

2023

Survival in the City Streets: An Autoethnographic Analysis Challenging the Criminalization of Urban Street Gangs

Robert Northman
Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/mcnair>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Northman, Robert (2023) "Survival in the City Streets: An Autoethnographic Analysis Challenging the Criminalization of Urban Street Gangs," *PSU McNair Scholars Online Journal*: Vol. 16: Iss. 1, Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.15760/mcnair.2023.16.1.4>

This open access Article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License \(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/). All documents in PDXScholar should meet [accessibility standards](#). If we can make this document more accessible to you, [contact our team](#).

Introduction

While gang members are arguably arrested at a higher rate than individual members of other group types, in my own life's experience as a gang member, I argue back that urban street gangs do not have any agreed upon criminal purpose or plans together, such as a central conspiratorial criminal objective underlying a criminal enterprise. Social scientists studying gangs for more than a hundred years have made attempts to understand the phenomenon of urban street gangs, but to this day, much of the research on street gangs remains speculative and quantitative with no clear consensus as to what a gang is or is not. During my academic research, I discovered *accurate* gang-reported scholarship to be the exception and not the rule.

Although there is a great deal of expressive contributions of gang culture made in music, entertainment, and pop-culture, generally, gang members do not historically have a strong presence in academia. When I set out to find academic perspectives, I also aimed to find what was missing from the academic inquiry on gangs. I found that in most gang studies literature, the context in which gangs were referred to as were almost entirely criminal. The overall aim here then is to explore the idea that gangs are criminal.

Academic inquiry has accounted for urban gang studies for more than a century. In studying the numerous researchers who have devoted themselves to the field of academic research pertaining to the study of gangs, as well, I have researched the websites and online archives of more than a dozen federal agencies that are involved in the suppression of gangs. Each of these acronymic entities act together in systematically and strategically criminalizing urban street gangs. I have monitored the NGC's nationwide GANGINFO listserv since 2016 for qualitative analysis of the application of models, strategies, and policies that have largely come forth from a forum of law enforcement agents and academics. It was noted that a great deal of the literature pertaining to gangs was published or funded by the United States Department of Justice—which is the nation's top law enforcement and criminal prosecuting agency. Every source of data coming from the policymaking, prosecuting and law-enforcement departments, bureaus, offices and agencies relies solely on information provided by surveys of law enforcement agents and agencies.

With law enforcement in clear control of the narrative surrounding gangs, it is no wonder then why the most common consideration of gangs, and the membership thereof, has implied that they are essentially, wholly, and individually, criminal in purpose and nature.

Literature Review

Of the roots of gangs, pioneering gang researcher Frederic Thrasher said, "gangs represent the spontaneous effort of boys to create a society for themselves where none adequate to their needs exist" (Thrasher, p.37, 1927). Conflict was thought to occasion much of the group's activities (Thrasher, 1927). In attempting to define gangs, academics have never agreed on one commonly shared definition

of what a gang is or what it is not (Ball & Curry, 1995). In essence, researchers have examined gangs by definitions created or adopted, with there being as many methods of arriving at a definition as there are definitions themselves (Ball & Curry, 1995; Sullivan, 2005).

Thrasher (1927) said:

Gangs, like most other social groups originate under conditions that are typical for all groups of the same species; they develop in definite and predictable ways, in accordance with a form or entelechy that is predetermined by characteristic internal processes and mechanisms and have, in short, a nature and natural history (Thrasher, p.3, 1927).

Historically, in explaining what gangs are and why gangs exist, much of the academic literature approaching the study of gangs tended to focus on antisocial aspects of the gang's activities (Thrasher, 1927; Cohen, 1955; Short & Strodtbeck, 1964; and, Miller, 1966). At the time, these delinquent and anti-social behaviors appear to be the only actions of concern for agents of institutional social control and so gangs were largely considered *conflict groups* (Thrasher, 1927). If left unstructured and unsupervised, gangs were believed to provide opportunities for the facilitation of wrongdoing (Hughes & Short, 2013). Gangs were also thought to form spontaneously, and integrate through their conflicts (Thrasher, 1927).

A steady trend toward criminalization intensified after 1970, when law enforcement and the media began sensationally mischaracterizing gangs as 'drug trafficking organizations' (Coughlin & Venkatesh, 2003), squarely placing both the blame and target on gangs for the public's fear and anger towards the American War on Drugs. Dr. Malcolm Klein, who generally dismisses conflation of organized gang involvement in drug trafficking, posited agreement with the following quote from Dr. George Knox, a well-known gang researcher:

Crime involvement of a group must therefore be a sub rosa function, about which few of the members have knowledge, if we are to consider the group a gang. Members of many legitimate voluntary associations and civic groups are sometimes arrested for a variety of offenses. But these are not offenses committed on behalf of the group; these are not offenses even necessarily known to their full social network; these are not offenses condoned and approved of in advance by their organization, or which enjoy their acceptance or blessing. To be considered a gang, the criminal involvement of members must be openly known and approved of as such (Klein, p.23-24, (1995), quoting G.W. Knox (1994).

Klein (1995) does opine that crime appears to be more of a product of the gang than an actual goal, adding that gangs usually don't make very good commercial organizations and that, "there is nothing in the 'natural' structure of a street gang that is appropriate preparation for community service or corporate success on a legal basis" (Klein, p.83, 1995). Klein and many researchers believe

that gang social life, though not *criminal* in itself, possesses potential to produce activity which *may* be unlawful.

Quoting W.B. Miller:

[A gang is] a self-formed association of peers bound together by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership, well-developed lines of authority, and other organizational features, who act in concert to achieve a specific purpose or purposes which generally include the conduct of illegal activity and control over a particular territory, facility or type of enterprise (Felson, p.306, 2006, quoting W.B. Miller (1980)).

In 1994, the U.S. federal government enacted a criminal statute (18 U.S.C. § 521) aimed at gangs and gang membership—it was part of the *1994 Violent Crime Control & Law Enforcement Act*, also known as the Clinton Crime Bill and reads in part:

“Criminal street gang” means an ongoing group, club, organization, or association of 5 or more persons—

(A) that has as 1 of its primary purposes the commission of 1 or more of the criminal offenses described in subsection (c) [crimes involving drugs, violence, or human/sex-trafficking];

(B) the members of which engage, or have engaged within the past 5 years, in a continuing series of offenses described in subsection (c) [crimes involving drugs, violence, or human/sex-trafficking]; and

(C) the activities of which affect interstate or foreign commerce (HSDL, 2014).

The statute above still does not define what a *noncriminal* street gang is. Of the above statute, one U.S. Department of Justice online archive revealed:

The statute requires, among other things, proof that the defendant participated in a criminal street gang with knowledge its members engage or have engaged in a continuous series of offenses and that the defendant intends to promote or further the gang's felonious activities or maintain or increase his position in the gang. Given these knowledge and intent requirements, § 521 has proven to be a difficult statute to apply successfully to defendants (DOJ, 2020).

