



**YOUTH GANGS IN SOUTHERN NEW MEXICO:**

**A Qualitative Analysis**

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Prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the Southern Criminal Justice Association, Gatlinburg, TN, Sept. 30 - Oct. 3, 1992. Address all correspondence to: G. Larry Mays, Dept. of Criminal Justice, New Mexico State University, Box 30001--Dept. 3487, Las Cruces, NM 88003.

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#### ABSTRACT

The 1980s saw a resurgence of gang activity and gang research in the United States. Some of this gang activity was drug related (especially the sale of drugs as an organized criminal enterprise). Much of the recent law enforcement attention and research has focused on Southern California. However, the whole U.S.-Mexico border has been a fertile area for gang activity for decades. In fact, some Southwestern Hispanic gangs now have third-generation members. This paper examines gang activity in Las Cruces, New Mexico, a community of 62,000 located approximately 45 miles from El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Extensive interviews were conducted in three high schools with 22 students identified by school officials as "gang affiliated." This paper will discuss their standing in school, home situation, and many of the factors motivating their gang involvement.

## YOUTH GANGS IN SOUTHERN NEW MEXICO:

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#### INTRODUCTION

Huff (1990) says that communities typically go through three stages in response to youth gang activity: denial, overreaction, and misidentification. Beginning in the mid-1980s the city of Las Cruces, New Mexico experienced these three responses to its emerging gang problem.

True to Huff's (1990: 310) characterization, the first reaction of city officials was to deny that there were gangs or that a "gang problem" existed in the city. The chief of police was approached by a small group of officers about undertaking an assessment of gang activity and if appropriate forming a "gang unit" within the police department. Both of these requests were denied since, by the chief's decree, no gang problem existed. By the late-1980s gang graffiti became so prevalent and drive-by shootings were being sufficiently reported by the news media that it was difficult for policy makers to deny the existence of a gang presence of some magnitude.

The second phase experienced by the city of Las Cruces was overreaction. Huff (1990: 312-13) says that "What often happens in this stage is that the police form a 'gang unit' and the gang problem is met almost entirely by a suppression response."

The overreaction phase was soon followed by misidentification which included both misidentification of who the gang members were (e.g., everyone who wears a certain type of athletic

cap or certain colors) as well as the causes of gang activity (Huff, 1990: 313). Because of a concern over both types of misidentification, and the possibility of unproductive or counter-productive responses, the Las Cruces City Council formed a gang task force composed of eleven members.

The task force undertook an assessment of the scope of gang activity in Las Cruces. A series of town meetings were held and surveys were sent to businesses, churches, social service agencies, and community members. Additionally, school officials were asked to identify students still in high school who were prominently associated with local gangs and gang activity. This paper reports the results of extensive interviews with the 22 youngsters identified by school officials as gang participants.

#### GANG IDENTITY, GANG INVOLVEMENT, AND REPUTATION

A research project focusing on reputed gang membership based on the identification by school officials involves a number of inherent problems. However, steps were taken to minimize some of the necessary subjectivity present in such a system. Initially, administrators at the city's three high schools were asked to provide lists of gang members known to them. These students were known through their open acknowledgement of gang involvement; their displays of "colors," hand signs, and tattoos; and through contacts with school counselors working with a local gang mediation program. None of the students selected refused to be interviewed and during the preliminary contacts and discussions each subject affirmed the accuracy of his or her gang label.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the interviews were conducted in pairs by trained interview-

ers working for the gang task force. An interview protocol was developed and each subject was asked the same series of questions.

While it may have flaws, the use of "reputational" research similar to this has been conducted with prison inmates (Sparger and Anson, 1982) and with gangs in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Hagedorn, 1990) and Los Angeles, California (Lasley, 1992). There are some specific shortcomings of such an approach to research, therefore we wanted to be cognizant of these problems and attempt to counteract them. One of the first problems is that of misidentification (see Huff, 1990). As discussed previously, every attempt was made to provide sufficient "triangulation" to minimize this problem. In the end, we relied not so much on the impressions of school administrators as on the acknowledged identifications of the gang-associated students themselves (see also Winfree et al., 1992).

Second, it is important to recognize that not all gang members are in one of the city's three high schools. Some gang members are of middle school age and some are beyond high school age.<sup>2</sup> Even among those of high school age, some have graduated and a few have dropped-out or have been permanently expelled by school authorities. However, the focus of the present research is on those juveniles who were still in school, as opposed to the total gang population. Consequently, the results presented here cannot be generalized to all gangs or all gang members in the city.

