequently uses three-dimensional designs.
Hispanic gangs have a strong sense of turf, and a great deal of gang violence is directed at warding off any threat to their control. Slight by rivals, including put-downs, stare-downs (“mad-dogging”), defacing gang insignia, and territorial intrusions, can set off a violent confrontation, often with high-powered automatic weapons.

Asian Gangs Asian gangs are prominent in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and Houston. The earliest gangs, the Wah Ching, were formed in the nineteenth century by Chinese youths affiliated with adult crime groups (tongs). In the 1960s, two other gangs formed in San Francisco, the Joe Boys and Yu Li, and they now operate, along with the Wah Ching, in many major U.S. cities. National attention focused on the activities of these Chinese gangs in 1977 when a shootout in the Golden Dragon restaurant in San Francisco left five dead and eleven wounded.

Ko-Lin Chin has described the inner workings of Chinese youth gangs. Chin finds that these gangs have unique properties, such as their reliance on raising capital from the Chinese community through extortion and then investing this money in legitimate business enterprises. Chinese gangs recruit new members from the pool of disaffected youths who have problems at school.

In addition to Chinese gangs, Samoan gangs have operated on the West Coast, as have Vietnamese gangs. James Diego Vigil and Steve Chong Yun found that the formation of Vietnamese gangs can be tied to external factors, including racism and economic problems, and to internal problems, including family stress and failure to achieve the success enjoyed by other Asians. Vietnamese gangs are formed when youths feel they need their ahns, or brothers, for protection. Asian gangs tend to victimize members of their own ethnic group. Because of group solidarity and distrust of outside authorities, little is known about their activities.

Anglo Gangs The first American youth gangs were made up of White ethnic youths of European ancestry. During the 1950s, they competed with African-American and Hispanic gangs in the nation’s largest cities.

Today, Anglo gang activity is not uncommon, especially in smaller towns. Many are derivatives of the English punk and skinhead movement of the 1970s. These youths, generally children of lower-class parents, sported wildly dyed hair often shaved into “mohawks,” military clothing, and iron-cross earrings. Their creed was antiestablishment, and their anger was directed toward foreigners, who they believed were taking their jobs.

Today, White gang members are often alienated middle-class youths rather than poor lower-class youths. They include “punkers” or “stoners,” who dress in heavy-metal fashions and engage in drug- and violence-related activities. Some espouse religious beliefs involving the occult and satanic worship. Some are obsessed with occult themes, suicide, ritual killings, and animal mutilations. They get involved in devil worship, tattoo themselves with occult symbols, and gouge their bodies to draw blood for satanic rituals. Some skinhead groups are devoted to White supremacist activities and are being actively recruited by adult hate groups.

A recent survey of almost six thousand youths found that about 25 percent of youths who claimed to be gang members were White, a far higher number than that found in national surveys.
Criminality and Violence

Regardless of their type, gang members typically commit more crimes than any other youths in the social environment. Members self-report significantly more crime than nonmembers and the more enmeshed a youth is in a gang the more likely he is to report criminal behavior, to have an official record, and to get sent to juvenile court; the gang membership–crime relationship begins as early as middle school.

Gang criminality has numerous patterns. Some gangs specialize in drug dealing. But not all gangs are major players in drug trafficking and those that are tend to distribute small amounts of drugs at the street level. The world of major dealing belongs to adults, not to gang youths. Other gangs engage in a wide variety of criminal activity, ranging from felony assault to drug dealing. Gang members are most commonly involved in such crimes as larceny/theft, aggravated assault, and burglary/breaking and entering; a significant portion are involved in street drug sales to generate profits for the gang. Drug use is quite common. In one recent survey, Geoffrey Hunt and his associates found that 82 percent of the female gang members they surveyed were multiple-drug users, using drugs such as cocaine, crack, LSD, PCP, methamphetamine, heroin, glue/inhalants, MDMA, and quaaludes.

