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Getting into the Gang:  
Methodological Issues in Studying Ethnic Gangs

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## Getting into the Gang: Methodological Issues in Studying

### Ethnic Gangs

#### Introduction

The study of gangs has a long, but rather uneven and curious history. The tradition begins in the roaring 1920's, with Frederick Thrasher's classic study (1927), *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*. His principal concern was to understand the development and processes of gangs; this social phenomena was increasingly visible in transitional areas of the city, where large numbers of recent European immigrant groups were settling. His work was informed by the University of Chicago's theoretical framework of social ecology and methodological tradition of ethnography. Researchers still regard his seven years of fieldwork as the most ambitious and comprehensive to date; it entailed extensive observations, interviews with gang members, locale residents and merchants, and public officials in Chicago, and analyses of census and juvenile court documents.

A small number of descriptive studies of ethnic gangs followed Thrasher's pioneering work, and was best represented by Whyte's (1947) piece on neighborhood groups of young Italian men in Boston. Jackson (1989) notes that these studies were primarily concerned with process questions and continued to rely on such ethnographic methods as personal and/or participant observation and interviews.

From the 1950's to early 1970's, a new generation of sociologists emerged who were principally interested in the etiology of gangs. During this period, they developed numerous theoretical concepts and issues which led to endless academic

debates over such theoretical matters as "focal concerns" (Miller 1958), "reaction formation" (Cohen 1955) "criminal, conflict and retreatist gangs" (Cloward and Ohlin 1960) and "near groups" (Yablonsky 1959). Some of these theoretical ideas were put to the "empirical test" through interviews with gang members and personal observations (e.g., Short and Strodtbeck 1965). But many observers noted that this period of gang research was far too heavy on theory and far too slim on empirical work (Klein 1971; Hagedorn 1988; Spergel 1984).

Gang research was essentially put to rest for the next decade as researchers shifted their focus to other areas such as evaluations of diversion programs, general studies of delinquency behavior, and advancements in methodology. However sociology and criminology recently have witnessed a resurgence of interest in understanding youth gangs. Many current studies have been concerned less with questions about social processes and causality, and, more with crime control (Klein and Maxson 1989; Fagan 1989). This focus stems, in large part, from public policy concerns over the "gang problem" which has "assaulted" America's metropolitan centers, and, which has spilled over into smaller cities and towns (see Hagedorn 1988). In recent years, the issue has not simply been the presence or "spread" of youth gangs, but its' connection with violence and drugs.

This particular focus has been accompanied by different methodological considerations and techniques as well as different funding sources. Many of these efforts have relied primarily on official data sources such as official arrest and homicide statistics (Maxson et al. 1985; Klein et al. 1986, 1991; Curry and Spergel 1988); discussions with law enforcement and public

officials (Reuter 1989), and inmate interviews derived from convenience sampling strategies (Skolnick et al. 1989). One ongoing study employs a combination of these techniques, and includes interviews with gang members, law enforcement, school officials, social service personnel and community members, observations of police operations, review of gang related arrests, and surveys with administrators of the juvenile court, the police, and the schools (Huff 1989).

But official data sources are complicated by numerous political, organizational and individual biases (e.g., campaign promises, arrest quotas, racism). In addition, other discrepancies make these data difficult to interpret and generalize including the high degree of variability in how cities define and respond to "gang related" crimes (Klein and Maxson 1989; Spergel 1989).

Other recent efforts to study gangs have adopted a different approach. A number of researchers are trying to revive the use of ethnographic methods to understand today's ethnic gangs (Hagedorn 1988; Vigil 1988; Jankowski, 1991).

#### An Ethnic Specific Focus

Thrasher (1927) suggested, over 60 years ago, that ethnicity was an important dimension in gang dynamics, especially during ecological succession. It was during this ecological phase that one ethnic group and its gang succeeded over another, resulting in fights between different ethnic gangs. Thrasher's understanding of the connection between ethnicity and gangs was tied to the European immigration and Black migration experiences.

Ethnicity continues to be an important aspect of gangs. But as Hagedorn (1988) notes, the ethnicity of gangs has changed since

Thrasher's time; it no longer involves European immigrants, but rather, minority youngsters. For the last several decades, gangs have largely involved Black, Hispanic and Asian adolescents (Miller 1975). Furthermore, the relationship between ethnicity and gang conflict is more complicated today than in the 1920's. Gang members are often engaged in fights with rival gangs of their own ethnicity. Black gangs are fighting other Black gangs. Hispanic gangs are battling with other Hispanic gangs (see Moore, Vigil, and Garcia 1983). Asian gangs are contending with other Asian gangs.

Despite this, an ethnic specific focus has not been central to theoretical and methodological developments in gang research until very recently. Most researchers of the 1950's and 1960's were principally concerned with theory building and, when data were used to test hypotheses, issues of ethnicity and race were often downplayed or ignored. For example, Cohen's (1955) analysis of gangs disregards race and instead focuses exclusively on class (Hagedorn 1988). Unfortunately ethnic specific research on youth gangs has been sporadic and limited.

This article addresses this research gap and has several interrelated purposes. First, it provides a brief overview of the current state of research on ethnic gangs, looking at the nature of these studies, the primary methods used, and the reasons for the sporadic development of an ethnic specific focus. Second, it examines how researchers can begin studying ethnic gangs. In this latter section, I focus on the methodological procedures - specific tasks, general problems, ethnic specific concerns, and strategies to overcome problems and barriers - of an ongoing ethnographic study of ethnic gangs in San Francisco, California.