Moreover, with respect to § 521, close attention should be paid that in subsection A the statute provides in its definition that a gang “has as 1 of *its* [distinct from belonging to individual members] *primary purposes* the commission of 1 or more of the criminal offenses described in subsection (c) [crimes involving drugs, violence, or human/sex-trafficking]” (HSDL, p.1, 2014). To be clear the gang itself as an entity must have as *its primary purposes*, the commission of a crime.

The academic literature generally favors the idea that the primary organizing motives underlying the formation of gangs, however, are *not* isolated to a primary purpose which is criminal (Klein, 1995).

Nevertheless, every branch of the federal government, in one way or another, defines a gang as characterized by criminal conduct; in addition, 43 States and the District of Columbia all have legislation defining gangs, and each one of those definitions use crime or criminality to describe gangs and/or the members thereof (HSDL, p.3, 2014). These are not flattering statements about gangs or gang members, but they pale in comparison to some of the other opinions on gangs.

One researcher has alluded that tens of thousands of gang members are being trained by the U.S. military; suggesting that these military trained gang members, or “MTGM’s”, have returned to civilian life where they now train fellow gang members with military tactics and, due to this proliferation of military training, gangs now pose more of a threat than ever to law enforcement and government (Smith & Doll, 2012).

Another opinion altogether argues that gang-related crime, combined with the ‘instability it wreaks upon government’, is now a ‘serious national security problem’ (Manwaring, 2005). Like the former, the following quote may seem unalarming until it is recognized that the author is a highly accomplished retired U.S. Army Lt. Colonel, graduate of the U.S. Army War College, and an adjunct professor in International Affairs at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. From his monograph titled *Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency*, it reads in part:

The annual net profit from gang-related activities is estimated to be in the billions of dollars. The precise numbers are not important. But the enormity of the amount of money involved is important, together with the additional benefits these financial resources can generate when linked to utter ruthlessness of purpose and no moral or legal constraints. (Manwaring, 2005).

One prominent gang researcher suggests, “to begin to understand the searing anger that forms the cultural scaffolding of gangs, download some hardcore rap and listen to it” (Hagedorn, p.xxix, 2008). Hagedorn’s front-loaded assertion that ‘searing anger’ is somehow formative of the ‘cultural scaffolding of gangs’ demonstrates a bold willingness to view gangs through a lens that is certainly framed by crime—and I found Hagedorn to be one of the most critical gang researchers.

Throughout this review of literature, there was a pervasive, ongoing pattern of gang criminalization. Klein (1995) shares a quote from the 1989 testimony of Inglewood Police Lt. Larry Carter to the California Council on Criminal Justice:

Once disorganized and lacking both the leadership and resources, the gangs of today [1989] are organized, are goal minded, and well equipped with weapons, vehicles, electronic gadgetry, and fat

budgets. The gangs of today, whether they realize it or not, are becoming business majors. They are involved in merchandising, franchising, retail, and wholesale sales, and market expansion. Their product is illicit drugs, and the rock cocaine is the flagship of their line (Klein, p.86, 1995).

In a monograph titled, *Urban Street Gang Enforcement*, the DOJ's Bureau of Justice Assistance said:

Gangs have been a major contributor to the growth of violent crime in the past decade. Heavily armed with sophisticated weapons, gangs are involved in drug trafficking, murder, witness intimidation, robbery, extortion, and turf battles. Gangs now operate in cities of all sizes, as well as suburban communities throughout the United States; gang violence no longer is limited to major cities (BJA, p.5, 1997).

Consensus on a definition of a gang remains elusive due to the several interested parties invested into the task of clearly defining gangs—including press, police, politicians, policymakers, and academics—who all see gangs through their own respective lens', according to their academic disciplines, professions, and personal opinions (Wood & Alleyne, 2009). Despite this lack of a definition, most proceed to concede that gangs are criminal. But, despite this criminal essentiality, there are scholars who seem less convinced of the degree of criminality by which gangs are measured.

Clay Mosher, a professor of sociology at Washington State University said, "I don't put a lot of stock in police gang statistics," adding that, "most crimes committed by gang members are not committed for the gang" (Mesh, p.1, 2014). The "gang" label suggests a high degree of functionality for criminal organization that is simply beyond the capacity of most street gangs (Howell, 2007). "The public— even many police— subscribe to a well-known gang image: An exaggerated view of the gang, giving it too much credit for bad deeds, organization, leadership, unity, and enormity" (Felson, p.306, 2006).

These socially constructed attitudes and approaches reflect a systemic purge of gangs, although there is no agreement on what a gang is. If the definition of gang is so broad as to consist of any "ongoing group, club, organization, or association of 5 or more persons" (HSDL, 2014). The criminalized outlook toward gangs has resulted in a national "anti-gang" mobilization aimed at suppressing gangs. Despite there not being any legal or academic consensus on how to define a gang, the FBI states there are approximately 1.4 million gang members across America (FBI, 2011).

In conclusion to *The American Street Gang*, Malcolm Klein said this:

Street gangs are an amalgam of racism, of urban underclass poverty, of minority and youth cultures, of fatalism in the face of rampant deprivation, of political insensitivity, and the gross ignorance of

inner-city America on the part of most of us who don't have to survive there (Klein, p.234, 1995).

Taking a more critical look at gangs, Brotherton (2008) discusses a shift from early resistance-based approaches to studying gangs, to the now popular 'social reproduction' approach that views gangs pathologically. Brotherton (2008) explains that the social-reproduction view holds gangs as reproducing the needs denied them by a dominant society. The resistance-based approach he refers to was favored in early gang research and views gangs as forming on the basis of conflict with and resistance to the dominant social structures oppressing them. He argues that gangs were not always regarded as essentially criminal and advocates for bringing back 'resistance' to the way in which we analyze gangs (Brotherton, 2008).

An interesting early view coinciding with Brotherton's observation, was found in the introduction to Joseph Puffer's book titled, *The Boy & His Gang* (1912):

The gang spirit is the basis of the social life of the boy. It is the spontaneous expression of the boy's real interests. A boy must have not only his companions, but a group of companions in which to realize himself... It is evident that nearly all the activities of boys in their group life are not injurious but wholesome or can readily be made so. What grown people too often interpret as done from evil motives, the boys in the gang do from their love of fun. The educational world has not yet taken the interesting viewpoint, that in the group activities of boys are cultivated the great fundamental virtues of cooperation, self-sacrifice, and loyalty (Puffer, p.xi, 1912).

However, even later in the 20th century there existed views that espoused gangs as less menacing than criminal. A need was thought to exist for boys to interact with other boys who are compatible and like-minded (Goldstein, 1994). "Gang membership is sought for camaraderie, pride, identity development, enhancement of self-esteem, acquisition of resources, support, excitement, and related typical adolescent goals" (Bernstein, p.10, 1994). There is certainly no consensus that gangs are essentially criminal.

