Chapter 2

The Evolution of Street Gangs: An Examination of Form and Variation

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Abstract

If street gangs are metamorphosing into organized criminal enterprises and large, highly organized structures, that would suggest they are becoming an even more serious threat. To determine whether this is happening, researchers examined the prevalence of different types of gangs and identified changes over time in their forms and functions. They obtained information from surveys conducted among almost 300 large police agencies and from interviews with members of four Chicago and San Diego gangs. The police and gang members’ perceptions were surprisingly similar. Little specialization of roles and organization in the gangs was identified; instead there was a wide range of gang types with various structures and a great variety of criminal activities. Even though some gangs were large and had existed for many years, and even though some gangs exhibited some features of highly structured organizations, overall there was little evidence of evolution into formal organizations resembling traditional organized crime. Instead, the gangs appeared to represent an adaptive or organic form of organization, featuring diffuse leadership and continuity despite the absence of hierarchy. Gangs in both cities experienced considerable organizational change over time—consolidating, merging, acquiring smaller gangs, reorganizing, and splintering. Their “generalist” orientation may have contributed to their ability to adapt to these changes and survive in a volatile environment. The criminal versatility of gangs suggests that law enforcement directed at particular criminal behavior will work primarily for gangs that are specialized, but most are not; and enforcement and prosecution directed at targeting gang leadership may be suitable only to the few gangs that have distinctive leadership patterns.
Street gangs continue to be a pervasive problem in America’s cities. They contribute to high rates of violent crime, instill fear in citizens, and engage in a range of troublesome behavior, from vandalism and graffiti to drug dealing and property crime. Problems related to gangs—especially those that are more organized, engage in serious criminal activity, or are violent—are a major concern. Although gangs have been around since at least the beginning of the 20th century, it is plausible that at least some of these organizations are changing, developing into criminal enterprises that may be similar in structure and criminal activity to traditional organized crime.

Much of the evidence that gangs may be metamorphosing into organized-crime-like enterprises is anecdotal, suggested by high-profile prosecutions, media coverage, or the actions of law enforcement agencies. Cases such as the 1987 conviction of members of Chicago’s El Rukns on terrorism charges, which linked that gang with Libya’s Muammar Gadhafi, raised concerns about the seriousness and possible transformation of contemporary gangs. Other high-profile cases, in which Federal RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act) charges were used to convict gang members, reinforced these concerns. Indeed, the Federal response to gangs bolstered the perception that gangs were becoming highly organized criminal enterprises. In 1991, the FBI created Operation Safe Streets, a program in which the bureau’s 52 field offices participate in a series of multiagency task forces targeting gangs and violent crime (Freeh 1999), in which 300 agents were reassigned from counterintelligence to violent crime investigations. The media coverage of and political reaction to gang violence contributed to perceptions that the gang problem was becoming increasingly serious (Jackson and Rudman 1993; Zatz 1987; McCorkle and Miethe 1998).

As a result of widespread evidence of rising gang violence and the incursion of gangs into middle America, numerous questions have been raised about gangs. In the 1990s, many gangs were widely described as rather disorganized groups (Klein 1995a; Spergel 1995). As Thrasher (1963) pointed out, however, “under favorable conditions,” gangs can undergo a “natural evolution” from a loosely organized group into a mature form. How does this occur? As gangs become more prevalent, do they become more highly organized, taking on the features of formal organizations? Do gangs naturally become larger and develop greater labor and criminal specialization? While a large body of literature on organizational evolution suggests that successful organizations become larger and more formally organized over time (see, for example, Simmel 1902–3; Starbuck 1965; Greiner 1972; Kimberly, M iles, and
Associates 1980; Staw and Cummings 1990), scant attention has been paid to the ways in which gangs change over time. These and other questions shaped this inquiry into the form and evolution of contemporary gangs.

This study was conducted to generate information about the different types of gangs and to document the changes occurring in them over time. The first part of the study was designed to identify and describe the different types of gangs through police sources, focusing on distinctions between the typical gang and the more serious gangs in a jurisdiction—violent gangs, drug-dealing gangs, and entrepreneurial or money-making gangs. The second part of this study was designed to examine highly organized gangs to determine how they are organized and shed light on their evolution over time.

**Approach to Research**

Two methods of research were used—a nationwide mail survey of police agencies, conducted in 1995, and structured, in-person interviews with gang members in four gangs in two cities, conducted in 1996 and 1997.

The aim of the survey, administered to 385 large municipal police agencies, was to identify the various types of gangs and highlight distinctions among them by organizational characteristics, demographic composition, criminal activities, and other factors. The survey drew from Fagan’s (1989) typology of gangs: violent, drug-dealing, entrepreneurial, delinquent, or social—a typology based predominantly on the behavior of gang members. Also examined were the evolution of gangs over time, including changing patterns of leadership, organizational characteristics, and gang duration.

In the field portion of the study, four highly organized criminal gangs in Chicago and San Diego were examined. “Organized” gangs are the exception, not the rule, among the universe of gangs in the United States. In the fieldwork, the organizational structure of these gangs was investigated and documented and changes in these gangs over time were identified, including their transformation or transition into groups or organizations resembling traditional organized crime groups. Differences and similarities between gangs within and across the two cities were highlighted.

By focusing on the most serious or organized gangs within jurisdictions, this study, in effect, ignores the most common or typical gangs. These more typical or prevalent gangs are no less important than the more organized
gangs, and may be more troublesome for communities on a day-to-day basis. Yet this research sought to understand how serious gangs operated and the extent to which typical gangs develop or evolve into more serious or mature gangs over time. Concentrating on a particular type of gang made it possible to gather specific information about individual gangs rather than being limited to collecting general information about a broader range of gangs. By focusing on the “most organized” gangs, the research team was able to home in on characteristics of specific gangs and examine how they have evolved in recent years. As Blau and Scott (1962: 224) note, large organizations did “not spring into existence full-blown but develop[ed] out of simpler ones.” An examination of these mature gangs may therefore provide unique insight into the effect of organizational processes on an important subset of contemporary gangs. Thus, although an examination of four gangs limits the generalizability of findings to all gangs, the greater depth of the investigation makes it possible to arrive at reasoned judgments about the extent of organization likely among other, less organized gangs. In addition, by examining the dynamics of highly organized gangs, the study lays the groundwork for a reexamination of how law enforcement monitors and responds to criminal gangs and other criminal groups.

The mail survey was distributed to all law enforcement agencies serving populations of 100,000 or more and to a randomly selected third of all agencies serving populations between 50,000 and 100,000. Responses were obtained from 82 percent of agencies serving large populations and 57 percent of agencies serving small populations—a total of 286 agencies. This number represented 74 percent of all agencies surveyed.

