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Origins and Problems of Gang Research in the United States

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A dramatic increase in gang activity during the past decade caught most everyone by surprise and all of us unprepared to speak in an informed way to the challenges it posed. That some portion of this activity was tied to a robust and violent trade in illegal narcotics was especially worrisome. Law makers and law enforcement officials in several states and Washington, D.C., hurriedly fashioned programs to address problems created by gangs, but they spoke less convincingly about the conditions that might have created gangs. All the while, a frightened and sometimes outraged American public watched as young people took their own lives and the lives of innocent bystanders with cool detachment and growing regularity.

Social scientists were particularly hard pressed to say anything useful or insightful about the upsurge in gang activity. Researchers found themselves studying gangs in earnest for the first time since the 1960s, using information and "theories" that seemed woefully outdated. Their work was hampered by several factors. Notable among them were the fad-like character of much social science research, methodological arguments over the best way to study gangs, and the near absence of any serious study of gangs as a historical phenomenon. Social scientists tried to

sound convincing, but much of the time they literally did not know what it was they were talking about.

In this chapter we will explore how social science research came to such a sorry state. Particular attention will be paid to those problems that have most hampered research into gangs. Research that preceded the work presented in this volume will be reviewed and tied to a tradition of social activism and efforts to shape social policy.¹ This review will be fairly general, because Joan Moore will examine more closely in the next chapter how previous research came to shape current thinking about such groups.

One question dealt with by Moore and raised implicitly in the work of several contributors to this book revolves around the ways gangs are studied. Persons have strong opinions on this subject and believe that the validity of some research may be doubted because of the manner in which it was carried out. It seemed appropriate to raise this issue at the outset so that the reader might appreciate the various methods used to study gangs and render some judgement as to which approach, if any, they considered more valid.

THE LEGACY OF FREDERIC THRASHER

What we think about contemporary gangs and the best ways to respond to them still is influenced by the work of Frederic M. Thrasher, whose study of 1,313 gangs in Chicago during the 1920s remains a classic.² The world Thrasher knew has changed, and so, too, have gangs. He wrote about gangs in an industrial city that was still growing, still employing full-time residents in blue-collar jobs, and still predominantly white. He could not have known that the first industrial revolution already was coming to a close, and that soon the economy of Chicago and many established cities would change in unexpected and uncongenial ways. He had no reason to imagine that suburban development, already an accomplished fact, would become an overwhelming factor in the decline of central cities after a second world war. Nor could he have guessed at the impact of these changes on a poor minority population stuck in an urban economy that no longer manufactured many things.

The urban world familiar to Thrasher was unsettled, to be sure, but it was not hopeless or unmanageable. Most of the problems and problematic people in the city, experts thought, could be found in an area sandwiched between the vibrant downtown business district and neighborhoods filled with stable working-class families. That sandwiched area, referred to somewhat ominously as the "zone in transition," was where Thrasher's "gangland" could be found. The "zone in transition" was unattractive, dirty, and filled with industry, railroad yards, ghettos, and the city's most

recent immigrants. It was, in Thrasher's words, an "economic, moral, and cultural frontier" where the civilizing influences of American society had yet to be felt. Rowdy, rambunctious, and altogether "foreign" in its style and smell, the "zone in transition" was a place where the "demoralizing" and "disorganized" life of poor people could be viewed and possibly adjusted.

Frederic M. Thrasher was one of those "better" persons who, as scientists and reformers, believed that good science could help the poor adjust to a more conventional world. He was aware of Chicago's shortcomings and wanted to do something that might improve the situation faced by many of its residents. Thrasher was not alone. Many well-placed Chicagoans and social service agencies were committed to addressing the same problems. They assisted Thrasher and his colleagues, and they took seriously the findings presented in the social scientist's reports.

Looking back, it is not easy to see what difference all of the studying and reforming made in the lives of those being studied and reformed. This is not surprising, or at least it should not be surprising. Thrasher, his cohorts, and the two dozen or more social service agencies that contributed to the "exploratory survey" of 1,313 gangs in Chicago were good soldiers in a moral reform crusade to clean up American cities and city residents that had begun in the early nineteenth century.⁴ More often than not, the good works of such reformers had little impact on the daily lives of most persons targeted for assistance. These good works certainly did not change the basic economic and social conditions affecting the inner-city poor; nor were they intended to. The idea behind most reform crusades was to help the poor and the immigrant become more like regular Americans or at least a bit more comfortable with their situations.

The various social service agencies that supported Thrasher's research had outposts in the "economic, moral, and cultural frontier" where "gangland" was found. Services of one or another kind were offered from the outposts, but that may not have been their most important accomplishment. What mattered more was their institutional presence and the link they represented to a larger, more cosmopolitan world.

"The broad expanse of gangland with its intricate tribal and intertribal relationships," wrote Thrasher, "is medieval and feudal in its organization rather than modern and urban."⁵ The social service agencies, schools, and police department represented the modern and urban world in gangland and served as a buffer between the local residents and the larger community. These organizations may not have succeeded in their mission to serve and make better the people of gangland, but they did succeed in presenting something of gangland to the larger community. This is what made Thrasher's research so important. It provided "a general picture of life in an area little understood by the average citizen."⁶

The picture presented by Thrasher was at once revealing and mad-
deningly superficial. Subsequent writers took Thrasher to task for many
shortcomings in his work. Data were collected in an unsystematic way,
and his analysis of those data was not terribly thorough. Important vari-
ables such as the age of gang members or the organizational features of the
gangs were not related in a straightforward way to differences in the
behavior of gangs. There were gaps in the information collected for
Thrasher, and the author acknowledged those holes. At the same time,
however, Thrasher probably did as much as he could have with the infor-
mation that was available. He presented many parts of a grand mosaic
and challenged others to pursue specific questions in a more systematic
way. It was as if Thrasher had been dropped in the middle of a fabulously
rich deposit of old bones and had only begun to wade through them and
assemble a picture of the beasts to which they might have belonged. His
major contribution was to lay out the broad outline of all the groups he
found and to describe, often quite vividly, the various ways they orga-
nized, behaved, and related to the community. Thrasher's explicit intention
was to develop hypotheses for others to examine; it was not to build a
theory about gangs.