Third, as Lasley (1992: 440) notes, it is difficult to identify and study some of the most "hard core" gang members,

particularly on their home turf. Thus, the current effort targeted those youngsters sufficiently gang-involved to come to the attention of school officials and to interview them in a neutral setting.

Fourth, the label "gang member" is one that might involve a series of self-fulfilling prophecies by school administrators.<sup>3</sup> As Takata and Zevitz (1990: 301) note "Prior research on youth gangs reveals that the label, *gang member* is a social status that defines the way certain young people within a community are perceived and dealt with by others in that community, including agents of the legal system." Therefore, as suggested by Horowitz (1990: 38, 43), we let the students interviewed define for us the accuracy of their perceived or reputed status.

Each of the 22 students was contacted by a member of the city gang task force and informed of our objective; namely, we were interested in obtaining information on the scope of the city's gang problem and possible solutions. As mentioned previously, each youngster was interviewed individually and in a neutral (i.e., non-coercive) setting. Interviews lasted from 30-45 minutes each and interviewers sought to elicit the maximum amount of information possible with the minimum amount of interference or interruption. The students were asked some follow-up questions and occasionally were asked to expand upon their answers. The following section presents in greatly condensed form the results of the interviews with these gang-affiliated high school students.

## RESULTS

For a variety of reasons--but primarily prevalence--most gang research has focused on males (see Campbell, 1990). Consistent with earlier research, 20 of the 22 gang-involved youths identified by school officials were males.

Lasley (1992: 443) found in his study of Los Angeles gang members "that gang membership tends to peak between the ages of 16 and 17 years and tends to decline monotonically thereafter." This was generally true of the population we interviewed as well: five youngsters were 15, eight were 16, five were 17, two were eighteen, and ages were not obtained from the remaining two. Also associated with age is the year in school for these students. Unfortunately, 13 did not mention the grade in which they were enrolled, but two were in the ninth grade, six were in the tenth grade, and one was in the eleventh grade.

Perhaps the most troubling feature of the research in Las Cruces is the racial/ethnic breakdown of the youngsters identified by school officials: 19 were Hispanic, three were black, and none were Anglo. Given its proximity to the Mexican border and its settlement history, Las Cruces has a prominent Hispanic population. However, as Lasley (1992) and others (e.g., Chin, 1990; Vigil and Yun, 1990) have noted, gang activity is not confined to particular ethnic or socioeconomic status groups. This does not mean that Anglo youths are not involved in gangs, but that (for whatever reasons) they are not as readily identified by school administrators as gang-associated. While the findings here based on race/ethnicity are obviously skewed, they

do comport with those of Takata and Zevitz (1990) from Racine, Wisconsin. Clearly, many members of the general public associate gangs with minority youths.

One of the persistent, and somewhat under-studied, notions concerning gang members involves the living arrangements in which these youngsters find themselves.<sup>4</sup> In fact, at one point a citizen contacted one of the task force members with "the" problem: adolescents join gangs, she said, because of a lack of parental supervision resulting from living in female, single-head of household environments. While there may be some element of truth to this notion, the 22 youngsters interviewed were in a variety of living arrangements. These include, in rank-order: nine living with both parents, seven living with mother only, two living with grandparents, and one each living with father only, adopted parents, neighbors, and elsewhere.

#### Scope of the Gang Problem

In terms of their attitudes and perceptions, the students were asked "Does Las Cruces have a serious gang problem?" It is important to remember that these are gang-affiliated youngsters, most of whom freely admit their involvement and associations. Two of the youngsters did not respond with answers that could be easily categorized. Of the remaining 20, six said that Las Cruces does not have a gang problem or, if so, it was of a relatively minor nature. Perhaps the most direct answer was given by "Martin" who said "The city is wasting time and money on gangs when there is no problem." He went on to add "There is nothing here." Most of the students who indicated that there was no gang

problem used as benchmarks cities like Phoenix, Dallas, and Los Angeles.

A third group of youngsters (five) said that Las Cruces does have a gang problem but that it is not a serious one. Over and over these youths repeated the phrase "but it's getting there." As evidence of a gang problem they noted beatings, vandalism, and drive-by shootings. However, the absence of deaths indicated to these students that the problem was not serious yet.