Although much of the reviewed literature seemed to revolve around gang violence, it was evident that gangs served in many ways to provide safety for its members. One researcher even posits that in a quest to be considered tough, each gang deploys *signaling* to appear tougher than each individual member might be alone—this creation of a signal to others is intended to deter and repel any harm by intimidation (Felson, 2006). This theory is thought to requisite violence, but not by all members—and, where an act of violence may constitute a crime, and although a predisposition toward it is normal in certain social ecologies and survival situations, not every gang member is a violent person (Felson, 2006).

After reviewing a somewhat voluminous amount of gang-related literature, I found that many of the authors were never gang members themselves, nor had they spent any actual time in the field researching the lives of gang members. It was clear that most of the gang researchers relied on information—both qualitative and quantitative—solely provided by law enforcement and the partnerships thereof.

Objectives & Methodologies

Generally, I intend to conduct critical inquiry and analysis to challenge views of urban street gang criminality. This critical inquiry and analysis will draw from personal knowledge and lived experiences to enhance the understanding of urban street gangs from the perspective of a gang member.

This research relies on the qualitative methodological approach of autoethnography. Autoethnography uses the personal experiences of the researcher to analyze and contribute a better understanding of what is at the center of any given research. Since the research here is centered on gangs, more specifically the widespread criminalization of gangs, this approach will apply this researcher's lived experiences and intimate knowledge of gangs and the membership thereof, to examine those outside perspectives and provide clarity for those who seek to better understand gangs and the members thereof.

The perimeters of this autoethnographic analysis are bound by my experiences. Qualitatively, I contribute to this academic inquiry lived experiences as a gang member. Prior to joining, I grew up in a gang environment and subsequently joined a gang as an adolescent. Over the course of the three decades of my gang membership, I have visited various U.S. cities and personally interacted with gang members from gangs located in Portland, Seattle, Los Angeles, Compton, Modesto, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Tucson, and Memphis. Furthermore, I have been incarcerated in federal prison where I have interacted with members of gangs from all over the world. I remain in contact with gang members of all ages, from both my own gang and several other gangs from all over the country, including Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and throughout the Midwest & South. I have lived amongst predominantly Black street gangs for my entire life. I am aware of the various identifying signs and representative symbols of most American urban street gangs, and I have personally met members of some of the largest and oldest street gangs in America. The gang I am a member of is one of those oldest and largest street gangs. The urban street gangs I reference throughout this analysis bear many similarities and share an overarching culture that includes much of the same principles. These gangs largely recognize one another and whether or not the gangs perceive one another as friends or enemies, these gangs provide a source of perpetuating validation of one another that results in what amounts to a community of gangs—or a *gang-gang*.

Analytic autoethnography is a form of qualitative research described as an ethnography with a researcher who is a full member of the group being researched, analytically reflexive, narrative visibility of self, has dialogue with informants besides self, and who remains committed to an analytic research agenda that is focused on improving theoretical framework of a broader social phenomenon

(Anderson, 2006). “As a social scientist, the researcher has another cultural identity and goals that lead to a secondary orientation to action within the social world shared with other group members” (Anderson, p.380, 2006).

Another challenge of any autoethnographic analysis is then remaining analytically reflexive, even when autoethnographic reporting is at risk of the formation of representational processes the researcher may also be engaged in (Anderson, 2006). The truest challenge in any analytical autoethnography is what Anderson describes as a commitment to an analytic agenda (Anderson, 2006). The objective of analytical research is to use evidence to formulate and refine theoretical understandings of social processes (Anderson, 2006). This is like “carnal”.

Carnality is a term I can relate with and a strength I possess in putting forth this autoethnographic analysis. In discussing a need for more *carnal*, Contreras (2015) describes his *carnal* experiences with Dominican stickup kids in the South Bronx:

I felt them; I understood their words, acts, and emotions even before asking them. Everything came together: my body experienced the same as their bodies, even in the moment. This “carnality” came about for the following reasons: I had been a crack dealer, I had experiences with violence, and I grew up poor in the South Bronx community (Contreras, p.29, 2015).

Contreras goes on to state:

In all, my “insider-ness” shaped how I framed my drug robbery research. My feelings informed my questions, which then informed my theory choice and analysis. Without a carnal experience, there is a great chance that my research would have took on a different look, tone, and style (Contreras p.29, 2015).

Like Contreras, I can relate to those who are similarly situated as I, and I can also place value in my experiences and the knowledge developed through the lens of both a gang member and a researcher.

Margot Duncan describes six key issues to measure the quality of an autoethnography; they are study boundary, instrumental utility, construct validity, external validity, and reliability (Duncan, 2004). The *study boundaries* for this analysis are the overall academic study of American urban street gangs for the past hundred years and the subsequent present autoethnographic analysis conducted herein to challenge the criminalization thereof within much of that literature. The *instrumental utility* of this analysis is to serve to provoke further inquiry, discourse, and understanding with respect to urban street gangs. This autoethnographic analysis’ *construct validity* is supported and corroborating by my own experiences with multiple other sources that are used to create a chain of evidence. The *external validity* of this autoethnographic analysis can be measured by the way in which I have synthesized my own experiences with the external school of thought regarding gangs and I believe these findings will provide at least *some* better understanding

of urban street gangs. In measuring *reliability*, in conformance with basic study protocols, this analysis was strictly conducted in line with the requirements outlined. Lastly, throughout this endeavor, I have sought to *ensure a scholarly account* by framing this analysis with evidence in support of the underlying reasoning (Duncan, 2004).

Autoethnography & Analysis

The examination of this essentiality of criminality using qualitative autoethnographic analysis will require a focus on qualitative reasoning. To provide some background and context, I was born in 1980, so the era in which my childhood is set was during the 1980s and 1990s. I had one brother who was less than a year old when I was born, and I never met my biological father. According to my mother, however, he was an ex-convict and a woman-beater who was addicted to both heroin and cocaine. In 1983, my mom met the man who would become my stepdad and he and my mom raised me and my brother until I became a ward of the state at the age of 14.

I grew up in an inner-city urban environment—more specifically, a place wherein the residents colloquially referred to it as *the ghetto*. The place I lived as a child was civically underserved and, as I now understand, it was typical of American inner cities of the same period (during the 1980s and 1990s). There were abandoned buildings board-up on the front streets, overgrown landscaping, trash strewn about, broken glass everywhere, packs of stray dogs, open-air drug markets, abandoned cars lining the streets, lots filled with refuse, and burned up houses dotted the backstreets.

I also grew up in abject poverty. For my entire childhood since birth, my family received public welfare (Aid to Families with Dependent Children/AFDC) benefits including cash assistance, food stamps, medical coverage, and access to low-income public housing, and eventually a HUD-subsidized Section-8 housing voucher that would virtually eliminate the cost of rent for my family. The places I lived as a child, however, were dilapidated, roach, mice, and rat-infested dwellings, where it was the norm for things to be dirty, dingy, or in a state of disrepair.