Do gang kids increase their involvement in criminal activity after they join gangs or do gangs recruit kids who are already high rate offenders? Data from the Rochester Youth Development Study (RYDS), a longitudinal cohort study of one thousand youths in upstate New York, supports the gang–crime association theory. Although only 30 percent of the youths in the sample report being gang members, they account for 65 percent of all reported delinquent acts. The RYDS data show that gang members account for 86 percent of all serious crimes, 63 percent of the alcohol use, and 61 percent of the drug abuse.

Gang Violence

Gang members are heavily armed, dangerous, and more violent than nonmembers. A nationwide survey of arrestees found that half of those who owned or carried guns claimed to be gang members. The 2000 National Youth Gang Survey found that 84 percent of police in areas with a gang problem reported at least one occurrence of firearm use by one or more gang members in an assault crime. Thornberry and his associates found that young gang members in Rochester, New York, were about ten times more likely to carry handguns than nongang juvenile offenders, and gun-toting gang members committed about ten times more violent crimes than nonmembers.

Research indicates that gang violence is impulsive and therefore comes in spurts. It usually involves defense of the gang and gang members’ reputations. Once the threat ends, the level of violence may recede, but it remains at a level higher than it was previously. Peaks in gang homicides tend to correspond to a series of escalating confrontations, usually over control of gang turf or a drug market. The most dangerous areas are along disputed boundaries where a drug hot spot intersects with a turf hot spot. There are also “marauder” patterns in which members of rival gangs travel to their enemy’s territory in search of victims.

Violence is a core fact of gang formation and life. Gang members feel threatened by other gangs and are wary of encroachments on their turf. It is not surprising that gangs try to recruit youths who are already gun owners; new members are likely to increase gun ownership and possession. Gang members face a far greater chance of death at an early age than do nonmembers.

Revenge, Honor, Courage, and Prestige

When criminologist Scott Decker interviewed gang boys he found that violence is essential to the transformation of a peer group into a gang. When asked why he calls the group he belongs to a gang, one member replied: “There is more violence than a family. With a gang it’s like fighting all the time, killing, shooting.”

When joining the gang, members may be forced to partake in violent rituals to prove their reliability. Gang members are ready to fight when others attack them or
when they believe their territory or turf is being encroached upon. Violence may be directed against rival gang members accused of insults or against those involved in personal disputes. Gang members also expect to fight when they go to certain locations that are “off-limits” or attend events where violence is routine. Girl gang members may fight when they sense that a member of a rival gang is trying to hook up with their boyfriend. Gini Sykes spent two years hanging with girl gangs in New York City in order to develop an understanding of their lives and lifestyle. One girl, Tiny, told her how ferociousness made up for her lack of stature:

Tiny fixed me with a cold stare that wiped away any earlier impression of childish cuteness. “See, we smaller girls, we go for your weak spot. “ Her gaze moved across my features. “Your face. Your throat. Your eyes, so we can blind you. I don’t care if you have more weight on me. I’ll still try to kill you because, you know, I have a bad temper—.”

Tiny related the story of how she attacked a rival who she caught in a sexual encounter with her boyfriend:

“She was crying and begging, but she’d disrespected me in front of everybody. We started fighting and she pulled that blade out—.” Tiny shrugged. “I just wasn’t prepared. You can’t tell when someone’s got a razor in their mouth.”

After she was cut, Tiny went into a defensive rage, and frantically felt for the wound, blood seeping between her fingers. Suddenly, in self-preservation, she grabbed the girl’s neck, and blinded by her own blood, began smashing her rival’s head into the concrete until Isabel, hearing a siren, dragged her away. The girl had slashed Tiny’s face eleven times.

Gang members are sensitive to any rivals who question their honor. Once an insult is perceived, the gang’s honor cannot be restored until the “debt” is repaid. Police efforts to cool down gang disputes only delay the revenge, which can be a beating or a drive-by shooting. Random acts of revenge have become so common that physicians now consider them a significant health problem—a major contributor to early morbidity and mortality among adolescents and children in major gang cities.