My discussion of ethnic specific issues focuses particularly on Asian gangs, but comparisons are made with Black and Hispanic youth groups to illustrate the unique methodological issues involved in studying different ethnic groups.

### Current Research on Ethnic Gangs

Recent efforts to study Hispanic gangs and their communities have started filling the research gap, and underscore the importance of adopting an ethnic specific and culturally sensitive approach to studying ethnic youth gangs. Moore's (1978) research on Chicano gangs in Los Angeles is perhaps the leader in this development. Her landmark study is based on a well-balanced research collaboration with Chicano gang members, and provides an in-depth look at the institutionalization of gangs in Los Angeles barrios and the nature of Chicano gang subculture (i.e., age graded cliques, allegiance to the barrio, emphasis on particular Mexican customs and norms like the importance of kinship). Anthropologist Vigil (1988) followed Moore's lead, conducting extensive fieldwork in the barrios of East Los Angeles and offering a new perspective on Chicano gangs. This perspective focuses on multiple marginality which "encompasses the consequences of barrio life, low socioeconomic status, street socialization and enculturation, and problematic development of a self identity. [And] these gang features arise in a web of ecological, socioeconomic, cultural and psychological factors" (1988:9).

Horowitz (1982, 1987) and Horowitz and Schwartz (1974) explore a number of issues such as honor and violence, and community tolerance in relation to Chicano youth gangs in Chicago. Her

studies are based on three years of participant observation and a seven year followup of the youngsters. Zatz (1985, 1987) provides a different perspective on Hispanic youth gangs by examining official reactions and responses to gang members in Phoenix.

By comparison, there are only a few studies on Black gangs in places such as Chicago and Philadelphia, and, most of these were carried out during a politically tumultuous time when delinquency prevention programs were devised as a cure-all for poverty and crime (e.g., Short and Strodtbeck 1965; Krisberg 1974). The political and economic climate of this period were especially unique. These studies were typically based on interviews with gang members who participated in various crime prevention programs, youth workers, and politically astute community activists. Personal observations supplemented some of these studies. Despite the merits of these studies, they generally cannot provide insight into the complexities of today's Black youth gangs, their neighborhoods, nor contemporary social policy.

However Taylor's (1989) recent study provides a foundation for studying inner city Black gangs. He adopts a community strategy similar to that found in the growing number of Hispanic gang studies, and attempts to understand Black gangs in relation to economic, political and institutional changes in Detroit neighborhoods. Taylor's investigative team relies on a combination of methodologies including an initial six month "surveillance" period, extensive contact and discussions with community members (e.g., nongang youth, residents, merchants, recreation workers, teachers), and group and individual interviews with gang members.

Comparative research on Black and Hispanic gangs is slowly emerging, and can generally be grouped into two categories. One



set of studies relies largely on official data sources, and, offers the advantage of viewing the "gang issue" from an institutional framework (Skolnick et al. 1989; Klein et al. 1986, 1991; Maxson et al. 1985; Curry and Spergel; 1988). But many of these efforts are principally concerned with developing and testing sociological concepts and hypotheses. Moreover they offer little in the way of understanding the "gang phenomena" from the perspective of those who are closest to the experience itself nor of clarifying how public policy would effectively address the needs of these young people and the communities they live in.<sup>1/</sup>

In comparison, this is precisely the research agenda of the second set of recent comparative studies. Hagedorn's (1988) study of Black and Hispanic gangs is based on interviews with gang leaders from a snowball sampling strategy, an investigation of official responses to the "gang problem", and an analysis of the impact of economic segmentation and social dislocation on Milwaukee's neighborhoods. At one level, this combination of methodological strategies provides policymakers and researchers with an understanding of the variable nature of gang formation and organization, and of individual member's experience. At another level, it reveals how gangs are interconnected with community dynamics and social transformations. Jankowski (1991) addresses similar concerns in his ambitious ten year ethnographic study of Black, Puerto Rican, Chicano, Dominican, Central American, Jamaican, and Irish gangs in New York, Boston, and Los Angeles.

Asian gangs are the most "understudied" of the ethnic groups. For reasons discussed in the following sections, researchers have found both the Asian community and the gangs difficult to access (Jankowski 1991; Chin et al. 1990). A few studies have followed

the development of Chinese youth gangs in San Francisco and Vancouver (Takagi and Platt 1978; Joe and Robinson 1980; Joe 1981). Two other endeavors focus on Asian gangs in New York with Sung (1977, 1987) providing life histories of Chinese gang members, and Chin (1990) trying to establish a connection between Chinese secret societies, tongs and New York Chinatown's street gangs. The difficulties associated with accessing Asian gangs and their communities has lead to different methodological strategies from those found in other ethnic gang studies. Unlike studies on Hispanic and Black gangs, these researchers have not relied upon personal and participant observations as a method for studying Asian gangs. The principal strategy of Asian gang studies has involved interviews with community activists, youth workers, the police, and small samples of gang members, and reviews of public documents and news articles.<sup>2/</sup>

#### Why so little research on ethnic gangs?

How do we explain the overall sporadic development in research on different ethnic gangs? Hagedorn (1988) identifies several reasons for the general dilemmas of gang research (i.e., lack of theory, lack of empirical work, over-emphasis on crime), which I would argue also helps explain why sociologists have generally avoided an ethnic specific focus in studying youth gangs. He argues:

"One reason is that the vast majority of sociologists and researchers are white, and gangs today are overwhelmingly minority. The history of the lack of minority participation in research is a long one (Moore 1973; Takagi 1981). While there are serious ethical and epistemological questions involved, the

fact is that sociologists in the 1980's have not considered minority gangs to be subjects of particular scientific interest. For white sociologists, 'benign neglect' may be tempered with the difficulties of access" (Hagedorn 1988:27).

