CHAPTER 8

Urban Gangs and Violence

Introduction

Urban gang problems are examined in this chapter. The main focus here is on serious violent gangs in large cities. New research is presented that groups cities according to their experiences with serious gang violence over a 14-year period. Case studies of five cities' gang histories are reviewed to illustrate nationwide differences in serious violent gang problems. Both the correlates (features of gangs themselves) and the context (the local urban and regional environment) of serious gang violence are then examined. The chapter begins with research on the intensity of gang activity in urban areas.

Serious violent gangs have been characterized by a diverse set of criteria (see Serious Violent Gangs in the Further Reading section at the end of this chapter). Most notably, they are typically found in large cities and distinguished by a number of structural features, the first of which is the degree of organization (e.g., they have rules, meetings, and leadership roles, a large membership—at least 15 gangs and more than 200 members but with wide variations—and a multiple-year history). Second, these gangs are involved in violent crimes that physically harm victims, including homicide, aggravated assault, robbery, and nonlethal firearm injuries. These violent crimes frequently occur out of doors, on the streets, and in very small set spaces in neighborhoods with high violence rates. Moreover, such violent crimes likely involve multiple victims and suspects and have a contagious feature. Third, drug trafficking and firearm offenses are also very common. Fourth, these gangs tend to have both female and male members. Finally, cities experiencing serious gang violence tend to be socioeconomically disadvantaged, racially heterogeneous, and have a large foreign born population. They also tend to be located in more punitive states with larger correctional and prosecutorial budgets.

The Intensity of Gangs in Cities

Patterns and Trends in the Number of Active Gangs in Cities

To begin to determine the intensity of the gang problem in local jurisdictions, the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) collects data on the number of active gangs, as well as an estimate of the number of...
gang members, in participating jurisdictions. Between 1996 and 2009, the average number of active gangs ranged from 16.73 (in 2005) to 23.33 (in 2001) across all jurisdictions. Not surprisingly, however, the size of the jurisdiction influences law enforcement’s estimates of the number of gangs operating in their local areas. Figure 8.1 separates the very largest cities (more than 100,000 population) reporting to the NYGS between 1996 and 2009 from larger cities (50,000 to 99,999 population) and the remaining types of jurisdictions (including suburban counties, rural counties, and smaller cities with populations between 2,500 and 49,999). Three conclusions can be drawn from the pattern of gang intensity shown in these graphs. First, the very largest cities report the greatest number of distinct gangs, on average. This is not surprising, as cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York have historically been home to many youth gangs. Second, trends in the average number of gangs reported by law enforcement vary by city size. For example, the number of gangs operating in smaller jurisdictions rose during some of the very same years that saw a decline among the largest cities (e.g., from 2003 to 2005). Finally, while it is difficult to directly compare trends in the number of gangs in cities with between 50,000 and 99,999 residents compared to “other” jurisdictions—given that other jurisdictions included counties with larger land masses and very small cities, resulting in dramatic differences in population density—cities between 50,000 and 99,999 actually report fewer, on average, annual number of gangs operating in the area than do these other jurisdictions.
Patterns and Trends in the Number of Gang Members in Cities

Figure 8.2 shows that the very largest cities are home to the greatest number of active gang members as well. Again, this is to be expected given that the base population in these jurisdictions is large. In cities with populations in excess of 100,000 people, the average number of gang members known to law enforcement was quite volatile, ranging from 1,008 (in 2005) and 2,220 (in 2001). By contrast, law enforcement reported between 204 (in 1997) and 311 (in 2000) gang members, on average, in jurisdictions with populations ranging from 50,000 to 99,999, and the number of gang members typically reported in other kinds of jurisdictions ranged from 297 (in 2002) to 859 (in 2001). According to the graph, law enforcement estimates of the number of gang members in the very largest cities rose precipitously after a low in 2005, whereas the number of gang members operating in other jurisdictions continued to fall over the same period. In the next section, Howell, Egley and colleagues apply trajectory modeling to see if serious gang problem cities could be grouped on another dimension: violent crime involvement over the 14-year period.

Serious Gang Problem Trends

The above analyses demonstrate that cities can be distinguished by their distinctively patterned intensity of gangs and gang members. With this in mind, the next step is to assess the relative seriousness
of gang activity among cities. For the purposes of this analysis, homicide is considered to be a primary indicator of serious gang violence.

### Gang-Related Homicides and Serious Gang Activity

Homicides characterize serious gang problem cities more than any other factor, and gang-related homicides are heavily concentrated geographically in the United States. Most cities have no gang homicides, and those that do usually report very few of them from year to year in the NYGS (Egley et al., 2006). Rather, it is in a subset of larger cities (populations greater than 50,000) and adjacent suburban counties where the overwhelming majority (96%) of gang homicides occurred in 2009 (Table 8.1).

The trajectory analysis presented in Figure 8.3 examines trends in the proportion of all homicides that are gang related and, in contrast to the previous section, offers a more pointed investigation of seriousness of gang problems nationwide. Further, the analysis that follows is limited to the very largest cities, with populations in excess of 100,000 persons, and incorporates total annual homicide counts from the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Uniform Crime Report (UCR) data for all very large cities participating in the NYGS between 1996 and 2009. Recall that the largest cities in the nation are the cities with the greatest number of both gangs and gang members at every period. Overall, 247 cities met the criteria for inclusion. (Only two of the eligible cities were excluded from the analysis due to complete missing gang homicide data for the entire time period.) Proportional homicide rates—along which cities’ patterns are aligned here—were determined by dividing the total number of gang homicides reported in the NYGS annually by the total number of homicides reported for the city in the UCR, multiplied by 100. This provides the percentage of all homicides that are gang related at each year for each jurisdiction.

The largest cluster of very large cities (with populations greater than 100,000) is seen in trajectory group T2 (\(N = 105; 42.5\%\) of the total sample of 247 cities). This group of 105 cities experienced a steady rate of gang-related homicides over the 14-year period, wherein approximately 20% of annual homicides were gang related. The next largest group (T4; \(N = 71; 28.7\%\)) experienced double the proportion of homicides that are gang-related, with approximately 40% of all homicides—or 4 in 10—gang-related over the same period. Another sizeable group, 55 very large cities (T1; 22.3%), averaged between 2% and 8% gang-related homicides over the 14-year period. The two remaining trajectory groups (T3; \(N = 14; 5.7\%\) and T5; \(N = 2; 0.8\%\)) experienced increases in annual gang-related homicides. Indeed, a cluster of

### Table 8.1 Distribution of Gangs, Gang Members, and Gang Homicides by Area Type, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area Type</th>
<th>Gangs (%)</th>
<th>Gang Members (%)</th>
<th>Gang-Related Homicides (%)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Larger cities (50,000+)</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>74.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban counties</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller cities</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural counties</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Total reflects only homicides reported to NYGS, and is not a national total due to missing data and sampling design.

14 cities (T3) experienced a very sharp increase from 2001 to 2009, from only around 4% to more than 60% over this nine-year period. Finally, two very large cities (T5; Inglewood, California and Salinas, California) stand out for having started the 14-year period at nearly 70% of all lethal violence that was gang related. By 2009, however, almost all (more than 90%) of the homicides in these cities were believed to be gang related.

Three important observations can be made from this analysis of gang-related homicides as a proportion of the total number of homicides reported in the UCR for very large cities. Overall, nearly 8 out of 10 very large cities (78%; T2, T3, T4, and T5 combined) reported a consistently high level or increasing proportion of gang-related homicides over the 14-year period. Second, a remarkable degree of consistency in the rate of gang-related homicides across trajectory groups is observed (this stability is especially apparent for 71% of cities; T2 and T4). Third, none of the trajectory groups found in these cities displayed a pattern consistent with a decline in the prevalence of gang-related homicide between 1996 and 2009.

Regional Variation in Gang-Related Homicide Trends

Are some parts of the country more likely to experience elevated rates of gang violence? To begin to assess whether there are regional variations in the seriousness and rate of change of the gang violence problem, each of the 247 very large cities experiencing these varied levels and trends in the proportion of all homicides that are gang-related are mapped in Figure 8.4. A preliminary inspection suggests that
T4 cities, or places where approximately 40% of all homicides are gang related over the period, are more
typical in major urban centers located in the West, the Northeast, and parts of the Midwest. Cities char-
acterized by T1, T2, or T3 trends appear more evenly spread across the United States, while the two T5
cities are located only in the West (California, more specifically).

Visual inspection of the map, alone, cannot confirm specific regional patterns. Therefore, Figure
8.5 further differentiates regional variations in serious gang violence trends. This graph shows the per-
centage of the very largest cities in each region (included in the NYGS) that can be characterized by the
five gang violence trajectory patterns. More than half of these cities in the South and nearly half of these
cities in the Midwest are T2 cities, whereas nearly half of these cities in the Northeast and the West are
T4 cities. Overall, more than 85% of Southern cities are characterized by T1 or T2 trends, which gener-
ally show between zero and 20% gang-related homicide patterns that are relatively stable over the
period. By contrast, nearly 1 in 10 very large cities in the Northeast show dramatic increases in the
proportion of all homicides that are gang related between 2001 and 2009 (T3). The Northeast, the West,
and to a lesser extent the Midwest all have their fair share of cities following a high and stable (T4)
trend, whereas this pattern is quite uncommon in the South. Finally, both cities characterized by the
most severe gang homicide problems—Salinas and Inglewood—are located in California, which
constitute 2% of all of the very large jurisdictions in the West that participate in the NYGS.

Source: Howell, Egley, et al., 2011, p. 8
A Snapshot of Gang Homicide in the Largest Cities

The level of violence produced by gangs can be large. In the 167 NYGS cities that provided gang homicide data in 2009, Egley and Howell (2011) found that 110 (66%) cities reported a total of 1,017 gang homicides. This total represents a 2% increase from 2002, a 7% increase from 2005, and an 11% increase from 2008 for these same cities (see Table 7.2 in Chapter 7).
Figure 8.6 shows the total percent of homicides that were gang related among cities with populations of 100,000 or more (for which homicide data were reported in 2009). Separate figures are presented for Chicago and Los Angeles because of their historically very large numbers of gang homicides. Overall, approximately one-quarter of all homicides in this category of cities were gang related in 2009. By comparison, one-half of the homicides in Los Angeles and one-third in Chicago were gang related.