Violence is used to maintain the gang’s internal discipline. If subordinates disobey orders, perhaps by using rather than selling drugs, they may be subject to disciplinary action by other gang members.

Another common gang crime is extortion, called “turf tax,” which involves forcing people to pay the gang to be protected from dangerous neighborhood youths. Prestige crimes occur when a gang member steals or assaults someone to gain prestige in the gang. These crimes may be part of an initiation rite or an effort to establish a special reputation, a position of responsibility, or a leadership role; to prevail in an internal power struggle; or to respond to a challenge from a rival. Checkpoints

WHY DO YOUTHS JOIN GANGS?

Though gangs flourish in inner-city areas, gang membership cannot be assumed to be solely a function of lower-class identity. Many lower-class youths do not join gangs, and middle-class youths are found in suburban skinhead groups. Let’s look at some of the suspected causes of gang delinquency.

The Anthropological View

In the 1950s, Herbert Block and Arthur Niederhoffer suggested that gangs appeal to adolescents’ longing for the tribal process that sustained their ancestors. They found that gang processes do seem similar to the puberty rites of some tribal cultures; gang rituals help the child bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood. For example,
According to the anthropological view, gang membership with its signs, writings, and tattoos is similar to joining a tribal cult. Matthew Ricci (left), manager of Skyline Tattoo in Arlington, Va., works on covering up a tattoo—a gang symbol—on Chris Perry’s left hand. Perry has many other tattoos on his arms and legs. A large koi fish stretches nearly the length of his right forearm. He also has a half dozen piercings on his head alone: between his eyes, in his nose, tongue, bottom lip, and a couple in each ear.

According to the anthropological view, gang membership with its signs, writings, and tattoos is similar to joining a tribal cult. Gang initiation ceremonies are similar to the activities of young men in Pacific Island cultures. Many gangs put new members through a hazing to make sure they have “heart,” a feature similar to tribal rites. In tribal societies, initiation into a cult is viewed as the death of childhood. By analogy, boys in lower-class urban areas yearn to join the gang and “really start to live.” Membership in the gang “means the youth gives up his life as a child and assumes a new way of life.”106 Gang names are suggestive of “totemic ancestors” because they usually are symbolic (Cobras, Jaguars, and Kings, for example).

The Gang Prevention and Intervention Survey found that fully two-thirds of gang members reported having members in their gang whose parents are also active members. These data indicate that ganging is passed on as a rite of passage from one generation to the next.107 James Diego Vigil has described the rituals of gang initiation, which include pummeling to show that the boy is ready to leave his matricentric (mother-dominated) household; this is reminiscent of tribal initiation rites.108 These rituals become an important part of gang activities. Hand signs and graffiti have a tribal flavor. Gang members adopt nicknames that reflect personality or physical traits: the more volatile are called “Crazy,” “Loco,” or “Psycho,” and those who wear glasses are dubbed “Professor.”109

The Social Disorganization/Sociocultural View

Sociologists have commonly viewed the destructive sociocultural forces in poor inner-city areas as the major cause of gang formation. Thrasher introduced this concept, and it is found in the classic studies of Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin and of Albert Cohen.110 Irving Spergel’s study Racketville, Slumtown, and Haulburg found that Slumtown—the area with the lowest income and the largest population—had the highest number of violent gangs.111 According to Spergel, the gang gives lower-class youths a means of attaining status. Malcolm Klein’s research of the late 1960s and 1970s also found that typical gang members came from dysfunctional and destitute families and lacked adequate role models.112

The social disorganization/sociocultural view retains its prominent position today. In Barrio Gangs,113 Vigil shows that gang members are pushed into member-
ship because of poverty and minority status. Those who join gangs are the most marginal youths in their neighborhoods and families. Vigil finds that barrio dwellers experience psychological, economic, and social “stressors.” Gang members usually have more than one of these problems, causing them to suffer from “multiple marginality.” Barrio youths join gangs seeking a sense of belonging.114

