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The Link Between Gangs and Delinquency

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Director's Foreword

In August 1995, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) convened a conference with researchers and practitioners to address the increasingly pressing problem of violence and other crime involving gang members. Researchers who have closely studied this issue developed "working papers" to help stimulate and guide discussion. In an effort to disseminate these papers to the wider audience of researchers and practitioners who did not attend the conference, NIJ has converted two of them into *Research in Action* reports.

This report, *The Link Between Gangs and Delinquency*, presents a detailed review of the research literature concerning the relationship between gangs and delinquency. The second report, *Responding to Gang-Related Crime and Delinquency: A Review of the Literature* (published concurrently), reviews the many types of responses to gang crime that have been implemented in the United States throughout the last century. It also discusses the results of studies of these various responses in an effort to draw lessons from which current efforts can benefit. It is hoped that the reports will help provide researchers and practitioners alike with a strong foundation and historical context from which to build new responses to the gang problem and improve upon existing ones.

Jeremy Travis

Director, National Institute of Justice

Issues and Findings Link Between Gangs and Delinquency

Discussed in brief: A review of the research literature on the relationship between gang involvement and delinquency. The literature reviewed was grouped in to field studies, analyses of criminal justice system data, and surveys of at-risk populations. The individual, the group, and the community were identified as levels of analysis required for understanding the nature of the relationship between gang involvement and delinquency. Needed research requires longitudinal surveys coordinated with analyses of official records measured at the individual, gang, and community levels that are based on preliminary field studies of gang problems in specific community contexts.

Key issues: The review of the literature focused on:

- The capacity of field studies to reveal the dynamics of the relationship between gang involvement and delinquency especially in terms of variation across community and ethnicity
- Evidence that law enforcement data show variations in community response to gang-related crime and delinquency over time.
- The role of systematic longitudinal surveys and analyses of official records in providing needed understanding of the relationship between gang-involvement and delinquency.

Key findings:

- Field studies have revealed that the dynamics of the relationship between gang involvement and delinquency vary with respect to time, community context, and ethnicity.
- Field studies have consistently revealed a link between violence and gang activity.
- Analyses of criminal justice system data have shown that law enforcement interest in gang-related crime and delinquency in the U.S. has consistently increased over the last two decades.
- Systematic surveys based on self-reports of delinquency have consistently show that gang members have significantly higher levels of delinquency than other delinquency youths.

Target audience: Gang researchers, law enforcement practitioners, social service practitioners, juvenile justice and criminal justice system practitioners.

It is not unusual for people in the United States to think of involvement in gangs and delinquency as synonymous. However, many researchers argue that this perception is not entirely accurate. Certainly gang members participate in many serious delinquent and criminal acts. But recent research suggests that organized drug-dealing by gangs is not widespread or common, and that gang migration is really not very different from youth migration in general.

Still, ethnographic and survey research do suggest that gangs facilitate greater levels of delinquency among gang members in comparison to non-gang members. This report reviews what is known about the relationship between gangs and delinquency, and the various types of research efforts that have generated this knowledge. Understanding how researchers have studied this issue, as well as their findings, is an essential step toward better identifying and responding to the problem.

The report first presents a detailed review of what research has revealed this century about the link between gangs and delinquency. Next, this information is discussed at three levels: the individuals who join gangs, the gang itself as an organization, and the community context of gang activity. The report concludes with a brief discussion of the kinds of research that are most needed to enhance understanding of the relationship between crime and delinquency.

Gang Membership, Crime, and Delinquency

It is first important to distinguish between gang-related crimes and crimes committed by gang members. Gang-related crimes are a function of gang membership or are motivated by gang identification or goals. Crimes committed by gang members include—in addition to gang-related crimes—those committed by individual gang members but having no relationship to gang membership or activity. Research has pointed to three conclusions about gangs and crime: (1) gang members are responsible for greater levels of crime and delinquency than their non-gang counterparts; (2) gang-related delinquency is more violent than non gang-related delinquency; (3) there is considerable variation across time, communities, and gangs in the scope and nature of gang-related crime and delinquency. These three conclusions have been drawn from field studies of gang activity, analyses of criminal justice data, and systematic survey studies of gangs.

Field Studies

Without question, most of what we have learned about gangs has come from field studies. Selected field studies describing gang member involvement in delinquency and crime are discussed below.

Asbury's Studies of New York City Gangs

In the 1920s, Herbert Asbury studied gangs in the Five Points area of New York City, an area populated largely by recent Irish immigrants who had yet to move out of the economic underclass.¹ The primary activity for gangs in the area was fighting, with each other as well as with rival gangs. Asbury was careful to distinguish between individuals who grew up in a gang and criminals who organized to perform illegal acts more effectively. He described numerous small gangs that had affiliations with larger gangs and suggested that most gang activity was concentrated in the neighborhood among a small group of close friends.

Thrasher's Study of Chicago Gangs

Frederic Thrasher's pioneering work, the first serious academic treatment of gangs, appeared in 1927.² In Thrasher's view, the gangs that he observed originated from the spontaneous group activity of adolescents and were strengthened by conflict over time. This process consisted of three stages. In their earliest stages, the gangs typically were diffuse, little leadership existed, and some gangs therefore were short-lived. Some gangs, however, progressed to the next stage, where they became solidified. Conflict with other gangs played a notable role in this process, helping to define group boundaries, strengthen ties between members, and unite members in the face of a common threat. Thrasher pointed out, "The gang is a conflict group. It develops through strife and thrives on warfare. . . . In its struggle for existence a gang has to fight hostile groups to maintain its . . . privileges, its property rights, and the physical safety of its members."³ The endurance of the criminally involved gang in its social setting and the internal structure of the gang are, according to Thrasher, the products of continuing inter- and intra-gang conflict. The final step in the evolution of the gangs observed by Thrasher occurred when they became conventionalized and members assumed legitimate roles in society. In those groups that failed to make this transition, delinquent or criminal activity became the dominant focus.

According to Thrasher, the gangs in the Five Points Area were diverse and motivated by typical youthful concerns, such as thrills and excitement. They engaged in a number of predatory activities, mainly stealing. Thrasher characterized many gangs as conflict groups that developed out of

disputes and flourished in the presence of threats from rival groups. Fighting was the predominant activity, and fights with members of one's own gang were as likely as those with members of rival gangs. Violence and the threat presented by rival gangs served both to unite gang members (especially new ones) and to speed the adaptation of the gang to its environment. Despite their involvement in criminal or delinquent activity, most gang members were at the same time assimilated into legitimate social activities, most often athletics.

Whyte's Study of Boston Corner Boys.

In the early 1940s William Foote Whyte conducted a study of an older group of corner boys, whom he identified as the Nortons, in depression-era Boston.⁴ The central unifying activity of the Nortons was an illegal gambling enterprise. The members had a history of collective participation in intergroup violence, but Whyte himself observed no violence among them. Whyte's study is important for its detailed descriptions of personal interaction among group members. It also provided a description of a group of Italian-American young adults who were temporarily stalled in their life development by the Great Depression and, as a result, continued their attachment to an adolescent organization centered on marginally profitable illegal activity.