Finally, nine of the students said there is a serious gang problem in Las Cruces. Interestingly, many of them used the same factors--shootings, beatings, and vandalism--as an indication that there *was* a serious problem that others used to note that there was *not* a problem (or that the problem was not serious). Typical of the comments here are those from "Johnny" who said gangs are "getting to be a serious problem" and "Andre" who said "When they start killing it's serious." Two other youngsters noted that "There have been drive-bys, jumpings, and trashing cars. I have been involved in some of these" ("Henry") and "Yes, when I started there were not weapons -- now there are shootings" ("Lorenzo").

#### Commitment to the Gang Lifestyle

As one measure of their commitment to a gang lifestyle, the 22 high school students were asked "Would you like for your little brother or sister to be in a gang?" Overwhelmingly, these youngsters felt that they would not want their siblings involved in gangs. Five of the subjects did not answer this question or gave somewhat vague answers. Only one ("Jennifer," a black

female) answered yes since, as she said, "the gang is close knit like a family."

For the most part the other 16 students were unequivocal in their responses: they *did not* want their brothers and sisters involved in gangs. Interestingly, one of the Hispanic males, "Diego," said he had an older brother who had been a gang member but that his brother was in prison because of gang involvement.

Typical negative responses include those of "Lorenzo" who said he did not want his brothers and sisters going through what he is going through. This was echoed by "David," "Luis," and "Roberto." "Roberto" said he would not want his siblings "to go through some of the things he is experiencing, such as fights and drive-bys." "Francisco" responded "it is not worth it, getting in trouble, getting jumped." "Henry" added "it is not worth it, getting beat up for nothing."

Based on these responses, it is safe to conclude that their gang experiences have been less than satisfying for most of these youngsters. While many of them express regrets, they nevertheless remain committed to the gang lifestyle. However, many react with fear, reservations, or anger at the idea of younger brothers and sisters following in their footsteps.

The interviews also dealt with reasons for gang membership. Although the 22 students were not directly queried about why they joined a gang, they were asked "What would have helped you stay out of a gang?" Most of the answers could be classified into one of two categories: (1) friendship/activities or (2) grew up with friends or family members who joined the gang. Three answers did not fit into these categories and they can be summarized as

follows:

"David" -- did not know why he joined a gang and could not think of anything that would have helped him stay out of a gang;

"Jose" -- said that he had three cousins and some other relatives who had died [although not specifically from gang activity] and that as a result of his loss he had a feeling of not caring;

"Diego" -- was the only student who answered that he belonged to a gang for protection [although it was anticipated that this would be a fairly frequent answer].

The most frequent answer given, by 12 of the youths, in relationship to gang membership concerned friendships or activities. For example, "Johnny" said that he initially joined a gang because "there was nothing else to do" and "it makes the days go by faster." "Larry" and "Tony" both supported the notion that more activities were needed to keep teens out of gangs. Four of the youngsters ("Edward," "Francisco," "Gaspar," and "Henry") emphasized the friendship dimension. They noted that their friends belonged to gangs so they decided to join, or that they started hanging around with gang members until friendships formed. "Ismael" gave perhaps the clearest answer to this question. He said that he is in a gang because he has known these people since elementary school and they are his friends.

The second most common group of responses (from six of the students) explained gang membership as something other than a conscious choice. These youngsters became gang members simply as a result of growing up with family members or acquaintances who

were or became gang members. For instance, "Ruben" said he was born into a gang because of where he lives. "Andre" also said that he grew up with the gang and the peer pressure associated with it. Similarly, "Martin" attributed his gang membership to "tradition." He said that he joined the gang when he was 11 and that his brother was a gang member and his grandfather had been a gang member in his day. For these gang-associated youths, membership was not so much a conscious choice as it was an evolutionary process. It was almost a situation for some of these youngsters that one day they woke up and realized they were in a gang.

In order to examine commitment to a gang lifestyle, with which several admittedly were comfortable, the students were asked "What would cause you to quit your gang?" Four of the youngsters did not answer this question directly (or clearly) and one indicated that moving would get him out of the gang. The remaining responses were divided between "nothing or not possible" (eight) and "me or my family getting shot at, hurt, or betrayal by gang members" (nine).

Among the eight interviewees who indicated that nothing would cause them to leave the gang were "Luis," "David," and "Jennifer." "Luis" felt that it was not possible for him to get out of the gang at this time. He stated flatly, "I'm in the 'hood so I gotta stay." "David" responded that he never tried to get out of his gang and could think of no reason why he would. "Jennifer" said that one of her friends had been killed when she tried to leave the gang, and that in her case, nothing would cause her to quit.