In the case of Asian gangs, the lack of scientific interest is also connected to common stereotypes of Asian Americans being the "well disciplined and hard working model minority". This typification is problematic in several ways. First, such gross generalizations are extended to a diversity of peoples with different ethnic origins, unique histories and immigration experiences, and distinct cultural traditions. The term "Asian" itself is quite complex; it includes approximately 34 distinct ethnic groups, naming only a few: Chinese, Pilipino, Japanese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Korean. Second, such popular conceptions have resulted in the myth that Asian Americans have few problems with juvenile delinquency, crime, alcohol, drugs, poverty, or housing. And consequently, there are few social ills in their communities.

Paradoxically there is little evidence to support or counter these stereotypes, due in part, to the insularity and isolation of Asian communities themselves, but more importantly, to the inadequate documentation by government and community agencies (i.e., mental health departments, law enforcement agencies, the criminal justice system, social service agencies, housing authority) Many public agencies, even those located in geographical regions with large Asian ethnic populations, do not include "Asian" as an ethnic category. Asians are typically lumped into the category "other". As a result, researchers have either not paid particularly close attention to this diverse

population or not been able to obtain relevant data.

The lack of minority participation in gang studies noted by Hagedorn may be also attributed to, what he calls, the "withholding tendency" (1988: 27). In other words, minority scholars may steer clear of this type of research because they are concerned that their findings on street life will not dispel, but will fuel and worsen existing racist generalizations. While this is a distinct possibility, there is a more basic problem underlying this potential tendency: there are simply too few minorities in this field. While a discussion of the reasons for this is beyond the scope of this article, it is at least partially linked to the accessibility, the financial burden and the time commitment needed for academic and professional training as well as the ability to break into a discipline with an entrenched hierarchy. Others have underscored the critical necessity of minority participation (Taylor, 1988). In fact, Jankowski (1991) pointed out that while he targeted Asian and Samoan gangs as a major part of his sample, he was unsuccessful in gaining access to these groups.

One final point merits our consideration. Thrasher's classic work demonstrated that ethnography was particularly fruitful for studying youth gangs, but this methodological strategy was not fashionable during the 1970's and even into the 1980's. This was due partly to funding sources, emphasis on gangs as a "crime problem" as well as advancements in quantitative techniques (Hagedorn 1988). A strictly quantitative approach offers numerous "advantages" ranging from easy sampling strategies to swift data collection; yet the resulting data are often unreliable and biased. These data also can not reveal what is distinctive about

the "world" of different ethnic groups. But with the increase of HIV among IV drug users, ethnographic approaches for studying life in inner cities has become an important tool for researchers and policymakers, starting in the mid 1980's and continuing into the 1990's. Nevertheless, a number of methodological issues complicate the study of ethnic gangs.

### Methodological Issues in Studying Ethnic Gangs

In the following sections, I first identify these methodological issues and discuss their implications for research. I then offer ways to resolve potential study problems by drawing on experiences from our current three year research project on San Francisco's ethnic gangs. Our research project's primary objective is to acquire a better understanding of the organization and activities of ethnic gangs, and is particularly concerned with exploring the relationship between gang involvement, crack sales and violence. Recent studies (Klein and Maxson 1989; Skolnick et al. 1989) have examined this connection using indirect approaches such as police identification files, arrest data, and institutional population samples.

In contrast, our study adopts a more direct strategy which combines the use of traditional ethnographic and social survey methodologies. The interview schedule is both qualitative and quantitative in nature, and focuses on issues related to the group's history, organization and activities as well as personal demographics, drug and alcohol use, individual history and current involvement with the group, and prior contact with the judicial system. Given the length of time required for the interview, we provide a \$50.00 honorarium for each respondent. The sampling

framework is based on a snowball sampling strategy, and referral sources are paid a locator fee for their assistance in making contacts for interviews. To obtain a representative sample from each ethnic gang, we have targeted ten members from each group, with half of the members under 20 years of age and the remainder over 20 years of age.

As we began the research process, several interrelated methodological issues were especially relevant:

- \*Defining the issue

- \*Identifying and gaining access to this "hard to reach" population

- \*Dealing with the general methodological concerns in studying gangs

- \*Addressing ethnic specific issues in studying gangs

- \*Interviewing gang members and validating their responses

#### What are we studying?-Defining Gangs

Thrasher (1927) conceptualized gangs in terms of "interstitial groups" which initially emerged spontaneously, but became more fully integrated through conflict. Since his time, sociologists have spent decades trying to define the concept, and have yet to agree on a general working definition. As Fagan notes, "the distinctions between youth groups and gangs have varied over the years, as have the distinctions between gang crimes and nongang delinquent acts" (1989:638). These variations are due partly to differences in researchers' theoretical interests and orientation. Changes in the definition of gangs also reflect larger political concerns and public policy shifts (Klein and Maxson 1989). These variations underscore the importance of establishing a working

definition, even if it is broadly or loosely conceived. How one defines the concept has a bearing on the research and discovery process.