Overall, the sociocultural view assumes that gangs are a natural response to lower-class life and a status-generating medium for boys whose aspirations cannot be realized by legitimate means. Youths who join gangs may hold conventional goals but are either unwilling or unable to accomplish them through conventional means.115 Gangs are not solely made up of youths who seek deviant peers to compensate for parental brutality or incompetence. They recruit youths from many different kinds of families. The gang thus is a coalition of troubled youths who are socialized mainly by the streets rather than by conventional institutions.116

**Anomie**

Irving Spergel suggests that youths are encouraged to join gangs during periods of social, economic, and cultural turmoil, conditions thought to produce anomie.117 For example, gangs were present during the Russian Revolution of 1917 and after the crumbling of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. The rise of right-wing youth gangs in Germany is associated with the unification of East and West Germany. Skinhead groups have formed in Germany in response to immigration from Turkey and North Africa. In the United States, gangs have formed in areas where rapid change has unsettled communities.

Immigration or emigration, rapidly expanding or contracting populations, and the incursion of different racial/ethnic groups, or even different segments or generations of the same racial/ethnic population, can create fragmented communities and gang problems.118

**The Psychological View**

Some believe that gangs serve as an outlet for disturbed youths who suffer a multitude of personal problems and deficits. For example, Lewis Yablonsky found that violent gangs recruit their members from among the more sociopathic youths living in poverty-stricken communities.119 Yablonsky views the sociopathic youth as one who “has not been trained to have human feelings or compassion or responsibility for another.”120

Malcolm Klein’s analysis of Los Angeles gang members also found that many suffer from a variety of personal deficits, including low self-concept, social deficits, poor impulse control, and limited life skills.121 In their in-depth study of Rochester youth, Thornberry and his colleagues found that those who joined gangs suffered from a multitude of social problems, including early involvement in delinquency, violence, and drug abuse, dysfunctional family relations, educational deficits, and involvement with deviant peers.122

**The Rational Choice View**

Some youths may make a rational choice to join a gang. Members of the underclass turn to gangs as a method of obtaining desired goods and services, either directly, through theft and extortion, or indirectly, through drug dealing and weapons sales. In this case, joining a gang can be viewed as an “employment decision.” Mercer Sullivan’s study of Brooklyn gangs found that members call success at crime “getting paid.” Gang boys also refer to the rewards of crime as “getting over,” which refers to their pride at “beating the system” even though they are far from the economic mainstream.123 According to this view, the gang boy has long been involved in criminal activity prior to his gang membership, and he joins the gang as a means of improving his illegal “productivity.”124

Gang membership is not a necessary precondition for delinquency. Felix Padilla found this when he studied the Diamonds, a Latino gang in Chicago.125 The decision
to join the gang was made after an assessment of legitimate opportunities. The Diamonds made collective business decisions, and individuals who made their own deals were penalized. The gang maintained a distinct structure and carried out other functions similar to those of legitimate enterprises, including recruiting personnel and financing business ventures.

Terence Thornberry and his colleagues at the Rochester Youth Development Study found that before youths join gangs, their substance abuse and delinquency rates are no higher than those of nongang members. When they are in the gang, their crime and drug abuse rates increase, only to decrease when they leave the gang. Thornberry concludes that gangs facilitate criminality rather than provide a haven for youths who are disturbed or already highly delinquent. This research is important because it lends support to the life course model: events that take place during the life cycle, such as joining a gang, have a significant impact on criminal behavior and drug abuse.126

**Personal Safety View** According to Spergel, some adolescents choose to join gangs from a “rational calculation” to achieve safety.127 Youths who are new to a community may believe they will be harassed or attacked if they remain “unaffiliated.” Girls also join gangs for protection. Though they may be exploited by male gang members, they are protected from assaults by nongang males in the neighborhood.128

Motivation may have its roots in interrace or interethnic rivalry; youths who reside in an area dominated by a different racial or ethnic group may be persuaded that gang membership is a means of protection. Ironically, gang members are more likely to be attacked than nonmembers.