Two cities—Chicago and San Diego—were selected for the field portion of the study. On their face, these two cities and their gang problems were quite different. Chicago, with a population of nearly 3 million, reported an estimated 130 gangs and 60,000 gang members in 1997. Gangs have existed in Chicago since at least the beginning of the last century. In stark contrast, street gangs are a much more recent phenomenon in San Diego, although the roots of the city’s gangs in its Latino car clubs date to the 1950s (see, for example, Pennell et al. 1994). San Diego had an estimated 65 gangs and nearly 5,000 gang members in 1997. The two cities also vary in demographics, economic conditions, urban geography, and in other important ways. In Klein’s (1995a) terms, Chicago can be characterized as a “chronic” gang city, while San Diego is considered an “emerging” gang city. Gang crime has been estimated as linked to more than 50 percent of crime
in Chicago, while reported gang involvement in crime is much lower in San Diego (National Drug Intelligence Center 1998). Indeed, the two cities were selected precisely because of these differences as well as the presumed differences in the nature and characteristics of their gangs.

Two gangs in each city were selected for study—a Hispanic and a black gang in each. The Black Gangster Disciples (BGDs) and the Latin Kings were selected in Chicago, and the Logan Calle Treinta/ Red Steps and Lincoln Park Piru/ Syndo Mob gangs in San Diego. Like their home cities, the gangs also varied. The BGDs are one of the largest and most well-established gangs in the country. With an estimated membership of 10,000 to 30,000, this gang has been heavily involved in drug trafficking. It was established about 1974, although its roots are in the 1960s. The BGDs have been remarkably tenacious despite the conviction and death of key leaders. In the 1990s, they formed a prosocial group called Growth and Development, which shares the same initials as the gang, to further educational and economic objectives. The Latin Kings, with 3,000 to 15,000 members, are also an extremely large gang. This gang was established in the 1960s or 1970s, but its roots go back to the 1940s.

In San Diego, the gang known as Syndo Mob was a set of Lincoln Park Piru, a predominantly black gang formed in the early 1980s with an initial membership of 12 people. The organization was heavily involved in drug trafficking, but some 26 members were indicted on Federal charges, and by the late 1980s its ranks had been decimated. In the mid-1990s, the gang had approximately 165 members. In contrast to Syndo, the Logan gang factions of Calle Treinta and Red Steps are Hispanic. The roots of the Logan gang go back to the 1940s, while Calle Treinta and Red Steps were both established in the mid-1970s. Each set has approximately 200 members.

The gang members interviewed for this study were identified through probation and prison sources in each city. Researchers sought to identify gang members who were more intensively involved with the gang and hence presumably more knowledgeable about its organization and activities. Gang members were asked to participate in a semistructured interview, assured of confidentiality, and paid $20 for participating. A total of 85 gang members were interviewed—26 Black Gangster Disciples, 18 Latin Kings, 20 from the Logan factions, and 21 from the Syndo Mob. Of the gang members interviewed, 61 percent (52) were contacted through the local probation department and the remainder were identified through prison records. The sample was opportunistic and is in no way random or representative.
Among the research issues this study examined were the nature of the organizational structure and criminal activity of the specific gangs and gang types. The study sought to determine the ways in which criminal gangs may be organizationally similar to traditional crime groups. The types of criminal activity in which these gangs engage and some of the organizational characteristics of these gangs were also examined.

Examining gangs both from the police perspective and from within the gang itself made it possible to compare and contrast these two (presumably quite divergent) points of view. Because police are concerned primarily with criminal activity, in many jurisdictions they tend to concentrate their attention on the most serious gangs and the most serious offenders in those gangs. Nonetheless, because local police deal with a wide range of behavior, from disorder, vandalism, and loitering to driveby shootings and drug dealing, they have a broad perspective on gang behavior. In contrast, gang members tend to view their gang from a different perspective, focusing more on their gang’s friendship networks than on its criminal activity.

The Police Perspective

Police agencies surveyed in this study were able to identify the various types of gangs that coexist in their communities and how these gangs differed in some important ways. When asked to categorize the most typical gang in their jurisdiction, police responded that the delinquent gang is most common. Forty-six percent of police respondents said that the typical gang in their jurisdiction is a delinquent gang consisting primarily of juveniles who engage in vandalism and other delinquent behavior, or a more socially oriented or “party” gang. Twenty-six percent of respondents reported drug-dealing gangs (or other entrepreneurial gangs) as the most typical in their jurisdiction, whereas 28 percent reported violent gangs as most typical.

Overall, more police respondents described the typical gang in their jurisdiction as a loose-knit organization (45 percent) with no formal structure (47 percent), territorial (50 percent), and primarily oriented toward criminal purposes (60 percent). Respondents were divided in their view of the leadership structure of the typical gang: 30 percent said that their typical gang had no formal leadership, whereas 37 percent reported formal leadership as a component of the typical gang.
Police see important regional differences in gang structure and activities. As expected, the larger cities typically have more gangs, larger gangs, and gangs that have been in existence for longer periods of time. Consistent with that observation, these cities also tend to have gangs that are more involved in serious criminal activity, are more highly organized, and have a more identifiable leadership structure. Delinquent gangs, more common in smaller cities, tend to be more loosely organized, with ephemeral leadership; these gangs are newer and lack the historic roots of gangs established generations ago. Delinquent gangs were reported as most typical among Southeast and Midwest respondents (by 56 and 54 percent, respectively). In the Western States, violent gangs were most common, whereas income-generating gangs (including drug-dealing gangs) were reported most commonly in the Northeast (see exhibit 1). Despite the predominance of gang type by region, large numbers of respondents reported other types of gangs in the region. For example, 35 percent of respondents in the Northeast and 42 percent of respondents in the West reported delinquent gangs as most typical.

The distribution of number of gangs within jurisdictions was consistent with the findings for types of typical gang by size of jurisdiction; violent gangs were identified less frequently in small cities, and delinquent gangs were identified most frequently. In cities with populations of 100,000 or less, 13 percent of respondents classified their typical gang as violent while 66 percent of respondents in these cities classified their typical gang as delinquent. In large cities (with populations of 200,000 or more), 44 percent of respondents classified their typical gang as violent. Yet even a large proportion of respondents from large cities—nearly one-third (31 percent)—reported delinquent gangs as their most typical gang.

### Exhibit 1: Type of Typical Gang, by Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Violent Gangs (n = 132)</th>
<th>Income-Generating Gangs* (n = 74)</th>
<th>Delinquent Gangs (n = 80)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes drug-dealing gangs.

Source: Survey of police, 1995
Police were asked a series of questions about the structure of more serious gangs in each jurisdiction—the violent, drug-dealing, and entrepreneurial gangs. Police respondents most often described serious gangs as lacking a clear or hierarchical organizational structure. More than half of respondents reported that their violent gangs and drug-dealing gangs (51 and 56 percent, respectively) had no clear organizational structure. A similar number reported that violent and drug-dealing gangs had no clear leadership. Entrepreneurial gangs were the type of gang the police viewed as most likely to feature a hierarchy: 36 percent said that entrepreneurial gangs in their jurisdictions had an organizational structure, and 41 percent said that these gangs had a clearly identifiable leadership.