So how shall the researcher define the concept? Does one define it from the perspective of the youngsters of the group? Or does one define it according to the views of the police and community members? Or does one incorporate the views of all three groups, as Klein has done:

"any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name), and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or enforcement agencies" (1969: 1427).

Although this definition seems well balanced, it presents problems. For example, given this definition, how does a researcher select potential respondents? While the police or community members may perceive a certain group of adolescents as a gang, the youngsters of the group may not view themselves in the same way. In our study, one well known youth worker in the Asian community referred the members of a small "gang". When our researchers began interviewing individual members, questions pertaining to the "name" of the gang or group were met with genuine puzzlement. These youngsters adamantly stated that they were not a "gang", but "just a group of guys who hung out together". They did not have a name for their group. A few of them further indicated that they had been previously arrested, and during this official contact, learned that the police had listed

them as members of "x" gang. Our Latino fieldworker has found that many Hispanic youngsters proudly identify themselves as "homeboys" - individuals who grew up in the barrio or neighborhood - but may acquiesce to the term "gang" member because of the large number of homeboy groups, and regional and prison affiliations.<sup>3/</sup> Some Black adolescents indicate that they adopted terms such as "posse" and "mob" from the media.

Definitions like Klein's impose other restrictions on the research process. For example, delinquency is a necessary condition of the gang. But Jackson notes that "most of the gang member's time is spent in nondelinquent pursuits, as researchers who have hung around for months waiting for 'something to happen' have discovered" (1989:314). Indeed our observations of and interviews with San Francisco ethnic gang members are consistent with Jackson's findings; these groups are not necessarily involved in crime and delinquency.

It became clear from these experiences that a flexible working definition was essential. We have not imposed a rigid academic definition, but have been willing to explore self definitions, and have avoided both the common assumption of participation in delinquent activities as well as the imposition of official and community labels.

#### Getting into the Gang-Identifying and Gaining Access

How does a researcher get into and begin understanding the world of these youngsters? Some gang researchers who have conducted interviews and observed these groups, provide few details on their research procedures and the problems they encountered (Joe and Robinson 1980; Horowitz and Schwartz 1974).



Did they simply start hanging out on a street corner and wait for group members to grant them recognition?

Recent gang researchers who are working in the ethnographic tradition, have found the process more complex than this, and have supplied detailed accounts on their strategies for accessing their target population (see Moore et al. 1978; Hagedorn 1989; Taylor 1989; Jankowski 1991). While their experiences in the field are instructive for studying particular ethnic youth groups, how can we incorporate their approaches into a comparative framework? Researchers interested in studying ethnic gangs are likely to find that identifying and gaining access to this target population are formidable tasks, and involve numerous methodological problems.

#### *General Problems in Studying Ethnic Gangs*

At the national and state level, there are no precise figures of the number of gangs nor of the number of gang members. This unknown universe makes it virtually impossible to develop a straightforward probability sampling strategy. Sampling is further complicated by variations in the longevity of the group, instability of individual membership, and changes in leadership and group rules (Fagan 1989).

Furthermore gangs may or may not have "high social visibility", adding to the difficulties of locating a study sample (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). A group's visibility is dependent on a number of factors including the utilization of a hangout or turf (and whether it's publicly accessible), nature of the group's activities, police surveillance, and community tolerance.

Researchers are likely to encounter other problems, even after they have targeted a potential sample. The most critical one is to

gain access into the group's world and to obtain the youth's point of view. Gang members are often suspicious, believing that the researcher is a law enforcement official. Moore et al. points out that pintos (i.e., convicts) perceive "scholarly informants" in terms very similar to the "police informant" (1978:4). In addition, past exploitative experiences in prison with "researchers" may foster distrust (Moore et al. 1978). Taylor's (1989) experience in making initial contact with his target population supports this view. Members of the Black corporate gang under study were initially hostile, rejecting his investigative team's inquiries, and suspecting the team might be law enforcement agents. But as Taylor (1989) notes, part of this suspicion was connected to the team's field observations of drug sales in the area.

In addition, younger members and immigrant adolescents may not understand the concept of "research" nor why someone is interested in talking with them. In these instances, interviewers should clearly explain the purpose of the study to alleviate anxieties about confidentiality. The "book approach" - "we want your story" - may be useful in this setting.

Researchers must also consider the respondents' openness and veracity. Is the member telling the researcher whatever he/she wants to hear? Is the member minimizing or being vague about his or the group's activities? Or is he exaggerating his or the group's activities to brag?

#### *Ethnic Specific Issues*

In addition to these general methodological problems, there are a number of ethnic specific issues that researchers must consider

in studying ethnic gangs and their communities. The most pressing issue for researchers is the overall reluctance and more often, unwillingness of ethnic communities to "talk about the issues". In designing an appropriate research strategy for these populations, it is necessary to understand the political, social and cultural reasons for why different ethnic communities maintain silence. At the political level, ethnic communities are likely to be distrustful of the intent and motives of "outsiders". Furthermore past promises of "information sharing" upon completion of a research effort may have never materialized, leaving community members embittered about their honesty with "outsiders".

At a more specific level, Taylor (1989) identified the "omerta" or "silence for self preservation" as a principal factor inhibiting discussion of the "issues" among street people in Detroit's Black neighborhoods. Other community members like neighbors, gang member peers and merchants were more forthcoming than street people after anonymity was guaranteed.

Moore et al. (1978) found that Los Angeles barrio residents were more likely to talk about community problems with pinto interviewers than with non-pinto interviewers. This finding was attributed to the pintos' past participation in the community and their openness in hearing about the issues. In comparison, non-pinto interviewers might have projected an image which appeared "uncomfortable" to the respondent (1978: 202).

