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WHAT'S IN A NAME?: A GANG BY ANY OTHER NAME ISN'T QUITE THE SAME

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I. INTRODUCTION

There is considerable debate in contemporary society over the definition of a gang. These debates have important public policy consequences, as the magnitude of the gang problem is not insignificant. The most recent national estimates from 1993 place the number of gangs nationally at 16,643, the number of gang members at 555,181, and the number of gang crimes at 580,331.¹

Some jurisdictions report that a large fraction of their citywide homicides are gang-related. In the city of Los Angeles in 1995, 45% of all homicides were gang-related (800 victims),² Chicago reports for the same year that 26% were gang-motivated (215 victims),³ and in St. Louis in 1995 fully 25% of its homicide victims (54) were gang members.⁴ Clearly, gangs represent a considerable problem, particularly in light of the violence they commit and its impact on communities.

Yet despite the magnitude of these figures, there are those who argue that gangs fulfill a positive role in the community. Such commentators, while acknowledging the damage done by gangs, argue that gangs play positive social control functions in the community. For Sanchez-Jankowski, gang members provide protection to store owners against thugs and ordinary street criminals

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1. G. DAVID CURRY ET AL., U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, ESTIMATING THE NATIONAL SCOPE OF GANG CRIME FROM LAW ENFORCEMENT DATA 2 (1996).

2. Cheryl Maxson, *Gang Homicide*, in HOMICIDE STUDIES: A SOURCEBOOK OF SOCIAL RESEARCH (M. Dwayne Smith & Margaret Zahn eds., 1997).

3. *Id.*

4. Computed by authors for the *Valparaiso University Law Review* Conference on Teenage Violence & Drug Use from electronic database of St. Louis Homocide Project, University of Missouri-St. Louis component of the National Consortium of Violence Research (Nov. 15, 1996).

who may victimize them, and protect citizens from unscrupulous business practices.⁵ Ironically, this conclusion receives no empirical support from other gang research.

This paper examines the issue of gang definition from the perspective of gang members in three cities: Chicago, San Diego, and St. Louis. Members in San Diego and Chicago were recruited from probation case loads and from within prisons. St. Louis gang members come from a detention center and a street sample. The definitions offered by gang members themselves provide a stark contrast to those who would argue that gangs play a positive role in the community.

II. SOURCES OF DATA

The data for this paper comes from three sources. The first is a series of interviews conducted with sixty-seven self-identified gang members in the juvenile detention center in St. Louis. These interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of the subjects during 1990.⁶ The second set of interviews came from an ethnographic study of active gang members in St. Louis from 1990 through 1993.⁷ In all, ninety-nine active gang members were interviewed, and their responses to a variety of questions were tape-recorded. The final set of interviews includes interviews of forty-four gang members in Chicago and forty-one in San Diego.⁸ In each city, interviews were conducted with members of an African American and a Hispanic gang. Approximately half of the subjects in each gang were interviewed in prison, with the balance interviewed in probation offices. These interviews were also tape-recorded.

While each set of interviews had a somewhat different instrument and focus, a common set of questions were asked about the definition of a gang, the characteristics of a gang, and what made the group they belonged to a gang. This format allows us to examine, in three different cities (Chicago, St. Louis, and San Diego), for two different ethnic groups (African American and Hispanic) and across four different catchment areas (streets, probation, detention, and prison), the definitions offered by gang members on this issue.

5. MARTIN SANCHEZ-JANKOWSKI, ISLANDS IN THE STREET: GANGS AND AMERICAN URBAN SOCIETY 122-23, 168, 187-88, 305-06 (1991).

6. Scott H. Decker & Kimberly Kempf-Leonard, *Constructing Gangs: The Social Definition of Youth Activities*, 5 CRIM. JUST. POL'Y REV. 271 (1991).

7. SCOTT H. DECKER & BARRIK VAN WINKLE, LIFE IN THE GANG: FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND VIOLENCE (1996).