Yablonsky's Research on New York City Gangs

An important development in gang-related theory and research occurred with the appearance of Lewis Yablonsky's work.⁵ Drawing on Thrasher, he identified three types of gangs—delinquent gangs, violent gangs, and social gangs—and argued that the violent gang was the most persistent and problematic for society. Not unexpectedly, the role of violence loomed large in every aspect of this gang, according to Yablonsky. The violent gang formed in response to threats against safety, providing a form of protection for its members. It had a loose structure and little formal character; for example, leaders in this gang "emerge" and membership within gang subgroups in many cases is more important than the larger gang. Violence, the defining event for members of these types of gangs, emerged over seemingly senseless matters, but most often it occurs in response to perceived threats against gang territory. Membership fulfills a number of needs, most importantly the psychological needs of boys incapable of finding such fulfillment in the larger society. Because of its lack of organization, Yablonsky identified the violent gang as a "near group"—a "collective structure" situated between totally disorganized aggregates (like mobs) and well-organized aggregates (like delinquent or social gangs).

Spergel's Study of Gangs in New York City

Irving Spergel studied patterns of delinquency in three New York City neighborhoods that are assigned the pseudonyms in the title of his book, *Racketville, Slumtown, Haulburg*.⁶ In each neighborhood, structural characteristics play a determining role in the organization of delinquency. Spergel observed and interacted with youths on the streets where they hung out, conducted limited structured interviews with 110 youths, and interviewed community residents and agency representatives in each community. In one of the neighborhoods, Haulburg, Spergel found no gang activity. Delinquent youths there were predominantly involved in property crimes, and delinquent associations were utilitarian in nature and limited to only the interactions required to achieve limited property crime goals. One effort by community youths to form a defensive fighting gang in the neighborhood failed.

However, Spergel did observe and describe in detail gangs in both Racketville and Slumtown. In Racketville, a predominantly Italian neighborhood, juveniles had better access to legitimate and illegitimate opportunities than in either of the other two neighborhoods. Spergel described the Racketville gangs as primarily "defensive" in nature. To some extent, other community residents were willing to express their support of gang members in this role, especially so long as those defended against were minorities. Ironically, the major enmity observed was between two Italian-American youth gangs. Members in Racketville gangs were likely to be lifelong friends. Younger generations of gang members respected older and former members of their gangs.

Gangs in Slumtown were drawn from populations of youths who had the least access to both legitimate and illegitimate opportunities compared with youth in Hallburg and Racketville. Based on both police records and interviews with gang members, Spergel identified the gangs of this predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood as "offensive" in nature and philosophy. He concluded that gang members in this community were above all else motivated by individual reputations and a desire for individual status defined in terms of toughness and fighting ability. Members of a particular gang were likely to know each other only by nickname and seldom knew older or former members of their gang or its history. In some cases, members would move from one gang to another, in order to enhance individual reputation by affiliating with a more successfully violent gang.

Klein's Research on Los Angeles Gangs

Malcolm Klein's analysis of gangs emerged from his evaluation of two gang intervention programs: the Group Guidance Project (which operated from 1961 to 1965) and the Ladino Hills Project (which operated from 1966-1968).⁷ Klein found that delinquency increased among gang members who received the most group-oriented services, and that solidarity among gang members seemed to increase due to the attention paid to the gang by street workers. Klein concluded that gang intervention programs may have the latent consequence of actually contributing to the attractiveness of gangs, thereby enhancing their solidarity and promoting more violence. He subsequently studied issues of gang structure and solidarity among gang members and found that most characteristics of gang structure were difficult to differentiate from other features of adolescent street culture, and that members of gangs shared many common features with nongang adolescents. He also observed that gangs contained large variation within their respective ranks.

Klein's views of leadership and the sources of cohesion within gangs were consistent with his characterization of gangs and gang membership. In his view, leadership was largely related to age and did not so much involve a specific office as a mixture of functions. In addition, gang members consistently reported that their primary activity was "hanging out" with other members on the street. Klein described their delinquency as "cafeteria style" rather than purposive, well-organized specialization. These observations reinforced the notion that gangs resembled youth culture (disorganized, spontaneous, short-term) more than they did more formal adult structures.

Klein thought cohesiveness, the force that keeps gangs together, resulted more from external than internal sources in the gangs he observed. That is, the bonds of gang membership appeared to become stronger not in response to internal mechanisms (meetings, codes, signs, activities) but rather as a response to external pressures, including structural influences (poverty, unemployment and weak family socialization) as well as inter- and intra-gang pressures. In particular, the threat of violence from another gang increased solidarity within the gang—if, that is, it did not destroy the gang as an organization. (As a result, most victims of gang violence were other gang members.) Of particular concern to Klein was the role that membership interaction played in strengthening gang cohesiveness. The more gang members met and the more important their gang was perceived to be in the community, the stronger the bonds were between gang members. In general, Klein found that few gangs had goals outside of those generated by external pressures, and the few internal gang norms that did exist were weak and transient. Against this backdrop, Klein believed that the intervention of

detached workers and gang programs actually enhanced gang cohesiveness and made the dissolution of the gang a greater challenge.

The Ladino Hills Project gave Klein the opportunity to build on findings from the Group Guidance Project. A working premise of this project's approach was that programmatic "attention" paid to gangs by such institutions as the police, social workers and the schools had the latent consequence of making the gang more attractive and, as a result, increasing membership and gang delinquency. Gang members were therefore provided services as individuals, with every effort made to lure the individual away from gang involvement. As individual members were lured into more conventional pursuits, new members were not recruited and the size of the gang declined. The cohesiveness of the few remaining core members also declined, with a comparable reduction in "companionship" offenses. The rates of individual offending by the remaining members did increase and in some instances, became more serious, but the reduction in the size of the gang resulted in less overall delinquency that could be attributed to the gang.

Moore's Research on Los Angeles Gangs

Joan Moore has conducted the longest ongoing field research with gangs.⁸ Her work is the result of collaboration between academics, Chicano ex-convicts (referred to as Pintos), and gang members in the Mexican-American neighborhoods of East Los Angeles. Moore's research has placed primary importance on the role of Chicano culture and the position of Mexican-Americans within the cultural and institutional life of East Los Angeles in explaining gang formation and activities. It also has highlighted the isolation of the barrio from mainstream life in Los Angeles, particularly its political and economic detachment.