Prior research has contrasted historical gang homicide patterns in Chicago and Los Angeles (Howell, 1999; Maxson, 1999). No other cities in the United States—or worldwide for that matter—come close to producing the volume of gang homicides found in these two cities. As discussed in Chapter 1, in each city, unique histories produced several waves of gang development that further exacerbated gang problems.

Aside from the prominence of Chicago and Los Angeles as gang homicide capitals, many other cities—particularly very large ones with populations greater than 100,000—have extremely high gang homicide rates and should not be ignored. As shown in Figure 8.3, 71 U.S. cities in this population category experienced very high gang homicide rates from 1996 to 2009, accounting for approximately 40% of all homicides (T4).

San Antonio researchers’ analysis of 28 homicides that occurred in the course of their study yielded five distinct circumstances in which these occur and six different motives (Valdez et al., 2009). Key circumstances include drug-related disputes (typically an argument associated with drug transactions), gang disputes over a variety of gang-related issues, assaults in which victims are attacked without...
notice, and *rolling out* (a gang exit rite that entails a physical beating by several gang members). Key motives include personal vendettas (feuds between victims and offenders), gang revenge or retaliation, gang rivalries, territorial trespassing, gang solidarity (camaraderie), and spontaneous retaliation (spur-of-the-moment retribution or defense).

**Case Studies of Gang Problems in Large Cities**

The next sections feature case studies for a single city from each gang violence trend in Figure 8.3 (Abilene, Texas; St. Louis, Missouri; Springfield, Massachusetts; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Inglewood, California). Each of these cities is among larger cities in trajectory group T2 shown in Chapter 7 (Figure 7.5) that consistently experienced gang activities throughout the 14-year survey period from 1996 to 2009; however, each of these cities shows distinctive trends in the extent of their violence problem that is gang related (see Figure 8.3). Abilene, Texas, is in trajectory group one (T1) in Figure 8.3, a group that averages very little gang-related violence annually, in fact, law enforcement in Abilene reported that none of their homicides between 1996 and 2009 were gang-related. St. Louis, Missouri, represents a modal city in the second trajectory group (T2) shown in Figure 8.3 wherein, on average, 20% of their annual homicides are gang related. The relative stability of gang-related violence makes sense as several St. Louis gangs have a long history of violence and other criminal activity (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Rosenfeld et al., 1999). Springfield, Massachusetts, is in trajectory group three (T3) of Figure 8.3, which demonstrates a marked increase in serious gang violence especially after the year 2000. For example, after reporting that none of their homicides were gang related in the late 1990s, law enforcement in Springfield indicated that more than one-third (38%) of their homicides were gang related in 2000, more than half (56%) were gang related in 2005, and, by 2006, nearly three quarters were defined as such (71%). Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is in trajectory group four (T4; wherein, on average, 4 in 10 homicides are gang related annually). The city of Pittsburgh has a long history of gang involvement in drug trafficking and guns (R. A. Gordon et al., 2014). Finally, Inglewood, California—about 12 miles southeast of Los Angeles—is one of the two cities in which a large majority of the lethal violence that exists there is gang related (T5 in Figure 8.3); between 80% and 100% of all homicides in Inglewood are reportedly gang related in all but 2 of the 14 years over which data were collected. The city of Inglewood is known for its serious and violent gang problems; in fact, the movie *Boyz N The Hood* was filmed on location in Inglewood in 1991 (see Figure 8.7).

**Abilene, Texas, Case Study**

Abilene represents an example of a very large city with a very small gang violence problem. Unlike Fort Worth, Houston, and Corpus Christi, Abilene law enforcement reported virtually no street gang-related homicides between 1996 and 2009. This is not to say that gangs are absent in Abilene; indeed there is some evidence of a presence of Aryan, motorcycle, and prison gangs in the area, but gang-involved criminality appears to revolve largely around cocaine and methamphetamine trafficking by prison gang affiliates, rather than youth or street gang violence. As early as 1991, surveys conducted by the Attorney General’s Office of police departments in Texas cities showed that Abilene had almost no problem with youth gang violence; the Abilene Police Department estimated that approximately five delinquent juvenile gangs or criminal street gangs, comprising 60–66 gang members in total, operated in the city in that survey (Morales, 1991). Standardizing to population size, Abilene is among the safest cities with respect
to gang violence. Morales (1991) finds approximately 60 gang members and 4.7 gangs per 100,000 population, compared to El Paso, for example, which reports 670 gang members and 38.8 gangs per 100,000 residents.

At the beginning of the period under investigation, youth gang problems were viewed by Abilene law enforcement as difficult “to take seriously” (Eiserer, 1996). For example, police officer Leland Mitchell joked that, on entering a home on suspicion of marijuana, “he found four Bloods and four Crips playing a game of poker”; Chief Melvin Martin, police chief at the time, also argued that Abilene’s gang problem was “almost nonexistent” relative to other similarly-sized cities in Texas (Eiserer, 1996). This was a marked improvement over the situation in the 1980s, when Abilene was believed to have up to 650 youth gang members. To stem the youth gang problem, the city of Abilene undertook a large-scale program to provide organized after-school and evening recreational activities to youth by building Boys and Girls Club gymnasiums near schools in high-crime areas (DeLattre, 1994). DeLattre attributes the dramatic decline in local youth gang problems to those recreational programs offered by the Boys and Girls Clubs and other police-initiated activities in Abilene between 1988 and 1993. These types of programs can reduce youth alienation and limit unstructured socializing time that might otherwise encourage the formation of youth conflict groups.

Latino prison gangs, some involving Abilene youth, have operated in the local area since the late 1970s. For example, the West Texas Tango gang merged with the Tango Blast Federation in 2004;
Tango Blast is classified as a Tier 1 gang by the Texas Department of Public Safety, meaning that it is among a small group of “organizations [that] pose the greatest gang threat to Texas due to their relationships with Mexican cartels, large membership numbers, high levels of transnational criminal activity, and organizational effectiveness” (Texas Department of Public Safety, 2013, p. 26). While loosely organized outside of prison and largely based in Austin, Fort Worth, Dallas, and Houston, some members of Tango Blast treat Abilene and other cities in north and west Texas area as their territory (Houston Intelligence Support Center, 2011). Indeed, in December of 2008, federal, state, and local law enforcement executed the arrests of a dozen members of the West Texas Puro Tango Blast prison gang for large-scale trafficking operations in Abilene and surrounding areas after a two-year intensive investigation (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008). In general, however, Abilene’s gang problems are less a function of violent street gangs and more focused on organized drug trafficking or hate organizations.

**St. Louis, Missouri, Case Study**

St. Louis appears to be typical of very large cities with respect to the long-standing seriousness of its gang problem. In Figure 8.3, St. Louis is among the very large cities in the trajectory group T2 that consistently reported a high level of gang homicides (approximately 20% of total annual homicides, on average) during the 1996 to 2009 period.

In the following description of St. Louis gangs, Monti (1993) illustrates how gangs vary in their key characteristics depending on the degree to which their surrounding communities were well settled. In describing St. Louis communities as “less settled,” “relatively settled,” and “more settled,” Monti refers to degrees of social disorganization, as indicated by racial/ethnic heterogeneity, rapid population movement, poverty, and unstable families and schools. His study of St. Louis gangs covered nearly a decade, beginning in 1984, corresponding with a period of accelerated gang growth across the city. These are based on his interviews of hundreds of male and female gang and nongang youths and other knowledgeable persons, including police officers (see Monti, 1991). The gangs Monti (1993) describes include only the “better-established groups composed largely, but not exclusively, of teenagers or young men in their twenties [and also] slightly older gangs that had established reputations for fierceness and, in most cases, a merchandising operation for illegal drugs” (p. 228). In particular, numerous nascent gangs comprised of younger children in north St. Louis and teenage gangs in south St. Louis are excluded.

**Gang activity in north St. Louis.** Known gangs located in the “less-settled” north St. Louis area numbered 19 in 1988—most of which had not been in existence long, typically only since 1984 (Monti, 1993). Most of the gangs in this area were still in the process of expanding and contracting, and only eight gangs had stable territories. Moreover, few of them had ties with other gangs. This introduces “brittleness” to gangs that makes them more vulnerable to outside attacks and seductions. Only Black males belonged to these gangs, but seven had female auxiliaries. Gang size varied enormously—but most had more than 30 members. These gangs were not particularly well organized. More than one leader was common and at least one person typically served as an “enforcer.” Moreover, “the gangs had no strict hierarchy, or officer corps or formal rules for developing a ‘gang policy,’ and no set custom for initiating or removing members” (p. 233). Virtually all of the gangs in this area were described as “fighting gangs.”

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Gang activity in near north suburbs of St. Louis. Gangs in “relatively settled” communities (i.e., near north suburbs) of St. Louis numbered 14 in 1990 (Monti, 1993). The two largest gangs had more than 100 members and both maintained up to four age-graded sets that corresponded with the members’ school status. Of these gangs, 12 had a fixed territory (three of which were female) and another gang, the Gangster Disciples, claimed a connection to the Chicago supergang of the same name. The remaining group was actually a drug gang. Criminal activities involving members of these gangs varied widely, although some patterned behavior was observed. Some junior high members began with burglaries and graduated into drug dealing. Others stole cars in auto theft rings. Some gangs were actively involved in drug distribution.

Gangs in this area were generally well established, such that children took their gang loyalties with themselves to schools. “There were children at every elementary school who were active gang members or serious about claiming some gang affiliation. Youngsters from all the municipalities were brought together at the junior and senior high schools” as a result of school desegregation plans (Monti, 1993, p. 242). Not surprising, “gang fights in city schools were more routine [in this area] and more likely to involve substantial violence” (p. 242). The “unsettled character” (i.e., poor school climate) of schools contributed to the seriousness of gang-related crime in and around the school, including drug and weapon use, intimidation, extortion, disruptiveness, and encroachment of nonstudents into the schools.