8. In Chicago, 26 Gangster Disciples were interviewed and 18 Latin Kings were interviewed. In San Diego, interviews were conducted with 20 members of the Calle Triente gang and 21 members of the Syndo Mob. These gangs were chosen because they were viewed by law enforcement and social service providers as the city's most organized gangs.

In Chicago, interviews were conducted with members of the Latin Kings and Gangster Disciples, two of that city's (and the nation's) most established gangs.

These cities are important for a variety of reasons. St. Louis has been classified by Spergel and Curry as an emerging gang city, and the rapid growth of gangs and gang crimes has led it to be designated a participant in the United States Attorney General's Anti-Gang Initiative.⁹ San Diego is an important addition because it has had cultural gangs (primarily Hispanic) for several decades, and due to its location, is heavily influenced by the Los Angeles gang scene. Chicago is considered a chronic gang city, and the site of the most organized gangs; a city where inter-generational gangs have been in existence for at least forty years.

III. GANG DEFINITIONS

The definition of a gang is problematic. Gangs vary on a number of dimensions including size, use of symbolic representations of membership, age of gang, age of members, level of organization, and involvement in crime. One of the most difficult issues in defining gangs is the fact that most youth crime, indeed most youthful activity, takes place in groups.¹⁰ Thus, distinguishing between gang activity and group activity is a significant task in attempting to understand and respond to gangs. There are different views within the research community, among social service providers, and even among law enforcement officials. Maxson and Klein demonstrated that when one uses the Chicago Police definition of *gang-motivated* homicide with Los Angeles homicides, the fraction of gang homicides is half that obtained by using the Los Angeles Police Department definition of *gang-related* homicides.¹¹ Clearly this raises important public policy questions about how we define gang-related activities.

Despite the obvious utility of such an approach, gang members themselves are rarely asked their views on the issue. There are a variety of reasons for this situation, not the least of which is the difficulty in contacting gang members. The current study is unique in that it presents the perspectives of gang members from different gangs in different cities, located through different sources.

9. Irving A. Spergel & G. David Curry, *The National Youth Gang Survey: A Research and Development Process*, in GANG INTERVENTION HANDBOOK 359 (Arnold P. Goldstein & C. Ronald Huff eds., 1993).

10. MALCOLM W. KLEIN, THE AMERICA STREET GANG (1995); Malcolm W. Klein, *On the Group Context of Delinquency*, 54 SOC. & SOC. RES. 63 (1969); Malcolm W. Klein, *Groups, Gangs, and Cohesiveness*, 4 J. RES. CRIME DELINQ. 63 (1969).

11. Cheryl L. Maxson & Malcolm W. Klein, *Street Gang Violence: Twice As Great, or Half As Great?*, in GANGS IN AMERICA (C. Ronald Huff ed., 1990).

The ways in which gang members define gangs do not differ greatly from how they are defined by law enforcement, social service, and research groups. The results of the collective interviews presented here can be subdivided into two main categories suggested by Bursik and Grasmick: (1) those who define the gang in terms of some characteristics of groups; and (2) those who define the gang in terms of the activities in which the gang engages.¹² Not surprisingly, those who choose the former nomenclature focus on organizational or affiliational issues. Those who fall in the latter category emphasize criminal activities. Interestingly, gang members from Chicago were more likely to fall into the former category than their counterparts from St. Louis and San Diego. In spite of the more generic organizational terms used by Chicago gang members to describe their gang, a subtext of criminal involvement and violence was present.

In the following Section, we present the gang members' views of what constitutes a gang. In order, we report on the St. Louis detention sample, the St. Louis field sample, and the Chicago and San Diego probation and prison samples.

A. *St. Louis Gangs*

1. The St. Louis Detention Sample

The largest fraction of this sample defined their gang in terms of criminal involvement. There is a considerable amount of bravado among the members of this sample as they describe the attributes of a gang. The first group is the modal category, those who define their gang in terms of criminal involvement.