In her earlier work, conducted in the 1970s, Moore studied gangs from three barrios (White Fence, Hoyo Maravilla and San Fernando), using Pintos as research associates. Moore and her associates isolated three distinctive characteristics of Chicano gangs: 1) they were territorially based, 2) they had a strong age-graded structure resulting in "klikas" or cohort groups, and 3) fighting occupied a central role in gang life. In addition to fighting, drugs played a prominent role in the life of gangs. Contrary to Klein's earlier findings, Moore emphasized the life-long role that gangs played for their members and communities. Adult gang members were numerous and played a role in the inter-generational transmission of gang membership within neighborhoods. The strong ethnic culture of Chicanos with its emphasis on individual status, also helped to shape the structure and activities of

Chicano gangs. In addition, while in prison, ethnic gangs attracted and socialized inmates from their neighborhood who were not previously involved in gang activity. Thus, a prison gang culture formed and ultimately found a role on the street. Moore argued that the continuities between Chicano prison gangs and those on the street were strong because the experiences in the prison and neighborhood were similar. That is, Chicanos were not included in the mainstream of the economy or political structure in either setting. This condition enhanced ethnic solidarity and produced the pressures that increased cohesion among gang members.

About 10 years after her initial research Moore returned to two of the neighborhoods she studied earlier (White Fence and Hoyo Maravilla). From a list of gang members from her earlier work, a random sample of 156 men and women was chosen for in-depth interviews. Her findings underscored the effect that the growth of the urban underclass has had on gangs and their activities. The evaporation of many employment opportunities, the decline of housing and schools, and dramatic population changes (e.g., the movement of the middle and working class from traditional neighborhoods) created conditions that altered the nature of the barrios and their gangs.

Early gangs began as informally structured "friendship groups" that claimed a territory as their own. Members were committed to protecting themselves and their neighborhood. Age-based cliques within gangs of boys and girls were the primary source of gang activity. Over time, and due in part to the growth of the underclass, gangs became more institutionalized in their neighborhoods and exerted greater influence over the lives of their members. In addition, gangs neutralized the socialization power of other institutions in the neighborhood, further enhancing their ability to grow stronger.

Reflecting their territorial nature, most gang members came from the same neighborhood. There was little evidence that adolescents were "forced" into joining the gang; rather it was a normal outcome of hanging out with a certain group of friends. Gang members spent most of their time "hanging around" the neighborhood. The major change in gangs from the 1950's to the present was the increase in aggression. Moore found that work, a productive job, was the single most important strategy for "making it" in the barrio.

Horowitz's Research on a Chicago Gang

Ruth Horowitz studied a gang in a Chicano community in Chicago—the Lions—during the late 1970s, situating her analysis in the context of Hispanic culture and the marginality of ethnic groups from the larger culture.⁹ She observed the Lions in both the early and late 1970's, as members made the transition from teenagers to adults. Her analysis focused on the often competing demands for honor made by local culture and the expectations of the American Dream which emanated from the dominant culture. The subculture of the gang represented one solution to the demands of honor, which placed a high premium on self-respect and character, both individual characteristics. However, the American Dream, emphasizing educational attainment and work, also had powerful sway over these young men and women.

The Lions had existed on 32nd Street since the 1950's, and membership consisted primarily of male Chicano residents. Most young men in the neighborhood joined the gang at some point in their life, though usually for only a short time. Members were typically between 12 and 17 years of age, and strong age-grading existed within gangs, with a approximately 15 to 40 members belonging to each age grouping. Although Horowitz characterized the gang as having considerable flexibility, there were some rules of membership, a vague leadership structure, collective goals, distinct roles, and membership stability. Violence was a regular feature of gang life, and members had to be prepared to respond to assailants at any time. Horowitz noted that gang members armed themselves in the belief that their rivals had guns; they sought to increase the sophistication of their weaponry in the hopes that they wouldn't be "left short," i.e., caught in a shootout with less firepower than their rival. Despite many maturational pressures and opportunities to leave the gang, a number of members remained into their early 20s.

Campbell's Research on Female Gang Members

Anne Campbell spent six months with each of three different types of female gangs in New York City: 1) a street gang, 2) a biker gang, and 3) a "religio-cultural" gang.¹⁰ Campbell argued that female gangs and their members could only be understood against the backdrop of their life conditions as young women in poor neighborhoods. Her work called into question the stereotypical portrayal of female gang members as either "marginal" members of society or "parasitical" attachments to male gangs. While noting that these characterizations could be applied accurately to a large number of female gangs, the diversity of female gangs prohibited their blanket acceptance.

Campbell identified two predominant roles among the female gang members she studied: sex objects or tomboys. Because sex objects were viewed in a proprietary fashion by male gang members, females in this role were submissive to the will of male gang members. These females often were marginal gang members and did not form a gang separate from the male gang. Tomboys, however, emulated and engaged in more typically "male" gang activities such as fighting, committing crimes and "hanging out". In each of the three female gangs she observed, Campbell found some evidence of leadership roles and gang structure, though typically less than in the male gangs with which the females gangs were associated. Campbell found that female gangs seldom operated beyond the shadow of a male gang. However, the girls in Campbell's gangs had a much larger life outside the gang than did their male counterparts, for the most part because of their familial responsibilities. The duties of housekeeping, babysitting younger brothers and sisters, and rearing one's own children fell disproportionately on the shoulders of female gang members. In a sense, these responsibilities insulated them from further gang involvement.

Vigil's Research on Barrio Gangs

James Diego Vigil, who worked with Moore and the Pinto project from 1976 through 1978, spent three years in the field compiling 67 life histories of gang members in Los Angeles.¹¹ Like Moore, he emphasized the unique nature of Chicano culture in the formation of gangs. In particular, he identified the process by which the Chicano youth he observed were "marginalized" from mainstream society. From Vigil's perspective, the Chicano youth were marginal to mainstream culture and institutional life, and the street provided an alternative socialization path. Because gang members shared many negative experiences in common—family stress, school failure, and lack of interest in legitimate activities—the gang provided a collective solution to the problem of identity.

The Chicano gangs that Vigil studied consisted primarily of males between the ages of 13 and 25. Most members joined the gang at a young age. Gangs ranged in size from 10 to 100, though the average size was 36. The primary reason for joining was to be with one's friends, though direct physical confrontations propelled some youths into gangs. While an age-graded structure was present, little formal hierarchy and rule structure were observed by Vigil. Violence was a constant feature of gang life, though it was threatened more often than it occurred.

Hagedorn's Research on Milwaukee Gangs

John M. Hagedorn has been one of the most outspoken proponents of the view that the growth of the urban underclass has led to an increase in gangs.¹² Drawing from interviews with 47 gang members (identified as the founders) of 19 of Milwaukee's largest gangs, he argued that local factors, especially economic and demographic ones, were the most important variables in explaining the emergence and nature of gangs. Hagedorn was especially interested in explaining the origins of gangs. He observed that many Milwaukee gangs took the names used by gangs in Chicago, but there was little evidence that gangs from Chicago had come to Milwaukee to form "satellites". Rather, most gangs in Milwaukee emerged on a more or less spontaneous basis from "corner groups," young men who hung out together in their neighborhoods. Others emerged from "dancing groups" that experienced physical threats and fighting, strengthening their alliances and ultimately resulting in gang formation. In understanding the development of gangs in "satellite" cities, Hagedorn maintained that local conditions, gang traditions from big cities, and the proximity of big cities must all be considered.