Throughout my entire childhood, in the section of town I grew up in, I regularly witnessed marijuana and crack cocaine being bought and sold on street corners and in drug-houses; I saw people using drugs, gambling, and drinking heavily. There were frequent homicides, rampant prostitution, theft, robberies, and assaults. Most of this criminal activity took place in the wide-open with what seemed like an indifference to most people. I was taught by my parents and other elders in my family and community to mind my own business, and more specifically to not talk to the police—ever. The police were casually viewed as the enemy and oppressor, and even in grade school, I knew that I should not cooperate with the police. Not only did it include the police, but this distrust extended to most people who served in some sort of official capacity, i.e., law enforcement, social workers, etc.—as they were deemed untrustworthy.

I began stealing with other kids when I was in grade school. It started in a neighborhood grocery store, taking things to snack on because my brother and I would be locked out of the house and not allowed to come inside until it got dark outside, which was fine with us because our mother was quite violent, except that we'd often become hungry while stuck outside. I stole even when I knew the consequences were as harsh as they were since discipline in my childhood home was quite strict, even by ghetto standards. My parents whipped my brother and I on a near daily basis for even the smallest behavioral infractions. This too I considered a norm, since I knew that most of my friends and even other kids in my family and neighborhood were disciplined similarly. My parents whipped me naked with leather belts and electrical extension cords. Offenses ranged from "talking-back" to not doing chores. I cannot recall a day in my childhood in which I was not beaten as described. This violence in the home prepared me for the violence outside of the home which was both fatal and frequent. I learned at a very early age that violence was inflicted to enforce rules, obedience, and respect for both. As I applied this knowledge to the streets I played in as a child, I found that violence reigned supreme. From as early as I can remember, I possessed an inclination to respond to challenges and confrontations with violence, such as punching, kicking, choking, biting, and using weapons against other kids. The kids I grew up with were just as violent, and I was fist-fighting with other kids from the time I was in kindergarten.

I was arrested when I was 11 years old for robbery, and again when I was 12 for stealing a car; by 13, I was very actively a criminal and had been involved in shootings, selling drugs, and at least two high-speed chases, both from which I escaped. Most of the scuffling I experienced was with other boys who were my age and had similar, if not identical, experiences as my own described herein. Most of the children I knew had parents who were also on drugs and drinking alcohol. Most parents also made us get out of the house during the day, while they went out to the nightclubs and partied at night and leaving us children home alone. My parents were into alcohol, weed, and cocaine and they were regulars at the bars and nightclubs in our section of town. While they were out partying, we essentially did whatever we wanted to do. I was addicted to smoking cigarettes when I was ten and had already experienced my first intoxication by alcohol at nine. I smoked weed for the first time when I was 12, but I never experimented with any other drugs after that. Other kids my age were also experimenting with different combinations of drugs and alcohol.

Joan Moore's explanation is quite reminiscent of my childhood experiences:

Because of a loose or loosening of social control in traditional institutions such as family, schools, and police, these youths have been cast into the streets. In this setting, they have created a street culture with attendant socialization and enculturalization processes, which provide street youth with purposes and identity and enable them to fit into the gang and its subculture (Moore, p.109, 1993).

By the age of 7, I was claiming gang membership among my peers, and at school, I was assigned to ‘Special Education’ classes in the second grade. “Gang posturing” was cited as one of the reasons. I consider special ed to be my first penal experience. A short bus picked me up in front of my home every morning and then drove around town picking up other students. When we arrived at the school, we were met at the bus by our teachers who would escort us straight to our classroom that was in a small room at the end of a hallway, far away from other classrooms. We ate separately in the school’s cafeteria after everyone else did. We had recess on the playground separate from the rest of the school. The desks were all facing the walls and away from other students and teachers and we were not allowed to speak or otherwise interact with other students. We were instructed to sit at our desks, facing forward at all times, and expected to complete packets of work provided by the teachers; and if we had questions, we were to raise our hands and wait for a teacher to come help.

Things never quite worked according to plan, however. The ‘special education’ atmosphere was often chaotic and there was not a lot of teaching or learning going on much of the time. Most of the kids were Black, Brown, or Native American. All of the kids in the class claimed allegiance to one gang or another and later in life I saw most of them in prison. When we were not competing with each other to see who could disrupt the class the best, we were fighting with each other or the teachers or we were running out of the classroom and school and escaping to nearby neighborhoods or accessing public transportation to head downtown or to the mall. To thwart our disorderliness, we were often physically restrained by the teachers, and there was a closet-sized room we were locked in when we were in a state of “crisis”—which was the rough equivalent of whatever a stressed-out educational professional may interpret the moment to be. This included slamming students to the ground face-first, twisting wrists to restrain them, and climbing atop them to use their weight to control a student in refusal to comply with rules or commands.

As a child, I didn’t always want to be in a gang. In fact, I grew up watching action movies like Rambo and first aspired to be a soldier. My friends and I would play a game we called *army*, and we’d have wars with opposing factions vying for control of an area. I wrote the U.S. Army when I was 8 years old, and they told me I had to be 18 years old to join. I also tried hanging out with the gang that hung out near my childhood home, but the gang wouldn’t let me join that young either. The gang mostly consisted of my older male family members who constantly shoved me away and encouraged me to go play with other kids and to stay in school. But I’d stubbornly hang out in their periphery anyway, often watching out for them, keeping a lookout for the police and anyone else who wasn’t from around the area. I saw myself as their guardian and was never too far from what they had going on. They mostly just hung around the corners, sidewalks, driveways, alleyways, parks, and other liminal public spaces. They’d be drinking, smoking weed, shooting dice, or just socializing. Sometimes they’d have some girls hanging out with them, and sometimes they’d be serious and quiet, appearing angry and vigilant. Other times, they would fight each other, sometimes for fun, and other times for respect. They

all favored a certain color, and they shared a vernacular I never heard spoken outside of the gang. They dressed different than anyone else and they were well-liked as the sons, nephews, and brothers of those who lived in the community. To me, they were *the homeboys from around my way*.

The community surrounding my home was a violent place. I heard gunshots in the daytime and the nighttime. I saw a shootout for the first time when I was 7 years old. I was beaten up and robbed for my bicycle at the same age. I saw people shooting at or getting shot at by others on a regular basis throughout my childhood. When I was 9, I saw a man stabbed and killed in front of me by a man who was screaming the other man owed him ten dollars. I have watched my family get in fights and act violently with neighbors and strangers alike. Our entire family has fist fought in the park with another entire family—women, children, and older relatives included! These were normal occurrences where I grew up; violence is the norm where I'm from.

So too are gangs. I formally joined an urban street gang when I was 13 years old. My understanding then was as it now remains—that is: my allegiance was based on the principles of honor, loyalty, and respect to the gang I was joining—and not to the individual members. Never once in the nearly three decades since has there ever been an understanding on my part that there was an expectation of a criminal objective or purpose on the part of the gang. To join, I voluntarily stepped into a circle of my homeboys—knowing they were going to kick my ass—and I fought. I fought as hard as I could to let them know I was tough enough to stand up to not just one person, but several. I was willing, I didn't run, and I never stopped fighting. That was all that was expected of me from that day forward. It is just that simple. No secret oaths or ritualistic ceremonies; no written substance whatsoever. In my gang, we shared a simplistic all-for-one, one-for-all attitude that changed as unpredictably as the membership did from time-to-time. For me, this loosely held concept of "all-for-one, one-for-all" never quite seemed to add up that way when I reflect back on the many instances exposing the snitches, cowards, and other dishonorable mentions I'd actually experience in the gang lifestyle.