Thrasher's work was not devoid of theory, however. Indeed, his
descriptions and analysis of gangs were rooted in contemporary theories
about collective behavior. *The Gang* also was laced with conventional
assumptions about life in poorer innercity neighborhoods. Both strains of
thought were brought together in Thrasher's basic argument about gang-
land and "ganging." Gangs were viewed as primitive and destructive
groups that emerged "spontaneously" from the "disorganized" neigh-
borhoods in the "zone in transition." This theme runs throughout the
book, despite evidence of sophisticated planning and organizational skills
on the part of gang members, and the author's frequent allusions to link-
ages between gangs and more conventional institutions.

One who has done field work usually is not ambivalent about the
group or custom being investigated. More often the observer carries on
something closely resembling a love-hate relationship with the subject.
This is particularly true in the case of someone who studies groups or cus-
toms different from his own. He can be attracted to them even as he waxes
on about their atavistic quality. So it was with Frederic M. Thrasher and
gangs. In *The Gang*, Thrasher alternated between statements about the
"demoralizing" effect of gangs on boys and the community and allusions
to the "romantic" life of gang members and their frequent displays of
devotion to each other.

Thrasher never resolved the tension between these two ways of
viewing gangs, and that probably was a good thing. Had he been wedded
to the idea that gangs were nothing more than a perverse aberration of

childrens' play groups, *The Gang* would never have shown the many subtle shadings of gang behavior or revealed the complex relation between gangs and more conventional groups. Had Thrasher "gone native" and completely romanticized the gang boy's world, he might have ignored some of the really troubling consequences of "ganging" for the participants and the community. Thrasher was not in any danger of going that far, of course. By training and inclination, he saw a close relation between the way groups or activities were arranged in different geographic areas and the kind of moral order or culture exhibited in those areas. It was logical for him to connect the emergence of gangs with the "disorganized" slums filled with people on the margins of an "American" culture. Given this theoretical orientation, one can be pleased that Thrasher described gangs and their behavior in sufficient detail to allow us to point out the gap between prevailing stereotypes about gangs and gangs as their members knew them.

What follows is a brief description of the major questions about gangs articulated by Thrasher and the answers that he and subsequent researchers have offered in response.⁷

WHAT IS A GANG AND WHO IS IN IT?

Thrasher and others generally found gangs to be a phenomenon of adolescence. Few gangs were composed exclusively of young children or adults. The membership of some gangs was drawn from a fairly broad spectrum of ages, and the size and age profile of gangs could change over time.

Early researchers found no gangs composed exclusively of girls. This was attributed to the greater control imposed by parents on their daughters. Occasionally, a girl was extended membership in a gang because of sexual favors she granted to the boys. Groups of girls sometimes attached themselves to specific boy gangs.

Gangs were formed out of "play groups" found in a particular neighborhood. The identity of the group was fixed by defending that territory against "outsiders," a term reserved for a long list of persons and groups against whom the gang had a real or imagined grudge. Routine confrontations with "outsiders" helped the gang to sustain its group identity. Most young men "grew out" of the gang habit as they matured and assumed more adult responsibilities.

The parochial quality of gangs was reinforced by their segregated membership. Most gangs were composed of persons of the same race or nationality. Gangs that drew members from different nationalities were common; gangs that drew members from different races were rare. Virtu-

ally all gangs were composed of persons who came from the ranks of the poor or less well-to-do.

More recent studies reveal that some things about gangs and their membership have changed. The majority of gang members still are adolescents, but more members today may be drawn from younger children and young men no longer in their teenage years. It seems that fewer young men are "maturing out" of gangs than was once the case. Their reasons for remaining active gang members probably are related to their inability to assume more conventional adult roles and acquire jobs in the regular economy.

The phenomenon of age-graded sets in gangs has persisted, at least in larger and better established gangs. Most gangs still consist of persons drawn from the same race, though examples of integrated gangs have been noted. Nationality distinctions among persons with some kind of European ancestry no longer seem relevant in gangs composed of "white" youngsters. Gangs still draw most of their members from less well-to-do households, and the identity of gangs remains most permanently fixed through their combat with real or imagined outsiders.⁸

The single greatest change in gangs and gang membership has involved young women. Once satisfied to be part of a girl's auxiliary to a boy's gang, more young women have come to develop their own independent gangs. Even less is known of female gangs than is known of their male counterparts, but the increasing prevalence of female gangs probably is tied to the loosening of constraints on young women generally and the much heralded erosion of minority families in urban areas.⁹

WHERE ARE GANGS FOUND?

Thrasher and his colleagues thought that only certain kinds of neighborhoods—poor, predominantly foreign-born or minority, industrialized, overcrowded and rundown—were likely to have gangs. Early research focused on slums as disorganized places, particularly when one racial or ethnic group was "invading" an area inhabited by a different population. Clashes between gangs from the two populations were common and provided evidence, at least to outsiders, of the disorganized character of slum life.