The early involvement of children in gangs in this area of St. Louis was noteworthy. “Children grew up knowing where they lived and the gang they eventually would join, if they chose to become a member” (Monti, 1993, p. 243). Even elementary school-aged children played at being a gang member. “While much of this play and imitative behavior had a game-like quality, the children took it seriously and appreciated the significance of what it meant to be a gang member” (p. 243). It was through role play such as “the wearing of colors, and flashing of signs that children explored the role of ‘gang member’ and identified themselves as potential recruits. The self-selection process continued at the junior and senior high schools” (p. 243).

Gang activity in central and south St. Louis. Gangs in “more-settled” areas (i.e., central and south St. Louis) were not as numerous as in the less-settled and relatively settled areas (Monti, 1993). This is attributable to two factors. First, part of this area, the central corridor, was very well settled and had only two gangs. Second, the gangs in the south St. Louis area were populated by Black youth from families that either lived in public housing projects or in relatively poor zones into which they had been relocated from housing developments downtown.

The principal established gangs in this area—the Thunder Katz, Peabody Boyz, Southside Posse, and South Side Gangsters—had fewer potential recruits, but the family and friendship ties among them were strong. Hence, these gangs were less vulnerable to outside attacks and seductions. Gangs in these areas were well integrated into the daily routines of the institutions and residents that shared the area with them; therefore, they seldom engaged in serious crimes or sustained criminal activities over a long period of time. In addition, these gangs did not exploit the vulnerability of the community; instead, they actually defended its integrity.

Springfield, Massachusetts, Case Study

Many of the cities characterized by the increasing youth gang violence trend (T3) in Figure 8.3 are places that, at least initially, are reluctant to acknowledge a gang problem in their local communities. This denial
is a common reaction among law enforcement to initial signs of an emerging serious problem of gang-related violence (Huff, 1991). According to Huff, denial is followed by a second stage called recognition and a final stage characterized by overreaction. Tracking gang-related violence trends in city of Springfield, Massachusetts illustrates this pattern. In the 1990s, and early part of the 21st century, police denied or downplayed the role that organized gangs played in local violence; yet by 2006, law enforcement were beginning to admit that the city had seen a rising gang presence, reporting knowledge of more than 200 members across at least 10 gangs (Wagner, 2006). By 2006, the Springfield News-Leader reported that roughly half of all street gang members in the city were Bloods, although there was some evidence of activity by Crips, Black Gangster Disciples, Vice Lords, MS-13, Los Boricuas, and the Latin Kings. Yet the head of the Springfield Police Department’s investigations division at the time, Major Steve Ijames, told the local newspaper,

Let’s talk about what overt behavior is consistent with the heavy influx of gang members. Street-corner drug-dealing. Dramatic spikes in violence. Lots of drive-by shootings. How prolific is that in this community? I think, statistically, the truth is it’s very low. (in Wagner, 2006)

But during the same period, the county prosecutor’s office was beginning to see an uptick in crimes committed by youthful gang members and had begun to argue for an aggressive strategy for dealing with street gang problems. This uptick soon morphed into an avalanche. Springfield became one of the most “dangerous cities in the United States” at the same time that gang presence in the city’s North End surged (Weinberger, 2012). According to an article in the New York Times, the North End is an area of Springfield where “gang members and drug dealers cruised the streets on motor scooters carrying SKS semiautomatic rifles in broad daylight . . . [and] gunfire erupted almost daily” (Goode, 2012). The FBI, the Western Massachusetts Gang Task Force, and local law enforcement efforts were directed toward large-scale gang sweeps and major initiatives to combat the activities of “OG’s” or “Old or Original Gangsters,” who were responsible for recruiting youth into the gang to deal drugs and engaging in other criminal activities (Berry, 2009).

In response to this problem, Springfield adopted a unique program to combat gang crime and violence entitled the Counter Criminal Continuum (C³) in 2009, which was said to draw heavily on counterinsurgency strategies employed by the military in Afghanistan and Iraq (Hibbard, Barbieri, Domnarksi, & Cutonne, 2014). Like community policing programs before it, C³ relied on community involvement to generate collaborative strategies for targeting gang problems, including graffiti removal, dealing with complaints over the actions of negligent landlords, teacher and officer chaperoning of school children to bus stops, finding summer job opportunities for youth, and engaging “street leaders, residents who act as an informal intelligence network, [to] report suspicious activities to the authorities” (Goode, 2012). Borrowing from the Army Special Forces approach, C³ is a two-pronged strategy focused on intelligence gathering and winning the trust of the local population (Weinberger, 2012). Collecting and analyzing data, including the social networks of gang members, has enabled Springfield police to disrupt gang activities by identifying the leaders and engaging in aggressive policing of those leaders, which then fractures the gang—a strategy consistent with the logic of Ceasefire and other violence-prevention programs across the country. While long-term evaluations of the C³ approach are not yet available, early evidence is optimistic; for example, in the year following its formal implementation, crime declined by 62% (Weinberger, 2012), plummeting to its lowest violent crime rate in nearly three decades. Despite these relative successes, however, Springfield remained one of the 10 most dangerous

**Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Case Study**

Pittsburgh appears to be somewhat typical among very large cities (populations greater than 100,000) with respect to the long-standing seriousness of its gang problem. In Figure 8.3, Pittsburgh is among the very large cities in the trajectory group T4 that consistently reported a high level of gang homicides (approximately 40% of total annual homicides, on average) during the 1996 to 2009 period.

Having experienced onset of gang activity in 1991, Pittsburgh is considered a “late onset” city (Howell, Egley, et al., 2002). However, unlike other cities in that onset group that did not report a large problem with violent crimes before the end of the decade, Pittsburgh quickly developed a serious gang violence problem, as we shall see in the next section. Its gang activity developed in two stages, which are characterized here as onset of gang activity and recent gang activity.

**Onset of gang activity in Pittsburgh.** According to Tita (1999) and Cohen and Tita (1999), a surge in drug-related arrests (apparently driven by crack cocaine offenses) preceded the onset of gang activity in Pittsburgh. “Shots fired” calls (citizen-initiated emergency 911 calls to police) spontaneously increased in “a classic epidemic” during a pregang period (1990–1991) in census tracts distributed widely throughout the city (Tita & Cohen, 2004, p. 195). Tita and Cohen observed that it was precisely in the high-violence communities that gangs emerged, which “was followed by a contagious spread of shots fired activity in gang tracts or tracts adjoining them,” fueling an epidemic of gun violence or “contagious diffusion” to other areas (p. 195).

Violent urban street gangs, including sets (subgroups) of Black Crip and Blood gangs, began to take hold in Pittsburgh during the latter half of 1991, according to Tita and Cohen (2004). Gang emergence continued through 1993, and stabilized in 1994–1995 with no new gangs forming and no gangs deserting (Tita, Cohen, et al., 2005).

Perhaps largely attributable to the violent community context within which they formed, Tita and Ridgeway (2007) assert that “all of the gangs included in this [Pittsburgh] study share one thing in common: They are known to be violent” (p. 217), and Tita (1999) contends they have earned “respect” and fear from the community. Given the territorial and retaliatory natures of urban youth gang violence, it is reasonable to expect that gang-related violence would follow predictable spatial and temporal patterns. In short, Tita and Ridgeway (2007) state, “One might expect set space to serve as a sort of lightning rod for intergang violence” (p. 217). From the onset of gang activity in Pittsburgh, about two-thirds of all gang homicides were gang motivated (intergang disputes, initiation activities, or spontaneous drive-by killings).

**Recent gang activity in Pittsburgh.** Tita and colleagues’ on-site study of Pittsburgh ended in 1995. This section summarizes the Pittsburgh Police Department’s responses to the NYGS from 1996 onward. Beginning in 1996, with a well-publicized Federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization Act indictment of a local street gang, which “had an enormous impact on all Pittsburgh gangs,” “[g]angs and gang violence virtually disappeared from the streets of Pittsburgh” (p. 281). From 1996 to 1999, the number of gangs reported by the Pittsburgh Police Department dropped 77%, from 86 to just 20.
For several years thereafter, Pittsburgh police responses to the NYGS characterized the city’s gang problem as somewhat stabilized but at a serious level, particularly in drug trafficking, aggravated assault, and firearm use. Law enforcement considered a majority of the gangs to be “drug gangs.” The proportion of gang members that is Black has remained virtually unchanged over the 14-year period, averaging almost 86%. Gangs still were well established in certain areas of the city as at the beginning of the new millennium, with subgroups based on age, gender, and geographical area. Then the gang problem turned noticeably larger and more serious. In six out of nine years (2001 through 2009), Pittsburgh police said the city’s gang problem was “getting worse” in three main respects.

First, law enforcement reported more gangs from the mid-2000s onward, which likely contributed to increased intergang conflicts and gang violence. While only 20 gangs were counted in 1999, an average of 36 was reported each year during 2001 to 2009, and this is a conservative estimate because Pittsburgh police count multiple sets as one gang. Although police had more difficulty estimating the number of gang members during the early part of this decade, during 2005 to 2008 an average of 869 gang members were reported each year. The few very large gangs were estimated to have between 95 and 200 members.

Second, gang members apparently remained in the gangs for multiple years. In the 1990s, police had estimated that 7 out of 10 gang members were juveniles. By 2008, this proportion had dropped to one-half, reflecting either more involvement of older gang members or aging of earlier members.

Third, inmates returning from prison may have reconnected with some of the gangs or joined outright as a result of relationships they formed in prison. Survey respondents said the returning inmates influenced local gang activity in important ways in the new decade, including drug trafficking, access to weapons, and violence itself. Three-fourths of these former inmates were estimated to be adults. From 2003 to 2006, the Pittsburgh Police Department reported more than 20 gang homicides each year along with increases in gang-aggravated assaults.