**Criminal Activity of Gangs**

Klein’s observations (1995a) about street gangs and the Youth Gang Survey’s findings about youth gangs (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention 1999) were confirmed by police, who reported a great deal of criminal versatility among their serious gangs. Assaults, crack cocaine sales, graffiti, intimidation, vandalism, violence as a means of discipline, and violence as a means of retaliation were the most common criminal activities of gangs as reported by police respondents. Each gang type tended to favor certain sorts of crimes. For example, entrepreneurial gangs were reported to have the highest involvement in motor vehicle theft and theft in general, whereas violent gangs had the highest involvement in assault, intimidation, graffiti, and vandalism. As expected, drug-dealing gangs were the most involved in selling crack, powder cocaine, marijuana, and other drugs, according to the police.

Yet police reported that most gangs, regardless of type, participated in many different types of crime (see exhibit 2). For example, entrepreneurial gangs frequently also sell crack cocaine, with 39 percent of police respondents reporting that these gangs often or very often engage in such activity. Similarly, violent gangs frequently commit burglary, with 36 percent of police respondents reporting high levels of participation. Police reported that all gang types mark their territories with graffiti, although the highest level of participation was associated with violent gangs (67 percent of respondents). Although drug-dealing is featured prominently in police estimates of gang activity, only one type of gang—drug-dealing gangs—engages predominantly in this activity.
The breadth of criminal activity identified within the various gang types suggests that while police may characterize gangs as concentrating on a specific type of crime (such as drug dealing), gangs as criminal organizations (and their members) have great criminal versatility, participating in a range of crimes rather than specializing in a few crime types. Police responses in this study indicated a clear recognition of this criminal versatility.

From the police perspective, serious gangs are changing over time in ways that create more problems for police and the community: 78 percent of police respondents said serious gangs had grown larger in the past 3 years, while 72 percent said serious gangs had become more violent during that period. (The term “serious gang” combines gangs identified by respondents as
violent, drug-dealing, and entrepreneurial gangs.) Police respondents said that serious gangs had grown larger in the past 3 years, both in size and in geographic coverage. Some of the growth had occurred through retention of older members who failed to leave the gang, effectively increasing the gang’s size. Fifty-four percent of police respondents reported that the average age of members of serious gangs had increased.

Gangs had also expanded geographically over the past 3 years: 53 percent of police respondents said serious gangs had migrated into their community, and 43 percent reported that gangs in their city had expanded to other jurisdictions, including suburban communities. Serious gangs are also causing more problems for police, evolving into organizations that have some features of traditional organized crime. Seventy-two percent of police respondents reported that in the past 3 years serious gangs were using more sophisticated weapons, and 46 percent reported that gangs had developed links with other crime groups. A total of 19 percent of police respondents in the past 3 years said that gangs were committing more sophisticated crime, 17 percent reported that they were using more sophisticated technology, and 16 percent said they had acquired legitimate businesses.

**Summary of Survey Findings**

Police respondents portrayed a picture of gangs that reflected recognition of a wide array of sizes, organizational structures, and activities. Rather than characterizing all gangs in much the same way, police drew clear distinctions among different gangs and among different types of gangs in their jurisdictions. Notably, most police respondents did not appear to stereotype serious gangs as highly organized or highly specialized.

For this study, information from the police provided a context for examining the organizational evolution of serious gangs from a different perspective—through the eyes of gang members. Because of their institutional objectives, police tend to look at gangs from the perspective of their criminal behavior; examining gang structure, leadership, and noncriminal gang activities are of secondary importance. Yet understanding how gangs emerge, grow, and evolve over time has substantial implications for police in developing effective strategies in response to the gang problem.
The Perspective of Gang Members

In the second part of this study, the nature of four gangs and their changes over time were examined from the perspective of gang members. The gangs were the Syndo Mob/Lincoln Park Piru and Calle Treinta/Red Steps in San Diego and the Black Gangster Disciples and Latin Kings in Chicago. Members of two of the gangs described their gang and its operations as disorganized. By measures of formal organization, two of the four gangs were found to be highly organized, but only one could be characterized as exhibiting features of traditional organized crime.

The gangs were examined with a view to determining whether they exhibited the characteristics of formal organizations or bureaucratic structures, including leadership, role differentiation, participation in formal meetings, compliance with formal rules and discipline, specialization, and goal orientation. The two Chicago gangs were higher on every measure of organization than those in San Diego. Both Chicago gangs featured more formal and distinctive roles of leadership, more explicit (and even written) rules and clearer consequences for breaking them, more routinely held and purposeful meetings, and the collection of dues. Only in the Black Gangster Disciples were there high levels of relationships with neighborhood businesses (including ownership and control of these businesses), relationships with gangs in other cities across the country, formal contacts with prison gangs, and involvement in political activities. These features are also characteristic of organized crime.

Although some law enforcement agencies, such as the FBI, would characterize San Diego’s Latin Kings as highly organized (see the sidebar on the FBI’s Enterprise Theory of Investigation), the gang members interviewed did not uniformly support that view. Some Latin Kings described some features of formal organizations, but most did not. This inconsistency between the study findings and the perspective of Federal law enforcement agencies is not unexpected. The FBI’s focus is on economic enterprise where there is gang leadership; this view may exaggerate the role of older or more crime-involved gang members. Although leaders, adult members, and heavy crime involvement may be present within the gang, these features are unlikely to characterize the gang as a whole.

Unlike the Chicago gangs, the gangs examined in San Diego featured little formal leadership, and were described by the gang members interviewed as primarily friendship and kinship networks rather than criminal enterprises.
Gangs in Chicago also included these traits of friendship and brotherhood, but they were subordinate to the objectives of economic opportunity and protection.

Many of the organizational differences between Chicago and San Diego gangs may be attributable to the vastly different size of the gangs and the respective gang population. Although Chicago is about twice as large as San Diego in population, it has nearly 12 times more gang members. Of the gangs studied, the largest Chicago gang is approximately 25 times larger than either San Diego gang. Even by the most conservative estimates of the number of BGD members, this exponential difference in size likely contributes to much of the organizational characteristics.

**Criminal Activity of Gangs**

Like the police respondents, gang members in both cities reported that their gang is extensively involved in a wide range of criminal activity. Indeed, gang members reported much greater participation of their gang in specific criminal activities than police attributed to specific serious gangs. In the interviews, gang members reported about two to three times as much criminal activity as did police.

The wide variety of criminal activity reported by gang members indicates little specialization of the gang as a criminal enterprise (see exhibit 3). Again, this finding is consistent with Klein’s (1995a) depiction of gangs as criminally versatile. Assaults and drug sales were the activity most often reported, but most gang members said that their gangs were involved in almost every criminal activity. In fact, the only exception was the Latin Kings’ involvement in shootings: Only for this crime did less than a majority indicate their gang was involved.