Apparently not all of the subjects were so unalterably committed to the gang lifestyle. Some saw possible events--albeit cataclysmic ones--that would hasten their departure. "Ismael" responded that if a close friend of his got shot he would stop hanging around the gang members. "Kena" believed she would leave the gang if her friends turned on her or did not help her out. However, she added, it would not help if she got out. "Butch" said that getting beaten up was not too bad, but if gang members were to go after his mother, brother, or home he would get out.

#### Relationship With Family

A fairly common theme in the gang literature is that of the family statuses and structures of gang members (Spergel, 1990; Vigil, 1988). Many gang members themselves view the gang as a surrogate family. In order to assess the family relationships of the youngsters interviewed in this project, the subjects were asked "Do you like to go home each day?"

Five youngsters did not answer this question directly, and four said they did not like to go home each day. For example, "David" said that he does not like to go home each day and that he prefers to go home late at night. Eleven of the subjects (10 males and one female) replied that they did like to go home each day, and most stressed family members as the primary reason.

Perhaps the most interesting answers came from "Johnny," "Larry," and "Edward." "Edward" said that he goes home, eats, and then leaves for the projects where his girlfriend lives.

"Johnny" answered that he has a good relationship with his mother but that when he gets angry he takes off to avoid hitting her. There are times, "Johnny" said, when he gets so angry that he does not go home. "Larry" emphasized that he enjoyed going home after school, but as the interview progressed he admitted that his mother had kicked him and his brother out of the house and that for several weeks they had been living with neighbors.

Another measure of the quality of home life was addressed by the question "What kind of relationship do you have with your parents?" Only "Johnny" reported not having a good home relationship. He lives with his mother and mentions that his father, who left a long time ago, is an alcoholic. Seven of the interviewees gave at best what can be described as mixed answers. A couple of replies illustrate the mixed nature of the responses: "Kena" said that her relationship with her mother used to be bad, but that it has gotten much better, and "David" mentioned that he could talk to his mom if he wanted, but that he does not think he could talk to her about deep, serious things.

Interestingly, 14 of the 22 youngsters reported having "good" or "close" relationships with their families. For instance, "Miguel" lives with both of his parents and believes that his relationship with them has been improving. He said he had more respect for his parents now than when he was younger. "Luis" reported a fairly close relationship with his mother and said that he and his mom often stay up late talking to one another. "Luis" mentioned in his interview that his father is an alcoholic who has served time in the state penitentiary. He seldom sees him, however, since "he lives in Albuquerque and has

another kid." Based on the information gathered here, it is difficult to discern major family problems for most of these youths. While they may be part of dysfunctional families, the source of dysfunctionality is not always readily apparent.

### Career Plans and Aspirations

The final two questions dealt with the future facing these 22 youngsters. Specifically, they were asked "What person do you respect the most?" (as a measure of role models in their lives) and "What are your special plans or ambitions for your life?"

The question about whom they most respect provided a variety of answers. One subject did not respond to his question, and two said they did not respect anybody in particular. "Jennifer," the black female, said she respected herself the most. Three interviewees mentioned friends or other gang members as the people they most respect, and one each named a minister, brother, and coach.

The two most common answers to this question were grandparent(s) (four responses) and parent(s) (eight responses). "Kena" said she respects her mother and grandfather the most because they are nice to her, love her, and accept her for what she is. "Gaspar" identified his grandfather on his father's side as being the person he most respects. He said that it was a case of mutual respect and that he enjoys doing things with his grandfather.

For those who mentioned one or both parents, a typical answer was provided by "Cesare." He said he most respects his mom because she has always been there when he needed her. "Tony"

provided a similar response in regard to his father whom he said "doesn't drink or smoke, is a hard worker and is good to my mother."

The final question addressed the youngsters' future plans. Previous research (see, e.g., Goldstein, Rogers and Mays, 1987: 105-107; Wilson, 1983) has indicated that both delinquent youths and adult criminals tend to be present- rather than future-oriented. The students interviewed for this project could be classified as primarily falling into four groups: (1) those with high, but perhaps unrealistic, goals (six or seven); (2) those planning on entering the military, which may be unrealistic for some of these youngsters (four); (3) those who had no plans or had not thought about it (three or four); and (4) those planning on attending vocational school or learning a skilled or semi-skilled trade.