In sum, Pittsburgh’s gang problem developed quickly and worsened measurably over time. Widespread drug dealing and gunplay preceded early gang emergence. Gangs emerged in the high-violence communities, followed by a contagious spread of shots fired activity in gang tracts or tracts adjoining them. Once the gangs developed a reputation for violence and earned respect for this, gang violence stabilized, but at a high level. Now, inmates returning from prison may well be refueling existing gangs.

Inglewood, California, Case Study

Inglewood has a long history of gang problems. Recent sources indicate that an Hispanic gang called Inglewood 13, as well as the Inglewood Family (an African American Blood set) and certain Crip sets, first emerged in the 1960s (Katz & Webb, 2003; Maxson, 1999). According to one senior officer in the Inglewood police department who was interviewed by Katz and Webb (2003),

Well, I think here in Inglewood it was the just absolutely rapid quadrupling and tripling, just growth of gangs that seemed to explode in the late 70s and early 80s, and we just realized all of a sudden that not only did we have hundreds, we had thousands of gang members in the city, and probably hundreds of different gangs, and so [the gang unit] was born out of the necessity [in 1980] to understand the gangs, identify the gangs, identify the gang leaders, and stuff like that. It was specifically an intelligence gathering as opposed to an enforcement unit, and remains an intelligence gathering unit today. (p. 60)
Thus, it was in the 1980s that gang problems escalated for the city, when law enforcement began to see an intergenerational transmission of gang ties from parents to children and the expansion of street-level cocaine markets (Katz & Webb, 2003). Police-involved shootings also rose as gang violence worsened in the city, promoting the police department’s gang unit to initiate a suppression-oriented approach to gang control (Katz & Webb, 2003; Lacey, 1990). The gang unit, in concert with various Anti-Crime Teams and other targeted policing units, instituted nighttime curfews and began actively patrolling gang hotspots in the early 1990s before launching community policing initiatives like organizing late-night basketball leagues and finding employment opportunities for specific gang members (Katz & Webb, 2003). The degree to which prevention and suppression activities were successful was a matter of some debate, but Inglewood’s gang problem did not subside. By 1999, law enforcement reported that approximately 6.4% of city residents were active street gang members and that every neighborhood in Inglewood had been claimed by at least one gang (Katz & Webb, 2003).

While Inglewood gangs were involved to some degree in drug distribution, they were for the most part not organized or sophisticated criminal enterprises. Instead, local gang members were heavily involved in opportunistic and violent offending, and were responsible for a vast majority of all homicides in the city between 1996 and 2009. Some of these incidents of violence have stemmed from internal conflict among gangs who claim turf in Inglewood; among the eight most active gangs are five African American gangs including Black P Stone, Crinshaw Mafia Gangsters, Inglewood Family, Raymond Ave Crips, and Rollin 60s, and three Hispanic gangs including Inglewood 13, Lennox 13, and Tepus. Other incidents are a consequence of rivalries between gangs in Inglewood and outlying areas like Compton (in Los Angeles) and the tiny city of Westmont, which lies between Los Angeles and Inglewood. Just recently, Westmont was euphemistically called Death Valley given its extraordinarily high rate of lethal violence (Santa Cruz, 2014). The infiltration of gangs across all of Inglewood’s neighborhoods and in proximate cities has contributed to the extraordinarily serious and sustained levels of gang violence over time.

**Contextual Characteristics That Contribute to Serious Gang Problems**

These case studies illustrate an important point. Even though each of these cities has experienced some serious gang problem histories, their levels and trends in gang violence differ in key aspects that may have important implications for intervention. The main difference between St. Louis and Pittsburgh, for example, is that St. Louis has an older, more established gang problem with considerable diversity in various sectors of the city. In contrast, Pittsburgh has more homogeneous gangs with very extensive involvement in drug trafficking. Likewise, there are some similarities in the approaches to gang suppression undertaken by police in both Inglewood and Springfield as their respective gang problems became more serious and entrenched, yet Inglewood’s problem with gang-related violence preceded Springfield’s by at least two decades.

The economic and cultural context of these cities, access to crime facilitators, and drug-related factors provide important contextual influences on serious gang violence problems. This section identifies causes and correlates of serious street gang violence that largely track Stage 4 of Howell’s (2015) model. A brief summary of important data and studies on each of these indicators follows.
Table 8.2 Contextual Characteristics of Modal Cities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trajectory in Figure 8.3</th>
<th>Abilene, TX</th>
<th>St. Louis, MO</th>
<th>Springfield, MA</th>
<th>Pittsburgh, PA</th>
<th>Inglewood, CA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T1</td>
<td>$180.00</td>
<td>$120.00</td>
<td>$125.00</td>
<td>$181.00</td>
<td>$212.00</td>
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<tr>
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<td>$14.83</td>
<td>$7.86</td>
<td>$24.17</td>
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</tr>
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<td>15.4</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T4</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T5</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>46.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T6</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>47.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.64</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T8</td>
<td>11.40</td>
<td>23.74</td>
<td>25.30</td>
<td>17.44</td>
<td>21.79</td>
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<tr>
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<td>5.60</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>T12</td>
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<td>1.60</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

City Characteristics

Table 8.2 provides a summary of select contextual characteristics of the case study cities on each trajectory in Figure 8.3. Some of these results begin to disentangle contextual differences between places with unique patterns of serious gang violence. It is important to note that the cities above are selected purely for illustrative purposes, and there is likely much more within-group than between-group variation in some of these features of place. Importantly, however, variations in these demographic, economic, political, and cultural characteristics begin to paint a picture of the types of very large cities experiencing consistent gang presence, but hosting varied patterns of serious gang violence.

In general, Inglewood—which had inordinately high proportions of gang-related violence between 1996 and 2009—is located in a state and county with the highest levels of correctional expenditures and prosecutorial strength of all five cities. It is also characterized by a large African American and Hispanic
population, reflected in absolute percentages as well as the index of racial heterogeneity. One-fifth to one-quarter of the population in each of these very large cities, irrespective of their gang violence trends, is living below the poverty line, with the exception of residents in Abilene, wherein a much lower proportion of residents are impoverished. The foreign-born population constitutes more than one-quarter of Inglewood’s residents and 8% of residents in Springfield but only 4% to 5% of the populations of the remaining cities. In general, criminal justice strength, relatively disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions, and racial and ethnic heterogeneity appear greater in Inglewood than in the case study cities with less serious gang violence trends.

Availability of Crime Facilitators

Accessing Firearms

In general, guns are the weapon of choice for gang members who involve themselves in violence. This means that the availability of firearms should play some role in facilitating the violence perpetrated by local gangs. Because gang members often use illegal guns—either accessed through strawman’s purchasers, through theft, or via illicit gun markets—rather than those acquired through legal channels, it is unlikely that state, county, or municipal gun control laws and ordinances will systematically influence serious gang violence trends (Murray, 1975). Nonetheless, focused deterrence strategies, like the “pulling levers” approach undertaken by the federal Project Safe Neighborhoods program, targets specific chronic offenders with high levels of criminal justice and social service intervention. Braga, Pierce, McDevitt, Bond, and Cronin (2008) describe the “pulling levers” approach as follows:

In its simplest form, the approach consists of selecting an appropriate crime problem, such as youth homicide; convening an interagency working group of law-enforcement practitioners; conducting research to identify key offenders, groups, and behavior patterns; framing a response to offenders and groups of offenders that uses a varied menu of sanctions (“pulling levers”) to stop them from continuing their violent behavior; focusing social services and community resources on targeted offenders and groups to match law-enforcement prevention efforts; and directly and repeatedly communicating with offenders to make them understand why they are receiving this special attention. (p. 134)

These targeted programs have been found to dramatically lower overall rates of gun-related violence, especially in Boston.

The Role of Firearms for Gang Members

Many gang studies show that the felt need for protection is the primary reason gang members own or carry an illegal gun (Esbensen, Deschenes, & Winfree, 1994). “It is therefore not surprising,” explain Lizotte and colleagues (2000), “that when boys join gangs, the probability of carrying a hidden gun is substantially increased” (p. 829). Beginning in the 1970s, youth gangs were reported to have more weapons of greater lethality (W. Miller, 1982/1992). Stretesky and Pogrebin (2007) assert that gang-related gun violence can be understood in terms of self and identity that are heavily rooted in self-concepts of masculinity and reinforced by other gang members. Bjerregaard and Lizotte (1995) add that gangs are more likely to recruit adolescents who own a gun, and gang members are
more than twice as likely as nongang members to own a gun for protection. “Gang members carry guns to protect themselves and their turf from rival gangs, who, in turn, must arm” (Lizotte et al., 2000, p. 830). Furthermore, C. Block and Block (1993) note that gun availability fuels gang violence. Lizotte and colleagues (2000) explain, “If one travels in a dangerous world of youth armed illegally and defensively with firearms, it only makes sense to carry a gun. Therefore, peer gun ownership for protection increases the probability of gun violence” (p. 830).

In the Rochester study cited here, during early adolescence, younger boys who are members of a gang have a higher probability of gun carrying. “In late adolescence, involvement in serious drug trafficking, independent of gang involvement, is a much stronger factor explaining hidden gun carrying”—typically after gang involvement has ended (Lizotte et al., 2000, p. 829). In this study and in the Pittsburgh longitudinal delinquency study referenced earlier in this chapter (R. A. Gordon et al., 2014), extensive involvement in drug sales and gun carrying typically come later in the life course, as discussed in Chapter 5.

Drug-Related Factors

Law enforcement views drug-related activity as the strongest factor influencing local gang violence (Figure 8.8). The Pittsburgh case study illustrates two ways in which gang involvement in illicit drug trafficking contributes to violence: first by their co-occurrence in communities, and second, by the direct involvement of gang members in trafficking. Among proposed explanations for the surge in youth violence and gang homicides in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Blumstein (1995a, 1995b, 1996) and Blumstein and Rosenfeld (1999) insist that the so-called crack cocaine epidemic is an important explanation, although the evidence is equivocal.