Many similarities exist between the gangs that Thrasher observed in Chicago in 1920, those that Short and Strodbeck studied there in the 1960's, and those described by Hagedorn. One difference, however, is that Hagedorn found that gangs were not strictly comprised of adolescents, but instead underwent a "natural splintering process" as gang members aged and moved into different roles within the gangs. Gangs exhibited little formal organization, had few roles or responsibilities, and activities were more likely to originate from subsets within the gang than from the entire gang acting as a unit. Crime was a small part of the overall activities gang members engaged in; as with their non-gang adolescent counterparts, hanging out, partying and sports occupied most of a gang member's time. For Hagedorn, the gang served as a family-like organization, and in many cases provided a means of survival. Traditional social controls had a weak effect on the behavior of gang members, in part because gang members were isolated from mainstream society. While gang members sold drugs, drug sales were not well-organized and provided only a modest level of income. Violence was an integral part of life in the gang, and gang members were expected to use violence against rival gang members.

Chin's Research on New York City Asian Gangs

Ko-lin Chin provided a unique in-depth study of Asian gangs,¹³ framing his analysis of contemporary Asian gangs in a detailed history of the traditions and structures of Chinese traditional societies

such as the triads. These traditions and belief systems provided a cultural mythology that could be used to motivate gang member loyalty and discipline. Still, Chin referred to the gangs he studied as "non-traditional crime groups." Gang members' knowledge and commitment to Asian traditions were limited. While gang members ran criminal networks, targeting legitimate and illegitimate Asian businesses for extortion, the victimization and the victimizing represented a dynamic that capitalized on the marginalization of Asians in U.S. society and extreme levels of gang violence. One dynamic that drove the patterns of gang organization and violence in New York City, according to Chin, were the recurring waves of Asian migration, enculturation, and exploitation. The traditions that Chin described were essentially Chinese; the participants in Asian gang violence were Korean and Southeast Asian, as well as Chinese.

Chin observed that in some years, violence among gangs gave way to periods dominated by intra-gang violence, perhaps reflecting the patterns of "war and peace" that Thrasher felt characterize the life history of gangs. In the examples described by Chin, increases in intra-gang violence seemed to occur when gangs achieved a level of stability by securing their territories for profit-making criminal activity and their places in the social structure of the greater community.

Taylor's Research on Detroit African-American Gangs

Carl Taylor studied a variety of gangs with shifting membership and structure over time.¹⁴ From his findings Taylor constructed an ordered typology of Detroit gangs.

- What he identified as *scavenger gangs* were extremely loosely organized; leadership and gang structure changed on an almost daily basis. Among scavenger gangs, delinquency was "senselessly" violent and generally spontaneous and unplanned.
- Territory, either geographic or defined in terms of criminal markets, served as the organizational cement that held what Taylor identified as *territorial gangs* together. Goals, violently protected profitable enterprises, and leadership all emerged as territorial gangs developed.
- Taylor also found *corporate gangs* that he considered highly organized with collectively established criminal agendas. Violence by corporate gangs was systematic and could be rationally associated with criminal gain by the gang.

All of the gangs studied by Taylor engaged in crime and delinquency. Each enhancement in organization was accompanied by concomitant increases in the efficiency of predation and in the lethality of gang violence.

Research by Sanchez-Jankowski on Gangs in Three Cities

The work of Martin Sanchez-Jankowski is among the more ambitious field studies of gangs.¹⁵ Over a 10-year period in the 1980s he conducted an ethnographic study of gangs in New York, Boston and Los Angeles as a participant-observer of 37 randomly selected gangs representing multiple ethnic groups (including Chicano, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Central American, African-American and Irish). His work provides a radically different view of gangs than its predecessors. He described the gang members he observed as "defiant individualists" who possessed several distinctive character traits, including competitiveness, wariness, self-reliance, social isolation, strong survival instincts and a "social Darwinist view of the world". Despite this, he views gangs as "formal-rational" organizations, having strong organizational structures, well defined roles, rules that guide member activities, penalties for rule violations, an ideology, and well-defined means for generating both legal and illegal income. Sanchez-Jankowski observed that the gangs functioned much like private governments, having positive relationships with people in their neighborhoods and often performing essential functions such as looking out for the well-being of the community in which they live (e.g., protecting the community against unscrupulous businesses). He labeled the links between gangs and their neighborhoods as a form of "local patriotism." Further, all of the gangs he studied attempted to develop ties to organized crime syndicates in their city.

Padilla's Study of a Chicago Drug-Selling Gang

Felix M. Padilla spent over a year studying the "Diamonds," a Puerto Rican youth gang in Chicago.¹⁶ He observed and interviewed gang members who were second generation immigrants contacted through social service agencies and "key informants." The gang was predominantly an "ethnic enterprise" involved in street drug sales. Adopting the approach chosen by Moore and Vigil, Padilla attempted to understand the Diamonds by focusing on the ethnic experiences of Puerto Rican youth in Anglo culture. Critical to this perspective was the view that these individuals have experienced cultural rejection, and as a consequence have found little hope in social institutions.

Despite their active involvement in street level drug dealing, the primary gang activities were "hanging out," playing basketball, and attending parties. Hanging out played an important role in the gang because it represented the way that gang members "marked" their turf and protected it from infringement from rival gangs attempting to "move in." Violence played an important role in initiation and an important symbolic role in gang life. Gang members were unafraid to use violence or be the target of it. Violence also reinforced the solidarity among gang members and accentuated

the boundaries between gang and non-gang members. Interestingly, being labeled as a gang member by a rival gang led other boys to join the gang. In this way, they joined the gang "out of necessity," seeking the protection of their neighborhood gang from gangs in rival neighborhoods.

Drug dealing was the primary criminal activity of the Diamonds, and many gang members referred to it as "work" in the same way they referred to legitimate jobs. However, street drug sales were by no means monolithic. There was considerable variation in the types of drugs sold, how they were sold, and uses for drug profits. Large amounts of capital were seldom accumulated; rather, the proceeds most often went to more typical adolescent pursuits such as partying, food, clothes and dating. The gang facilitated street drug sales because of its collectivism. Unlike the gangs described by Klein and Short and Strodbeck, there were clear roles in drug selling and a clear organizational structure. "Pee Wees," 13- to 15-year-olds, demonstrated their cunning and willingness to take risks by stealing. If successful, they could become runners or "mules" who moved drugs by the time they reached the age of 16. The most successful runners sold drugs directly on the streets. For Padilla's gang members, these represented sequential steps in the career development of gang members.