I also want to be as clear as day when I posit that in most of my life's experience discussed herein, I have seen very few White people in the spaces I have been in and, in that regard, I saw far more were White women (in relationships with Black men) than ever there were White men. Indeed, the spaces these experiences were gathered in were predominantly occupied by Black people. The gang I joined originated in the 1950s and, since the early 1990s when I joined, I did not and have not observed any plans, organizational structure, goals, cooperation, resources, property, or anything else gained or maintained by my gang. Indeed, I believe that my gang's age contributes to its dysfunction and disorganization in many ways. I do not even know all of my own gang's members, as it has grown so large that it has become impossible to keep up with who is a member or not. The gang—as an entity separate from its members—is poor and owns nothing. Conversely, it is owned by and belongs to the gang's members—who individually and collectively own and administer the rights of our gang's name, symbols, styles, principles,

language, history, and overall identity—but little else, since the gang owns nothing else.

The reality is far removed from the unity we as a gang outwardly project. In fact, there is always much controversy and disagreement within the gang, and we fight with each other and compete against each other and generally do not trust one another until the safety or security of a member(s) becomes apparent. Because a gang is a mere reflection of its individual members, and, in turn, the individual interpretations of each member, the gang is complex in its identity, and although they may be alike, in my experiences not one gang is the same, nor are its members. In instances in which I am physically separated from other members of my gang, I am still a gang member and have outwardly represented myself. My first loyalty is to the gang, its name, its language, symbols, traditions, customs, and overall reputation—only secondary to that is my loyalty to the individual members of the gang I'm a member of.

Upon joining a gang, not only did I inherit an imposed perplexing quasi-criminality which virtually guaranteed a constant harassment by law enforcement for the next several decades, but, as a new gang member, I also inherited a wealth of enemies to include, of course, mostly all the other gangs, but then too, the judicial system, the government & politicians, churches, society, and especially academia. Historically and quite commonly, those who are not members of gangs have very broadly regarded gangs as enemies of the public. The result of this collective social exclusion and alienation caused me to forego any meaningful connection or relationship with mainstream society. I have always been ostracized by those tasked with an anti-gang agenda—including school staff, social workers, law enforcement, and juvenile corrections “counselors.” There was always the promise that if I just *left the gang*, that life would suddenly become *better*. But the ultimatum only met me as offensive and further alienated me from those who regarded themselves as saviors of sorts. These tactics and strategies always increased the cohesion between me and my gang. Besides that, I knew plenty of people who left the gang—and, in my own opinion, *they weren't shit*.

In my gang experiences, snitching has been regarded as dishonorable and unbecoming of a gang member. To be clear, snitching is when an individual member dishonors the confidence held between themselves and another, whether the other person is a member of the gang or not. When most members leave the gang, it's usually because they are arrested for individual criminal conduct and then “cooperate” with law enforcement and/or the district attorney against others in exchange for more lenient sentences. This behavior is considered to be dishonorable and is widely discouraged, not only in gangs, but in the streets generally, and even in many parts of the dominant society, including law enforcement. In my experiences, this particular form of dishonorability is one of the primary motivating reasons of those who have forfeited their gang membership. There has been no effective means of regulating this forfeiture of membership, however, and so unfortunately, there are those members who have nevertheless dishonored themselves and yet continue to represent themselves as a member of a gang. *Caveat emptor*.

As a gang member, my experiences cause me to believe that we were mostly our own worst enemies. Me and my homeboys enjoyed having fun and most of the time we busied ourselves in search of a pastime, hobby, or activity, but, since there were very little of those kinds of things in the community that I grew up in, what we mostly found was *trouble*. As the entity our gang existed as, it was in no way criminal—there was never any criminal consensus, agreement, or stated purpose to commit crime, and not all the gang’s members were criminals; as well, in my experiences, not all criminals were gang members. Crime existed and individual gang members committed crimes for individual gain or satisfaction, but those crimes resulted from individual interpretation of what was in order for their individual survival in the streets and not due to any *purpose* of the gang. In fact, most of the time, when I, as an individual, committed to engaging in any *gainful* criminal activity, I kept the details of my criminal intentions and opportunities away from my fellow gang members and acted alone. I never shared any benefit or proceeds of my criminal activities with the gang, nor was it a requirement of the gang for me to do so. As well, members of my gang were not expected to provide for me in any way and it is the norm for individual gang members to be quite selfish.

Crime is a very real occurrence in the streets and the gang I was member of was a product of the same underserved environment that was plagued with crime and particularly violence even before my gang existed in it. Plainly put, I broke the law because I did not respect it. I felt that laws were imposed and enforced by those who didn’t live where I did and by those who didn’t know what was necessary to survive there. In the streets where I grew up, it was a common belief and understanding that the police and the corresponding criminal justice system were racist and that the two worked in tandem to target, capture, and/or kill Black people. Mostly all the gang members where I grew up were Black people. Whether this was a conjured-up conspiracy-theory or fact, this was how it was. So, at 12 and 13 years of age I was rebelliously robbing stores, stealing cars, and had even taken the police on several high-speed chases. I disrespected authority figures; I fought with everyone and obeyed no one, and I only respected the *code of the streets* (Anderson, 1994; Mitchell, et al., 2016). By the age of 14, I was adjudicated of several felonies, including gun charges and burglary, and was sent to juvenile prison as a ward of the state.

Juvenile prison is a lot like adult prison, except there were more fistfights in the former and more stabbings in the latter. I fought often and earned a violent reputation throughout the time I was there. By the time I was 16 years old, I stood six feet tall and weighed 165 pounds. I was very athletic and even more aggressive. When new kids would come in, I’d check to see what gang they were from and if they were from a gang that my gang did not get along with, I’d physically attack them immediately. It wasn’t about building a reputation for my gang; it was about building a reputation for myself as someone who sought justice for any one of the several dead friends I already had by that time. If an incoming kid were from my gang, I’d give them a pillowcase with everything they could possibly buy from the canteen (institutional store). I did this not because I was required to, but because I individually sought to project to everyone else that there was a benefit of being in

my gang and consequences for opposing it. I spent a lot of time in isolation for assaultive and other disruptive behavior, even a riot once. I have been choked and assaulted by staff inside juvenile prisons, and at other times I have been allowed by staff to fight with or outright assault other youth. The streets made me tough, but juvenile prison served to harden me and build a reputation for myself and my gang. In the long-term, this reputation was helpful in that it allowed me to forego as much remedial violence as might otherwise be necessary to impart with for survival.