A real gang member may die for his colors or do different things to join the gang, but a pretender won't die for his colors or won't get arrested for them or kill somebody for someone in the gang just to join it. That's the pretender. (#454)

If you want to be a real gang member you got to bust out windows, steal, sell dope, hang out. The next one you got to do if you in the gang, you got to sell coke or rock, anything. They think it [gang membership] is fun, they can rule everything, take over schools, take over neighborhoods, and they think they own all that. (#458)

12. ROBERT BURSİK & HAROLD GRASMICK, NEIGHBORHOODS AND CRIME: THE DIMENSIONS OF EFFECTIVE CONTROL COMMUNITY 114-17 (1993).

Well, you can tell a real gang person because a real gang person they don't really play. Like some of them just be, they play, well I can't think of the word but the real gangs they will hurt you in a minute, they don't really play. (#459)

It just means, I guess, going out fighting over territory, that's the main thing. Trying to see who is the strongest in the territory. (#486)

What does it mean to me to be a member in a gang? It means a lot of people going out and fighting one another for no reason. (#477)

Having a reputation and having people terminated, shot up, show off, pretend like you bad, want everybody to stay away from you 'cause you don't want to express your feelings. (#474)

Just be fighting [to be a gang member]. You feel like you got it, feel tougher. That's all I can say. Beat everybody up, be fighting and if somebody try to beat you up then the whole gang will jump in. (#489)

The second category described the gang in terms of its group attributes. Typically language describing the gang as a family, or loosely based organization was used.

It didn't mean anything [to be a member of a gang]. It just probably something that I do just to hang out and be cool with the rest of the people in the neighborhood. (#453)

It's about dying for your colors. The color that you are for, it's not to wear a different color. Wear your own color. (#476)

It feels kind of good [to be a gang member] 'cause you know on one hand you got two families. You got your family and then they all look at you like family. For instance, I get in some trouble and I can make more phone calls and I can be out of here but I don't want that. I can do this now, but then on the other hand if I get into some trouble on the streets, it might cause a friend getting killed, it might cause me getting killed but we all stick together like family. (#479)

2. The St. Louis Field Sample

More members of the St. Louis field sample described their gang in terms of crime, especially violent crime, than in any other terms. For these respondents, the typically adolescent character of their activities—congregate,

spontaneous, swaggering—came through loud and clear in the interviews. Once again, we begin by examining the modal category, gang members who described their gang in terms of criminal activity or orientation.

A gang is like I say, they start off like five to ten people and they say “man yea we gonna start making money together.” That’s a gang and that’s like unity. (#001)

A gang is a group of friends that help each other when they need to fight, for when they need help of something. (#008)

It’s good to be in a gang ‘cause there’s a lot of violence and stuff. (#009)

A bunch of thugs doing bad stuff. Some people good but they get in trouble and take it out on somebody else. ‘Cause they devilish. They don’t think before they do things. They just do things, they don’t think. Regular people think. (#015)

A gang is something you follow behind the leader. Do different things just like a family. Hang out together, rob, steal cars, fight other gangs like for competition. (#017)

I call it a gang because it is a gang of boys. Talking from the street, it’s a gang of niggers. That’s why we call ourselves a gang ‘cause when we out in the street we black, we are ruthless, we just go buck wild. We just niggers. (#021)

It be something to do. You get to shoot. (#032)

Somebody who is fighting over colors. Somebody approach me and say, “What’s up Blood,” and I’m going to say killer. They down on my set, they know I’m a Crip. If they come here and say “What’s up Blood,” I’m going to say killer. That mean I’m a killer. Then we will probably fight or shoot or whatever. Whatever happen it happen. (#033)

A whole lot of people against another whole lot of people for a particular reason or color, for territory. (#048)

It’s mainly protection. If I’m gonna sell some dope then I got somebody to protect me. Like if a Blood or Crip try to fight me then I have some protection so we won’t get no interference. If the police come I can get away quicker while they be fighting. (#075)

Business, acting crazy. My friends, well they not really friends, but when it's time to go bangin' they'll help you out. When you ain't got no place to go they'll take you in. I ain't legit for real. It's easy money. (#086)

'Cause that's what we are. Fighting, shooting, selling drugs. (#091)

We are an organization. We all hang out together, and we do what we do together. Bang, drive-by, and shoot shit up. (#099)

You can get to fight whoever you want and shoot whoever you want. To me it's kind of fun, then again it's kind of not because you have to go to jail for that shit. I'm tired of that. But other than that, being down for who you want to be with, it's kind of fun. (#101)

A second group of the St. Louis field sample described their gang in terms of its affiliational characteristics. These characteristics typically used the terminology of the family to describe the gang. However, many typifications of the gang equivocated about its nature, suggesting that other features, such as criminal involvement, may also be salient.