Another contributing factor to the sharp rise in drug-related arrests observed in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s was the “war on drugs” initiated by the Reagan administration (Howell, 2003b). To be sure, Howell and Decker (1999) conclude gang participation, drug trafficking, and violence occur together, and more so, according to Coughlin and Venkatesh (2003), in certain cities with more organized gangs, and where gangs are intermixed with drug trafficking groups. The Pittsburgh case study is an excellent illustration of this latter condition. In other words, these problems overlap considerably, but, as Decker (2007) notes, “Conflict between gangs accounts for more gang violence, including homicide, than does involvement in the drug trade” (p. 392).

Law enforcement officers themselves recognize the tangential and infrequent involvement of gangs in drug distribution. From the 1996 NYGS onward, Howell, Egley, and colleagues (2002) found only a minority of gang-problem jurisdictions report that gangs controlled a majority of the drug distribution in their jurisdiction. The bulk of the evidence from law enforcement, field studies, and youth surveys finds that most gangs lack key organizational characteristics to effectively manage drug distribution operations. Decker (2007) outlines specific criteria required for large-scale operations as follows, and few street gangs meet these criteria:

First, gangs must have an organizational structure with a hierarchy of leaders, roles, and rules. Second, gangs must have group goals that are widely shared by members. Third, gangs must promote stronger allegiance to the larger organization than to subgroups within it. Finally, gangs must possess the means to control and discipline their members to produce compliance with group goals. (p. 392)
In general, research supports a connection between drug-related offenses and lethal violence rates in multiple cities, but these are both considered potential outcomes of what Ousey and Lee (2004) call *preexisting social conditions*. These, alongside gang proliferation, mean that violence, gangs, and drug trafficking are often correlated across places, but gangs are not necessarily causally connected to elevated drug activity. Martinez, Rosenfeld, and Mares (2008) claim indicators of social disorganization (socioeconomic disadvantage and residential instability) predict drug activity, which, in turn, leads to higher levels of criminal violence (aggravated assault and robbery). Moreover, violence rates may be higher where gang problems are especially serious, and several studies of individuals’ increased violence rates while involved in gangs suggest this possibility. Nevertheless, research shows that relatively unorganized gangs are not able to control local drug dealing operations very effectively.

At the individual level, Bjerregaard’s (2010) research to date supports each of three potential connections among involvement in gangs, drugs, and violence. The first possibility is that gang membership
promotes involvement in drugs and that both gang membership and drug involvement in turn increase violence. Second, drug involvement or violent behavior may precede gang membership. Third, gang membership, drug involvement, and violent behaviors all occur simultaneously and are simply manifestations of the same antecedent factors.

In a nationwide test of the relationships between individual gang membership, drug involvement, and violence in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Bjerregaard (2010) found that gang membership influences drug involvement in teenagers, though less than anticipated. Misleading impressions of greater gang drug involvement are reported when the sequencing of gang, drug, and violence involvement is not separated in the analysis. Across several longitudinal studies with high-risk, large-city samples, Krohn and Thornberry (2008) found drug use and involvement in drug sales increase with gang membership and decrease when youth leave gangs, but drug sales remain elevated in some sites. This excellent review of longitudinal studies also concludes that “the weight of the evidence suggests that street gangs do facilitate or elicit increased involvement in delinquency, violence and drugs” (p. 147) at the individual level.

Research in Pittsburgh supports that conclusion. For example, Loeber and colleagues (2008) found that in the youngest cohort, “drug dealing and gang membership in late childhood significantly increased the risk of violence in late adolescence and dealing and gun carrying in early adolescence significantly increased the risk of violence in late adolescence” (p. 163). In this study, “drug dealing, gang membership, and gun carrying were strongly related to serious violent offending over time . . . Gang members who carried guns had about three to five times the risk of later violence even with controls for violence” (p. 163).

This long-term and very comprehensive Pittsburgh study of child, adolescent, and young adult crime reveals that violence is most likely to occur where drug trafficking, gun ownership and use, and gang activity intersect (R. A. Gordon et al., 2014). The youngest cohort was ages 12–16 at the middle of the 1990s, the approximate peak of the crack cocaine epidemic in Pittsburgh that Tita, Cohen, and colleague (2005) amply documented. Furthermore, both gang activity and homicides in Pittsburgh escalated in the early 1990s in concert with the crack cocaine epidemic in the city, “peaking just prior to the middle of the decade, and then falling through the late 1990s” (p. 236). This confluence was seen in gang member crime patterns. R. A. Gordon and colleagues (2014) found that

the evidence for particular forms of multitype delinquency is consistent with gangs using violence in instrumental ways, as a means to make money either by protecting drug territory or by supporting the acquisition and selling of stolen goods as well as drugs, at least in Pittsburgh in the 1990s. (p. 248)

In sum, at the individual level, gang involvement typically promotes participation in violence, drug use, and drug trafficking, and perhaps prolongs gang member involvement in drug sales. The Pittsburgh case study illustrates what criminologists call a period effect, when historical events serve to exacerbate criminal activity—in this particular case, gang involvement in drug trafficking at the peak of a crack cocaine epidemic in the city. But the sequencing can vary from one neighborhood or community to another, from one city to another, and from one cohort to another in the same city.
Features of Gangs That Contribute to Serious Gang Problems

A number of features of gangs—including the number of gangs in cities, size of gang membership, level of gang organization and structure, the influence of prison gangs, possibilities for transnational gangs, group process, and cultural codes—are important indicators of serious gang problems in large cities. Indeed, the presence of these features provides some indication that places have reached Stage 5 of Howell’s (2015) model. A brief summary of important data and studies on each of these indicators follows.

Number of Gangs

The number of gangs is a potent correlate of overall gang crime, particularly where multiple gangs are active in a restricted area. Approximately two-thirds of all gangs were located in cities with populations above 50,000 and adjacent suburban counties in 2009 (Table 8.1). Generally speaking, studies in Chicago (R. Block, 2000; C. Block & Block, 1993) and Los Angeles (Hutson et al., 1995) show that the number of gangs present in an area significantly relates to the area’s overall level of violence and other crimes. In the southeast area of Chicago, where three or four different named gangs were sometimes active in the same area, R. Block (2000) illustrates this point:

The conflict between the Black Disciples and BGDN has resulted in many deaths in District 7, where all four major black gangs were active, and in the housing projects in District 2. The southeast area includes the former turf of the El Rukins (now renamed the Black P. Stone Nation) and the oldest Mexican neighborhood in Chicago, where the Latin Kings are active. (p. 378)

R. Block (2000) examined gang homicides in very small grid squares, consisting of 150 meters on a side, revealing that “the relationship between the number of gangs that are active in an area and the levels of assaults and drug-related incidents is remarkably high” (p. 379). This research found that gangs do not necessarily need to be large to carry out a large number of homicides. In fact, the remaining street gangs other than the largest four Chicago gangs were responsible for more police-recorded offenses of any type than any one of the top four. Many of these smaller street gangs were relatively new in Chicago, predominantly Latino, and continuously fighting among themselves over limited turfs.

“[How did you personally feel about fighting?] I loved it, loved it. I was one of the first ones in. I liked to throw blows… I put my life down for [my gang] many times, that’s how I got shot—five times—and knifed.” —Anonymous male member of the Hoya Maravilla gang (in J. Moore, 1991, pp. 61–62)

Number of Gang Members

Three findings about the number of gang members are important. First, gang members are far more prevalent within larger cities. Approximately 8 out of 10 gang members are located in cities with populations above 50,000 and adjacent suburban counties in 2009 (Table 8.1). Second, Egley and colleagues (2006) conclude that gang members are far more numerous in densely populated cities that report a persistent gang problem. Third, Decker and Pyrooz (2010b) found that in the largest cities both the...
number of gang members and number of gangs “are strong, positive, and significant” correlates of gang homicides (p. 369), but that the number of gang members is a much stronger correlate than the number of gangs (although both measures are statistically significant). This is understandable given that some law enforcement agencies count multiple sets as one gang while others enumerate only larger gangs.

Gang Structures and Conflicts

Gang Structure

Previous research has not always been clear on the correlation between gang structure and gang violence, largely because much of the research viewed gangs as either highly organized (resembling adult organized-crime groups) or unorganized. Thrasher (1927/2000) is widely recognized for his natural history of the gang, which accounts for how gangs develop and evolve from a play group to a full-fledged criminal gang. For instance, Thrasher observed that gangs in the embryonic stage may evolve into a more highly organized unit, from a “diffuse” gang to a “solidified” criminal gang, and eventually, possibly become a “conventionalized” (formalized) organization if it, for example, becomes an athletic club or a pleasure club of some sort. But as pointed out in Chapter 2, few highly formalized gangs have been found elsewhere. C. Taylor (In Focus 8.1) asserts that some gangs evolve into criminal organizations.

IN FOCUS 8.1
GANG TRANSFORMATIONS IN DETROIT

C. Taylor (1990b) identified three different motivational gang categories in Detroit: scavenger, territorial, and corporate. Scavenger gangs mainly consist of lower and underclass youths. They are urban survivors who prey on the weak and have no common bond except their impulsive behavior and need to belong. They engage in senseless, spontaneous crimes for fun. Leadership constantly changes (p. 105). Scavengers are also the social and violent gangs that Yablonsky (1959) identified, and the “42 Gang” of Chicago that Shaw and McKay (1942) studied.

Territorial gangs, Taylor (1990b) contends, evolve from scavenger gangs, when they define a territory and become more organized for a specific purpose. Someone assumes a leadership role, which is part of the process of organization. They actively defend their territory, the area of their “business.” They become “rulers” of their turf, generally defined as neighborhood and ethnic boundaries, using physical violence as their only enforcement tool against invaders (pp. 107–108).

Corporate gangs are highly organized for the purpose of engaging in illegal money-making ventures. In Chicago, for a time, they served as “farm teams” for mafia organizations. They took on many of the characteristics of a business organization, motivated only by profit. They operated by rules and military-like discipline. Their membership came from all social classes (Taylor, 1990b).