Subsequent researchers identified gangs in areas that were poor but not at all disorganized. These so-called "stable slums" had been occupied by the same racial or ethnic group for a long time. Hispanic gangs found in barrios of southwestern cities often were cited as examples of this phenomenon. Such gangs, it was speculated, probably were different from the gangs in disorganized slums.¹⁰

Researchers generally have not found gangs, or have not looked for them, in places other than slums. Where gangs are found, or thought to be found, implies much about the organization, behavior, and thinking of the gangs and the community of which they are part. The geography and morality of gangland have not changed. Gangs are still thought to be a phenomenon of slums, and gangs can be ascribed traits (e.g., rudeness, aggressiveness, criminality, parochialness, and disorganization) that outsiders typically attribute to the communities where gangs were found. Gangs remain a metaphor for all that is seductive and dangerous about ethnic groups and the slums they inhabit.¹¹

HOW ARE GANGS ORGANIZED?

There always has been a contradiction between what persons thought gangs were like and how gangs actually appeared upon close inspection. This tension has been seen most consistently in descriptions about gang organization. On the one hand, researchers make allusions to the informal, spontaneous, and evanescent quality of gang organization. Thrasher's allusion to gangs as a form of "collective behavior," Yablonsky's assessment of gangs as "near groups," or Cohen's recent allusion to gangs as a "collectivity" speak to the tendency of persons to deny gangs intellectual credibility and practical significance.¹² It is difficult to accept gangs as a legitimate, viable group. On the other hand, firsthand observations of how gangs actually behave frequently belie the impression that gangs are incapable of carrying on relatively sophisticated and long-term activities.

Thrasher found that gangs might have begun as simple play groups, but they could develop relatively sophisticated structures and "traditions" that lasted beyond the tenure of individual members. When the gang acted as an economic unit its members often had distinct roles and responsibilities. On most other occasions, the status of individual members was essentially equal and decisions were reached by consensus.

Given the communal origins of such groups, there was a limit to how large and complex they could become. Larger groups divided themselves into sets based upon the age of the members. There sometimes was friction among members, and there were recognized ways to reduce the friction. When those procedures failed, it was not uncommon for the gang to split and become two distinct gangs.

Gangs sometimes formed alliances and assisted each other in a variety of ways. The alliances were brittle, however. Allies were known to have disagreements that ruptured their confederation.

Thrasher wrote about four types of gangs: diffuse, solidified, con-

ventional, and criminal. Yet it was evident from the case histories of gangs that characteristics of more than one type of gang were observed in different groups. There was no clear line distinguishing diffuse from solidified gangs or conventional from criminal gangs in the 1920s, and that remains true today.¹³

A number of subsequent researchers have tried to develop ways to classify the organization and structure of gangs. The only thing these classification schemes have succeeded in doing, Irving Spergel indicates, is to

suggest a bewildering array, complexity and variability of [gang] structures. Gangs may not be simply solidary, loosely knit, or bureaucratic so much as variable small networks . . . more or less cohesive or clearly structured at various periods of their development.¹⁴

The fundamental building block of gangs remains the age-graded set or clique of local youngsters. However, these cliques can combine, dissolve, and be reassembled in a variety of ways. Gangs may not be as large as a corporation or as tightly regimented as an army unit, but they manage to survive and even thrive in an inhospitable environment every bit as well as other groups do in a more conventional environment. Indeed, as many observers have noted, gangs often serve effectively as surrogates for families that do not work especially well for some gang members.

IN WHAT KINDS OF ACTIVITIES DO GANGS ENGAGE?

The commission of delinquent acts is so well tied to gangs that it usually appears in the definition of gangs. Thrasher discovered that gang members engaged in many activities together, only a portion of which could be classified as delinquent. Much of the time gang members played, explored, "hung" around the neighborhood, or "loafed" in their "hiding places" just as other boys did. They supported each other during difficult times and simply enjoyed each other's company on most occasions. Friends sometimes fight, however, and Thrasher's gang boys were no exception.

Thrasher found that gangs created special names for their groups and peculiar ways of speech to better distinguish themselves from outsiders and to reinforce their identity in a particular group. Thrasher recognized that this enabled gang members to keep secrets from those not privileged to be members. It also was apparent that gangs were borrowing such practices from more conventional groups.

The delinquent acts engaged in by gang members often did not require all members to participate. Some delinquent activities required the collaboration of numerous boys, however. The only activity that demanded the attention of nearly all members was fighting; fighting was taken quite seriously because it involved the protection of their territory against other gangs. Resources acquired through one or another illicit means were shared by all members, just as the honor or dishonor attached to winning or losing a fight was shared by all members.

"The struggle" against outsiders, Thrasher observed, played a significant part in the gang's routine affairs and folklore. Members of other gangs would have appreciated this, even as they ridiculed their enemies. However, Thrasher also noted the tendency of other persons to dismiss as trivial the ongoing fight between gangs and their real or imagined enemies. One supposes that the persons Thrasher had in mind were adults who did not know how important the struggle was to the creation and maintenance of every gang.

Thrasher understood that the struggle became an even more vital part of a gang's existence as the group slipped or jumped into more routine and profitable criminal enterprises. The amount and severity of violence associated with the struggle certainly increased with the seriousness of those enterprises, a fact that probably accounts for the sharp decline in the number of gangs composed of older adolescents and/or adults.

Some researchers such as Whyte, Suttles, Moore, and Vigil tried to show how gangs fit into the daily routine of a community. Life in most neighborhoods did not revolve around fighting and delinquent or criminal acts, and most gangs were not preoccupied with such activities. Important as delinquency and fighting may have been to individual gang members or the group as a whole, there were many conventional activities that also served to solidify bonds among gang members and to establish an identity with outsiders.