It started in California, it's like an organization of colors. It's all colors. I guess they named it the Crips. They have been the Crips for about seven years now but they just hit St. Louis about five years ago, 'cause that's the number one gang in L.A. (#006)

We call it a gang because there be a lot of us and we be together, that's why we call it a gang. (#011)

It's more like a family away from home. You with your friends, you all stick together. They ain't going to let nothing happen to you, you ain't going to let nothing happen to them. (#031)

To my knowledge it's a group of fellas. Not just fellas but ones that can depend on each other that's all down for the same thing. (#037)

I don't really call it a gang. I just call it a group of guys that get together when its time to keep respect for the neighborhood so nobody won't come in getting you. (#040)

A gang to me is really an organization, a group of people that claiming. Society calls us a gang. We don't really call it a gang, we all just down for the hood. We don't claim no set, just North County. (#065)

Second family. A crew, family, 'cause it's together. A gang of people always together. (#092)

B. Chicago Gangs

1. The Gangster Disciples

The two Chicago gangs (the Gangster Disciples and the Latin Kings) are similar in contrast to their St. Louis and San Diego counterparts. As gangs in Chicago are more organized and have older membership, it is not surprising to find that gangs from Chicago report a different context for gang activities. For the Gangster Disciples, an African American gang that has evolved from the El Rukns of the 1960s, the gang is typically described as an "organization." Indeed, many gang members bristled at the characterization of their group as a gang.

They are a consolidated group of people that are working toward one goal, to better the political, social, and economical development. I don't look at it as no gang because a gang, I always look at it as a wild radical group of people, but we never acted like that. (#09)

Some individuals look at it as being called Gangster Disciples, but I don't look at it like that. I look at it as being a Growth and Development organization.¹³ (#13)

I don't call it a gang. I call it an organization from the fact that we are organized, some of us. That's why I don't call it a gang. I call it an organization. (#16)

Well, basically, what it means is when you say a collective group of people, it's a group of people just out there for each other's needs really, and they are governed by a chain of command so to speak. (#01)

Just like a business. The way they operate businesses is the same way we do it in ours. We have different people doing different things. It's not all running around shooting guns and sticking people up and selling drugs and stuff. (#02)

13. The Gangster Disciples have begun to refer to themselves as Growth and Development in an attempt to gain social and political legitimacy.

A gang is a group of individuals bound together for a common purpose. (#05)

Everybody be protesting on the news about it's a bunch of gang-bangers and all that and like I just told you a little while ago, the organization yeah sure enough, everybody out there call themselves in a gang but it's like we come together. Everybody that's in it is not in it just to go out here and make trouble. They set examples for kids and try to help people out. Even the big time drug dealers that I'm not gonna get into here that people don't know, trying to help out. (#17)

It's a unit just like the police. It's a unit, it's unity. It's friends that are brought together that grew up for many years. They just form they self a mob, out the home, so they call they self family to protect themselves from other people. (#09)

Okay, a gang is a group of people that is coming together for something that is destructive. [But] I'm talking about the KKK, they saying that's an organization. They coming up for a worthy cause. Now here everybody else is a gang but my gang that I was in, we was really not a gang, we was an organization because we was coming together for a worthy cause to make things better for us in our community and yet they label us a gang. (#51)

Other members of the Gangster Disciples used criminal involvement to define a gang.