I was released from juvenile prison when I was 18 years old, the same year I was arrested for my first adult offense—for selling crack-cocaine—and sent to adult state prison. I had been selling crack since I was 13 years old. I grew up seeing crack cocaine everywhere. My parents sold and used it. Many other family members sold it and used it. White people came in cars with local and even out-of-state license plates to buy it. I knew how to cook crack before I knew how to cook meat. Where I lived, you could sell crack cocaine 24 hours a day, seven days a week and the customers did not stop coming—all that to say, it made good money. I bought the drug and sold it from whomever had it. I bought drugs from individual members of gangs that my gang didn't like. I sold drugs to members of gangs that my gang didn't like. I witnessed kids my own age smoking crack—and I sold it to them. I sold it to my dad, aunts, uncles, pregnant women, old people, White people, Black people, crippled people, 12-year-old crackheads and anyone else who had money to spend. I would buy and sell cocaine all the same, as opportunities permitted, to anyone who had money they wanted to spend on it. But I never gave anyone in my gang anything *I earned*. Members of my gang were out in the streets getting their *own* income, whether it was a hustle, a job, or *whatever*, but we all took care of *ourselves*. This was not a requirement of my gang or any other gang, but in my circle of friends, you were looked down upon if you were without a means of your own gainful income and it was the norm that no one was going to give you anything. The gang was then, and remains, a noncommercial social group.

The true purpose of being in a gang doesn't immediately occur to those who do not have to face the worry of violent confrontation on a regular and frequent basis. Contreras (2018) describes the experiences of non-affiliated youth who inhabit the same space of a gang. The non-affiliated youth have become so accustomed to being asked, '*Where are you from?*', that they know how to respond in a way that will increase their odds at surviving—to wit: *From nowhere—I don't bang!* That option no longer remains when you join a gang. For me, and many others I presume, there was a fair trade-off of newfound social stature and structure and a sense of importance, ownership and belonging—all of which were missing from my minimally interactive connections between an oppressive dominant society.

Whether or not I was actively engaged in individual criminal activity at any given moment, I was *always* treated as though I were a criminal by the police. In reflection, my life was so much more of a struggle being stopped by police so often, patted down, searched, detained, cited, arrested, fined, indebted, and restricted by one form of 'community supervision' or another; including being restricted from going to this side of town, or that side or associating with known gang members. I

have even been arrested and placed in jail for a parole violation for associating with a known gang member—to wit, my biological sibling. Most of the time, I'd run from the police because I simply was not in the mood to deal with their routine harassment and less because I had any involvement in a crime at that time. Regardless, when I got out of prison the first time I wasn't out for an entire year, before I was arrested, charged, and convicted of selling crack cocaine again.

I've served three separate terms of felony imprisonment—twice in State prison for selling crack cocaine, and federal prison once for being a convicted felon in possession of a firearm. I am a gang member from the streets, so when I first arrived in prison, I knew a lot of people who were already there. Many were in juvenile hall and juvenile prison with me. Others were classmates from special ed. Still yet, many others lived in the same area of the streets I grew up in. Nearly everyone in the prison was in a gang, or a 'car' as we gang convicts call them. I've been to more than a dozen different prison facilities and most of them were high-security due to my being a gang member. Gang members are routinely classified as Security Threat Group members and subsequently placed into the most secure institutions—which also were often the most violent prisons. These high-security institutions were where most gang members are housed.

Though prison was a violent place, there was little inter-gang violence. In every prison I've ever been in, the lines were drawn mostly around race and geography. Preceding that, however, was one's loyalty to their gang. There was then, the occasional instances of White gang members of gangs with predominantly Latino or Black membership. For the purposes of prison politics, those White members of predominantly Black and Latino gangs are commonly considered by the prison officials and prisoners alike to be the same race as the majority of the gang they belong to. For example, if White prisoners were to have a group conflict with the Black prisoners, the White members of Black gangs would be in opposition to the White prisoners, who, *vis versa* regard White gang members as "race-traitors."

In prison, there was a convict code that did not conflict with the code of the streets, but instead mirrored it in many ways (Mitchell, et al., 2016). Normally, violence was reserved as a means of last resort, and since we all faced the penalty of an institutional lockdown, possibly a death, or perhaps a murder charge if anything *popped off*, we were all vested in keeping a peace. A large part of the violence in prison was due to prisoners keeping their house clean. *Housecleaning* is a term that convicts use to describe the expulsion and exclusion of one of their own people. Snitches and child molesters automatically fell into the exclusionary category; bullies, shit-starters, and people who don't pay their debts fell closely in line with the former. When violence would occur, *in-house*, they'd lock us down for an hour or two, or long enough to clean up whatever blood might have been spilled, and we'd be let back out of our cells. However, if a fight happened between two different races, we'd be locked down for months.

An example of housecleaning is as follows: a member of my gang owed money (from gambling) to someone who was not a member of our gang and he

refused to pay his debt. Our gang met up in a cell, confronted him about his outstanding debts and he said he felt cheated and wasn't going to pay. Rather than allowing his stark belligerence to force the entire gang to aid in his defense from another gang—all for his selfish refusal to pay his gambling debts—we paid his debt for him. However, after that, a few of us, myself included, put our boots on, blindsided him, knocked him out unconscious and stomped him in the middle of a busy chow hall with several hundred prisoners just sitting there watching, and not a correctional officer in sight. Needless to say, no one interfered or audibly objected in any way whatsoever. These kinds of assaults were quite frequent, so our actions were not at all that extraordinary. We walked out, leaving him knocked out cold in a puddle of his own blood, returned to our housing units, smoked some weed, drank some wine, re-enacted the event for those homies who were not present; and knowingly, we packed ourselves laundry bags with what we needed for the segregated housing unit. An hour later, sure enough, our names were called over the PA speaker, and we were instructed to report to the Lieutenants office. We were asked one question and one question only: was it *in-house*? We knew what that meant, nodded our heads and spent two weeks in the hole. If the streets made me tough and juvenile prison hardened me, prison made me dangerous.

With respect to my gang membership, to this day my identity is centered on it. Most of the homeboys I grew up with are dead, imprisoned, suffering from mental health and/or drug addiction, homelessness, or other trauma, displacement, disenfranchisement, and social exclusion. I have but a few homeboys remaining who I knew while growing up. Since first joining, I've been to prison; I've been shot and otherwise traumatized by violence; and, for most of my life, I've been broke—out in the streets trying as best I could to take care of myself, my home, and family. I'm in my fourth decade in life and I still consider my gang near and dear to my heart. It is my identity, my culture, and even my religion.

Every action in my capacity as a gang member is evaluated by my understanding and interpretation of the *code of the streets* (Anderson, 1994). Because the gang is but one species in a scrupulous taxonomy of street inhabitants, the overarching code of the streets supersedes a gang's control and is the prevalent *law* in every set of streets I've had the nerve to visit. The *code of the streets* is brilliantly described by Elijah Anderson in a May 1994 Atlantic Monthly article aptly titled *The Code of the Streets*, as: *a set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, including violence* (Anderson, 1994). I absolutely agree. In the environment I was raised in, relying on police for public safety was not the norm. Conversely, the norm was to fear the police and thus avoid the police. The entire criminal justice system is viewed suspiciously and distrustfully by the community centered around the habitat of *the streets*.