Although the San Diego gangs were less formally organized, the members interviewed reported levels of criminal behavior as high as those reported by the Chicago gang members. In fact, for all but three crimes, gang members from San Diego reported even higher gang participation than Chicago gangs. Gang members from the two cities reported similar gang participation rates in assaults, driveby shootings, and crack sales.

The high levels of participation in a wide range of criminal behavior by all four gangs suggests that these gangs can be considered criminal generalists.
The FBI’s Enterprise Theory of Investigation

Gangs vary greatly in size, criminal sophistication, modus operandi, and their impact on the community. The vast majority of gangs in the United States are community or neighborhood based and adversely affect small geographical areas. Some gangs, however, grow rapidly in size and sophistication, becoming multijurisdictional and even international in nature.

The goal of the FBI’s national gang strategy, known as the Enterprise Theory of Investigation (ETI), is to identify, disrupt, and ultimately dismantle violent gangs whose activities constitute criminal enterprises. Stated succinctly, the strategy is for the FBI, in conjunction with other Federal, State, and local law enforcement agencies, to combat major domestic violent street gang/drug enterprises as significant threats to American society through sustained, multidivisional, coordinated investigations that support successful prosecution. This strategy incorporates investigative and prosecutorial theories of enterprise investigations that have proven successful in combating traditional organized crime. Although ETI is not an appropriate way to deal with every jurisdiction’s street gang problem, it is an effective technique to use against large, multijurisdictional street gangs.

The FBI defines a “violent street gang/drug enterprise” as a criminal enterprise that has an organizational structure and that functions as a continuing criminal conspiracy, employing violence and any other criminal activity to sustain itself. A criminal enterprise is any union or group of individuals engaged in a pattern of criminal activity. For an enterprise to be “criminal,” it is not necessary for it to have written bylaws or written agreements between the individuals.

Street gangs are increasingly viewed as organized crime threats because they are heavily involved in illegal drugs or guns, seek dominance in many new areas of the country, and often use violence in pursuing their objectives. Street gang drug and gun activities often produce criminal
networks that span regional and national boundaries and use modern weapons, communication technology, and transportation in their operations. FBI analysis suggests that some gangs are building coalitions to control and expand their operations more effectively.

As they grow, gangs involved in criminal operations must develop an organizational structure if they are to function efficiently. Most gangs are loosely knit coalitions of small, autonomous cliques. Apart from a general commitment to their “hood” and the gang lifestyle, the only unifying force is combat with outsiders. Gang leadership is usually decentralized, nonhierarchical, even situational; it is more a function of individual prowess and reputation than a formalized structure for making collective decisions. Leadership changes rapidly and may vary by activity; for example, leaders in drug selling may differ from leaders in “gangbanging.” As with most groups, leadership is age-graded, although some older members may represent powerful role models. The type of gang leadership varies from gang to gang and by geographical area. Gangs in Chicago, for example, tend to have a more defined leadership structure than those in many western cities.

Two primary Federal criminal statutes are used to prosecute street gangs: the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act and the continuing criminal enterprise (CCE) statutes, part of the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970. These statutes were enacted to address the conspiratorial nature of the street gang and to enable prosecutors to present evidence of multiple criminal acts committed by various gang members that proves a pattern of criminal activity by the enterprise or gang. In RICO prosecutions, evidence of acts of racketeering (“predicate acts”)—such as drug distribution, any violent acts, witness tampering, mail or wire fraud, or illegal gambling—can be presented to the jury; thus, the full scope of the gang’s criminal conduct can be demonstrated. Prosecuting these crimes individually would not convey a clear overall picture of the gang’s criminal activity. The CCE statute is an excellent prosecutorial

(continued)
tool to combat gangs that have some form of defined leadership structure and are involved in drug distribution.

**Prosecuting Street Gangs Under ETI**

Normally, evidence developed in an investigation is presented to a prosecutor, who structures the indictment and thus the method of prosecution. Under the Enterprise Theory of Investigation (ETI), a strategy originally devised by the FBI in 1981, this is not the case; the prosecution is structured from the inception of the investigation.

The first step in investigating any violent street gang is a review of the available intelligence base to estimate the group’s structure, membership, and criminal activities. Then, a background investigation is conducted through agency file reviews, agency and public record checks, and by assigning informants in the group to check on the individual members and their criminal activities. At this stage, the investigator attempts to identify individual and group assets, as well as proprietary interests of the gang.

In the next phase, investigators seek to identify meeting places, methods of communication among gang members, and entities used to facilitate their criminal activities. This is done through the use of various investigative techniques. At this stage, the investigator evaluates and defines the criminal group, the enterprises that may be the investigative focus, and the potential predicate criminal acts.

Before the proactive investigative stage begins, consideration is given to determining which sanctions are appropriate and can be obtained and which type of legal relief will solve this particular problem. If every member of the group is identified and potentially prosecutable, criminal RICO prosecution and confinement will suffice. If the group has amassed assets, their identification for possible forfeiture should be included in the strategy. If criminal prosecution will not solve the problem, the civil provisions of the RICO statute should be applied.
Next, the question of whether to pursue an overt or covert investigation must be decided. In an overt investigation, the investigator interviews witnesses, subpoenas records, locates expert witnesses, and convenes a grand jury. The use of covert investigative techniques in the initial stages has proven to be more successful. While these techniques are being used, direct and circumstantial evidence must be recorded separately, based on the sanctions being pursued. Separate administrative systems must be established as a repository for evidence of the structure, membership, and purpose of each enterprise; assets must be identified for each individual and enterprise; illegal profit generation and criminal evidence of RICO predicate criminal acts must be identified; and support must be compiled for the projected civil relief. The predicate criminal acts, the defined enterprises, and the required civil sanctions must be continually reevaluated during the course of the investigation. When the criminal RICO indictment is structured, all assets subject to forfeiture must be identified. These assets must be frozen at the time of indictment so that they are not transferred and liquidated before they can be seized.

The Weisel Study

The conclusions of Dr. Weisel’s report as they relate to the Logan Street, Syndo Mob, and Black Gangster Disciples gangs are reasonably consistent with investigative information developed by the FBI on these groups, but the report’s findings on the Latin Kings are inconsistent with the FBI’s investigative and criminal intelligence information. ETI would be an appropriate investigative approach for all four gangs, however, because a criminal enterprise need not have a “traditional” hierarchical organization and can be as simple as a group of individuals “associated in fact” who engage in a pattern of illegal activity.