Well, in my words, a gang ain't nothing but people come together to do crime and make money and be a family to each other. I guess society put that label, it's a gang. I can speak for the Gangster Disciples and say that now the concept is to be productive, become educated, educate your community, doing things which is right. That's the new concept. I agree with they new direction. (#03)

I would personally consider it [a gang] a mob of individuals led by a chief or a king that's predominately a criminal activity, though there may be ones that are trying to do something productive and do something for the community and things, but those are few and far in between. Especially they be involved in illegal activity also. (#11)

They getting primped around for they little old money, little dudes, and all that and they ain't really reaping nothing up out of it. It was like, back when I got hooked up, it was maybe because my older

brother and them was into it and I was like okay, cool, I'm gonna get into this here. Now you got grammar school kids taking guns and crap to school talking about they in this gang. It's stupid, it don't make no sense, it's crazy. (#04)

It's stupid, I'll tell you that much. But I don't know. I never got nothing out of it. It's about the money for me. I got out last week, seven years. (#48)

A gang nowadays, would be money making, make money. (#85)

2. The Latin Kings

Latin Kings reported similar definitions of their gang. However, they differed from the Gangster Disciples in two important respects. First, Kings emphasized the cultural aspects of their gang far more than was the case for the Gangster Disciples. These cultural aspects typically included an emphasis on the familial nature of the gang. In addition, Latin Kings were far less politicized than their African American counterparts. We start with the modal category, gang definitions that emphasized the cultural or familiar nature of the gang.

Just a group of guys hangin' out and doing whatever in the street. (#19)

It's a second family. They are like your brothers. They will help you out when you need help. Whenever you mess up they will take care of you too. To me it's like a family, some people want to get out of it, they don't want to be a part of it no more. (#21)

It's like a group of friends that you be with every day. If you got to do something with them you do it. (#32)

Family, they are always there. (#71)

We call it an organization because it's so organized basically. (#14)

It's a group of brothers that agree to go by a set of rules or guidelines. We don't just do gang-type tactics, just go beat people up. We have rules. (#49)

Other members of the Latin Kings included involvement in crime as a major factor in their definition of a gang.

We have colors, we have our hand signs, our handshakes and we represent against our enemies. (#53)

I think a gang is a way to escape reality, to tell you the truth. It's like an easier way to cope with life. When you are gang-banging you are serious, but there is a lot of people that are not serious when they join because they think it is cool and maybe sometimes most of the time when kids are young they join for that reason, to be cool and then end up doing time for the Latin Kings or going to jail or getting shot and having to rely on them. (#83)

C. San Diego Gangs

San Diego gangs were less organized than their counterparts in Chicago or St. Louis. However, Hispanic gangs did maintain a stronger orientation to family and group than did their African American counterparts. Once again, the framework that distinguished between group characteristics and activities was useful.

1. Syndo Mob

The Syndo Mob is an African American gang in San Diego. The emphasis in defining a gang within this group is on criminal involvement.

To me, a gang is you don't give a fuck and you are just right there with your homeboys, you know, partying. All you do is party and sell drugs. If you hit it off wrong with somebody else from another neighborhood you just do what you got to do. (#59)

A gang is something where people get together and get in trouble, fights or whatever. One neighborhood has problems with somebody else's neighborhood. (#60)

A gang to me means a group of people that are always together no matter what, that's what I think. But that's what they call us. But these guys that I'm hanging around, we are not out there looking for trouble. They will come to us and a fight will break out and they will get hurt and it's Logan did it, they are bad guys. They think it's the worst gang in San Diego. (#80)

Most of the people in the gang is unemployed. Most of them hang out and they can get violent. (#23)

It's a person that say they down. It's like you basically have to live in that area that you know you from that gang. Basically you like, right now they don't go around trying to start trouble no more but if you see somebody coming at you with a different language, and they talking about like 'cause this and then you gonna say something and they gonna trip. As long as nothing happening, they not disrespecting you, then won't nothing happen. But sometimes it depend on what kind of day it is. If you feel like you want to start trouble then you just go and do it. So that's how they [gangs] are. (#34)

A gang in my opinion is like, I don't really call it a gang. I call it homies, I don't really call it a gang because I wear a green rag or something like that because that's the way I've been living. Yeah, of course they rob and kill and steal and do all that kind of stuff too, but that's only not necessarily everybody from Lincoln go out and kill. (#39)

A gang is basically like family. It's just one big family. When we have our little hangouts and stuff, we be down there, we be shooting stuff [guns] and talking, one of the homies might come through and might need something. (#42)

However, a number of members of this gang did identify affiliational characteristics of gangs.