This point has been lost in many studies of gangs and delinquency that followed Thrasher's work. It became ignored nearly altogether during the past decade as many street gangs began to distribute and sell illegal narcotics and engage in running gun battles with each other. Given changes in the economies of urban areas over the last few decades, it may be that more gangs and gang members have begun to slip into routine and serious criminal activities earlier, and remain more firmly fixed to such behavior longer, than was once the case.

It is not that earlier gangs were immune to the attractions of criminal enterprises. The gangs studied by Thrasher appeared to be an important part of their neighborhoods' economy, however unconventional parts of that economy might have been. They used some of what they stole and sold the remaining stock to area residents, no doubt at prices that enabled

people to buy things they otherwise could not have afforded. These activities were condoned by area residents.

Thrasher described a variety of other ways in which gang members acquired money and goods that were used by individuals or shared by the whole group. Some of these activities were more profitable and better organized than others. He provided no good estimate of how much time gang members spent planning or executing such schemes, but he conveyed the impression that these were routine activities.

The gang as a whole probably was not involved in any single criminal incident, though varying numbers of its members were. A "group factor" or influence was apparent, and still is apparent, in the illegal activities of those members.¹⁵ Thrasher argued that the rules and ethics of gangs encouraged such enterprises and carried the promise of protection for individuals being sought by the authorities. Gangs did not cause crime in the sense that they brought lawlessness to an otherwise law-abiding community. Gangs made more efficient and extensive those activities that were an accepted part of the area's unconventional or hidden economy. In this sense gangs did make crime a more serious or pronounced part of the community's routines and its residents' habits. The "organized and continuous" criminal activities of youth gangs also blurred the distinction between adolescent and adult gangs; and they made it easier and more natural for young persons to adopt a criminal career or at least become involved in more serious crimes.

Insofar as Thrasher's findings have any validity today, it would seem that more or less organized and profitable criminal activities continue to play an important part in the existence of most gangs. Involvement in criminal activities is nothing new to gangs. It is not, however, the only or most important thing that gangs do for their members or in the community.

WHAT IS THE GANG'S RELATION TO THE COMMUNITY?

Thrasher found the gang to be a natural part of the local community. Its members and general activities were known to area residents. Gang members identified closely with their neighborhood and defended it as well as themselves against the encroachment of outsiders.

The reactionary or defensive quality of many gang activities did not escape Thrasher's attention. Gangs fought representatives from other neighborhoods or groups of a different race and nationality. Their alliances with other groups were based on their mutual dissatisfaction with gangs from more distant parts of town. Their antagonism toward organizations

or agencies sent into the neighborhood to save its residents from themselves was similarly motivated. The "general soreness at the world" which Thrasher attributed to gang members was not directed at everything or everyone. It was directed at those persons and things that interfered with the customs and routines of the gang and, more generally, of the community.

Adult organizations that made space in their world for gangs were assisted by the boys. Adult organizations that tried to dissuade boys from becoming gang members or tried to disband gangs altogether fared less well at the hands of the boys. To be sure, much of what gangs did to assist the local politician was of dubious legality; but the politicians who employed them and the local residents who bought stolen goods from them accepted the boys as they were. The settlement houses, police, and schools harassed the boys and tried to make them give up a group and style of life that they wanted or needed.

Thrasher bemoaned the gang boy's detachment from the larger community and its civic affairs. He also worried about the boy's lack of preparation for the "conventional world." At the same time, Thrasher showed just how well connected the gang boy was to the workings of his local community's political and economic routines. What Thrasher really objected to were the gang boy's unwillingness to become more "American" and the "corrupting" influences of local adults who "used" the boys for their own selfish ends. When he allowed himself to see it, Thrasher conveyed a strong sense of the gang boys as primitive rebels who resisted the intrusion into their neighborhood of "American" standards and customs that Thrasher and the agencies that collaborated with his work would have preferred the gang boy to adopt.

Subsequent researchers did not pay much attention to the different ways in which gangs fit into their home neighborhoods. There were several notable exceptions to this, but social scientists generally analyzed gangs outside the social context in which they were found. Much more attention was paid to aspects of gang structure and behavior or to theories and typologies about gangs and juvenile delinquency.

This is unfortunate, because it appears that the relation between at least some gangs and their community might have changed in important ways during the last few decades. Some gangs might have become less connected to the conventional institutions in their neighborhood and, perhaps, as a result are more likely to attack local citizens and exploit those organizations that remain in the community. This certainly would help to account for the rapacious profiteering some gangs enjoy by virtue of selling drugs to local residents and the violence and fear they introduce to their neighborhood in the course of such transactions. In the absence of long-term studies of how gangs fit into their local community, we are

forced to guess how that relation may have changed or to suppose that such a relation never existed. Were it not for Thrasher's work, we might easily suppose today that gangs always had been isolated in their local community.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE ABOUT GANGS?

Thrasher was well aware of efforts by conventional institutions to address "the gang problem." There was ample evidence even in his day to suggest that making the individual boy the target of intervention strategies had not worked. Nor had police suppression been particularly helpful. Even when gangs were successfully disbanded there were few, if any, alternative things for boys to do.

Thrasher was impressed with the way politicians and saloon owners had coopted gangs and noted that some legitimate institutions also had tried to do this. Some modest successes had been achieved by encouraging gangs to carry out their feuds with other gangs through athletic contests. Thrasher also noted, however, that sometimes the effort backfired. Established gangs were known to have disrupted larger organizations that tried to adopt and change them. Apparently, it also happened that boys who were not members of a gang had formed one as a result of having been brought together by a conventional organization. Efforts to address "the gang problem" by changing the gang itself, therefore, had only limited success and had some potential drawbacks.