Taylor (1990b) illustrates the transformation of a scavenger gang to a territorial gang, then to a corporate gang with the case of the 42 Gang in Chicago. Even as scavengers, they were considered one of the most vicious gangs in the United States at that time, once they staked a territory, grew, and

(Continued)
became more formal in their organization. Some of them graduated into the lower ranks of the Capone mob, although some of the mobsters thought the 42 Gang “too crazy” for organized crime work. Most of them eventually were maimed, killed, or imprisoned for murder, armed robbery, or rape.

The growth of the lucrative drug trade in the mid- to late 1980s redirected scavenger gangs into independent organizations in their own right in Detroit. Taylor (1990b) contends that the advent of the new era of drug use and trafficking gave new life and purpose to scavenger gangs. Without the Job Corps and other programs, they saw the drug business as a way out of poverty. These conditions combined to move Black youths for the very first time into “mainstream major crime.” The Detroit scavenger gangs became part of organized crime in America. They became “imperialists” (p. 113). As Taylor put it, “The fact is that drugs have taken street gangs and given them the capability and power to become social institutions” (p. 114).


As research has become more sophisticated, the findings have become clearer. For example, Esbensen, Osgood, Taylor, Peterson, and Freng (2001) show that when gangs are even “somewhat organized” (i.e., have initiation rites and so on), members self-report involvement in more serious delinquent acts than other youths. In other research, a study of detained youths in three Arizona sites, Decker and colleagues (2008) found that “the more organized the gang, even at low levels of organization, the more likely it is that members will be involved in violent offenses, drug sales, and violent victimizations” (p. 169).

Egley and Howell (2010) associate other structural characteristics of gangs with gang violence. Using NYGS data, gangs that have subgroups based on age, gender, and geographic area or territory are associated with higher homicide levels. Among 2009 survey respondents, asked directly whether gangs in their jurisdiction have such subgroups, only 33% of localities that acknowledged gang activity reported none of these three subgroupings. Almost one-third (32%) reported one of the three subgroups, 18% reported any two of them, and 17% reported having all three subgroups. While the existence of any one of these subgroups predicted gang violence, odds ratios reached statistical significance with any two of the subgroups, and the odds ratio more than doubled from a condition in which only one subgroup was present to the presence of all three subgroups. This national research strongly suggests that the greater the organization of gangs into subgroups of some sort, the greater the likelihood of gang-related violence.

In sum, evidence is growing “that measures of gang membership and the number of gangs are . . . robust, whether reported by individual gang members or official agencies” (Decker & Pyrooz, 2010b, p. 371). And the number of gangs, the number of gang members, and the presence of gang subgroups predict gang homicide in very large cities.

**Intergang Conflict**

Numerous studies show that most intergang violence, including homicides, is commonly related to several circumstances (maintenance of set space, interpersonal “beefs,” normative or order violations,
surprise assaults, and drug-turf disputes) and a variety of motives (defending one's identity as a gang member, defense of the gang's honor and reputation, set space trespassing, gang revenge or retaliation, personal spontaneous retaliation) (Braga, 2004; Hughes & Short, 2005; Papachristos, 2009; Tita, Cohen, et al., 2005). Interestingly, the bulk of intergang violence is directed against others of the same racial/ethnic background, often in battles for prominence or turf disputes.

The most detailed information on dispute pretexts among gangs and gang members comes from two studies in which research teams observed thousands of gang members' daily behaviors over several years. In the first one, a Chicago study, Hughes and Short's (2005) analysis of Short's observations in the 1960s of more than 2,600 incidents involving members of 20 lower or working-class gangs over three years revealed valuable insights on typical dispute pretexts (In Focus 8.2). When outcomes were examined, those that precipitated violence per se were largely retaliations (55%), followed by identity attacks (36%), and normative or order violations (31%).

**IN FOCUS 8.2**

**GANG DISPUTE PRETEXTS**

1. *Norm violations* include "annoying" behavior, failure to fulfill an obligation, ignoring, causing, or contributing to another's loss, boasting, cheating, unacceptable demeanor, and taking and/or violating another person's property.

2. *Noncompliance with an order* is begrudging acquiescence or (implicit or explicit) refusal to comply with demands to engage in or to not engage in a certain behavior.

3. *Actions that suggest a need to defend others* are behaviors directed toward one party that elicit a verbal or physical sanction from one or more observers.

4. *Money or debts* involve failure to repay a financial loan upon collection by the lender.

5. *Unfair or rough play* includes actions that are inconsistent with the explicit or implicit rules governing participation in an organized athletic contest.

6. *Identity attack* is any direct attack on personal or gang identity—including accusations, insults, challenges, and physical violations that do not result in bodily harm—and degrading rejections and yelling.

7. *Concern regarding opposite sex relations* involves behaviors that are upsetting because of the challenge they represent to another party's claim to a romantic interest.

8. *Territory or neighborhood honor* include actions undertaken by one party that directly threaten another's claim to a particular territory.

9. *Racial concerns* involve physical or verbal actions undertaken by one party against another solely because of race.

10. *Fun or recreational incidents* include physical or verbal actions that lead to hostilities during leisure activities such as "playing the dozens" and less organized body punching and horsing around.

(Continued)
Earlier, W. Miller’s (1966) pioneering study of Boston gangs revealed the nature of gang-based retaliations. Over a two-year period of field observation of 200 members of seven violent gangs by field workers, approximately 54,000 behaviors and interpersonal sentiments were recorded. Although violent intergang conflicts were extremely rare, Miller found that “gang members fight to secure and defend their honor as males; to secure and defend the reputation of their local area and the honor of their women; and to show that an affront to their pride and dignity demands retaliation” (p. 112).

Prison Gangs

The Gypsy Jokers (actually a motorcycle club) were the first acknowledged prison gang, formed in the 1950s in Washington state prisons (Camp & Camp, 1985). Violent prison gangs grew in concert with the massive expansion of prison populations in the United States that began in the 1970s and continued for 30 years (Howell, 2015). By the end of the 1970s, bona fide prison gangs were prevalent in a dozen states. In a mid-1980s survey of all state and federal prisons, facility administrators in 33 states indicated that they had gangs in their prisons (Camp & Camp, 1985). Having been formed to provide protection inside prisons from rival street gang members, the prison gangs were “an extension of an identical organization imported from the streets” (Jacobs, 1974, p. 397). Two states stand out for sheer strength and statewide influence of their prison gangs: California and Illinois.

California has been dubbed the “mother” of major prison gangs because six major prison gangs were active in the state’s prisons by 1984, and these without doubt contributed directly to the growth of gang activity throughout the state and to some extent in the West region. Gang suppression legislation, coupled with the state’s indeterminate sentence provision, and its “Three Strikes and You’re Out” law

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11. Retaliation is action undertaken by one party to avenge a previous attack or any other perceived or actual wrongdoing by the targeted party or a close associate.

12. Rumors include physical or verbal actions undertaken by one party to seek redress for negative information allegedly disseminated by the targeted party.

13. Robbery involves intimidating or violent actions undertaken by one party to acquire money or property from another.

14. Misunderstanding includes intended or actual actions directed at one or more persons who are mistakenly identified or accused of a wrongdoing that did not occur.

15. General troublemaking is physical or verbal harassment for no apparent reason.

16. Other pretexts include physical or verbal actions undertaken for other reasons, such as doing what someone else asked, indirectly harassing one person or group of persons by harming others, and preempting an anticipated attack.


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(Continued)
served to increase confinement of street gang members (Schlosser, 1998). In turn, growing conflicts and assaults between northern and southern California gang inmates led to the formation of Sureños and Norteños networks, and a rivalry that produced many gang wars, both in prisons and on the streets (National Alliance of Gang Investigators’ Associations, 2009). Rival southern California Hispanic street gangs thus were enemies with anyone from northern California, and vice versa. In time, this rivalry would unite the respective clusters of gangs in jails and state prisons. By the mid-1990s, the California prison system was said to be full of warring gangs, members of the Crips, Bloods, Mexican Mafia, and Black Guerrilla Family, to name a few.

In Chicago, massive incarceration of gang members followed Mayor Daley’s 1969 gang war. Prison administrators inadvertently strengthened the gangs by using them to help maintain control of prisons, thus allowing them “to consolidate, form alliances, and grow in number and strength” (Venkatesh, 2002, p. 133). The Illinois prison gangs were “reorganized at a level of sophistication that dwarfed the type of structures that had developed in the streets” (Perkins, 1987, p. 17). By the mid-1970s, Latino, African-American, and Caucasian gangs in Chicago and elsewhere across the state had merged into two major coalitions in Illinois prisons, the “People” and the “Folks” by inmates who were seeking protection through coalition building (Chicago Crime Commission, 2006). They soon took control of older inmate organizations by guile and targeted violence, and became the strongest force within the prisons. Once members were freed from prisons, they quickly moved to battle, overpower, and subsume the weaker street corner groups (Cureton, 2009). By the mid-1980s, Illinois had the largest number of gangs and gang members in prison of all U.S. states (Camp & Camp, 1985). Across Illinois, Department of Corrections officials estimated that some 5,300 inmates were active gang members in 1984, constituting 34% of all inmates (p. 134). Some of the Chicago gang leaders formed organizational networks both inside and outside prisons that linked inmates with others in jails and on the streets in illegal enterprises, creating what came to be called webs, supergangs, or gang nations (Venkatesh, 2002, p. 134). “But significantly, and unlike past inmate groups, the gangs maintained their ties to the streets” (Hagedorn, 2006, p. 203). People and Folk alliances accounted for the major street conflicts that took place in Chicago in the 1980s (Perkins, 1987). Under these coalitions, gang conflicts were far more serious because they involved multiple gangs on occasion.