Source: FBI Violent Crimes and Major Offenders Section, Criminal Investigation Division
Exhibit 3: Gang Participation in Criminal Activity, by City and Crime

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crime</th>
<th>Chicago BGDs (n = 26)</th>
<th>Chicago Latin Kings (n = 18)</th>
<th>San Diego Calle Treinta/ Red Steps (n = 20)</th>
<th>San Diego Lincoln Park/ Syndo Mob (n = 21)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auto Theft</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driveby Shooting</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crack Sale</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocaine Sale</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marijuana Sale</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graffiti</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shooting</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vandalism</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indeed, according to organizational theory, organizations operating in highly volatile environments are much more likely to be generalists than specialists (Katz and Kahn 1966; Meyer 1978). Generalist organizations can adapt more quickly to changing conditions and are more likely to survive than specialists because the latter must learn a new set of complex skills to create a new specialty (or “niche”) under changing conditions. While organizational specialization may be sustained under conditions of short-term volatility, it will not be useful in the continuously volatile gang environment (Katz and Kahn 1966), in which there is ongoing competition with other gangs and a presumed high level of attention from police and other criminal justice organizations. Such environmental volatility would likely discourage specialization both within and among gangs.

Organizations can also be classified by the extent of specialization of their individual members. Like the gangs they belonged to, the members of all four gangs studied reported participating in a wide range of criminal activities, from vandalism to drug sales (see exhibit 4). When group criminal activities were compared with individual criminal activities (exhibits 3 and 4), it was found that gang members participated substantially less in some of the gang’s
Exhibit 4: Individual Participation by Gang Members in Criminal Activity, by City and Crime

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Chicago BGDs (n = 26)</th>
<th>Chicago Latin Kings (n = 18)</th>
<th>San Diego Calle Treinta/Red Steps (n = 20)</th>
<th>San Diego Lincoln Park/Syndo Mob (n = 21)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motor Vehicle Theft</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>48%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crack Sale</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocaine Sale</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marijuana Sale</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graffiti</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>67</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shooting</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vandalism</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>52</td>
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</table>

...criminal activities than did the gang itself. This finding could reflect a respondent’s reluctance to identify all of his individual criminal behavior, but it also suggests that there are criminal activities in which some gang members participate but others do not.

All gang members reported participating in a wide range of criminal activities. A majority of all gang members reported that they had engaged in assaults (74 percent) and sold marijuana (68 percent). Nearly half had engaged in motor vehicle theft, theft, burglary, and vandalism.

The differences between the two cities in gang member participation in criminal activity were consistent with the differences in gang participation. Gang members in San Diego reported greater individual participation in almost all 11 crime types than did Chicago gang members. A large majority (90 percent) of San Diego gang members reported individual involvement in assault. San Diego gang members also reported greater involvement in assault and marijuana sales than gang members in Chicago. When members’ responses from each city were combined, it was found that gang members in Chicago were more involved in cocaine sales and shootings than were gang members from San Diego. Gangs in the two cities reported similar rates of involvement in motor vehicle theft.
The breadth of criminal activities reported by individuals helps confirm the notion that most gang members are criminal generalists much like the gangs to which they belong. Just as generalist organizations adapt more quickly to changing environmental conditions, generalist gang members are inherently easier to replace than specialists. Because they report involvement in fewer types of crime, the Chicago gangs and their members appear to be slightly more specialized than the San Diego gangs and gang members.

Goal Orientation

Centrality of goals is a key and defining feature of formal organization (Parsons 1987; Weber 1947; Blau and Scott 1962; Katz and Kahn 1966; Stinchcombe 1965; Lippitt 1982). Organizations are established to attain certain goals and are structured to maximize their attainment. It is widely recognized, however, that organizational goals may be vague, changing, numerous, contradictory, and not always closely linked with the organization’s day-to-day activities. In some forms of organization, the goals of individuals and those of the organization are consistent, and the former may be thoroughly integrated into the latter (Popielarz and McPherson 1995; Scott 1993).

Among the features of formal organization in the gangs Thrasher (1963) studied, he recognized that they were directed toward goals. According to Klein (1995a), their members, on the contrary, typically have a “rather low focus on group goals” because these goals may come into conflict with the individual needs of gang members. “Gangs,” says Klein, “are not committees, ball teams, task forces, production teams, or research teams. The members are drawn to one another to fulfill individual needs, many shared and some conflicting: they do not gather to achieve a common, agreed-upon end” (1995a: 80). Yet group rewards, Klein contends, are an important individual motivation for joining a gang. These include status, companionship, excitement, and protection. Among individual motivations, gang members routinely join for a sense of “belonging” or of “family.” Material rewards associated with group crime are also a factor in promoting gang membership.

Among gang members studied here there was strong evidence of organizational goals and purposefulness focused on making money. These economic objectives were often described in quite varied terms, and organizational goals were often embedded in broader descriptions of the purpose of the gang. Many gang members showed evidence of integrating or blending the larger organizational objectives with their own individual needs. Among San
Diego gang members, moneymaking appeared incidental to the friendship and social networks. As San Diego gang members put it—

We kick it together, smoke marijuana, maybe jack something. If we think we can make some money selling it, we will take it.

Throughout the whole time [I’ve been in the gang] I was a party cat. . . . The one thing I did throughout the whole time was party. I always liked to party. Liked to have fun. If you are going to have fun you got to make your money. So you sell drugs or you do violent crimes to get money.

We get together and have little picnics and things with the community. Sometimes we get together and set up moves to make on other gangs. When you go to other neighborhoods and they selling certain things we go and take theirs, we make moves. . . . We do more transactions, money transactions. We mainly making money. That is a main part of the gang, making the money. The riding on other neighborhoods and shooting and all that, that’s part of the gang too but the main thing is getting our money.

[We] smoke weed, sell dope, I would say that’s about it that I know of. [We] have parties and stuff. . . . [We p]robably hang out, that’s about it, make money.

In contrast, gang members from Chicago tended to describe their gangs as primarily focused on making money:

Well, in my words, a gang ain’t nothing but people come together to do crime and make money and be a family to each other. That’s the original idea.

A gang, nowadays, would be money making, make money.

[A gang is] a bunch of brothers hooked up, trying to make money.

[The gang is] really [about] making money, it’s holding your own neighborhood so nobody can come into your neighborhood and try to take the bread out of your mouth.

But Chicago gang members also articulated the objectives of the gang in a broader way that emphasized the social and familial rewards of gang membership:
A gang is a group of individuals bound together for a common purpose. [They are bound together] a lot of ways, socially, economically, emotionally sometimes.

Basically [a gang is] a group of people with the same objectives, trying to reach for the same goals.

Gang members in Chicago and San Diego viewed their gangs as an opportunity for social interaction (including partying, “hanging out,” getting women) and as a family, brotherhood, or support system. Gang members in both cities described the role of the gang as a means of protection from rivals, a means of survival, and a source of respect. Many gang members appear to seamlessly combine social interaction with making money: For San Diego gangs, social interaction, friendship, and self-protection appeared to be the primary purpose, and moneymaking was incidental or opportunistic. Although the concept of gang as brotherhood or family was also extremely important to the Chicago gangs, making money was their central organizational objective or defining feature.