**Fun and Support View** Some youths join gangs simply to have fun.129 They enjoy hanging out with others like themselves and want to get involved in exciting experiences. There is evidence that youths learn progang attitudes from their peers and that these attitudes direct them to join gangs.130

Some experts suggest that youths join gangs in an effort to obtain a family-like atmosphere. Many gang members report that they have limited contact with their parents, many of whom are unemployed and have substance abuse problems.131

These views are summarized in Concept Summary 8.1.

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**CONTROLLING GANG ACTIVITY**

Two methods are used to control gang activity. One involves targeting by criminal justice agencies, and the other involves social service efforts. These methods will be discussed in the next sections.

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**Checkpoints**

- There are different types of gangs—some are social, others criminal.
- Gang membership seems to be aging; kids are staying longer in gangs.
- Gangs communicate through wall writings (graffiti) and have their own slang terms and hand signs.
- Many gangs are involved in drug dealing, whereas others specialize in violence.
- There are a number of reasons why kids join gangs: anthropological, sociocultural, psychological, and rational choice views have been offered.

To quiz yourself on this material, go to question 8.19 on the Juvenile Delinquency: The Core 2e Web site.
Law Enforcement Efforts

In recent years gang control has often been left to local police departments. Gang control takes three basic forms:

1. **Youth services programs**, in which traditional police personnel, usually from the youth unit, are given responsibility for gang control
2. **Gang details**, in which one or more police officers, usually from youth or detective units, are assigned exclusively to gang-control work
3. **Gang units**, established solely to deal with gang problems, to which one or more officers are assigned exclusively to gang-control work.\(^{132}\)

A national assessment found that three-quarters of the departments surveyed maintained separate gang-control units. They are involved in processing information on gangs and gang leaders, prevention efforts, efforts to suppress criminal activity and apprehend those believed to have committed crimes, and follow-up investigations. About 85 percent of these units have special training in gang control for their personnel, 73 percent have specific policies directed at dealing with gang boys, and 62 percent enforce special laws designed to control gang activity.

The Chicago Police Department’s gang crime section maintains intelligence on gang problems and trains its more than four hundred officers to deal with gang problems. Officers identify street gang members and enter their names in a computer bank that is programmed to alert the unit if the youths are picked up or arrested. Some departments also sponsor general prevention programs that can help control gang activities.

Some police departments engage in “gang-breaking” activities. They attempt to arrest, prosecute, convict, and incarcerate gang leaders. For example, Los Angeles police conduct sweeps, in which more than a thousand officers are put on the street to round up gang members. Police say the sweeps let the gangs know “who the streets belong to” and show neighborhood residents that someone cares.\(^{133}\) Despite such efforts, gang membership and violence remain at all-time highs. Few departments have written policies or procedures on how to deal with youths, and many do not provide gang-control training. The Preventing and Treating Delinquency feature on page 206 discusses one police program in Boston.
Traditional police tactics may not work on today’s drug gangs, which may best be dealt with as organized crime families. In these cases, it might be useful to (1) develop informants through prosecutions, payments, and witness protection programs; (2) rely on electronic surveillance and undercover investigations; and (3) use statutes that create criminal liabilities for conspiracy, extortion, or engaging in criminal enterprises. Of course, these policies are expensive and may be needed only with the most sophisticated gangs. In addition, as new community policing strategies are implemented (see chapter 12), it may be possible to garner sufficient local support and information to counteract gang influences.

Community Control Efforts

During the late nineteenth century, social workers of the YMCA worked with youths in Chicago gangs. During the 1950s, the detached street worker program was developed in major centers of gang activity. Social workers went into the community to work with gangs on their own turf. They participated in gang activities and tried to get to know their members. The purpose was to act as advocates for the youths, to provide them with positive role models, and to treat individual problems.

Detached street worker programs are sometimes credited with curbing gang activities in the 1950s and 1960s, although some critics claimed that they turned delinquent groups into legitimate neighborhood organizations. Others believe they helped maintain group solidarity, and as a result, new members were drawn to gangs.