Decker's Research on St. Louis Gangs

Scott Decker and his colleagues recently conducted a comprehensive study of gang crime in St. Louis with support from the Family Youth Service Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.¹⁷ Decker and his team of researchers followed Hagedorn's dictum that the most effective method to gain information about active gang members is to contact the gang members themselves in their natural environment—the streets and neighborhoods where they live. With the assistance of a street ethnographer (a community resident and former participant in St. Louis street life), the researchers used in-depth interviews with 99 gang members, 24 relatives, and 28 ex-gang members to construct an ethnographic portrait of the violent and dynamic social world of St. Louis gangs. An image emerged of gang structures and processes that presented a unique combination of local neighborhood dynamics and what Klein has identified as the national-level diffusion of gang cultures. St. Louis neighborhood rivalries dating back for decades as well as contemporary friendship networks were transfigured into a system of conflict structures bearing the names and symbols of California's longstanding conflict between the Bloods and Crips,¹⁸ with occasional symbolic manifestations of Chicago gang culture. The project described the beliefs and practices of 29 gangs (16 affiliated with the Crips cultural identification and 13 affiliated with Bloods contingents).

From a survey of members of a politically appointed gang task force, members of a police gang unit, and a population of juvenile detainees, Decker and Leonard recently documented the divergence in perspective on the magnitude and nature of the gang crime problem in St. Louis. From their interviews with gang members, Decker and Van Winkle found that gang members in St. Louis are frequently involved in the sale of drugs, but such sales are seldom well-organized and are almost never a manifestation of gang organization. Above all, gang life in St. Louis is ubiquitously integrated into a socially organized and culturally grounded pattern of violence. Decker portrayed a St. Louis gang problem that is predominantly characterized and defined by violence. When St. Louis gang members were asked how their particular gangs could be reformed or dispersed, they usually proclaimed violence as the only antidote to the violent activity and philosophy that define their gang's existence. Because gangs pose a threat to family members, schools, neighbors and social institutions, Decker suggested that the violence that dominates gang behavior among St. Louis gangs increases gang member marginalization. Therefore, efforts to reduce gang violence have important policy consequences for then reintegrating gang youth into mainstream social institutions.

Criminal Justice Data Analysis

Where field studies have provided broad images of delinquent and non-delinquent behavior by gang members, analyses of criminal justice data and systematic survey designs have focused on specific features of gang member involvement in crime and delinquency. Field studies, to some extent, provide an emic approach to gang involvement—that is, an effort is made to understand gang involvement from the perspective of the gang members themselves. Analyses of criminal justice data and systematic survey designs constitute etic approaches that analyze and categorize the behavior of gang members in terms that are of interest to non-gang members.

National Surveys

Much of what we know of criminal justice system data on gang-related crime and delinquency stems from a series of national surveys of law enforcement and other agencies. For example, supported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), Walter Miller conducted two surveys of multiple agencies in multiple cities¹⁹ and subsequently constructed a definition of a gang that ties gangs to crime and delinquency: "A gang is a group of recurrently associating individuals with identifiable leadership and internal organization, identifying with or claiming control over territory in the community, and engaging either individually or collectively in violent or other forms of illegal behavior."²⁰ Needle and Stapleton conducted a random survey of police departments in

cities with populations over 100,000.²¹ Of 78 city police departments selected for the sample, 60 agreed to participate. Of those 60, 27 (45 percent) reported the presence of gang crime problems. The most frequently reported defining criterion of gangs (by nearly 80 percent of the respondents) was "violent behavior." The National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Program, a cooperative project of OJJDP and the University of Chicago, selected a sample of 254 gang prevention, intervention, and suppression programs in 45 cities and six sites.²² The researchers found that gangs were almost universally considered a crime and delinquency problem, with local gangs engaging in a wide variety of activities ranging from property crimes to drug-selling. The most commonly reported criminal activity for gangs was violence. This perception was supported again more recently by an NIJ national survey of law enforcement agencies.²³ Another, even more recent NIJ national survey, chronicles a steadily increasing pattern of officially recorded gang-related crime and delinquency extending over the last 20 years.²⁴

Analyses of Los Angeles Criminal Justice Data

Klein, Maxson, and Cunningham stressed the utility of analyzing criminal justice data for understanding gang-related crime and delinquency: "With the number of cities having documented street gang problems swelling to well over 200, law enforcement is currently the best source available for comparisons of gang prevalence and violence."²⁵ With other colleagues, Maxson and Klein have supported their contention by producing a decade of research results from the systematic analysis of law enforcement data from agencies in the Los Angeles area. Maxson, Gordon, and Klein used discriminant analysis of Los Angeles Police and Sheriff's Department records on over 700 homicides to show that "gang homicides differ both quantitatively and qualitatively from nongang homicides."²⁶ Gang homicides were more likely to involve minority males, automobiles, public places, firearms, and a greater number of participants. The gang homicides were predominantly intra-ethnic in nature, were likely to involve perpetrators and victims with no prior personal contact, and were characterized by a "relative absence of 'innocent bystander' victims".²⁷ While gang homicide perpetrators and victims were significantly younger than their counterparts involved in non-gang homicides, they were older than the "typical" youth gang member. In an extension of their analyses of homicide, Klein and Maxson found that fear of retaliation was three times more likely to be characteristic of gang homicides than other homicides involving juveniles.²⁸ By applying the Chicago "motive" based definition to Los Angeles homicide data, Maxson and Klein showed that official estimates of gang-related homicide can vary dramatically across jurisdictions simply as a function of official definition. (In Chicago a crime is considered a gang crime if its motive is to

further a gang's goals, whereas in Los Angeles any crime in which a gang member is involved is considered a gang crime.)²⁹

Klein, Maxson, and Cunningham used police arrest records from five Los Angeles area police stations to examine the differences between crack sales involving gang members and those involving non-gang members.³⁰ They were interested in several hypotheses, particularly that crack increased the control of drug markets by gangs, and that increases in violence were linked to the disproportionate involvement of gang members in crack sales. They found no support for either of these contentions, underscoring that each was based on a conception of the nature of gang organizational structure and social processes at variance with the sociological literature on gangs. Central to their concerns were the consistent lack of an effective organizational structure within gangs, the absence of permanent membership or roles, and the lack of shared goals. Compared to non-gang transactions, gang crack sales were more likely to occur on the street, involve firearms, include younger suspects, and disproportionately involve black suspects. However, most of these differences were small. Klein and his coauthors concluded by noting that gang membership added little of a distinctive nature to street drug sales, and while the problems associated with gangs and drug sales intersected, they were not a single problem.

Extending the analysis of drug arrest data to two Los Angeles suburban cities for the period between 1989 and 1991, Maxson found that gang members were more likely to be involved in cocaine arrests.³¹ Gang members were involved in 27 percent of cocaine sales arrests, but less than 12 percent of arrests for selling other drugs. Arrests of gang members were more likely to involve rock or crack cocaine, males, African-American offenders, and younger offenders. On a number of other criteria, including the amount of cash involved and the presence of firearms, gang cases were not significantly different from non-gang cases. Most notably, on the basis of these results, Maxson concluded that gang specialization in narcotics enforcement may be a strategy that needs rethinking.