That was the only thing I had to look forward to. If I needed a place to stay I would go to them. When I was getting in trouble, to me, it felt like they were always there for me when I was little. Things got different when I got older. That's how I felt when I was younger. It's a family, it's like a group of friends that you grew up with. (#25)

A gang to me is just a bunch of friends, just a bunch of people that grew up together as kids. (#28)

What is a gang? A gang, to me, is a group of people that represent something like the area, the neighborhood, the community where they live and that, to me, would be a gang of people, from a certain neighborhood. (#43)

I understand why they call it a gang because it's a group of people, but the definition that they put it, they make it seem like it's real bad. They put it in a bad way. I don't think it is. (#47)

Well to me now that I've learned more about it and done research, the gang to me is a group of individuals coming together as far as wanting to, I guess, control something or own something or that could make them feel, I don't know, good I guess, because they are in control in an organization or something with a group of people. (#22)

I don't call them a gang. That's what everybody else calls them. They are just my homeboys really. Gang is just a name that they gave us. But basically to me, it's just my friends that I grew up with, like relatives that I grew up with 'cause I been knowing them for so long. (#26)

Yeah, a bunch of people that grew up together. They are just trying to make it seem like it's organized so they can get more police budgets. That's bullshit. There is more cops than there is gang members. (#27)

To me it's like a family, you know what I'm saying? Your sister, your brother, your cousin, just like a family. (#35)

2. Calle Triente

Calle Triente, also know as the Red Steps, is an Hispanic gang in San Diego. Membership and gang definition issues among these individuals reflected a cultural orientation to ethnicity and family.

A gang is where you hang out. Your friends, you find a lot of love that you don't get at home, a lot of respect, they are always there for you. Friends, it's fun. (#29)

Just my homeboys, the people that I hang around with, grew up with, family just like almost, friends. Most of them is family. (#61)

Yeah, because when I was growing up I grew up on the streets and in juvenile hall. I never had nobody to tell me anything like stay home, go to school. They were there for me. I kind of fit in with them. If anything happens to them I feel hurt. We call ourselves like a real big family. Especially inside the system. (#62)

Somebody who is always there, they gonna back you up for whatever reasons if you are right or wrong, no question asked. (#66)

A lot of people joined together is a gang. (#68)

It's like a different family. (#69)

A group of people. (#76)

It's just like a neighborhood, some place you belong to. To some people a gang means everything. The gang bangers and the regular gang members they stay down for the neighborhood or someone who is just down for the neighborhood when they want to be. (#77)

It's being part of an organization, like a family. (#81)

The police call it a gang. It's just friends that be together and hang out together. (#65)

Fewer members of this gang identified criminal involvement as the benchmark of gang membership.

They are like a family. [But] my experience with a gang is trouble. They are not a company that works or anything. They sell drugs. Everybody know they are that way. That's why society is scared of them. (#67)

The first thing that comes to my mind is fighting with sticks and chains and stuff like that. I always wanted to be somebody that everybody thought was tough. (#75)

We grew up together basically. (#79)

IV. CONCLUSION

If we equate gangs with non-criminal organizations, and gang members with non-criminal members of other groups, we miss fundamental differences between gangs and groups. To be sure, gangs are a form of group, but gangs have a strong criminal orientation and gang members commit crimes. During periods of gang membership, young men and women commit more crimes, and more serious crimes, than prior to entering *or* after leaving the gang. It may be popular for political or partisan reasons to equate gangs with other groups. To do so, however, is to miss the fundamental reason gangs have attained the level of public concern and law enforcement attention they have. Gangs facilitate the commission of crime. To ignore that is to ignore (or worse, to excuse) the violence gang members commit against each other and their communities.