Today, there are numerous community-level programs designed to limit gang activity. Some employ recreation areas open in the evening hours that provide supervised activities. In some areas, citywide coordinating groups help orient gang-control efforts. For example, the Chicago Intervention Network operates field offices around the city in low-income, high-crime areas that provide neighborhood watches, parent patrols, alternative youth programming, and family support efforts. Some community efforts are partnerships with juvenile justice agencies. In Los Angeles County, the Gang Alternative Prevention Program (GAPP) provides prevention services to juveniles before they become entrenched in gangs, including (1) individual and group counseling, (2) bicultural and bilingual services to adolescents and
their parents, and (3) special programs such as tutoring, parent training, job development, and recreational and educational experiences.  

Still another approach has been to involve schools in gang-control programs. Some invite law enforcement agents to lecture students on the dangers of gang involvement and teach them gang-resistance techniques. Others provide resources that can help parents prevent their children from joining gangs, or if they already are members, get them out.

Sociologist Irving Spergel, a leading expert on gangs, has developed a model for helping communities deal with gang-involved youth that has become the basis for gang-control efforts around the nation. His model includes the five distinct strategies contained in Exhibit 8.1.

### Why Gang Control Is Difficult

Experts have charged that to reduce the gang problem, hundreds of thousands of high-paying jobs are needed. Economic opportunities might prove to be particularly effective, because surveys reveal that many gang members might leave gangs if such opportunities existed.

This solution does not, however, seem practical. The more embedded youths become in criminal enterprise, the less likely they are to find meaningful adult work. It is unlikely that gang members can suddenly be transformed into highly paid professionals. A more effective alternative would be to devote more resources to the most deteriorated urban areas, even if it requires pulling funds from other groups that receive government aid, such as the elderly.  

Although social solutions to the gang problem seem elusive, the evidence shows that gang involvement is a sociological phenomenon and must be treated as such. Youths who live in areas where their needs cannot be met by existing institutions join gangs when gang members are there to recruit them. Social causes demand social solutions. Programs that enhance the lives of adolescents are the key to reducing gang delinquency. Exhibit 8.2 illustrates some of the key elements of a successful gang control strategy.
The YVSF is a multiagency coordinated task force made up of forty-five to fifty full-time Boston police officers and fifteen officers from outside agencies. Members hail from the Massachusetts State Police; the Department of the Treasury’s Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF); police departments from neighboring jurisdictions; Massachusetts Corrections, Probation, Parole, and Division of Youth Service (juvenile corrections) officers; and other agencies, as appropriate. The YVSF works closely with the Suffolk County district attorney’s and the state attorney general’s offices, and participates in the Department of Justice’s AntiViolent Crime Initiative (AVCI) led locally by the United States Attorney. The YVSF investigates youth crimes, arrests those responsible, and breaks up the environment for crime. One important accomplishment of the YVSF has been the creation of a comprehensive computer database, which has allowed tough enforcement efforts against the leaders of gangs and positive interventions in the lives of those who are at risk of becoming hardcore gang members.

In addition, in cooperation with the city of Boston and the Department of Justice, the YVSF has used criminal and civil forfeiture laws to help secure the safety of the community by taking over drug dens and renovating them as new homes. Drug dens have been closed through joint federal-state-local cooperation. Some former drug houses have been renovated in order to provide low-income elderly housing.

CRITICAL THINKING

Is it possible to reduce gang membership without providing youths with a reasonable legitimate alternative, including first-rate schools and job opportunities?