Organizational Transformation: Consolidation and Splintering

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the formal organizational character of the gangs studied was the organizational transformation each had experienced over time. Like other organizations, gangs are seldom static entities. Although the temporary gangs described by Thrasher (1963) typically disintegrated, the gangs in this study reflected patterns of consolidation (primarily through merger with, or acquisition of, smaller gangs), reorganization, and the splintering of larger gangs into spinoff gangs. Such findings are consistent with those of Thrasher, who noted that groups form and re-form over time.

Gang members’ richly detailed descriptions of the organizational transformations that occurred in each of the gangs were evidence of both the tenacity and enduring nature of the gang and offered insights into its organizational growth or decline. One gang member described the merger that created the BGDs:

[Black Gangster Disciple Nation, Black Gangsters, Disciples, and High Supreme Gangsters] actually was all brought together in 1981. Although you had the same members that came together, all these different gangs
all came together under one name. It’s like we’ll take some of your doctrines, we’ll take some of your doctrines to satiate everybody’s upbringing, what they originally were, and bring them all together under one thing. . . . There was many different smaller organizations just in the process of being brought together. And then a couple of years later everybody was brought together under one law, under a one-people concept, all of us being the same thing.

Two other gang members told a similar story of merger and acquisition:

Before I became a Black Disciple, I was a Rod; it was an extremely small organization and we converted over to GD’s, to Black Gangster Disciples. . . . Disciples been around for ages. Like I said, in the beginning there was Devil Disciples. But the GD organization has been in existence since 1971.

They were attempting to form a conglomerate. . . . [I]t was three organizations that come together and formed one big organization.

Unlike the Chicago gangs, which showed evidence of mergers, gangs in San Diego appeared to exhibit a pattern of splintering through the division of larger gangs and the creation of new, spinoff gangs. Logan gang members described the evolution of their gang this way:

Thirtieth Street was originally all of Logan. Then along came another ‘hood called Logan Trece—another little gang. So they had to get permission from 30th to start their little gang. Give them a little part of Logan. So Red Steps came along and asked them too. So Red Steps and Logan Trece to gain some respect from other gangs, they had to start fighting and all that. So that’s where it all started.

There is two more [gangs] in Logan Heights. There is Red Steps and Trece Logan Heights. But back in the old days, it used to just be Logan. But as time went by, they started separating because of freeways getting built and boundaries started separating them apart. But they are still united though. Except there is always family disputes between the different family cliques.

Spergel (1990: 204) believes that the reason for splintering is “competition between cliques [within the gang].” Such competition, he wrote, “may be a central dynamic leading to the gang splitting into factions or separate gangs.” It seems reasonable that external pressures—law enforcement,
neighborhood dynamics, competition with other gangs—and other “pull” factors could also splinter the gang. These same dynamics could also lead small gangs to join forces to provide protection or to form economic alliances.

The notion of gang mergers is occasionally mentioned in the gang literature but has not been fully discussed. During the 2-year period in which Huff (1989) studied gangs in two Ohio cities, the number of gangs in Cleveland declined from 50 separately named gangs to 15 or 20; in Columbus, the number of gangs dropped from 20 to 15 during the course of the study. Mergers accounted for the reduction in the number of gangs, according to Huff, although some gangs dissolved and some groups originally identified as gangs may have actually been splinter groups rather than gangs. While mergers may result in larger gangs (that is, more gang members in a gang), such an increase in size does not necessarily take place. Mergers may serve only to offset attrition of gang members, resulting in no net increase in gang size.

As Monti (1993) noted, gang cliques and sets can combine and reassemble in different ways over time; a portion of the gangs he studied in St. Louis were “absorbed” into other gangs during a 2-year period. The growth of the Blackstone Rangers in Chicago was described by Sale (1971) as occurring through takeovers of existing gangs and “renovation” of cliques. The gang’s original street clique clashed with rival gangs and then later combined with them. The result, after 10 years, was a much larger version of the Blackstone Rangers. The observation that the merger is an organizational feature of contemporary gangs and occurs over time is an accepted but poorly understood dimension of the organizational growth of gangs.

Similarly, there has been little discussion in the field of gang research of splintering, although there is recognition that cliques or subsets of gangs have a life of their own. Spergel et al. (1991) reported that internal competition within the gang may cause it to split into factions or form a separate gang. He also suggested that gangs might splinter and dissolve if more criminal opportunities become available to members through drug trafficking gangs or other criminal groups. According to Goldstein and Huff (1993), there is serious intragang rivalry between sets within the Bloods or the Crips in Los Angeles, especially when the profits of drug dealing are at issue. They note that there can be as much violence between different sets of the same gang as between rival gangs, a fact that may contribute to further splintering of the gang. Decker (1996) described how the rise of violence in larger gangs can result in the emergence of splinter gangs. Monti (1993) suggested that when gangs
reach a certain size, they would split when friction occurred among members and remained unsettled. This splintering occurs because, when the gang is small, the gang can exercise cohesion and control through face-to-face personal interactions (Kornhauser 1978), but large increases in the size of individual gangs appear to lead to breaches within gangs, resulting in more gangs in a jurisdiction.

The concepts of gang merger and splintering can be framed within organizational theory. Organizational theory holds that populations of organizations of a similar form and function tend to reach an equilibrium. Over time, some organizations die out and others form—some through schism, which occurs when subgroups break away to create a new organization. The process continues until the number of organizations is stable (Tucker et al. 1988; Hannan and Freeman 1987; Hannan and Carroll 1992). Historically, this phenomenon is driven by organizational creation and failure—two processes that are much more common than adaptation.

Summary of Gang Member Interviews

The gang members interviewed in this study provided richly textured descriptions of the character of their gangs. Framed in an organizational context, their narratives illuminate and clarify police observations about gang size, gang activities, and changes in gangs over time. The evidence from these interviews demonstrates that the four gangs studied have been in existence for many years and have experienced major organizational changes. Changes in gang name and size are the most observable indications of these organizational shifts. The generalist orientation of the gangs and their members may have contributed to their survival through periods of organizational upheaval and environmental uncertainty.

Unexpected Agreement

It might be expected that the views of police and gang members would be quite divergent on issues such as the nature of gang leadership and activities. This study, however, did not identify any major differences. In large part, police descriptions of gangs were not inconsistent with those of gang members. Indeed, the interviews with gang members tended to elaborate on police observations of the variation within and among gangs. For the most part, the
police did not tend to stereotype gangs; they did not, for example, describe them as showing evidence of formal organization and hierarchy where this was not well established. Nor did the police tend to see role and organization-al specialization within gangs. Instead, they recognized a wide range of gang types, identified different structures within different gangs, and described a wide range of behaviors of gangs and gang members. In the interviews, gang members confirmed and elaborated on these observations.