The possibility of dealing with gangs as part of a bigger effort to reorganize the whole community was considered by Thrasher. It was raised, however, only in the context of preventing crime. It was not tied to a broader campaign to improve the economic conditions that persons faced in gangland and which provided much of the impetus for gangs to acquire money through illegal activities. This idea did not occur to Thrasher, who thought that the local public school would be the best spot to mount a community-wide campaign to prevent crime.

Little has changed since Thrasher chronicled what was being done to address the gang problem in Chicago during the 1920s. More is known today about gangs, but this additional experience and information have had no discernible impact on the way outsiders from the conventional world treat gangs. Gangs continue to be addressed as a residual by-product of a still diseased community.¹⁶

Remedies for the gang problem continue to take two different, but complementary, tacks. One set of treatments leaves the gang in the community and exposes it to the civilizing influences of a more conventional world. Stiff doses of "good" socialization provided by street workers or

youth outreach specialists are intended to save youngsters and whole groups from themselves. The idea is to redirect gangs and make them the vehicle of their own transformation. A related strategy has conventional agencies setting up programs for the entire community. The gang itself is not necessarily the target of these programs. It may only be the indirect beneficiary of an improved and better organized community. The harsh conditions that spawn gangs would not be overcome. Instead, conventional institutions would try to smooth the community's rough edges and introduce a degree of order into an otherwise mean and disorganized social world.

A second and more aggressive set of treatments removes the gang or many of its members from the community or tries to mobilize the community against the gang. The idea behind these strategies is that local institutions have grown flabby and too tolerant of gangs. Bigger agencies from outside the gang's territory work in such a way as to better control or supervise gangs with the assistance of institutions from the gang's neighborhood.

The distinction between smoothing a community's rough edges and pushing its institutional residents around to the point that they better control local gangs probably was clearer in theory than in practice. Nevertheless, more recent thinking about the gang problem clearly indicates that the most popular way to handle gangs is to remove them from the community or, barring that, to supervise and control their activities much more closely.¹⁷ Particular emphasis is being placed on the police and schools as agencies well positioned to monitor and manage gang activities. Prevention and detention are the key words in the current debate about how best to handle the gang problem.

It is hard not to find this approach attractive when young men in many cities are turning streets into drug bazaars and shooting galleries. Appealing as such an approach may be, it ignores several important things that we have learned or forgotten about gangs. First, only a few strategies to curb gang activities have had any success over the years, and these successes have not been widely replicated. Many efforts to control gangs failed, and some things that were tried actually made gang-related problems worse.

Second, one thing that worsened the current gang situation has been the tendency of public officials to take no action when gangs first appear and then to overreact when gangs finally become too obvious to ignore.¹⁸ Both reactions have the unintended effect of promoting gang activity by initially ignoring it and then challenging the gangs once they are well established. It must be recalled that conflict with outsiders reinforces the bonds among gang members and prompts them to take more aggressive actions against their real and supposed enemies.

Third, there is a great discrepancy between the public hue and cry over gang activity and the rather modest steps actually taken to address the gang problem. The unstated policy of government toward gang activities is to tolerate them. If there is a point beyond which such activities will not be tolerated, it is clear that point has not yet been passed. The moral outrage expressed about gangs may be little more than an acceptable way for us to scream at the darkness even as we throw up our hands in resignation. Were the conditions that create gangs more widely experienced and the violent things gangs do routinely felt outside minority communities, our outcry might be more closely matched by concerted action.

Fourth, the outline of an argument by Thrasher in which gangs are described as primitive rebels has been all but lost in the current uproar over gang violence and drug dealing. Thrasher noted how gangs resisted the encroachment of outsiders and carried out nearly continuous skirmishes with businesses or institutions popularly viewed as exploitative. The reactionary quality of much gang activity was subsequently identified by other researchers as well; but it has been largely overlooked in recent years because many gangs seem to have turned against everyone and everything.

Yet the posture of many contemporary gangs that it is "us against the world" can be tied to that longer tradition of constructing artificial barriers between themselves and hostile outsiders.¹⁹ If the perimeter of their fortress has shrunk over the years, it is a measure of the desperate situation faced by young persons in their own community. It also helps to account for the willingness of gang members to turn against adults in their neighborhood and to extend their fights into places like schools which once were islands of relative calm inside an otherwise "disorganized" community.

Fifth, the control of gangs always has been a high priority for persons who wanted to do something about the gang problem. Legislation to treat gang members more harshly than other persons who commit crimes, the creation of military-like boot camps for juvenile offenders, and the banning of gang colors and clothing from schools all speak to a tradition of dealing with gangs through detention and repression. Observers over the years have spoken of gangs as a symptom of more serious and deeply rooted problems in the communities where gangs were found. With the exception of broad-based efforts to mobilize communities for the prevention of crime and the anti-poverty programs of the 1960s, however, there has been little attention paid to restructuring local communities in order to address the gang problem or to providing young persons with economic and social alternatives to gang activity.²⁰

This is unfortunate inasmuch as the absence of jobs in the conventional economy is widely viewed as responsible for pushing young persons into drug dealing; economic incentives have been suggested as a

means of coopting gang members.²¹ It will be recalled that Thrasher was impressed by the ability of local persons such as saloon owners and politicians to coopt gangs by offering them intermittent financial support. Had he and other reformers at the time been more creative in their use of material incentives and less concerned with wresting gang boys away from wicked characters in the neighborhood, they might have discovered things that could have been put into use today. In the absence of such information, contemporary observers must develop such programs in a politically inhospitable environment or fall back on the more conventional techniques of several generations of well-intentioned reformers who were at least as interested in maintaining their own privileged positions as they were in saving gang members from themselves.