The code of silence among Asian American community members and gangs is related to several factors. First, Asians have had a historical mistrust of outsiders and officials. Newcomers from Southeast Asia are especially fearful of authority figures, having fled from a coercive environment. Consequently, crime and

delinquency has frequently gone unreported to the police (Chin et al. 1990; Joe 1980).

At the same time, cultural traditions stress that community or family problems should not be shared with outsiders, but dealt with internally. This means "sticking together and taking care of one's own problems". Help from the outside only brings misunderstandings, unwanted attention, shame and disgrace. As a result, Asian communities tend to take on an insular quality. The local political machinery handles community and, sometimes, family problems. Personal problems are likely to be "handled" by family members. To illustrate how a family problem is sometimes "handled", consider a parent whose child is arrested several times for various delinquent acts. Some parents send their child back to their homeland or to another state to stay with relatives. This is done to straighten the youngster out and to avoid bringing further disgrace upon the family (Joe 1991).

In some cases, individuals or family members may approach known staff members of community based agencies. But as Loo's (1991) recent community survey of San Francisco Chinatown residents indicates, personal problems are most typically addressed through self help or support from relatives and friends. Moreover my discussions with staff at these agencies indicate that overall, Asian Americans are generally difficult to engage, and are prone to "deny" the existence of such problems as drug and alcohol abuse, juvenile delinquency, family conflict, cultural shock and feelings of isolation. For an Asian American to admit one of these problems means to admit personal and family failure.

Community members are likely to keep quiet about gang activity for other reasons as well. Given the extreme population density

of Chinatown combined with the social insularity of the community, residents fear for their personal and family's safety.<sup>4/</sup> In addition, local merchants also fear that public disclosures reflects poorly on the community, and ultimately is bad for business. Some local businesses are involved in both legitimate and illegal enterprises (i.e., gambling operations), and undoubtedly do not want to draw attention to their activities.

Similar to the Black gangs in Taylor's (1989) study, Asian gang members are also close mouthed, believing that revelations to outsiders are acts of betrayal to the group. But some Chinese gangs are connected with "criminally influenced tongs", and provide even more incentive for young gang members to keep silent.

The general characteristics of Asian gangs also make it difficult for researchers to penetrate this population. In comparison to other ethnic gangs, Asian groups tend to have very low social visibility. For Asian gangs in San Francisco, territorial issues are associated with the extortion of certain community businesses (Toy 1991). Defending one's turf and hanging out in the neighborhood are not central concerns for Asian gang members.<sup>5/</sup> They also do not typically identify themselves with any special clothing. Moreover, some Asian groups like the Vietnamese youth gangs are noted for their tremendous physical mobility (see Vigil and Yun 1990; San Francisco Examiner 28 April 1991, pp. A1, A10).

Finally, immigration status and language capabilities can make it difficult for researchers to access members of both the Asian and Hispanic communities.

### *Resolving These Issues*

Given these methodological issues, where does one start? How does one gain entrance into these ethnic communities? Some ethnic gang studies have taken a community based collaborative approach whereby the research team includes homeboys and academicians (Moore et al. 1978; Vigil 1989; Hagedorn 1989). Working jointly, the researchers try to completely immerse themselves into the youth gang's subculture and their neighborhoods. This allows them to establish rapport with gang members and community residents and alleviate suspicion and fear. While this approach is well suited for studying small numbers of ethnic gangs and their communities, it could potentially become problematic for studying larger numbers of gangs (e.g., heightening existing opposition between gangs, budgeting and time constraints of research grant).

Our research is concerned with capturing the point of view of a diversity of ethnic gangs; this includes comparisons within as well as across ethnicity. Because the study is broad based and comparative, our methodology differs from other recent ethnic gang studies. Unlike Moore et al. (1978), Vigil (1989) and Hagedorn (1989), we did not have the extent of prior contact with the ethnic communities under study. These studies emerged out of existing community based research or social service programs, and consequently were well situated in specific ethnic neighborhoods.

In comparison, the principal investigator of our study had worked previously in San Francisco's Hispanic community in conjunction with a drug prevention program, and, through his ethnographic research, had developed contacts with several gangs in this area. But since the parameters of all the major ethnic gangs in San Francisco were unknown, we first contacted the police

gang and narcotic units, and obtained information on the known groups in the city - gang name, ethnic composition, territory, number of members. This identification process served as a starting point for our fieldwork. To ensure the validity of our interviews and the safety of our staff, we have not relied on interview referrals from law enforcement or juvenile justice authorities.

Fieldworkers and interviewers are a critical part of any research process. They represent the project in the community, and in many ways, help legitimize it. Taylor pointed out that race was a significant consideration in recruiting his research team to study in the Black community since non-Blacks were perceived as unwelcomed outsiders (1989:31). But as his study and other's (Moore et al. 1978; Hagedorn 1989) have shown, the research team should not only be able to identify ethnically and culturally with the gang members, but they should also be well connected with the various communities.