Respect is at the heart of the code, while itself is loosely interpreted as being treated deservedly—which, I posit is a loose individual interpretation subject to negotiation between different street-oriented individuals (Anderson, 1994). If a street-oriented person interprets a violation of their perceived right to be treated deservedly, vengeance is thereby considered justified, and violence might be remedially inflicted as a result. For those who are street-oriented, it is easy to see

how far the individual interpretation can carry a perception of disrespect; it is also easy to see how the resulting violence is all too common in the streets—yet, often misunderstood by those looking at it from the outside-looking-in (Anderson, 1994).

In his general theory of subcultures, Albert Cohen (1955) said:

What people do depends upon the problems they contend with. If we want to explain what people do, then we want to be clear about the nature of human problems and what produces them. As a first step, it is important to recognize that all the multifarious factors and circumstances that conspire to produce a problem come from one or the other of the two sources, the actors “frame of reference” and the “situation” he confronts. All problems arise and are solved through changes in one or both of the classes of determinants (Cohen, p.51, 1955).

The Code of the Streets (Anderson, 1994) describes a “frame of reference” of *the streets*:

The police are most often seen as representing the dominant white society and not caring to protect inner-city residents. When called, they may not respond, which is one reason many residents feel they must be prepared to take extraordinary measures to defend themselves and their loved ones against those who are inclined to aggression. Lack of police accountability has in fact been incorporated into the status system: the person who is believed capable of “taking care of himself” is accorded a certain deference, which translates into a sense of physical and psychological control. Thus the street code emerges where the influence of the police ends and personal responsibility for one's safety is felt to begin. Exacerbated by the proliferation of drugs and easy access to guns, this volatile situation results in the ability of the street-oriented minority (or those who effectively “go for bad”) to dominate the public spaces.

It becomes clearer when you assume the proper “frame of reference” and analyze gangs from a *street perspective*, influenced of course by the *code of the streets*, which, for many is what we were taught as children and have subsequently adhered to throughout life—gang or not. My upbringing then is perfectly explained below:

Those street-oriented adults with whom children come in contact--including mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, boyfriends, cousins, neighbors, and friends--help them along in forming this understanding by verbalizing the messages they are getting through experience: “Watch your back.” “Protect yourself.” “Don't punk out.” “If somebody messes with you, you got to pay them back.” “If someone disses you, you got to straighten them out.” Many parents actually impose sanctions if a child is not sufficiently aggressive.

For example, if a child loses a fight and comes home upset, the parent might respond, "Don't you come in here crying that somebody beat you up; you better get back out there and whup his ass. I didn't raise no punks! Get back out there and whup his ass. If you don't whup his ass, I'll whup your ass when you come home." Thus, the child obtains reinforcement for being tough and showing nerve (Anderson, 1994).

I have heard every last one of the above-mentioned quotes from the adults who raised me. More specifically, of *gang warfare*, a different "frame of reference" posited a similar view that creates more questions than answers as to what the "situation" is:

The gang is a conflict group. It develops through strife and thrives on warfare. The members of a gang will fight each other. ... Gangsters are impelled, in a way, to fight; so much of their activity is outside the law that fighting is the only means of avenging injuries and maintaining the code (Thrasher, p.173, 1927).

Thrasher's (1927) framing explains *what*, without explaining *why* in the way in which Anderson (1994) does so flawlessly. I believe the source of Anderson's framing was *autoethnographic*, while Thrasher's was plain *ethnography*, lacking the "carnal" explained by Contreras (2015). Both of these qualitative approaches form a worthy analysis, but each does so with the nature of their knowledge and the attitudes of their upbringings. Thrasher (1927) stating that "so much of their activity is outside the law," is an example of how so much gang research has traditionally failed to take note of the systemic racism and generational distrust of police by those who inhabit *the streets*, to include, especially, gangs.

Gangs I've encountered are not conscious, intelligent, or aware of the conduct of the individual members. Further, the gangs I've interacted with in my life's experiences have not mandated any purposes which are criminal and the gangs I'm familiar with lack any *mens rea*. The gangs I know of are unknowing, and unwilling entities often manipulated by individual members to accommodate individual interpretations or goals. As well, gangs are manipulated by those who target gangs for suppression, such as law enforcement who routinely use the gang's disorganization—and lack of knowledge or resources—against the gang, thereby attacking gangs with sensationalized descriptions of gangs as villainous and powerful entities that, if not suppressed, threaten to recruit the world's children into gangs which will then traffic sex, drugs, and other moral "crimes" to no end. Gangs are largely defenseless to these tactics and this strategy has fielded immeasurable resources while yielding little to no results in suppressing gangs.

Lastly, the final evidence hereby offered to counter the ongoing criminalization of urban street gangs is my own declarative statement, as an urban street gang member of approximately thirty years, that I'm not involved in anything constituting a crime—unless it is a crime itself to simply be in a gang; then, by all means, I'm a criminal.

Limitations

In acknowledgment of the limitations of autoethnography as a qualitative method, it is recognized that this analysis will draw criticism from those who strictly adhere to the traditions of conducting research that is the same as it has always been. Conversely, if I allow these limitations to limit my contributions, I'd be conducting research that is similarly the same.

Further limitations are the barriers that accompany my gang membership. Because gangs are essentially defined as criminal, as such, I may be deemed untrustworthy and unreliable and disregarded as another "subject" of academic research rather than a source to be cited in support of an argument against the essentiality of urban street gang criminality. I seek to provoke further inquiry and discourse on the position that criminality is essential to defining a gang, and I am not as much of an anomaly as it may seem, unless the only observations of gangs are intended to support an essentiality of criminality and seek not to carry gang members in a mutual, inclusive, non-criminal manner when studying gangs.

Conclusion

In 1835, in one of the first ethnographies ever, Alexis de Tocqueville said, "Among the laws that rule human societies there is one which seems to be more precise and clearer than all others. If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased" (Tocqueville, 1997). This advisement holds true to this day, and if the equality of social conditions for gangs were improved at the same ratio as the dominant society, this aspect of criminality might not exist.

It's arguable that because many gang members have been convicted of crimes committed in their individual capacities, that the gang is therefore criminal. The first question that came to my mind when I began researching this claim is, where is the evidence to support this argument? Gangs, in and of themselves, as an associations-in-fact, are no more criminal than other groups with members who have been arrested for the individual commission of crime(s). It is an absurd notion to depict the millions of urban street gang members (FBI, 2022) as essentially criminal based on the individual actions of members who individually interpret the environment they inhabit.

When weighing the evidence provided in the review of the literature, against what I have experienced in my own gang membership, as well as my experiences with the several other gangs I have encountered and interacted with for most of my life, I was unconvinced of any essentiality of criminality with respect to gangs or the membership thereof. If *the streets* were a better place, gangs and the members thereof would be better too. I will offer knowledge that I hope will serve the city and hereby contribute my own definition of a gang as follows: a volunteer, non-profit, non-commercial, unincorporated social group centered on respect and credibility, according to the *code of the streets*, and survived by inherent violence.