The six or seven youths with perhaps unrealistically high goals mentioned that they would like to attend college and prepare for a profession such as athletic trainer, engineer, or respiratory therapist. This may be unrealistic for at least two different reasons: several have weak or insufficient academic backgrounds, and most lack the financial wherewithal to attend college.

Those youngsters mentioning possible military careers may be facing military employers looking for fewer and more highly qualified applicants in a more streamlined military establishment. Also the presence of criminal records (even juvenile records) may hamper some of these adolescents. Perhaps the most realistic of these interview subjects were those with fairly

concrete images of vocational/technical training and employment. Career plans for this group include jobs such as mechanic, cartoonist, electronics, computer work, and paramedic training.

### CONCLUSIONS

There exists a fruitful world of gang research between participant/observation (Burgess, 1984; Lofland and Lofland, 1984; Takata and Zevitz, 1990) and what Hagedorn (1990: 244) calls "courthouse criminology," which he says is "the analysis of official statistics and data gathered on gangs by surveys of law enforcement or other public sources." This paper has steered a middle course between these two approaches, but has relied slightly more heavily on qualitative methodologies.

The interviews were part of a larger community assessment on the scope and severity of gang problems in a medium-size Southwestern city. The answers to a variety of questions provided by the 22 youngsters identified by school officials as gang-involved proved to be particularly illuminating. As is true of most gang research, both classical and contemporary, the vast majority of these youngsters were males. Consistent with the location, most of these students were Hispanic and a few were black, but Anglo gang members were particularly conspicuous by their absence. Also consistent with previous research (see especially Takata and Zevitz, 1990), the peak years for gang involvement (at least for these high school students) was 16-17.

In terms of living arrangements, eight youngsters lived with one parent (seven with the mother only) and nine lived with both parents. The remaining five lived in a variety of circumstances.

When asked whether the city has a gang problem, 11 of the youths answered either that there was no problem or that it was not a serious problem. It might be possible to conclude from these adolescents immersed in the gang world that they do not perceive their behavior as law-violating or particularly threatening. In fact, when asked what they did with their friends a frequent response was "just hang out."

Many of the students interviewed exhibited a certain ambivalence toward the gang lifestyle. For instance, some said their parents did not know that they were gang members and that they did not want them to know. Additionally, 16 said they would not want their siblings to join a gang and they would exert whatever pressure possible to prevent a brother or sister from becoming a gang member. However, when asked about their own involvement, many of the interviewees did not want to leave the gang or they could not see themselves not being gang members.

Family relationships seem to be important to a significant segment of these youths. Half of them said they like to go home each day (after school) and nearly two-thirds (14 of 22) describe the relationship with their parent(s) as good. Additionally, over one-half (12) identify one or both parents or grandparents as being people they respect.

Therefore, on the surface it seems that the family is not a source of gang-related influences. After extended conversations, however, family frictions and problems begin to surface (an absent parent, alcoholism, disputes over authority, etc.). Some families also have histories of one or more gang members. Based

on the information available here, it is difficult to say whether the family is the "cause" of gang activity or not. In all likelihood it is one contributing factor out of a wide social milieu.

Perhaps the most significant influence is peers/friends. It is obvious from the interviews that many of these youngsters grew up and attended school with other youths who joined or formed gangs. Some gravitated toward gang membership and others evolved into it. Clearly, many of these youths, and perhaps other gang-affiliated adolescents, remain in a gang because of the sense of family or companionship or because they fear the scorn (or worse) of the other members should they decide to leave.

Finally, the 22 interviews summarized here illustrate something that policy makers, law enforcement officers, and school officials overlook: gangs, for the most part, are very utilitarian, they meet some actual or perceived need(s) in the lives of the youngsters involved in them. As Spergel (1990: 222) emphasizes, the gang "provides psychological, social, cultural, economic, and even political benefits when other institutions such as family, school, and employment fail." It is also important to consider the degree to which race or ethnicity impact on gang involvement (see especially Curry and Spergel, 1992). For policies to be effective in dealing with gangs, they must address cultural factors and the needs these youngsters have.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>One student ("Larry") was noncommittal about his gang affiliation, at times even denying membership, but his answers indicated more than just a passing familiarity with gang customs, terminology, etc.

<sup>2</sup>See Lasley's (1992) discussion of age and gang involvement.

<sup>3</sup>This is much like Lemert's (1967) conception of secondary deviance.

<sup>4</sup>For an additional discussion of this topic see Winfree et al. (1992).

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