As I described earlier, there are few minority researchers in this field of study, and this became clear in our attempt to locate trained ethnic fieldworkers. Given our difficulties with finding this type of staff, we decided to recruit persons who had extensive knowledge and experience in the various ethnic communities but were not necessarily trained in qualitative methods. Although they had diverse backgrounds, all were well connected in the Black, Hispanic and Asian communities. For example, two of our Latino fieldworkers knew and were well known in the Hispanic community. Both had extensive contacts with social service agencies and had been street outreach workers for a community health project. Our Black fieldworkers and interviewers

also had invaluable contacts. One had several personal contacts having formerly lived in a housing project dominated by a well known gang. He also had previous research experience, interviewing crack users in the Black community for another research project. Another Black interviewer had developed extensive professional contacts, having worked for many years in several housing projects and community agencies. Both of our Asian staff grew up in Chinatown, worked with a large Asian youth drug prevention project, and previously interviewed Chinese gang members.

Once fieldworkers and interviewers were located, we conducted intensive training sessions on the study's goals, location strategies, interviewing techniques, data instruments, confidentiality issues, coding and editing procedures, and validity concerns. Practice sessions were also conducted.

Gender does not appear to affect the quality of interaction with gang members, although our Black female interviewer indicates that older Black gang members are receptive to talking with her because "she has that grandmother image that these youngsters greatly respect".

"Street smarts" including knowledge of street jargon helps legitimize the interviewer's status and, also facilitates communication and interaction with the respondent. One of our fieldworkers describes the importance of "being aware":

"Man, you have to know what's going on with the guys that you are interviewing. The interviewer needs to be able to pick up on those issues. You have to constantly watch their behavior. I was interviewing a guy who kept telling me, 'no man, I'm not doing no drugs', and his partner in the other room kept hollering, every 20 minutes, 'hey, narcs are cruisin outside'".



The ability to converse in Spanish has been important for interviewing Latino gangs whose members included recent immigrants. Our interviewer has been able to quickly adapt to the respondents' language preferences. Thus far, our interviews with Chinese and Vietnamese adolescents have been conducted in English. Their preference for speaking English is not surprising; youth workers of community based agencies in the Asian American community indicate that many immigrant youngsters prefer to speak English at all times, even when their native tongue predominates at home. The reasons for their preference are unclear, but may be related to identity and assimilation concerns.<sup>6/</sup>

Once turf areas had been identified and the research team had been trained, we were interested in getting a better sense of what was happening on the streets. We wanted to establish, and in some cases, verify the existence of certain gangs, and also to obtain first hand information on the nature of group and individual activities, especially drug sales. Consequently the principal investigator initiated the observational process, and our field workers conducted systematic observations of turf areas in the Black and Latino communities. These two communities were relatively self contained and boundaries were well-defined.

Our fieldworkers have continued to observe different groups and their activities in these areas, even while we interview members for the social survey component of the study. Moreover we have developed ongoing relationships with three Latino gangs. Our fieldworkers ability to engage these groups was very likely related to their ties in the neighborhoods and housing projects, and to the consistent contacts made with community agencies. Our initial observational process was similar to Taylor's (1989)

"surveillance approach". But as he cautions, once his investigative team verified the existence of and acquired information on the group, their first attempts to engage gang members were rejected. His team was eventually able to break the "omerta" when the gang was thrown into confusion from a federal investigation (1989:37).

By contrast, the Asian American community was scattered in various sections of the city, and there were initially no public turfs identified for Asian gangs nor public areas used in drug transactions.<sup>7/</sup> Key informants indicated that drug sales often occurred in residences and through pick-up and delivery systems. Consequently field observations for this population were not conducted during the early stages of the project. As the study progressed, we did begin observations of public areas when one of the Chinese fieldworkers learned from key informants of a location where many youngsters congregate, and sometimes get recruited into a gang as well as a few bars with drug sales. Overall, Asian gangs and drug sales have been less publicly visible in the community compared to other ethnic neighborhoods, and has limited our ability to conduct field observations of these groups.

Once the field workers started the observational process, our primary focus turned to identifying effective location strategies so that we could begin interviewing individual gang members. We identified several location strategies: 1) staffs' personal contacts, 2) community agencies' referrals, and 3) other locators' contacts (i.e., individuals who are not necessarily home boys but are well connected to the community). And from these three sources, we anticipated a fourth (and in our view, very important) location strategy involving the development of chain referrals by

home boys themselves (i.e., other home boys refer their peers).

Shortly after our interviewers started accessing the groups and interviewing individual gang members, it became clear that each ethnic community had different location strategies. In the Black community, our research team was able to initiate interviews from their personal contacts. This pattern quickly shifted and other gang members began referring their peers. Our interviewer has found that 15 to 16 year old teens are sometimes skeptical of the interview, even when their peers refer them or when the interviewer knows them personally. When this occurs, our interviewer adopts the "book approach", and reassures them of the confidentiality of our study. Overall gang member referrals remain the dominant location source in this community. Hagedorn was also able to establish a chain referral system among the "top dogs" of Milwaukee's Black and Hispanic gangs, and had responded similarly to gang leaders' skepticism, stating a preference for street names or initials of other group participants rather than real names (1989: 32-33).

In contrast, community based agencies provided the starting point for groups in the Latino and Asian communities. In the former community, one of our Latino interviewers personally knew some homeboys and was able to initiate interviews in this way, but our research team relied mainly on their personal and professional contacts with two community agencies. At one of the organizations, our principal contact was a homegirl who provided invaluable contacts and referrals. With regard to the two agencies, each provides services principally to one specific group of homeboys; these two homeboy groups are rivals. Our Latino interviewer has been sensitive to the opposition of the two groups, and has tried

to interview a certain number of members from each group. This helps avoid offending both the members and the groups. These safety precautions must be underscored; our interviewer indicates that, "our community is so small that word gets around fast. People talk. A particular group may have a common friend with the enemy".