In a 2009 survey of Directors of Security in the 53 U.S. prison systems (federal and state) systems, 19% of all inmates were classified as gang members, half of whom belonged to gangs prior to imprisonment. Nearly 12% of all inmates had been “validated” as gang members, and approximately one-quarter of all members were leaders or hard core members. These criteria include, but are not limited to

- gang tattoos,
- correspondence to or from known gang members or correspondence containing references to gang activity,
- wearing gang colors,
- association with known gang members,
- possession of gang-related literature,
• possession of a photograph of known gang members, and
• identification by a fellow prisoner as a gang member.

“The principle behind the teardrop is to symbolize pain . . . Every time you go to prison, you get a teardrop, y’know, the teardrops you see going down from the corner of the eye.” —Maniac (in Leap, 2012, pp. 108–109)

Once that classification has been made, the prisoner is “administratively segregated,” meaning that he/she is housed separately from and receives different treatment than prisoners who have not been validated as gang members or associates. In the view of prison systems, the most important rationales for Security Threat Group (STG) or prison gang affiliation are: fear of other inmates/gangs (91%), sense of belonging (82%), personal status (70%), economic benefits (58%), and access to contraband (60%). Officials in 75% of the surveyed prison systems reported an increase in the membership of STG members over the preceding five years, as well as increased disruptive behavior (67%), more sophisticated operations (61%), and a history of violence (59%).

Transnational Gangs as a Version of Street Gangs

The prospect of “transnational” gangs, especially in Los Angeles, has heightened international security concerns (Franco, 2010). Four issues concerning these gangs are pertinent to our main focus in this chapter. First, are these the most dangerous gangs in Los Angeles? Second, do these gangs appreciably increase gang violence in other U.S. cities? Third, are these gangs an international security threat? Finally, do these gangs contribute significantly to the seriousness of gang violence along the U.S. Southwest–Mexico border?

Unfortunately, there is no single definition of a transnational gang. Franco (2010, pp. 1–2) cites one or more of the following characteristics in various definitions,

including (1) gangs that are criminally active and operational in more than one country; (2) gangs that are involved in criminal activities committed by gang members in one country that may be planned, directed, and controlled by gang leaders in another country; (3) gangs that tend to be mobile and adapt to new areas; and (4) the criminal activities of such gangs tend to be sophisticated and transcend national borders.

For a gang to be considered transnational, Franco suggests that it should have more than one of the preceding characteristics, and in most cases, so-called transnational gangs meet only the first criterion. Just two street gangs are referenced as potential transnational gangs: the 18th Street (Mara Dieciocho) Mexican American gang and Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13). These gangs have been characterized as “transnational” largely because members of these gangs have been reported in Central America and in the United States, and these gangs have a particular transnational migratory pattern between Los Angeles and Central America. Moreover, both gangs “have established gang cliques in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico that are modeled on, and perhaps linked to, U.S. MS-13 and M-18 gangs” (Franco, 2010, p. 2). Having originated in Los Angeles, M-13 gang members have been reported by law enforcement in cities in seven states (Franco, 2010). Two features of these gangs have fueled security concerns, first their enormous membership (Chapter 2), and second, their
possible involvement in multi-national organized crime, particularly through connections with major drug cartels in Central America and Mexico.

The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) (2007) considers both MS-13 and 18th Street gangs to be among the most dangerous gangs in the city, and it publicly targeted these along with nine other gangs among the top 11 gangs targeted for suppression practices in 2007. A Los Angeles street gang expert (Alonso, 2008) points out that 18th Street is actually a collection of as many as 20 separate autonomous gang cliques operating under the same label with separate barrios in the San Fernando Valley surrounding Los Angeles. The LAPD listed just one such clique, Eighteenth Street Westside. Alonso also notes that the LAPD named three MS-13 cliques, one of which may not be particularly dangerous in his ongoing assessment.

Little gang violence has been associated with MS-13 and 18th Street gangs in other cities (FBI, 2011). Although the most recent FBI gang threat assessment (2011) asserts that MS-13 and 18th Street are among the Sureño gangs that are spreading most rapidly in the United States, these particular gangs were associated with extensive violence only in the Washington, DC, area (p. 17). This matter is disputed, however. The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) study revealed that 18th Street, at that time, did not “have a strong presence in the DC area, though small cliques may form and disband occasionally” (McGuire, 2007, p. 1), and that MS-13, the most well known of the two gangs that exist both in Central America and the United States, did have a notable presence in the Washington area. Moreover, neither gang appeared to be engaged in a systematic effort to become more involved in organized crime. “In contrast to the WOLA report, law enforcement officials point to evidence that the Washington DC area’s gangs are indeed criminally active and may show signs of increasing criminal sophistication” (Franco, 2008, p. 8). Interestingly, neither 18th Street nor MS-13 is among the most prominent drug trafficking operations in the Southwest region (National Gang Intelligence Center, 2012), and neither of these gangs is said to present the highest level of threat in Texas prisons at this time (Joint Crime Information Center, 2014; Texas Fusion Center, 2013). Other reports have linked MS-13 with major drug cartels in Central America and Mexico (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2010).

But are these gangs truly transnational or a “new urban insurgency” (Manwaring, 2009a, 2009b)? Experts on Central American and Mexican gangs question the elevation of these gangs to international-level security threats (Cruz, 2010; Hazen & Rodgers, 2014). MS-13 and 18th Street came to be discussed as possible transnational gangs because of their reputation in Los Angeles and cross-fertilization in Central America with local gangs (called maras in Spanish) in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Central America maras, previously small territorial gangs, grew into large dangerous gangs in two phases (Cruz, 2014): first, from having been inculcated with gang culture and identity in Los Angeles, and second, from El Salvadorian mano dura (heavy handed) gang control policies and a “war on gangs” that brought overreliance on imprisonment, and inadvertently reconstituted the gangs into hierarchical structures. Briefly, the MS-13 and 18th Street gangs in Central America were not extensions of the Los Angeles–based gangs. As a result of intermittent back and forth migration, local maras adopted gang culture of the Los Angeles–based MS-13 and 18th Street gangs. Strictly speaking, the local maras, renamed MS-13 and 18th Street, were perhaps “trans-formed” rather than “trans-national,” yet they continued fighting one another, and with increasingly serious violence (Rogers & Hazen, 2014).

The El Salvadorian Mano Dura Act of 2003 permitted the detention and prosecution of suspected gang members under the newly classified felony of “illicit association.” The new law had the
unintended effect of strengthening local gangs. Confining large numbers of MS-13 and 18th Street gang members gave them the opportunity to reorganize themselves and recruit new members. At the same time, the El Salvadorian government declared war on these gangs, and this increased their resolve. “The mano duro blow seemed to have moved youth gangs toward a more criminalized type of violence” (Cruz, 2014, p. 136). Yet, expert analysts on Central American gang activity contend that neither the MS-13 nor the 18th Street gangs meet criteria for “transnational” status (for supporting information, see G. Jones, 2014; Rodgers & Hazen, 2014). In essence, “the transnational nature of the maras is more imagined than real, at least in the present” (Rodgers & Hazen, 2014, p. 4). Moreover, “groups that appear similar at first glance may be quite different on closer inspection” (p. 5). In March 2012, authorities in El Salvador facilitated a truce between MS-13 and the 18th Street gang (Thale, Bateman, & Goerdt, 2013). Other well-informed sources question the very existence of truly transnational street gangs (Hazen & Rodgers, 2014; Jones, 2013; McGuire, 2007; Seelke, 2012; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2007; Washington Office on Latin America, 2010). Nevertheless, the intermingling of these and other local gangs with international drug-trafficking organizations and transnational criminal organizations, which does occur in the Mexico and Central America corridor that extends into the Southwest United States, is a serious matter (Seele, Aronso, & Olson, 2013; Seelke, 2012; U.S. Agency for International Development, 2006). This situation bears close watch.

**Violent Hot Spots and Gang Set Space**

Violent hot spots and gang turf often co-occur, and these neighborhood places are said to have criminal trajectories in their own right (Griffiths & Chavez, 2004; Tita & Cohen, 2004). In Chicago in the mid-1990s, at the height of gang violence, R. Block (2000) explains,

> Even the largest street gangs were active only in limited areas. Police, community residents, and gang members perceived these activity areas, “turfs,” differently. Some gangs are ephemeral. They may occupy a fixed area for only a few months. For other gangs, a core turf may exist for generations, [but overall, gang] boundaries are constantly shifting, are extremely tedious to map. (p. 369)

In the course of interviews with gang members, Tita, Cohen, and Engberg (2005) asked them to map places where they came together as a sociological group, that is, their set space. This study indicates that the location of gang set space is usually a very small geographic area, much smaller than neighborhoods or even census tracts. R. Block’s (2000) study showed that multiple-gang activity was observed in just 4.5% of the total grid squares citywide (N = 25,744); however, “these squares accounted for 23.0% of the assaults and 44.3% of all drug-related incidents” (p. 379). Papachristos’s (2009) Chicago study demonstrates that these homicidal patterns of gang conflict are extremely stable over time. “Gang members come and go, but their patterns of behavior create a network structure that persists and may very well provide the conduit through which gang values, norms, and culture are transmitted to future generations” (p. 119).

The earliest studies on gangs, like that undertaken by Thrasher (1927/2000), show that “boundary lines” and “borderlands” of gang turf—or the “interstitial areas”—are particularly vulnerable to elevated levels of violence as a means of defending and enlarging territory. Recent research on gangs and violent
communities more broadly confirms this pattern (Anderson, 1999). For example, using sophisticated mathematical models, Brantingham and his colleagues (2012) show that the physical boundary equidistant between, and perpendicular to, the set spaces of two rival gangs has the greatest concentration of between-gang violence. This is exactly the outcome that would be expected in a competition between rival gangs for physical space.

**Group Process**

As discussed in Chapter 5, the typical gang is constantly in flux. As long as the gang is in an inactive state, that is, not attacked by a rival, even fringe members can keep it alive. Jankowski (1991) observed that the Los Angeles Mexican American gangs became violently active when the hardcore element grew in size or when an age cohort with a large hard-core membership moved into a central leadership position. “If the hard core is large, then the gang will be violently active, but if the hard core is small, then the gang will be violently inactive, regardless of the static structure” (p. 137). Cohesive gangs challenge more rival gangs and, in turn, are more frequently challenged themselves.