Analyses of Chicago Criminal Justice Data

By comparing the aggregated demographic characteristics of the participants in gang and nongang homicides in Chicago, Spergel identified a number of social characteristics that distinguished gang offenders from non-gang offenders.³² Using census, criminal justice, and social agency data, Curry and Spergel studied the distribution of gang homicide rates (as recorded by the Chicago Police Department) across community areas and time.³³ They found that social variables, particularly

including ethnic composition and poverty were significantly related to differences in homicide rates across areas and time. Block and Block have used the Chicago incident data to study patterns of lethal and non-lethal gang-related violence over time, using a Geographic Information System (GIS) method of clustering data points into "hot spots."³⁴ Among their findings, the Blocks showed that (1) gang violence was more likely to be turf-related than drug-related; (2) differences were observed in the patterns of violence of the four largest established street gangs and smaller less established gangs, and (3) guns were the lethal weapons in practically all Chicago gang-related homicides between 1987 and 1990.

Other Analyses of Criminal Justice Data on Gangs

Maxson and Klein conducted a national survey of law enforcement agencies about the nature of street gang migration.³⁵ After screening interviews in over 1,000 jurisdictions, they identified over 700 cities with perceived gang migration problems. From these jurisdictions, Maxson and Klein chose a random sample of 263 sites for more in-depth interviews. According to law enforcement respondents, social factors such as family ties were the primary motivation for the migration of individual gang members, and most gang members moved from city to city as individuals rather than in groups. Not all analyses of law enforcement information have employed complex quantitative methodology. William Sanders used observations of police performance and interviews with law enforcement and incarcerated gang members to develop a grounded theoretical analysis of gang-related crime in San Diego.³⁶ The transition over a 10-year period from less violent (and fatal) "gangbangs" to more fatal "driveby's" was his central finding.

Systematic Survey Studies of Gangs

In his overview of gang research, Irving Spergel asserted, "The relationship between gangs and violence is most evident when patterns of behavior by gang members and nonmembers are compared. Gang youths engage in more crime of a violent nature than do non-gang but delinquent youths."³⁷ This comparison is best carried out through systematic survey research that compares the delinquent behavior of gang and non-gang youths.

Fagan's Surveys in Three Cities

Jeffrey Fagan constructed cluster samples of 500 high school students and snowball samples of 50 high school dropouts from each of three cities: Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Diego.³⁸ Each sample was predominantly African-American and Hispanic, and mixed in terms of males and

females. Gang membership was measured by self-report. The prevalence and incidence levels of 12 self-reported delinquent behaviors were found to be higher for gang members. Overall, Fagan concluded that gang members, male and female, had more serious delinquent involvement than non-gang youths.

Spergel and Curry's Chicago Socialization to Gangs Survey

The Socialization to Gangs (STG) study baseline data was constructed in 1987 by surveying all attending male students in the sixth through eighth grades at four middle schools from a low income neighborhood in the near northwest area of Chicago.³⁹ The communities surrounding the selected schools were marked by disproportionate numbers of gang homicides in Chicago's police records. Possibly due to the young age of respondents, only three survey respondents self-reported gang membership. The researchers developed a seven-item scale for measuring gang involvement prior to self or officially identified gang membership. With gang involvement represented by the scale, Curry and Spergel later developed structural models of gang-involvement and delinquency for their cross-sectional data.⁴⁰ A major finding was that the two ethnic subpopulations, Latino and African-American, varied in terms of what factors were most likely to predict gang involvement. Latino gang involvement was more likely to correlate with social psychological variables associated with school and peer groups, while African-American gang involvement was more associated with exposure to gang members. By analyzing longitudinal police data on the STG population over the five years following the initial survey, Curry demonstrated that the study population were indeed at "extreme risk" for serious gang-related crime and confirmed the reliability of the gang involvement scale.⁴¹ In addition to early adolescent gang involvement, school and family-linked variables exhibited independent relationships to subsequent officially measured criminal gang involvement. As with other research, the number of offenses attributed to gang delinquents in the study population far exceeded those attributed to non-gang delinquents. Of 432 youths, 197 had at least one offense and together a total of 688 offenses. Of these 688 incidents, 160 (23.3 percent) attributed to 91 youth were classified by the CPD as gang-related offenses. These 91 youths committed 504 (73.3 percent) of the total 688 gang and non-gang offenses or 2.7 times as many offenses as the non-gang members of the population.

Esbensen and Colleagues' Analyses of the Denver Youth Survey

Finn-Aage Esbensen and his coauthors used a longitudinal survey of an at-risk youth population in Denver to identify factors that differentiated gang and non-gang youths, the involvement of gang

members in delinquent activity, and the temporal relationship between criminal offending and gang membership.⁴² Gang membership was measured by respondent self-report. The researchers found that gang members did not differ from other youth involved in serious "street" level offending on explanatory factors such as commitment to delinquent peers and commitment to positive peers. While gang membership was observed to be a rare and transient phenomenon among the Denver respondents, Esbensen and Huizinga found that gang members reported two or three times as much delinquency as non-gang members. When gang members in the Denver study were asked what kinds of activities their gang was involved in, fighting with other gangs was the most frequently reported behavior.

Analyses of the Rochester Youth Development Study

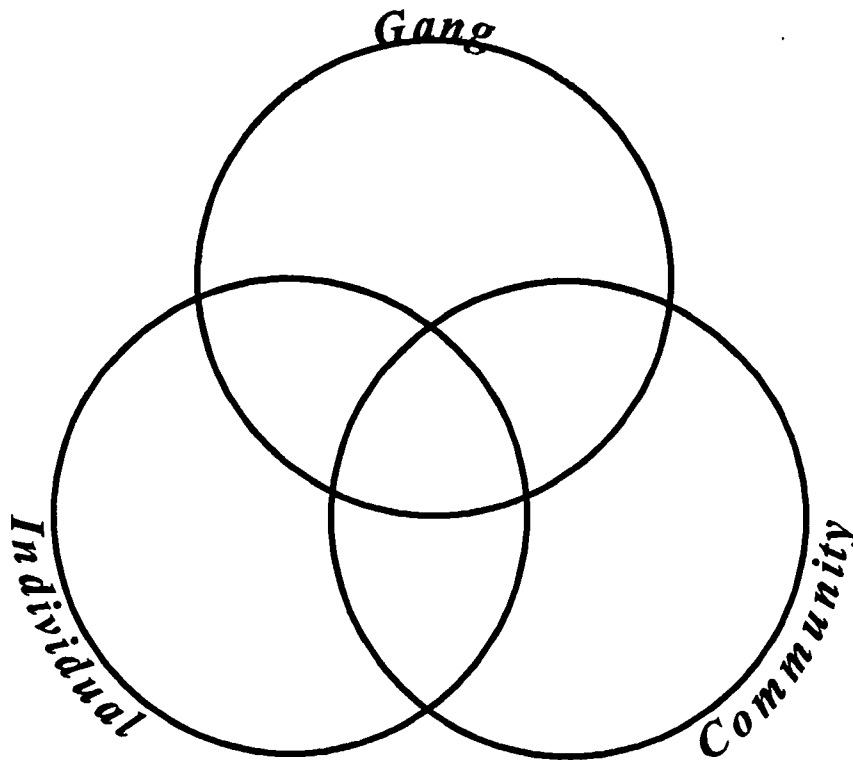
From longitudinal survey results on a representative sample of Rochester youth, Thornberry and his colleagues found that gang-involved youths were significantly more likely to report involvement in violence and other delinquency.⁴³ By following youths over time, their analysis showed gang involvement to be a transitional process with delinquent activity increasing during gang involvement and declining afterward. Bjerregaard and Smith, also using the Rochester data set, systematically examined gender differences in gang involvement.⁴⁴ They found surprisingly little difference in the factors that explained male and female gang involvement; increased involvement in delinquency and substance abuse were observed for both male and female gang members. The only major difference observed was that failure in school was a stronger explanatory variable for female gang involvement.