As the Latino homeboys became familiar with the study and our interviewer, they were increasingly willing to refer other homeboys. We also found that homeboy referrals were facilitated in the Latino community by tapping into the "opinion leader" who carries "a great deal of weight" in the group.

Although our approach in the Latino neighborhood can be characterized as a community based strategy, it differs from Moore et al.'s (1978) research which developed out of a pre-existing collaborative advocacy effort between pintos and academicians. In their study, many of the project staff were gang members who had extensive ties in the three barrios under study.

In general, the Asian community has been more difficult to access than the Black and Latino communities. Our Asian research team initiated interviews with the assistance of their personal contacts at two youth serving agencies in the Vietnamese and Chinese communities. Our principal contact at the Vietnamese community center has numerous personal contacts, having been a former gang member. Although we have several contacts at the Chinese community agency, one has been especially invaluable in legitimizing our interviewers. This referral source works extensively with members of all ages and from several different Chinese and Vietnamese groups, and most importantly, is well respected by them. A personal connection is important for

targeting this population, or as our referral source puts it, "you know Asian kids, they don't trust you at all if they don't know you".

These community agency contacts have been the principal referral source for accessing Asian gangs. An independent locator has also been a vital connection for making contact with several Asian groups. Interviewers have also pursued their personal contacts as well. It has been especially difficult to obtain referrals from other Asian gang members.

While community agencies can provide a useful starting point for gaining access to ethnic gangs, referrals from this source should be closely monitored to reduce the potential for bias. Researchers should have a thorough understanding of the agency's history in the community, philosophical orientation, program activities, and clients served. Some agencies tend to focus their efforts on younger members, finding that older adolescents and young adults are more difficult to engage. Similarly agencies sometimes concentrate on less serious cases; in these instances, the probability of intervention is greater than with "hard core" cases. Some community agencies deal only with certain kinds of cases (i.e., school referrals) or, as we discussed above, only one specific group of gang members.

While paid locators can facilitate access to the target population, researchers must be aware of and guard against potential problems. For example, in our study, we found that some locators were trying to "get a cut" from the monies paid to the interviewees they referred. In a few cases, our interviewers quickly surmised during the interview that the paid locator had "coached" the respondent on "what to say". Finally, a locator may

try to monopolize the position of being a referral source. We encountered one locator who was unemployed and who wanted to be the sole referral source for certain groups in his neighborhood. He instructed our interviewer to not ask the interviewee for referrals nor to reveal that he was receiving a locator fee. If he had been allowed to maintain such a position, he would be preventing the development of other referral chains.

Some interviews are initiated by fortuitous events (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). For example, our interviewers were sometimes walking in the neighborhoods with someone who knew and spotted potential respondents. In the Asian community, our interviewer is able to pursue these interviews "on the spot". But the Latino community encompasses a small area where "everyone knows what's up". Our staffperson refuses to conduct "on the spot" interviews and prefers "appointments only" because he wants to make it clear to the various homeboy groups that he is not involved in their disputes. Taylor's (1989) "break" provides another illustration of how researchers penetrate sensitive populations.

We have also found that interviews with former gang members are especially instructive, and offer a social historical context for understanding gangs in ethnic communities. Unlike some younger members, former members can provide details and insight into the history of particular groups, the reasons for prior and existing inter and intra-group conflict, and transformations of both the groups and the neighborhood.

#### Hitting the Streets: Interviewing Homeboys and Validating Their Responses

Once researchers locate and access a target population, another

set of issues must be addressed. First, finding a suitable place to conduct the interview is no small matter. Originally, the project planned to have a place to do the interviews, but this proposition raised numerous liability and safety concerns (i.e., two opposing members accidentally meet up with each other). Consequently, we contacted and paid several community agencies for providing us with space to do the interviews. When we selected the community agencies, we were especially sensitive to the local dynamics. Our research team has also used other sites, depending on the circumstances of the individual interview.

Because the Latino community is small and the two primary referring community agencies work with rival groups, our interviewers have located a community center which is considered by the gang members and residents as "neutral territory". This "safe place" is the primary location for interviews with Latino homeboys. Taylor (1989) relied on several sites located in various parts of Detroit to conduct group and individual interviews with two "coporate" gangs and four "scavenger" groups.

When our contacts at the Asian community agencies refer a gang member, our research team usually conducts the interview at the center. In a few instances, however, the gang member feels uncomfortable in a social service environment, wants to avoid meeting at the agency. Our interviewers work with the youth to find an alternative site. Interviews with Asian gang members have also been carried out in such settings as the member's residence, a peer's home, car, beach, park, and coffee shops.

Our Black interviewers have relied on a number of interviewing sites including a neutral community center, gang members' residence, laundromats, and cars.

A second logistical issue concerns scheduling interviews, specifically with Asian gang members. Our experience with these youth has been particularly instructive. Asian cultural traditions strongly emphasize group identity, and in our study, the members of certain groups wanted to do it together. However, group interviews were not appropriate given our research interests as well as possible methodological problems associated with this approach. Instead we scheduled their interviews back-to-back so that they could come together but be interviewed separately. They were willing to wait for each other even if it meant sitting around for several hours.