It is worth noting that both police and gang members indicated that the large and enduring gangs examined in this study exhibited some distinctive features of formal organizations. There was little evidence, however, that their structure is highly bureaucratic—an anomaly, according to organizational theory. Despite their large size and organizational longevity, of the four gangs examined, in only two was there evidence of the bureaucratic structure of large organizations (leadership, membership levels, regular meetings, specialization, and written rules). Only one gang exhibited the more elaborate features of traditional organized crime groups—relationships with other gangs nationwide (including prison gangs), incursion into legitimate businesses, and involvement in political activities (Decker, Bynum, and Weisel 1998). In all four gangs, however, there was some evidence of formal organization, such as organizational continuity and an orientation toward goals.

The gangs studied here appear to represent a fundamentally different form of organization, one that can be described as adaptive or organic rather than bureaucratic. These forms of organization have also been called “federations, networks, clusters, cross-functional teams, lattices, modules, matrices, almost anything but pyramids” (Bennis 1993).16

In stark contrast to the myriad literature on bureaucratic organizations, there have been few studies of organic organizations—and thus there is a dearth of descriptions of this form even among organizations such as legitimate businesses. An examination of the recognized features of the organic-adaptive model, however, suggests that the gangs studied here feature the attributes associated predominantly with this form of organization. These include an emphasis on individual goals concurrent with organizational goals, diffuse leadership, the active role of subgroups, a generalist orientation, persistence in a volatile environment, and continuity despite the absence of hierarchy. Adaptive or organic organizations thrive in a volatile or changing environment, and organizations that survive under such conditions are more likely to maintain multipurpose and flexible structures, with flexible leadership and little differentiation among member roles (Meyer 1978; Burns and Stalker 1961).
Despite some evidence of bureaucratic features in the gangs studied, the results of the interviews with gang members make it difficult to support the hypothesis that these gangs have evolved into formal organizations mirroring traditional organized crime. Although the Chicago gangs have some explicit features of formal organizations, on other dimensions, the evidence is less clear: Group and role specialization, for example, appear minimal.

Their organizational continuity and their expansion and membership growth suggest that these four groups can be considered successful organizations. They have endured and thrived at times when environmental exigencies might have logically selected against them. Their survival and growth have been punctuated by organizational changes—mergers, splintering, consolidation, and other organizational dynamics. These changes have been responsible for the gangs' growth to their current, large size.

The substantial organizational change these gangs experienced is consistent with organizational theories that see social organizations as not static but changing in important ways, adapting to changing environmental conditions. According to one widely held notion, organizations proceed through temporal and sequential stages of development, a process commonly known as the organizational life cycle. The gangs in this study—with their patterns of consolidation and fragmentation—showed clear evidence of such a process. According to Klein (1995a), the proliferation of gangs in the 1980s resulted from the establishment of many small, autonomous organizations. The result was that gangs were large in number but small in size. As Klein points out, however, “there are a lot of acorns out there that could become stable, traditional oaks” (p. 104). In other words, small, autonomous gangs can grow into stable, traditional, and much larger gangs, the latter, of course, being of far greater concern to the public and to police.

Life cycles of gangs suggest that smaller, socially oriented gangs can evolve into more serious gangs, often merging or aligning with larger or more organized gangs for protection. While transformation into large, networked gangs such as the BGDs is clearly an exception, for that gang, the merger and acquisition process was a major contribution to its growth. Of course, gangs are also growing larger for a number of reasons, among them that the age range is expanding, with members remaining in the gang longer and the gang retaining members who move outside the neighborhood.

Size will continue to be a major factor in predicting the extent of organization in a gang. The largest gang in this study showed the clearest
evidence of bureaucratic organizational features, suggesting the need for a systematic process for counting gangs and their members and for close attention to changes that affect the number and size of gangs in a specific area or jurisdiction. Klein (1995b) describes the cyclical processes of the seasonal and epochal variations in gang activity (crime) through which gangs proceed. Many of these epochal cycles, Klein believes, are city-specific and may reflect upturns and downturns in sub-areas and neighborhoods within cities. This view, of course, suggests that cities or counties are the relevant population boundary for monitoring gang crime and changes in the size and number of gangs. As Klein (1995b) states, aggregate numbers of gangs, gang members, and gang crime tend to mask important changes in gangs that occur at smaller geographic levels.

Implications for Police Practice

For the police, monitoring the growth of individual gangs or of organizational changes taking place among or within gangs in a jurisdiction provides insights that can aid in developing effective responses to gang problems. Differences among gang types and among specific gangs—especially organizational differences such as patterns of leadership, membership age, size, duration, criminal involvement, and so forth—have significant law enforcement implications. Hierarchical or organized crime models that target gang leadership by using vertical prosecution and applying Federal statutes\(^a\) may be appropriate for law enforcement agencies or prosecutors that focus on the few gangs having particularly distinctive leadership patterns. This model is probably not useful for addressing the vast majority of the country’s street gangs. Spergel (1990), for example, has warned against exaggerating the organized character of gangs. Such exaggeration may be a byproduct of an organized crime model that targets gang leadership, which tends to characterize most gangs by the troublesome features of a few gangs. Indeed, the present study indicates that street gangs do not necessarily progress into highly organized crime organizations. Organizational processes, however, may contribute to marked increases in gang size, influencing the structure, operations, and relationships of some gangs.

The criminal versatility of the gangs and gang members observed in this study suggests that law enforcement efforts that target particular criminal behavior will work primarily for highly specialized gangs. Most gangs are not. Even the most troublesome gangs in this study appeared to be highly adaptive
generalists. Most research suggests that rather than employing generic anti-gang strategies, approaches to gang problems should be framed very narrowly to address identified problems of concern to communities and police (e.g., Sherman et al. 1998; Bureau of Justice Assistance 1997).

Gangs and gang-related problems vary. Indeed, Spergel’s model requires that law enforcement agencies carefully assess local problems before implementing any antigang strategy. Because there have been few useful evaluations of such strategies, there is a need for rigorous evaluations, which could help move the country to more quickly identify the most effective methods for solving the various gang problems.

Police have tried a wide variety of measures to address the problem of gangs at the local level. They have employed situational crime prevention, for example, altering the flow of vehicular traffic to reduce gang-related violence; enforcing antiloitering statutes to keep gangs from intimidating and menacing community members (Regini 1998); using civil injunctions to keep gang members out of areas where they cause trouble (Cameron and Skipper 1997; Gibeaut 1998; Regini 1998); setting up traffic checkpoints (Crawford 1998); carrying out aggressive curfew and truancy enforcement (Fritsch, Caeti, and Taylor 1999); and cracking down on weapons violations, often using Federal laws that impose stiffer penalties. Some jurisdictions have used a technique known as “lever pulling,” targeting specific chronic offenders with warrants, close supervision of probation conditions, and other measures.

Many of these law enforcement approaches have been integrated into community or problem-oriented approaches to gangs. The approaches also include mediation, situational crime prevention, working with families, and other strategies (Sampson and Scott 2000; Bureau of Justice Assistance 1997). Klein (1997) warns that policing that involves only enforcement will solidify gangs by increasing cohesion among gang members. Policing strategies are most effective when teamed with intervention programs such as providing economic opportunities, job training, remedial education, and other services and community involvement (see, for example, Spergel 1995; Spergel et al. 1991). These diverse strategies may be necessary to deal with highly versatile and adaptive gangs.