Understanding Gang Membership and Involvement in Crime and Delinquency

Research into gang crime and delinquency involve three levels of inquiry (see Figure 1): the individual, the gang, and the community. Key questions include:

- (1) Do individuals who join gangs differ from individuals who do not?
- (2) What are the social mechanisms about gangs that facilitate involvement in crime and delinquency?
- (3) To what degree is gang crime a consequence of community-level factors?

Figure 1. Levels of Explanation in Gang Delinquency



Finally, we must understand how these levels of inquiry interact with each other. For example, how do individual gang member cognition and variations in gang structure interact with community forces?

The Individual

It is possible that gangs attract individuals already heavily involved in criminal behavior. In this case, gang membership itself would contribute little to the increased levels of crime and delinquency observed among gang members. Without longitudinal data and information on comparable control youths, this possibility is difficult to establish. For Martin Sanchez-Jankowski, the defining feature of gang membership is the development of a "defiant individualist character."⁴⁵ By "character," Sanchez-Jankowski referred to "a group of personal traits structured in such a manner as to constitute a psychological system." An alternative perspective emerges from Taylor's description of the "scavenger" gang members that he studied. Taylor noted that "members generally have the characteristics of being low achievers and illiterates with short attention spans who are prone to violent, erratic behavior."⁴⁶ Spergel used the term "personal disorganization" to describe an individual-level vulnerability to gang involvement.⁴⁷ Personal disorganization consists of limitations in intellectual and personality development and in self-control. For Spergel, "The gang youth is not so much a deviant or a rebel, attached to a set of different, deviant, or criminal norms and values and relationships, as he or she is unattached to criminal or conventional systems. He seeks a closer, more adequate connection, but does not know how, where, or when to establish such a connection. The gang represents for him an available structure of social attachment and connection during a period of adolescent identity crisis."⁴⁸

The Gang

Gang membership may play a substantial role in increasing the level of criminal and delinquent behavior. The group context of gang behavior may provide support and opportunities for its members to engage in both *more* illegal behavior as well as *more serious* illegal behavior. (This is not to assume that organizational factors outside the gang are operative in the shaping of gang phenomena. We choose to view the organizational influences of schools, law enforcement, and even the families of gang members as elements of the community context of gang delinquency.) Esbensen, Huizinga, and Weiher found that gang members do not differ from other street level offenders on a number of social psychological measures, yet their level of offending is greater.⁴⁹

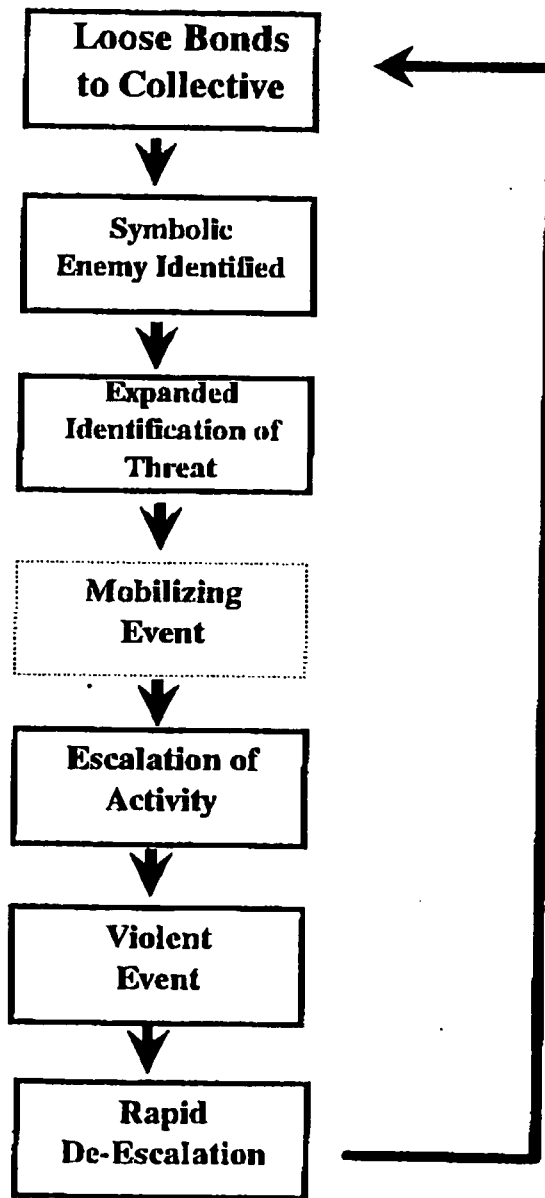
Thornberry, *et al.*, outlined three alternative explanations of gang delinquency: (1) the "kind of person" model, (2) the social facilitation (or "kind of group") model, and (3) the enhancement (or interaction of person and group) model. To choose among these three models, Thornberry, *et al.*, argued that two hypotheses must be tested. First, differences in delinquency between gang members and non-gang members must be studied. Second, comparisons across individuals and individual careers must be made before, during, and after gang membership. Based on their longitudinal data, Thornberry and his colleagues found strongest support for the social facilitation model.⁵⁰ Performing a comparable analysis on their Denver data, Esbensen and Huizinga reached a similar conclusion, "Our findings ... lead us to conclude that it is not solely individual characteristics that are associated with higher levels of involvement in street crime. Rather, there may well be factors within the gang milieu that contribute to the criminal behavior of gang members."⁵¹

Decker suggested that the growth in gangs and gang violence can be described by what Colin Loftin has called "contagion."⁵² In this context, contagion refers to subsequent acts of violence caused by an initial act; such acts typically take the form of retaliation. For contagion to occur, three conditions must be present: 1) a spatial concentration of assaultive violence, 2) a reciprocal nature to assaultive violence, and 3) escalations in assaultive violence. The reciprocal nature of gang violence accounts, in part, for how gangs form initially, as well as how they increase in size and strength of membership. The need to engage in retaliatory violence also helps explain the need for increasingly sophisticated weapons on the part of gang members. The knowledge that youths in a proximate neighborhood are united and may attack creates the need for an association to promote mutual protection. A gang fulfills this need. The threat of attack by a group of organized youths from another neighborhood is part of the gang belief system and helps to create the need for protection as well as to generate unity among a previously unorganized group of neighborhood youths. The concern that a rival gang is considering an attack often compels a preemptory strike (particularly drive-by shootings) from the gang that considers itself under threat. Rapid escalation of violence serves to explain the sudden peaks in gang violence. Attacks by one gang on another quickly lead to retaliatory strikes. These "spikes" observed in data on gang violence in Chicago⁵³ are conceptualized by Decker in the process shown in Figure 2.