Another consideration in conducting interviews with ethnic gang members involves the data collection instruments. Researchers should adjust the interview schedule to reflect each ethnic group's and individual's language capabilities, their cultural terminology, their ethnic experience, and their generational status. For example, our Latino interviewer has translated the data collection instruments into Spanish for interviews with many of the Latino home boy respondents. Moreover, minor adjustments in terminology can also be effective for establishing rapport with the respondent during the interview process. For example, our Latino interviewer cites the use of several such terms: *maton* for PCP, *chiva* for heroin, and *leyno* for marijuana joint. Our Asian interviewers refer to *dai-lo* which is a term Chinese gang members use when referring to the leader. Our interview schedule for Asian gang members has been expanded to explore the relationship between the youth groups and the tongs, and gang involvement in particular activities like gambling and extortion.

During the interview process, fieldworkers and interviewers



should be aware of local dynamics for both research and safety reasons. As our Latino interviewer described above, the researchers must make it clear through words and actions that he/she is neutral. They should also know "what's going on" with the different gangs as well as the community. When the "heat's on" and groups are "gang banging", interviews with opposing home boy groups should not be scheduled. Staff may also have to take steps to avoid "being put in a bad situation". For example, when our fieldworkers or interviewers are walking with a homeboy, and they encounter "the enemy", he/she leaves the scene immediately.

Finally, fieldworkers and interviewers should be concerned about the validity of gang members' responses. Moore et al. (1978) tries to alleviate this potential validity problem with a community needs oriented approach, collaborating with barrio members. In comparison, our orientation is based on a combination of community contacts and a "book approach", and undoubtedly, there will be instances in which an individual will try to create stories to obtain the financial honorarium. Or members of the group will try to get *their story* together prior to individual interviews. Our project staff have tried to sensitize interviewers to the possibility of lying, especially regarding drug sales, and have questioned them regularly about the validity of the homeboys' answers.

Like Taylor (1989), our Black interviewer finds that younger respondents tend to exaggerate and brag about their activities. However, she also contends that older members tend to minimize or downplay their activities. In either case, these members are frequently "tested" on the spot with "reality checks". As our interviewer states, "I check out their answers with them. I test

them. I don't let them get by. They just want to see if you are going to believe them". Another method for validating answers "on the spot" involves rephrasing and repeating questions during the interview.

The truthfulness of respondents can sometimes be checked through staff discussions and observations. Staff have sometimes conducted interviews with gang members who are known personally by another staff member. Our fieldworkers have found a few instances in which the respondents' answers to questions regarding certain activities were inconsistent with their field observations.

The validity of gang member responses sometimes becomes clear after completing a number of interviews with a group. For example, after doing a number of interviews with two gangs, we reviewed all the completed interviews and questioned their reports about drug sales. No one admitted to selling. We continued to interview members of the two groups, and eventually some respondents reported sales by the groups. Eventually, the field observer was also able to observe drug sales by people he had interviewed and other gang members. We also made contact with some home girls of the two groups, and they reported drug sales by both groups.

### Conclusion

This discussion has tried to underscore the importance of an ethnic specific focus in studying gangs, and described some of the major tasks, issues, and methods for accomplishing this. An ethnic specific focus in studying gangs is critical for several reasons. First, although ethnic specific research on gangs is sparse, existing studies suggest that there are major differences in the development, activities, and organization of varying ethnic

gangs. Jackson has recently recommended a comparative approach; "research should look at the variation in gangs and gang behavior across ethnic lines, since there is some evidence of important differences between Asian, Black, Hispanic and white gangs (1989:323). Second, these differences are important to understand from a policy standpoint. The experiences and concerns of each ethnic community and its' members are diverse; a culturally appropriate approach is essentially for effective policy and program planning.

Notes

1. Although Skolnick et al.'s (1989) study is based on 39 interviews with gang members, and in some respects, provides the "gang perspective", their results must be interpreted cautiously since their sample was drawn from "self selected" young males who were incarcerated in juvenile and adult correctional facilities, and who were first by prison authorities. Moreover, Skolnick et al. interviewed the respondents in these correctional facilities. Several potential biases are associated with this methodological strategy including official versus self designations of gang affiliation, coercive versus voluntary participation, and respondents' veracity given present circumstances (i.e., incarceration).

2. Vigil and Yun's (1990) study of Southern California Vietnamese gangs includes 17 interviews with youngsters who were incarcerated for gang related offenses.

3. Homeboy affiliation in California is first tied to region - North/South - and then to city. These regional affiliations are carried over into the correctional setting. See Moore et al. (1978) for connection between pinto and barrio.

4. Chin, Fagan and Kelly (1990) also describe some of the problems of accessing the Asian community, but were able to gain entry into extortion activities in New York Chinatown's through interviews with victims.

5. In comparison to today, San Francisco's Chinese gangs had a

higher visibility during the late 1960's and into the 1970's. These gangs had relatively well defined "turfs" and hung out in public areas (see Morici and Flanders 1979). However, this pattern changed after the infamous Golden Dragon Massacre in 1977, and the subsequent formation of the Asian Gang Task Force.

6. While I was conducting an evaluation of a drug prevention program in San Francisco's Asian community, I attended a community forum organized by Vietnamese youth for their parents. The major issues discussed between the youngsters and their parents centered on cultural conflict within the context of a generation gap. During the forum, the youngsters talked in English about their concerns and issues, while parents and other elders responded in Vietnamese.

7. Although Chinatown is one of the most densely populated areas in San Francisco and the central business district for Chinese and Southeast Asians, it represents only one of the many areas they reside in. Moreover many commercial enterprises have emerged in other areas of the city where large numbers of Asian Americans live.

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