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HISTORY OF STREET GANGS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Introduction

The first active gangs in Western civilization were reported by Pike (1873, pp. 276–277), a widely respected chronicler of British crime. He documented the existence of gangs of highway robbers in England during the 17th century, and he speculates that similar gangs might well have existed in our mother country much earlier, perhaps as early as the 14th or even the 12th century. But it does not appear that these gangs had the features of modern-day, serious street gangs.[1] More structured gangs did not appear until the early 1600s, when London was "terrorized by a series of organized gangs calling themselves the Mims, Hectors, Bugles, Dead Boys … who found amusement in breaking windows, [and] demolishing taverns, [and they] also fought pitched battles among themselves dressed with colored ribbons to distinguish the different factions" (Pearson, 1983, p. 188).

The history of street gangs in the United States begins with their emergence on the East Coast around 1783, as the American Revolution ended (Sante, 1991). But there is considerable justification for questioning the seriousness of these early gangs. The best available evidence suggests that the more serious street gangs likely did not emerge until the early part of the nineteenth century (Sante, 1991).

The Influence of Population Migration Patterns on Gang Emergence

This bulletin examines the emergence of gang activity in four major regions of the United States: the Northeast, Midwest, West, and South. (Gangs would emerge in the South much later than in other regions.) The purpose of this regional focus is to develop a better understanding of the origins of gang activity and to examine regional migration and cultural influences on gangs themselves. There is some evidence that the gangs that first emerged in each of these regions influenced the growth and characteristics of gangs in their respective regions. Therefore, an understanding of regional influences should help illuminate key features of gangs that operate in these particular areas of the United States.

Gang emergence in the Northeast and Midwest was fueled by immigration and poverty, first by two waves of poor, largely white families from Europe. Seeking a better life, the early immigrant groups mainly settled in urban areas and formed communities to join each other in the economic struggle. Unfortunately, they had few marketable skills. Difficulties in finding work and a place to live and adjusting to urban life were equally common among the European immigrants. Anglo native-born Americans discriminated against these immigrants as well. Conflict was therefore imminent, and gangs grew in such environments.

First came the "old immigrants," those who came to the United States from Northern or Western Europe (especially Great Britain, Germany, and Scandinavia) during the first wave of immigration following American independence and extending up to about 1860. The second enormous group of immigrants—the Poles, Italians, Irish, and Jews—overlapped the first wave, arriving during the 1820–1920 period. Both groups largely consisted of low-skilled, low-wage laborers. Not unexpectedly, the second wave on top of the first one overwhelmed the housing and welfare capacity of the young Northeast and Midwest cities,[2] contributing directly to slum conditions and the accompanying crime problems, gangs included (Riis, 1902/1969). "The slum is as old as civilization. Civilization implies a race [among social strata] to get ahead… They drag one another farther down. The bad environment becomes the heredity of the next generation. Then, given the crowd, you have a slum ready-made" (Riis, 1902/1969, p. 1).

In contrast, gangs grew out of the preexisting Mexican culture in the Western region, and their growth was fueled by subsequent Mexican migrations. El Paso, Albuquerque, and Los Angeles initially were populated by immigrant groups along the trail from Mexico to Los Angeles. The continuing influx of Mexicans fueled

1 Serious street gangs are typically characterized as having a multiple-year history, having a large membership (varies widely), being somewhat organized (having some sort of hierarchy and leadership roles), and being involved in violent crimes in the course of street presence (e.g., homicide, aggravated assault, robbery, use of firearms) (Howell, 1999, 2006).

2 The U.S. Bureau of the Census designates four major regions (Midwest, Northeast, South, and West).

gang growth. Indeed, they brought an embryo, or pre-gang, culture with them that was transmitted by youth who had been named *pachuchos*, after field hands from a Mexican city of that name (Geis, 1965). These *pachuchos* socialized with other immigrant youths in the streets (Vigil, 2002).