Potential determinants of gang membership may be found in the journey of my own life's experiences. To that observation, the environment and the social fabric shared herein this autoethnography played an important role in shaping the way in which I interacted with particular people in a specific place. Better understanding of the people and places in which gang members are native will increase the overall understanding of gangs.

If gangs are to be defined by how its individual members are primarily situated, a gang could adequately be described as an extremely poor, uneducated, homeless, mentally ill, hypocritical, and disorganized entity. This label of criminality is cast upon gangs without charge, trial by jury, or any other remedial due process provided for in the U.S. Constitution. In America, for any essentiality of criminality to legally exist, there must be *mens rea*, or knowledge and intent. So, if a gang member is unaware of an overarching criminal "purpose," there can be no criminality on the part of the entire gang. Also, as informal associations-in-fact, gangs have a legal right to Constitutional due-process; but this has not been the process by which gangs have been criminalized. Instead, gangs have been criminalized by the "observations", "presumptions", "findings-of-fact", and other "scientific studies", or "empirical research" that were all carried out and attended to by mostly law enforcement and criminal justice system partners, aided by those academics who opine on gangs in ways that support those law enforcement and criminal justice system partnerships, in exchange for government funding and research support. It should be noted that the government agencies awarding the research funding for much of the studies on gangs are the same government agencies tasked with the suppression of gangs.

In conclusion, it appears there is no essentiality to criminality in defining urban street gangs and I suspect the common mischaracterizations are a continuum of a racist weaponization of the label of *criminal*, which targets the racial and economic demography of gangs, rather than any bona fide criminality on the part of gangs themselves as entities separate from individual members. Unless the approach to gangs shifts from the suppression of gangs to the tolerance, inclusion, and empowerment of gangs, gangs and the members thereof are simply *on their own* in surviving the city streets—and, essentially, this is how it's always been for gangs.

Bibliography

- Anderson, E. (1994). The code of the streets. *Atlantic Monthly*, 273(5), pp.80-94. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1994/05/the-code-of-the-streets/306601/>
- Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 25(4), 373-395. <https://journals-sagepub-com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/doi/pdf/10.1177/0891241605280449>.

- Ball, R.A., & Curry, G.D. (1995). The logic of definition in criminology: purposes and methods for defining “gangs”. *Criminology*, 33(2), 225-245.
- Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1997. Urban street gang enforcement. *Department of Justice*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED427146.pdf>
- Bernstein, S. (1964). *Youth on the Streets*. Association Press.
- Brotherton, D.C. (2008). Beyond social reproduction: Bringing resistance back in gang theory. *Theoretical Criminology*. Sage Publications. DOI: 10.1177/1362480607085794.
- Cohen, A. (1955). *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang*. Free Press.
- Contreras, R. (2015). A need for more “carnal”. *Qualitative Sociology*, 38(27-31), DOI: 10.1007/s11133-0149299-3.
- Contreras, R. (2018). From nowhere: Space, race, and time in how young minority men understand encounters with gangs. *Qualitative Sociology*, 41(263-280), DOI: 10.1007/s11133-018-9830-4
- Coughlin, B.C., & Venkatesh, S.A. (2003). The urban street gang after 1970. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29(41-64), DOI: 10.1146/annurev.soc.29.101602.130751.
- De Tocqueville, A. (1997, June 1). *Democracy in America*. University of Virginia. https://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/DETOC/ch2_05.htm
- DOJ (2022, July 29). Criminal street gang statutes, 18 U.S.C. 521. <https://www.justice.gov/archives/jm/criminal-resource-manual-1457-criminal-street-gangs-statute-18-usc-521>
- Duncan, M. (2004). Autoethnography: Critical appreciation of an emerging art. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(4), Article 3. Retrieved June 28, 2005, from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3_4/html/duncan.html
- FBI, (2011). National gang threat assessment. Federal Bureau of Investigation. [https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/stats-services-publications-2011-national-gang-threat-assessment-2011-national-gang-threat-assessment-20-emerging-20-trends.pdf/view](https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/stats-services-publications-2011-national-gang-threat-assessment-2011-national-gang-threat-assessment-2011-national-gang-threat-assessment-20-emerging-20-trends.pdf/view)
- Felson, M. (2006). *Crime & Nature*. Sage Publications.
- Goldstein, A., Glick, B., Blancero, D., & Carthan, W. (1994). *The Prosocial Gang: Implementing Aggression Replacement Training*. Sage Publications.
- Hagedorn, J. (2008). *A World of Gangs: Armed Young Men & Gangsta Culture*. University of Minnesota Press.

- Howell, J.C., (2007). Menacing or mimicking: Realities of youth gangs. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 58(2), 39-50, DOI: 10.1111/j.1755-6988.2007.tb00137.x.
- HSDL (2014). Brief Review of Federal and State Definitions of the Terms “Gang,” “Gang crime,” and “Gang Member”. *Homeland Security Digital Library*. <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=762864>
- Klein, M. (1995). *The American Street Gang*. Oxford University Press.
- Knox, G.W. (1994). *An Introduction to Gangs*. Wyndham Hall Press.
- Manwaring, M.G., (2005). Street gangs: the new urban insurgency. *Strategic Studies Institute*.
- Mesh, A. (2014). Gang mentality. *Willamette Weekly*. <https://www.wweek.com/portland/article-22842-gang-mentality.html>
- Miller, W.B. (1966). Violent crimes in city gangs. *The Annals of the American Academy*, 364(1), 96-112.
- Mitchell, M., Pyrooz, D.C., Fahmy, C., and Decker, S.H. (2016). Criminal codes, crews, and contexts: Differences and similarities across the code of the street, convict code, street gangs, and prison gangs. *Deviant Behavior*, 38(10), 1197-1222. DOI: 10.1080/01639625.2016.1246028.
- Moore, J. (1993). Gangs, drugs, and violence. In S. Cummings & D.J. Monti (Eds.), *Gangs: The origins and impact of contemporary youth gangs in the United States* (pp.27-44). State University for New York Press.
- Puffer, J.A. (1912). *The Boy and His Gang*. Houghton-Mifflin Company.
- Short, J.F. Jr., and Strodbeck, (1964). Why gangs fight. *Society*, 1, 25-29. <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/10.1007/BF03182287>
- Smith, C., & Doll, Y. (2012). Gang investigators’ perceptions of military-trained gang members (MTGM). *Critical Issues in Justice and Politics*, (5)1
- Sullivan, M.R. (2005). Maybe we shouldn’t study “gangs”: does reification obscure youth violence? *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 21(2), 170-190. DOI: 10.1177/1043986204272912.
- Thrasher, F. (1927). *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*. University of Chicago Press.
- Wood, J., and Alleyne, E. (2009). Street gang theory and research: Where we are now and where do we go from here? *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 15, 101-109. DOI: 10.1016/j.avb.2009.08.005.