THE RESEARCHER AS ACTIVIST AND SCIENTIST

It is not easy to see the world through the eyes of someone else, particularly when the other person is different from us in important ways. That should not deter us, because a big part of the reason for studying people different from ourselves is to learn more about them and, if we are fortunate and sensitive, to learn a bit more about ourselves as well. This is what Thrasher tried to do, and why he succeeded as much as he did. Thrasher was not afraid to look hard at something most persons of his day, and our own, would rather ignore.

Thrasher was more than a dispassionate observer of gangs and the world in which they lived. He also was an activist, a person committed to putting what he learned into practice so that the lives of others might be improved. One can and should question what Thrasher hoped to accomplish and the adequacy of the information upon which he intended to act. One cannot doubt, however, that he was engaged in matters of importance or that he tried to make a difference.

Thrasher did not trip or back into his study of gangs. Given the assistance he received from organizations in Chicago, it is clear that he had a pretty good idea of what he was trying to do and that some notable Chicagoans agreed with him. The legitimacy conferred upon him and his study from the outset could only have sustained him during the tough moments that must have arisen, as they do in any research project, much less one dealing with a sensitive social problem.

Social scientists are accustomed to courting public and private leaders in order to do or publicize their research. Most of us are aware that our work can be used or abused by persons with a social or political agenda to promote. Thrasher had no difficulty reconciling his roles as scientist and activist, though his work revealed the tension between those competing

responsibilities. Today we are more self-conscious about this tension and argue about it among ourselves. There are a variety of ways in which the argument could unfold, but it emerges most clearly in discussions over the most effective and legitimate ways to study gangs. The means employed to study gangs and the data yielded by each are treated as windows into the researcher's soul, or at least his politics.

A curious and somewhat arbitrary distinction often is made between so-called "etic" and "emic" methods of studying gangs. The former, it is suggested, allow the researcher to stand far removed from the groups and behavior being discussed. Information about gangs is filtered through official reports (e.g. crime statistics) or acquired with the assistance of officials (e.g. conversations with jailed gang members). Critics of studies based on such data believe that barriers separating the researcher from his subjects need to be removed, if one is to acquire a more accurate picture of gangs. In a more "emic" approach, firsthand observation replaces predigested government reports. Interviews are conducted free of any hint of official coercion or oversight.²²

It certainly is legitimate and useful to assess the advantages and disadvantages of different research strategies. Too often, however, certain social or political goals are ascribed to persons employing one or another method and data. One critic of so-called "etic" techniques, John Hagedorn, decries what he calls "courthouse criminology" and "surrogate sociology."²³ Interviews with a few officials charged with the responsibility of "handling the gang problem" or with reformed and jailed gang members, Hagedorn maintains, are highly suspect. The interviewed parties are assumed to be hiding something or advocating something that is in their interest. Cooperation with the scientist might be a means to achieve one's personal goals or to defend one's organization. In either case, argues Hagedorn, the scientist is likely to acquire information that reinforces the outlook of bureaucrats and law enforcement officials who want to dramatize or downplay the behavior of gangs and reinforce what they typically do when such problems arise.²⁴

Critics of research based on "etic" methods prefer to do field studies that break down the barriers between the researcher and the object of his study. If at all possible, the study should be conducted in collaboration with the gangs. Joan Moore is a great advocate and pioneer of such research, and she describes her approach in the next essay. There are practical problems associated with this kind of research. It is expensive and time consuming, and it can be dangerous. Advocates of an "emic" approach to studying gangs, however, believe that it is the best way to acquire accurate and revealing information about gangs. One supposes that the information would be more sympathetic to gangs, but only in the sense that members' views of the world would be given an honest and

thorough portrayal. The researcher would not extend approval, or condemnation, to gang members for their actions. The politics of such researchers are assumed to be more liberal, if only because the researchers appear willing to challenge prevailing assumptions about gangs and policies intended to deal with problems associated with gangs.

There is validity in the criticisms raised against "courtroom criminology" and "surrogate sociology."²⁵ My experience studying gangs in St. Louis and in hearings of the Missouri State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights suggests that some law enforcement and school officials have only the faintest of ideas about what is happening in the community or they misrepresent what they know in order to convey an impression that their institutions are dealing effectively with gangs. Academic researchers may be no better. One set studied police reports on homicides in an attempt to identify patterns in the causes of murders in St. Louis. In testimony before a subcommittee of the Missouri State Advisory Committee, a representative of this group claimed that there were few gang-related killings in St. Louis. He was certain that police records would be accurate because everyone was sensitive to the gang situation. Unknown perhaps to the researcher, homicide detectives were not knowledgeable about gangs and the police department was making a concerted effort to downplay gang activities in the city. The "data" provided to the subcommittee were highly suspect, but the researchers' project went forward with support from city hall.

It is easy to identify studies that contain such suspect data.²⁶ Several presented in this book would be among them. Scott Cummings studied a "wilding gang" from Fort Worth, Texas and interviewed its jailed members. Jerome Skolnick and his colleagues interviewed California gang members who were in prison at the time of the study. My own study of St. Louis gangs was based largely on interviews of youngsters that were conducted in police stations and schools. I also used crime statistics provided by the city police department. Pat Jackson consulted newspaper stories and transcripts from legislative hearings in order to describe the response to gangs in California.

None of the authors, to my knowledge, would claim that his study was perfect or that he was satisfied completely with the amount and quality of the data in his possession. I also suspect, however, that each would take exception to the idea that his data were invalid and findings suspect. The data each acquired were relevant to the question posed in the research project and collected fairly.

