YOUTH GANGS

Third Edition

YOUTH GANGS

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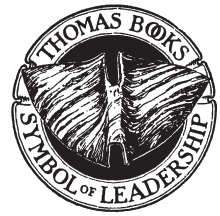

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To Patty, Bob, Ginny, and John-RJF

To Marty, Kelly, and Chris-HCC

To Laura, Jessica, and Valery-SM

PREFACE

The first two editions of this book were titled *Juvenile Gangs*. With this edition, we decided to shift to the more conventional title of *Youth Gangs*. This change more accurately reflects the terminology characteristic of most of the current literature on gangs. The focus of the third edition remains on gangs that are comprised of primarily and sometimes exclusively of adolescents, preadolescents, and young adults. Seldom, if ever, are older adults participants in the gangs described in this edition. However, it should be noted that youth gangs appear to be including older and older members who delay exit into a non-gang world.

R.J.F.
H.C.C.
S.M.

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YOUTH GANGS

Chapter 1

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN YOUTH GANGS

The National Gang Crime Research Center (NGCRC) located in Peotone, Illinois is a reservoir of knowledge and data on youth gangs in the United States. The Center estimates that in the United States there are 30,500 youth gangs, some with membership well into the many thousands. A super gang, the Gangster Disciples, is reported to have 30,000 members in just Chicago alone (NGCRC 2003). However, The National Youth Gang Center which is located in Tallahassee, Florida, estimated the number of gangs in the United States at 23,000, with approximately 700,000 members (2002). But what do these numbers mean? Twenty-three thousand or 30,000 street gangs in the United States? And 30,000 members in one gang in one major American city? It is questions such as these that have permeated the study of youth gangs for nearly 80 years. Thrasher's classic study of gangs published in 1927 represented the first in-depth attempt at unraveling the youth gang phenomenon, from defining youth gangs to understanding them in terms of etiology, purpose and organizational structure.

The literature is replete with definitions and discussions concerning youth gangs. The discussion has frequently been more like a debate with numerous attempts at answering the following questions. What is a youth gang, or when is a gang a gang? When is an individual member of a youth gang? Do members of youth gangs perceive themselves as belonging to a gang, and if so does the community agree with these self perceptions? What constitutes youth gang membership? What are the key characteristics of youth gangs and how do these differ from non-gang youth characteristics? And, are youth gangs violent and if so are they more violent than non-gang youth?

The study of youth gangs is an intermeshing of conceptual, theoretical, methodological issues and challenges. Over the 77-year span since the research by Thrasher, many methodological approaches to answering the above questions have been tried, including qualitative as well as quantitative measures. The research techniques used have resulted in a mammoth amount of varying opinions and conceptualizations concerning youth gangs, often leading to confusion and serious doubt as to whether answers to rather simply framed questions are possible.

DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

The literature abounds with definitions of youth gangs (Bynum and Thompson 1988; Cartwright 1975; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Hagedorn 1989; Horowitz 1990; Johnstone 1981; Klein 1971; Klein and Maxson 1989; Loeb 1973; Miller 1982; Peterson 2000; Sheldon, Tracy, and Brown 2001; Thrasher 1927). The difficulty in arriving at consensus on what constitutes a gang has frequently centered around issues such as leadership (Bjerregaard 2002; Cohen 1969; Johnstone 1981; Miller 1975, 1980; Spergel 1984); territory or turf (Cohen 1969; Hagedorn 1988; Johnstone 1981; Miller 1975, 1980; Moore 1991; Spergel 1984; Thrasher 1927); organization (Battin, Hill, Abbott, Catalano, and Hawkins 1998; Miller 1975, 1980; Spergel 1984; Short 1990); and number of gang members and gang name (Cohen 1969; Hagedorn 1988; Klein 1971; Spergel 1984; Thrasher 1927). In addition, a major focus of study in defining youth gangs has been the degree of participation in criminal and violent activities of gang members (Bjerregaard 2002; Cartwright, Thompson, Schwartz 1975; Curry and Decker 1998; Esbensen, Winfree, He, and Taylor 2001; Klein 1971; Miller 1975, 1980; Thornberry, Huizinga, and Loeber 2004; Thrasher 1927).

One of the earliest and most frequently cited definitions of a gang is that of Thrasher (1927). Thrasher defined a gang as a group that forms spontaneously and without any special attachment to existing parts of society. Gangs, according to Thrasher, are "interstitial"; they form in the "cracks" in the social fabric, the boundaries of society. Thrasher believed that conflict integrates gangs because it provides common labels and common enemies. Thrasher's definition is important because of its influence on decades of research and thinking on gangs and gang activities.

Box 1.1: Thrasher's definition of a gang

A gang is an interstitial group, originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following types of behavior: meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning. The result of this collective behavior is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory. (Thrasher 1927: 57)

It would be little exaggeration to suggest that according to the definition originally proposed by Thrasher, the Harvard and Notre Dame football teams could be regarded as gangs. So, too, could groups of migrant workers (especially if they were unionized, thus increasing the potential for conflict, especially non-physical conflict) or Mardi Gras revelers. In the early 1970s, Malcolm Klein (1971, 13) defined an adolescent gang as, "... any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood; (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name); and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or enforcement agencies." More recently, Klein defines a street gangs as:

> A street gang is used to indicate a group-accepted and acknowledged orientation toward anti-social or criminal activities. It includes some specialty-focused groups such as street-level drug sales groups but not organized, upper level distribution systems and cartels. It includes some hate groups such as a number of skinheads, but not terrorist groups. It excludes prison gangs, motorcycle gangs, football hooligans, and the many youthful groups at school and elsewhere that may occasionally dabble in delinquent activities but not orient themselves around these. [Malcolm Klein 2001, 61]

Malcolm Klein's definition would not clearly distinguish gangs from law-violating youth groups, as defined by Miller (1981). Klein (1995a) believes that setting and style are more defining characteristics of street gangs than age. According to Klein (1995a, 2001), street gangs are qualitatively different from other youth groups. Klein observes that for some youth, street gang membership becomes their master identity. Further, Klein has found that most street gangs tend toward moderate levels of