At the turn of the 21st century, a wide variety of organizations fall under the umbrella category of “gangs.” One type or size of criminal organization may differ from another only by a matter of degree. Howell and Decker
(1999) distinguish between drug gangs and street gangs, and between youth gangs and adult criminal organizations. These distinctions (and others) will have the most value when employed at the local level. As Starbuck, Howell, and Lindquist (forthcoming) point out, their changing nature makes it increasingly difficult to categorize and characterize them. These authors describe the new gang form as a hybrid organization. Even 70 years ago, Thrasher (1963 [1927]) recognized that the distinctions between gangs and other criminal organizations crime were rather illusory. There is, according to Thrasher, “no hard and fast dividing line between predatory gang boys and criminal groups of younger and older adults. They merge into each other by imperceptible gradations.” It is important to identify and monitor the inherent distinctions and similarities among different criminal organizations within jurisdictions, since these elements reflect local conditions, criminal opportunity, and other explanatory variables. Such an examination will aid in building an accurate perception of local problems and will be useful in avoiding the stereotypes and overreaction that may lead to well-intentioned but misguided policies and practices. Just such a continued examination may aid in building a corpus of information that will offer greater insight into the form and structure—and inherent variation—of contemporary gangs.

Notes

1. Not all gangs “mature”; indeed, many disintegrate. Some gang researchers have described this maturation process. Knox (1994) characterizes gangs by their stage of development, from pre-gang to emergent gang, from crystallized gang to formalized gangs, suggesting that gangs move from one category to another as they grow larger and more like a formal organization. Thrasher described the transformation of gangs to a solidified form as a function of longevity, conflict, and the age of their members (1963: 47–62).

2. Fagan (1989) examined gang participation in criminal activity and drugs, classifying gangs as party gangs, which engage in few nondrug criminal behaviors except vandalism; social gangs, which engage in few delinquent activities; delinquent gangs, which engage in violent and property crime but few drug sales; and organized gangs, which are extensively involved in the sale and use of drugs along with predatory crime. Other typologies of gangs based on police information have taken different approaches. For example, Maxson and Klein (1995) identified common structures for 59 gangs and looked at how offending was related to these structures. As
these authors note, however, “police attend far more to gang crime than gang structure,” leading the present study to focus on gang behaviors as an organizing characteristic.

3. Surveys were addressed to police chiefs, who were asked to have it completed by the person in the department most knowledgeable about gangs. As a result, respondents varied from police chiefs to investigations commanders to gang or youth unit supervisors. Since populations served by respondents varied from 50,000 to more than 3 million, it seemed appropriate that knowledgeable police respondents could be identified at different levels of different organizations. The technique of surveying the police chief is also used by the National Youth Gang Survey (see Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention 1999).

4. The higher response rate from larger police departments likely reflects the greater prevalence of gangs in large jurisdictions; smaller jurisdictions with few or no gangs were probably less likely to respond to the survey.

5. Estimates of numbers of gangs and gang members vary by source. City-level estimates were provided by the National Youth Gang Center based on annual surveys conducted in 1996–1999.

6. Federal and local law enforcement sources were used to identify the most organized gangs in each city. General gang history was provided by local police sources.

7. In contrast to local law enforcement, which focuses on the criminal behavior of individual gang members, Federal responses to gangs, such as the FBI’s Safe Streets Task Force, appear to focus on the structure of gangs, especially leadership, using tools such as Racketeering Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) statutes to dismantle gangs. Indeed, the stated policy of the FBI is to address violent street gangs through long-term, proactive investigations by concentrating on criminal enterprise and conspiracy. See Freeh (1999) and the sidebar “The FBI’s Enterprise Theory of Investigation” for a more detailed description of the FBI’s work on gangs and organized crime.

8. Fagan (1989) notes that social gangs accounted for 28 percent of all gangs; party gangs accounted for 7 percent; serious delinquents constituted 37 percent; and “organization”-type gangs represented 28 percent of all gangs. These proportions varied, however, from one city to
another. In Chicago, gangs were predominantly serious delinquents and organized gangs; in Los Angeles, gangs were social (38 percent) and serious delinquents (36 percent), whereas San Diego gangs consisted of more serious delinquents (39 percent) and organized gangs (31 percent).

9. Klein (1995) called this versatility “cafeteria style” crime, a type in which gang members combine opportunistic crime with crime requiring more planning. It should be noted that participation of the gang in crime is different from participation of individual gang members in crime; the former term aggregates activities of gang members, the latter reflects individual behavior. Both concepts of criminal activity are examined in this study.

10. Although this study revealed higher levels of criminal versatility in serious gangs, the findings of this study are parallel with findings about criminal activity of youth gangs in the National Youth Gang Survey (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention 1999). Police participants in the youth gang survey reported criminal versatility among gang members, with high involvement by youth gang members in aggravated assault, larceny/theft, motor vehicle theft, and burglary. Slightly more than one-fourth of all NYGS respondents reported high involvement by gang members in those crimes. If youth gangs evolved into the more serious criminal gangs examined in this study, one would anticipate substantial increases in assaults, robbery, theft, and burglary and some increase in motor vehicle theft.

11. An earlier report of the findings from this study described the extent to which these organizational characteristics were present in these four gangs (Decker, Bynum, and Weisel 1998).

12. One respondent described the volatile environment as follows: “Standing on the street corner and talking and sitting there getting high all day, you make plenty of money, I’m not gonna lie about that, but it gets tiresome always looking for the police too or looking for somebody that is gonna try to kill you for your money.”

13. Taylor (1990a) and Joe (1993) reported that older gang respondents minimized gang activity, and Goldstein (1991) noted that gang members may exaggerate or hide information. Although the gang members interviewed for this study appeared to have been mostly honest in their
responses, it seems reasonable to assume that many would be disinclined to own up to the range of their own criminal activity.

14. Gang members were asked to define a gang, to describe the purpose of the gang (including why they joined the gang), and to describe what is good about being in a gang.

15. Gang members were asked to tell interviewers about the history of their gang.

16. Similar terms include negotiated order, federation, loosely coupled system, temporary system, organic-adaptive organization, coalition, external model, post-bureaucracy, colleague model, interactive organization, network, and blended or open organization.

17. As with contemporary gangs, there is a great deal of debate about the definition and degree of organization of organized crime. See Maltz (1985) and Kenney and Finckenauer (1995) for a discussion of this issue as it relates to organized crime.

18. Limitations of these strategies are described by Johnson, Webster, and Connors (1995) and Miethe and McCorkle (1997).


20. “Lever pulling” and RICO statutes were employed in a widely publicized reduction of violence program in Boston. See Kennedy (1997).

References


Chapter 2


Chapter 2


The Evolution of Street Gangs: An Examination of Form and Variation