Given the fluid and violent character of the group Cummings studied, for example, it would have been all but impossible to find and interview individuals outside of a controlled setting. It also would have been dangerous. The young men involved expressed no reluctance about being

interviewed; and their comments about the group to which they belonged and life in general were consistent with statements made by youngsters interviewed by other researchers in less confined settings. Skolnick and his co-workers were not interested in the daily routine of gang members in or out of prison but in the way gangs were organized in different parts of the state and how they carried out drug sales. The information they acquired went beyond that presented in earlier work but was consistent with insights gleaned from studies of gangs in California and elsewhere. My project also was designed to gather relatively basic information about gang conduct and organization. No one was asked to compromise himself or his gang by revealing things that could make them legally vulnerable. In fact, they were instructed not to do so. All interviews were confidential and subjects anonymous. Persons were given opportunities to terminate their interview. Few did. The information I acquired differed substantially from what police had told me in many instances, but it was consistent with what some officers knew and it did not change dramatically from one gang to the next.

Gangs can be studied in a variety of ways, with varying distances kept between the researcher and subjects, and with different goals in mind. What one can and cannot do in a particular study depends a great deal on the access one has to the subjects or sites under investigation. On the other hand, the questions one seeks to answer may make firsthand observations more or less imperative. There simply is not one best way to study gangs.

It is my experience that all but the most calloused and bruised young person will be willing to teach an adult many things about gangs, as long as the adult is willing to be taught and allows the young person not to implicate himself or any specific person as having committed a particular offense. Where one interviews these persons is less important than the subjects' knowledge that they control what is said and know how the information will be used. Informed consent is crucial in such matters.

Conversations with other gang researchers about this issue and reviews of their research suggest to me that we all get remarkably similar stories. Some are less detailed and far reaching, perhaps, but certain ideas, feelings, and recollections consistently turn up in our interviews. I think some researchers are too quick to reject data acquired in institutional settings, and too ready to overlook or dismiss the problematic nature of data gathered out in the field. Ultimately, the information one acquires about gangs is filtered by someone or something. Even the most committed field worker knows that there are some places gang members go and some things gang members do that cannot be observed firsthand.²⁷ Moreover, familiarity with the groups under study does not guarantee that interesting data will be collected at all or well and that revealing analyses will be made of gang organization and conduct.²⁸

John Hagedorn and other gang researchers favoring more "emic" study methods probably would disagree. In fact, he has gone so far as to argue that "minority social scientists are best suited" to study contemporary gangs and that white researchers must show they are "on the community's side," if they are to get valid information.²⁹ An important corollary to this position is that the benefits of the research somehow should be shared with the community.

Hagedorn is a thoughtful person, and his position warrants serious attention. Field workers know that their race, sex, age, and a host of other personal attributes affect the types of sites and groups to which they might have access. Informants also must trust the researcher, if valid data are to be acquired. Finally, the idea that the researcher's knowledge, contacts, and work might be used to help the group being studied certainly has much to recommend it. Few persons would argue against the position that researchers should give back something for all they have received.

Hagedorn's position is somewhat more extreme, however. It is indefensible to argue, for instance, that minority researchers necessarily will get more or better information and have less to prove to their subjects than would white researchers. In the present book Howard Pinderhughes presents some interesting preliminary findings from his dissertation on racially motivated attacks in Brooklyn, New York. His subjects are working- and lower-class white ethnics. Mr. Pinderhughes is of African American descent. The present author, clearly showing the effects of what anthropologists call hybrid vigor, has interviewed many black youths who were gang members. While it is unlikely that either of us could have conducted a long-term ethnographic study of gangs in our respective study sites, it was possible to acquire much detailed information about these groups and their members. A degree of trust was needed and achieved between the researcher and his subjects, trust enough to acquire the information needed to answer the questions posed by the researcher.

The idea that white researchers must show solidarity with the community being studied is equally flawed. It presumes, inaccurately, that community members have a single view of gangs. Even gang members do not have a single view of their group or of their involvement with it. Any attempt to display an uninformed sympathy for a given view of gangs is likely to make potential informants suspicious and raise serious doubts about the researcher's objectivity. Experienced field workers understand that the risks of "going native" are every bit as serious as those entailed in accepting uncritically the opinions of agency officials, politicians, repairmen, and car dealers. As Anne Campbell has said so well with regard to studies of female gangs, "some writers . . . accepted the more romantic presentations given by girl(s) . . . uncritically. . . . [S]uch gang rhetoric is not designed solely to fool researchers, but also to fool the gang members

using it."³⁰ Whatever good might come of social scientific research would be jeopardized by the researcher's naivety.

One needs to be sensitive to the strengths and shortcomings of different methods, deal with them as best one can, and acknowledge the possible impact they might have on the work in question. In general, it is possible to blend different methods for the same project, and probably a good idea to do so. One cannot afford to ignore what the "official" portrayal of gangs is. Pat Jackson's discussion of responses to gangs in California would be useless without such information; and I would have been unable to identify differences between gang and nongang areas had I not consulted crime reports routinely assembled by police officials. However, it is terribly important to have as close to a firsthand view of gangs as one can. Absent such information it is not possible to balance or complete the picture of gangs drawn by agencies and officials who have pet policies to defend or promote. One can protect the anonymity of individual gang members or whole groups and check out the information they provide without violating their trust. One need not hide behind information sanitized by government representatives or indulge the willful hyperbolist who poses as an informant.

Disagreements over the appropriate or most effective way to study gangs mask a far more important difference among gang researchers: The extent to which gangs are viewed as an integral part of a community that has little value in the eyes of outsiders. It will be recalled that Thrasher held contradictory views about the relation between gangs and the communities where they were found. On the one hand, he thought of "gangland" as a disrupted community and gangs as a manifestation of the disorder bred there. On the other hand, he observed how gangs fit in neighborhoods and contributed to their economic and political routines.