In prior research, Klein (1969) lists six key connections between group process and gang violence:

1. Gang process selectively crystallizes factors leading to violent behavior.
2. The gang legitimates displays of aggression.
3. Gang membership inadvertently leads to violence on behalf of the gang because this mistakenly appears to be expected.
4. The gang permits or reinforces the commission of violent acts.
5. The gang helps to draw attention to immediate as opposed to long-range consequences of activity.
6. The gang is a medium for the status-deprived member to seek peer group status. (pp. 1143–1144)

This is not to say that gangs routinely encourage their members to “get out and be violent” (p. 1144). Indeed, some gangs are not involved in violence at all, and in other cases the gang acts as a constraining force on its members, prohibiting or discouraging behavior which otherwise would result in discomfort for the group as a whole. “The gang more commonly does nothing so much as wonder what to do” (p. 1144). Spergel (1966) described this situation as follows: “A dozen youngsters suddenly find themselves walking down the street to a fight, and eight or ten or even all of them, individually, may be wondering why he is there” (p. 115).

The importance of group process in gangs and the implications of this for the violent character of many gangs, according to Decker (2007), cannot be overstated. Decker (1996) delineated a seven-step process to account for observed gang violence spurts—episodic gang conflicts that wax and wane and sometimes extend over a number of years (C. Block & Block, 1993). The process Decker (1996) observed in St. Louis begins with a loosely organized gang:

1. Loose bonds to the gang
2. Collective identification of threat from a rival gang (through rumors, symbolic shows of force, cruising, and mythic violence), reinforcing the centrality of violence that expands the number of participants and increases cohesion
3. A mobilizing event, possibly, but not necessarily, violence
4. Escalation of activity
5. Violent event
6. Rapid de-escalation
7. Retaliation (p. 262)

As Horowitz (1983) explains, “In seeking to protect and promote their reputation, gangs often engage in prolonged ‘wars,’ which are kept alive between larger fights by many small incidents and threats of violence” (p. 94). One gang may claim precedence, which means that the other group must challenge that gang if they want to retain their honor and reassert their reputation. “Whatever the ‘purpose’ of violence, it often leads to retaliation and revenge creating a feedback loop where each killing requires a new killing” (Decker & Van Winkle 1996, p. 186), often “spreading from one neighborhood to another and outliving the initial source of the problem” (Decker, 2007, p. 398).

Similarly, Papachristos (2009) found that murders spread in the neighborhood through a process of social contagion as gangs respond to threats from other gangs. Specific murders, particularly those in public view, have the intended effect of threatening the social status and ranking of groups within the neighborhood. Thus, to avoid subjugation themselves, other gangs “must constantly (re)establish their social status through displays of solidarity—in this case, acts of violence—which, in turn, merely strengthen these murder networks” (p. 76). Papachristos’s findings “suggest that gangs are not groups of murderers per se, but rather embedded social networks in which violence ricochets back and forth . . . [and] what begins as a single murder soon generates a dozen more as it diffuses through these murder networks” (p. 76). These events become, in effect, “dominance contests” in which “violence spreads through a process of social contagion that is fueled by normative and behavioral precepts of the code of the street” (p. 81).

Culture and the Code of the Street

Some of the earliest studies on youth delinquency and youth gangs evoked cultural, or more precisely subcultural, values and orientations to explain in-group cohesion and shared motives, drives, and experiences (Bordua, 1961; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; A. Cohen, 1955; Short, 1968). After a protracted movement away from cultural explanations, research by E. Anderson (1999) reinvigorated this tradition by the mid- to late 1990s. Based on his Philadelphia ethnographic research, Anderson coined the phrase code of the street as a set of informal rules or street culture governing interpersonal public behavior, particularly violence. At the heart of Anderson’s code is the idea of respect. Youngsters on dangerous streets who follow the street code attempt to build reputations for themselves as commanding respect, or juice, thereby warding off potential attackers. One of the street code’s most pervasive norms is that of retribution, stipulating that personal attacks (verbal or physical) must be avenged. This set of normative behavior was communicated interpersonally and in rap music (Kubrin, 2005).

Brezina, Agnew, Cullen, and Wright (2004) found some support for Anderson’s basic thesis using national youth survey data. Stronger support has emerged from studies in Georgia and Iowa with neighborhood-level data that measured adolescents’ adoption of Anderson’s street code (E. Stewart, Schreck, & Simons, 2006; E. Stewart & Simons, 2010). This research found that, indeed, adolescents who follow the street culture have a higher probability of offending (see also Keith & Griffiths, 2014). Moreover, at the individual level, adoption of the street code “seems to aggravate the risk of victimization because
most of the potential offenders are themselves operating by the street code” (Stewart et al., 2006, p. 448). At the neighborhood level, Stewart and Simons (2010) conclude,

the positive effect of individual-level street code values on violent delinquency is increased when an adolescent lives in a neighborhood where the street culture is endorsed. This pattern of results adds to the growing literature that describes how neighborhood structural characteristics combined with deviant cultural and situational codes lead to the perpetuation of violence. (p. 592)

Stewart and fellow researchers’ (2006) earlier study also drew attention to this cycle of violence: “As a consequence, the potential for relatively minor infractions to escalate into major violent encounters (e.g., lethal violence) increases, thereby leading to a cycle of violence in African American communities” (p. 449).

Despite the seeming relevance of cultural codes to group behavior and, more specifically, to the cultivation of antisocial or criminal youth gangs, however, very few studies have explicitly linked the code of the street to youth gang membership (but see Matsuda, Melde, Taylor, Freng, & Esbensen, 2013).

Concluding Observations

An examination of gang presence histories in Chapter 7 showed that larger cities (50,000 residents or more) in the NYGS tended to report consistent gang presence at each year between 1996 and 2009. Yet this analysis did not differentiate the nature and seriousness of the gang violence problem. Therefore, this chapter reports on preliminary analyses of gang-related homicide trends in the very largest cities (with populations greater than 100,000) in the United States. These analyses revealed that more than 8 out of 10 very large cities reported a consistently high level or increasing proportion of gang-related homicides over the 14-year period. None of these cities evidenced a decreasing pattern.

The findings suggest that gang activity and its associated violence remains an important and significant component of the U.S. crime problem. While it has been reasonably assumed that gang-related violence would be following the overall dramatic declines in violent crime nationally, analyses reported in this chapter and by Howell, Egley, and associates (2011) provide overwhelming evidence to the contrary—that is, gang violence rates have continued at exceptional levels over the past decade despite the remarkable overall crime drop. Gang violence that is rather commonplace in very large cities seems largely unaffected by, if not independent from, other crime trends—with the possible exceptions of drug trafficking and firearm availability.

The number of gang members, number of gangs, and other structural characteristics are important indicators of serious gang activity in the largest cities. Research confirms that both the number of gangs and the number of gang members predict gang homicide, particularly where gang subgroupings exist, based on age, gender, and geographical area.

Several contextual factors inflame gang set space, including local socioeconomic characteristics of place, the availability of firearms, and patterns of drug trafficking or related activities. In addition, features of the gangs themselves, like the number of gangs or gang members, inmates returning from prison, intergang conflict, and transnational gang growth influence the seriousness of local gang
violence problems. Moreover, set space (as originally noted in Chapter 3, where gang members most frequently hang out) serves as a sort of “lightning rod” for intergang violence (Tita & Ridgeway, 2007), which manifests even more dramatically in the interstitial areas between gang turf. Group processes, especially contagion, can enliven gang members and unify them in collective violence, and cultural codes may offer an explanation for shared values or orientations of members. At the individual level, gang involvement promotes or facilitates individual participation in violence, drug use, and drug trafficking, and perhaps prolongs gang member involvement in drug sales; importantly, these crimes can co-occur.

The influence of each of the indicators of serious gang activity and contextual factors associated with gang violence can vary from one neighborhood or community to another, from one city to another, and from one gang to another in the same city. Serious gaps in knowledge remain with respect to the role of prison gangs and the impacts of returning gang-involved inmates.

**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

1. Why do we find regional trends in gang violence?
2. Which factors facilitate gang violence, and how can we capitalize on this knowledge to reduce gang-related violence?
3. Why do gang problems become increasingly more serious in some cities and not in others?
4. What are some distinctive features of gangs in the city case studies?
5. What are the distinctions between transnational and transformed gangs?

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER READING**

**Serious Violent Gangs**


Crack Cocaine “Epidemic”


Transformed or Transnational Gangs


GANGS IN AMERICA’S COMMUNITIES


Studies on Gang Retaliations


Gang Features and Structure


NOTES

1. This analysis was reported in Egley and Howell (2011).
2. A census tract is considered to be a reasonable approximation of a “neighborhood” or a “community” (Griffiths & Chavez, 2004, p. 942).
3. Strawman gun purchasers are buyers who can legally obtain firearms according to local requirements, but do so on behalf of individuals who would be ineligible (Cook & Cole, 1996).
4. For example, see Bellair and McNulty (2009).
5. Studies in several established gang cities show that when multiple gangs are active within specific geographic areas, violent, drug, and property crime rates are higher—especially violent crimes, in Chicago (R. Block, 2000; Papachristos, 2009), St. Louis (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Monti, 1993), Boston (Braga, Papachristos, & Hureau, 2010), and Pittsburgh (Tita & Cohen, 2004; Tita, Cohen, et al., 2005; Tita & Ridgeway, 2007).
6. Squares with no gang activity had an average of 2.88 assaults. Those with one active gang averaged 13.5 assaults. Those squares with four gangs averaged 42.7 assaults in 1996 (R. Block, 2000, p. 379).
7. Though state prison systems may use a standard written definition of what constitutes a gang member, the process for actually proving that someone is a gang member, and the amount of proof required, can vary by state. California has been segregating suspected gang members since at least 1984, and other states have studied California in developing their own gang validation procedures (Columbia Human Rights Law Review, 2011, p. 864).