The Community

Moore has stressed the need for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to become aware of the degree to which whatever is happening with respect to gang violence is "happening differently in

**Figure 2. Collective Behavior Process of Gang Violence
Decker (1993)**



black and Hispanic communities.⁵⁴ An informed assumption is that this advice also holds for Asian and new immigrant communities. Incorporating community level factors into understanding the link between gang membership and delinquency goes beyond group process and dynamics explanations. Perhaps best known of community level theories is "social disorganization" which dates back to Thrasher.⁵⁵ The tradition is traced to its contemporary context by Bursik and Grasmick and provides a foundation for Spergel's community mobilization approach to gang crime problems.⁵⁶ Another community level approach to gang crime and delinquency emphasizes the importance of culture. This perspective has been used effectively by Vigil, Chin, Moore, and Padilla.⁵⁷ Hagedorn has stressed the importance of macroeconomic forces in explaining the development of the contemporary gang crime problem among urban African-American populations.⁵⁸ Dynamics in gang crime patterns across communities and across cities underscore the necessity to include community level factors in our understanding of the link between gang membership and delinquency.

Multiple Level Explanations

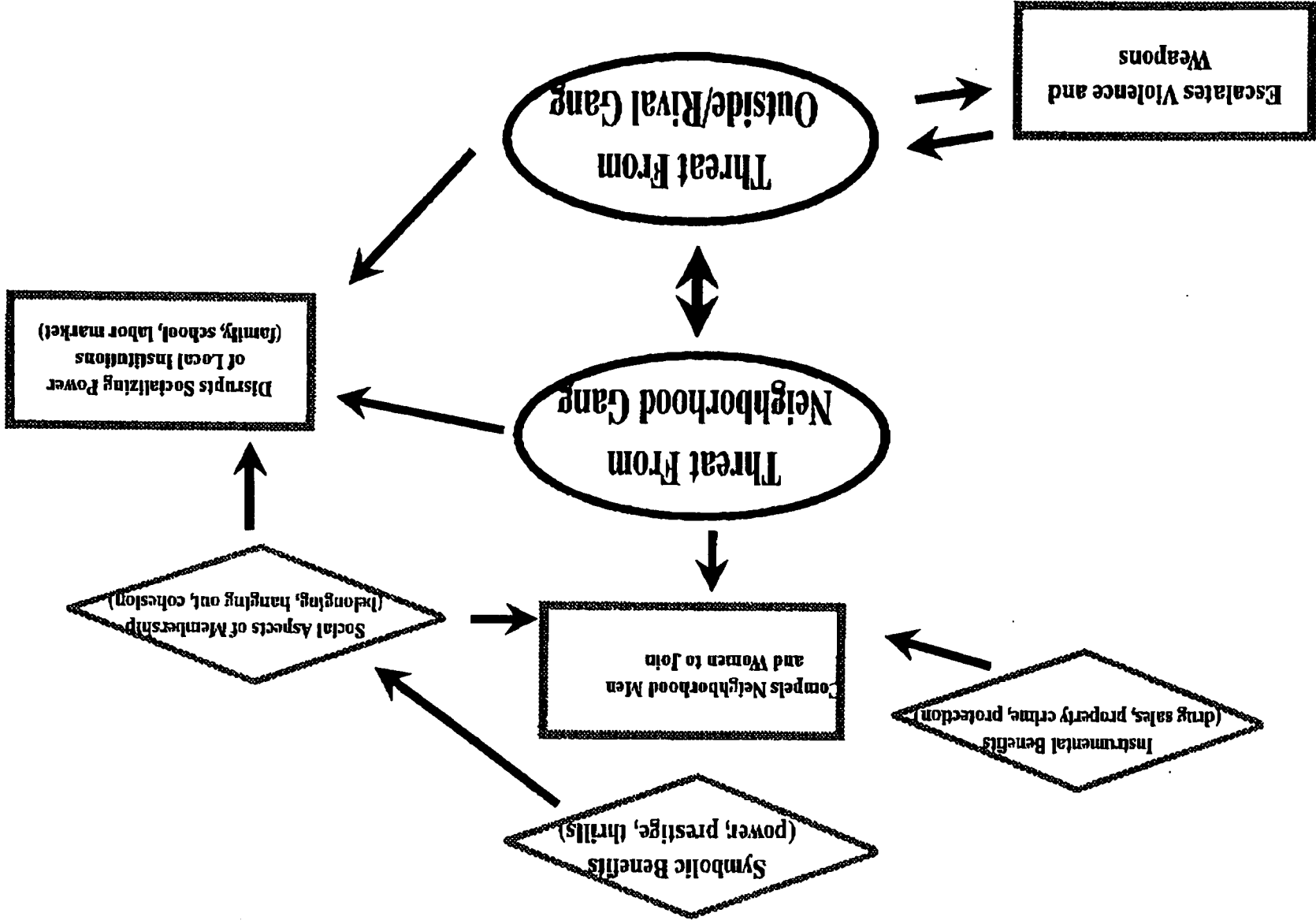
Decker and Van Winkle, in analyzing the gang crime problem in St. Louis, proposed a model that incorporates variations in perspective at the individual level, group process variables at the gang level, and community level influences.⁵⁹ This model is shown in Figure 3. Testing such multiple level models will require systematic research designs that link longitudinal surveys to official records measures for individual and community areas, perhaps even in multiple cities. It is crucial, however, that these kinds of designs remain sensitive to what we have learned and are still learning from field studies.

Future Research Needs

If we are to add to our knowledge of the connection between gang membership and greater participation in crime and delinquency, we must plan and conduct research that examines the extent to which gang membership

- is responsible for the onset of criminal or delinquent behavior,
- increases the prevalence of criminal or delinquent behavior,
- increases the incidence of criminal or delinquent behavior,
- increases the seriousness of criminal or delinquent behavior,

Figure 3. Multiple Level Model of Gang Delinquency (Decker & Van Winkle, Forthcoming)



- is associated with changes in the types of crime and delinquent behavior, and
- prolongs involvement in criminal or delinquent behavior.

As noted above, what is needed to answer these questions is research that is sensitive to prior gang research of all kinds. Ideally, such research would link field studies with longitudinal systematic surveys and analyses of official records measured at the individual, gang, and community levels.

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