Subsequent researchers have been unable or unwilling to determine which view is more accurate or whether some combination of the two would be useful in framing analyses and explanations of gang behavior. Joan Moore, in the next chapter, says that gangs are treated as symbols of the community or social class from which they emerge. Our reaction to gangs gives expression to broader and deeper concerns about the social class and communities from which most gangs come. Moore's point is well taken, but her contribution has been to articulate clearly that which Thrasher left unstated over seventy years ago. Today we are most concerned about gangs composed of black youth stuck in something called the "underclass." In 1920, persons were concerned about white ethnic gangs found in industrial slums. The population at risk may have changed, but the fears and symbols of those fears have not.

Persons who study gangs can be divided into two categories. The first category consists of persons who view gangs as poor excuses for

groups. Gangs may be "near groups," collectivities, packs, mobs, or any number of other foul-sounding things; but they cannot be accorded the same intellectual credibility as more "normal" forms of human association. The neighborhoods that spawn gangs are similarly tainted. They are viewed as desperate places where most forms of social control have broken down. The second category of gang researchers includes persons who accept gangs as a valid form of human association, similar in some ways to other groups but also revealing important differences. These researchers are not necessarily fond of gangs. They recognize that gang members can do awful things to themselves and other persons. However, they are not prepared to dismiss as aberrations either gangs or the communities where gangs are found. Gang neighborhoods may have great problems, but they also are resilient. Gangs are an expression of that resiliency. Until such time as more researchers and policy makers appreciate this fact, we are unlikely to deal effectively with gangs and the problems they create.

NOTES

1. Daniel J. Monti, "The Practice of Gang Research," *Sociological Practice Review* (1) (January 1991): 29-39.

2. Frederic M. Thrasher, *The Gang* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927).

3. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

4. Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America: 1820-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

5. Frederic Thrasher, *The Gang*, p. 5.

6. *Ibid.*, p. xi.

7. See for example: Herbert Bloch and Arthur Niederhoffer, *The Gang: A Study in Adolescent Behavior* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1958); Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin, *Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960); Albert Cohen, *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1955); David Curry and Irving Spergel, "Gang Homicide, Delinquency and Community," *Criminology* 26 (1988): 381-405; Edward F. Dolan and S. Finney, *Youth Gangs* (New York: Julian Messner, 1984); Howard Erlander, "Estrangement, Machismo and Gang Violence," *Social Science Quarterly* 60 (2) (1979): 235-48; John Hagedorn, *People and Folks: Gangs, Crime and the Underclass in a Rust Belt City* (Chicago: Lake View Press, 1988); Ruth Horowitz, *Honor and the American Dream* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1983); Malcolm Klein, *Street Gangs and Street Workers* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1971); Walter Miller, *Violence by Youth Gangs and Youth Groups as a Crime Problem in Major American Cities*, National Institute for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Pre-

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8. James D. Vigil, "Cholos and Gangs: Culture Change and Street Youth in Los Angeles," in *Gangs in America*, ed. C. Ronald Huff (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1990), pp. 116-28.

9. Anne Campbell, *The Girls in the Gang* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

10. Vigil, "Cholos and Gangs."

11. C. Ronald Huff, "Introduction: Two Generations of Gang Research," in *Gangs in America*, ed. Huff, pp. 24-36.

12. Albert Cohen, "Foreword and Overview," in *Gangs in America*, ed. Huff, pp. 7-21.

13. Ko-Lin Chin, "Chinese Gangs and Extortion," in *Gangs in America*, ed. Huff, pp. 129-45.

14. Spergel, *Youth Gangs*, pp. 61-62.

15. Campbell, *Girls in the Gang*; Jeffrey Fagan, "Social Processes of Delinquency and Drug Use Among Urban Gangs," in *Gangs in America*, ed. Huff, pp. 183-222.

16. C. Ronald Huff, "Denial, Overreaction, and Misidentification: A Postscript on Public Policy," in *Gangs in America*, ed. Huff, pp. 310-17.

17. Walter B. Miller, "Why the United States Has Failed to Solve Its Youth Gang Problem," in *Gangs in America*, ed. Huff, pp. 263-87.

18. Hagedorn, *People and Folks*.

19. Jack Katz, *Seductions of Crime* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), p. 119.

20. Irving Spergel and G. David Curry, "Strategies and Perceived Agency Effectiveness in Dealing with the Youth Gang Problem," in *Gangs in America*, ed. Huff, pp. 288-309.

21. Hagedorn, *People and Folks*.

22. Ruth Horowitz, "Sociological Perspectives on Gangs: Conflicting Definitions and Concepts," in *Gangs in America*, ed. Huff, pp. 37-54; James D. Vigil and John M. Long, "Emic and Etic Perspectives on Gang Culture: The Chicano Case," in *ibid.*, pp. 55-70.

23. John Hagedorn, "Back in the Field Again: Gang Research in the Nineties," in *ibid.*, pp. 240-62.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 250.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 250-56.
26. Cheryl Maxson and Malcom Klein, "Street Gang Violence: Twice as Great, or Half as Great," in *ibid.*, pp. 71-100; Jeffrey Fagan, "Social Processes of Delinquency and Drug Use Among Urban Gangs," in *ibid.*, pp. 183-219; Irving Spergel and G. David Curry, "Strategies and Perceived Agency Effectiveness."
27. Vigil and Long, "Emic and Etic Perspectives," pp. 58-59.
28. Carl Taylor, *Dangerous Society* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1990).
29. Miller, pp. 263-64.
30. Anne Campbell, "Female Participation in Gangs," in *Gangs in America*, ed. Huff, p. 174.