INFOTRAC COLLEGE EDITION RESEARCH


Peer relations are a critical element of maturation. Many experts believe that maintaining delinquent friends is a significant cause of antisocial behaviors. Some experts believe that criminal kids seek each other out. Gangs are law-violating youth groups that use special vocabulary, clothing, signs, colors, graffiti, and names, and whose members are committed to antisocial behavior. Gangs are a serious problem in many cities. Gangs have been around since the eighteenth century. The gang problem slowed down for a while in the 1960s, then reemerged in the 1970s. There are now thousands of gangs containing more than 750,000 members. Most gang members are male, ages fourteen to twenty-one, and live in urban areas. Gangs can be classified by their structure, behavior, or status. Some are believed to be social groups, others are criminally oriented, and still others are violent.

Hundreds of thousands of crimes are believed to be committed annually by gangs. Although some gangs specialize in drug dealing, gang kids engage in a wide variety of criminal offenses. Violence is an important part of being a gang member. Although most gang members are male, the number of females in gangs is growing at a faster pace. African-American and Hispanic gangs predominate, but Anglo and Asian gangs are also quite common. We are still not sure what causes gangs. One view is that they serve as a bridge between adolescence and adulthood when adult control is lacking. Another view suggests that gangs serve as an alternative means of advancement for disadvantaged youths. Still another view is that some gangs are havens for disturbed youths.

KEY TERMS

- cliques, p. 184
- crowds, p. 184
- controversial status youth, p. 184
- gang, p. 185
- interstitial group, p. 186
- disorganized neighborhood, p. 188
- retreatists, p. 189
- near-groups, p. 190
- barrio, p. 190
- klikas, p. 193
- graffiti, p. 193
- representing, p. 194
- skinhead, p. 197
- prestige crimes, p. 199
- detached street workers, p. 204

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do gangs serve a purpose? Differentiate between a gang and a fraternity.
2. Discuss the differences between violent, criminal, and drug-oriented gangs.
3. How do gangs in suburban areas differ from inner-city gangs?
4. Do delinquents have cold and distant relationships with their peers?
5. Can gangs be controlled without changing the economic opportunity structure of society? Are there any truly meaningful alternatives to gangs today for lower-class youths?
6. Can you think of other rituals in society that reflect an affinity or longing for more tribal times? (Hint: Have you ever pledged a fraternity or sorority, gone to a wedding, or attended a football game?) Do TV shows like “Survivor” show a longing for more tribal times? After all, they even use tribal names for the competing teams.

APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

You are a professor at a local state university who teaches courses on delinquent behavior. One day you are approached by the director of the president’s National Task Force on Gangs (NTFG). This group has been formed to pool resources from a variety of federal agencies, ranging from the FBI to Health and Human Services, in order to
provide local jurisdictions with a comprehensive plan to fight gangs. The director claims that the gang problem is big and becoming bigger. Thousands of gangs are operating around the country, with hundreds of thousands of members. Government sources, he claims, indicate that there has been a significant growth in gang membership over the past twenty years. So far, the government has not been able to do anything at either a state or national level to stem this growing tide of organized criminal activity. The NTFG would like you to be part of the team that provides state and local jurisdictions with a gang control activity model, which, if implemented, would provide a cost-effective means of reducing both gang membership and gang activity.

- Would you recommend that police employ antigang units that use tactics developed in the fight against organized crime families?
- Would you recommend the redevelopment of deteriorated neighborhoods in which gangs flourish?
- Would you try to educate kids about the dangers of gang membership?
- Would you tell the director that gangs have always existed and there is probably not much the government can do to reduce their numbers?

**DOING RESEARCH ON THE WEB**

To read more about gang prevention efforts, go to InfoTrac College Edition and check out Lonnie Jackson, “Understanding and Responding to Youth Gangs: a Juvenile Corrections Approach,” *Corrections Today* 16:62 (August 1999). To do more research on gangs, use “gangs” as a key word.

To read some comprehensive visions of gang prevention, click on Web Links under the Chapter Resources at [http://cj.wadsworth.com/siegel_jdcore2e](http://cj.wadsworth.com/siegel_jdcore2e).

Pro/Con discussions and Viewpoint Essays on some of the topics in this chapter may be found at the Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center: [www.gale.com/OpposingViewpoints](http://www.gale.com/OpposingViewpoints).