The Northeast, Midwest, and Western regions would soon be inundated with a second major wave of immigrants, African-American populations that migrated northward and westward from the Deep South. In addition, other gang mixtures including Hispanic/Latino[3] (Puerto Rico, Mexico, Dominican Republic, Cuba), Asian (Cambodians, Chinese, Filipinos, Koreans, Samoans, Thais, Vietnamese, and others), and Latin American (Colombians, Cubans, Dominicans, Ecuadorians, Panamanians, Puetro Ricans, and others) would later populate the gang landscape (Miller, 2001, p. 43). Native-American gangs also would emerge, but much later (Conway, 1998). The internal migration of the blacks mainly fueled the emergence of another distinct wave of gang activity. The end result was a mixture of predominantly white, Mexican, and black gangs—with varying degrees of influence—in each of the three early gang regions in the United States.

These regional histories begin with the first observance of street gangs in the United States in the Northeast.

Street Gang Emergence in the Northeast

Street gangs on the East Coast developed in three phases (Adamson, 1998; Sante, 1991). The first gang-like groups began to emerge immediately after the American Revolution ended in 1783, but they were not seasoned criminals; only youth fighting over local turf. The beginning of serious ganging in New York City would commence a few years later, around 1820, in the wake of far more large-scale immigration. The gangs that emerged from this melting pot were far more structured and dangerous. A third wave of gang activity developed in the 1950s and 1960s when Latino and black populations arrived en masse.

New York City's Ellis Island was the major port of entry to the United States. It "has throughout the country's history been the cauldron into which highly diverse immigrant groups have been poured" (Geis, 1965, p. 42). The three predominant early immigrant groups that arrived in New York City and settled in the Lower East Side in large numbers after the War of 1812 were English, Irish, and German (Sante, 1991). Their collective arrival spurred gang development in the squalor and overcrowding of the Lower East Side. That area of the city—particularly around the Five Points—fell victim to rapid immigration and ensuing political, economic, and social disorganization.

First Period of Gang Emergence in New York City

The members of the gangs that first drove social stakes in the streets of New York in the late 18th century were the same age as most members of current street gangs, from the early teens to about the mid-twenties (Sante, 1991). They consisted of five main groups: "The Smiths's Vly gang, the Bowery Boys, and the Broadway Boys were white, mainly Irish groups; the Fly Boys and the Long Bridge Boys were black" (p. 198). There already was a substantial black population in the area (Sante, 1991, p. 199).

It is important to examine more closely the racial/ethnic character of the early New York gangs described here. Overall, the earliest gangs were largely Irish, followed after the Civil War by Italian and then Jewish gangs with a mixture of Italian, Irish, and Scandavian members (Riis, 1902/1969; Sante, 1991). Dutch, Welsh, Scots-Irish, Irish Catholic, and German youth, as well as persons of mixed ethnicity, soon would expand the melting pot. Indeed, early gangs were often multi-ethnic, drawn from neighborhoods that were not rigidly segregated by ethnicity (Adamson, 2000).

The earliest gangs of New York were not criminal groups. Many street gang members were employed, mostly as common laborers (Adamson, 1998; Sante, 1991). Some were bouncers in saloons and dance halls, as well as longshoremen. A few were apprentice butchers, carpenters, sailmakers, and shipbuilders. "They engaged in violence, but violence was a normal part of their always-contested environment; turf warfare was a condition of the neighborhood" (Sante, 1991, p. 198). Gangs formed the "basic unit of social life among the young males in New York in the nineteenth century" (Sante, 1991, p. 198).

More dangerous street gangs than previously seen emerged around 1820 from the persistent disorder that gripped the city slums, tenements, saloons, and dance halls (Riis, 1902/1969; Sante, 1991). The Forty Thieves gang was characterized as "the first important and decisively dangerous gang of the quarter [century]" (Sante, 1991, p. 199). It and other new groups of gangs that emerged in this period were centered in criminal enterprises as much as in territorial disputes (Sante, 1991). "It is axiomatic that the more sophisticated the gangs became, the more violent they grew as well" (p. 198).

"Prior to 1840, territorial alliances took precedence over ethnic solidarity. Thereafter, in the climate of economic restructuring and intense competition for jobs, gang warfare replicated ethnic conflict" (Adamson, 1998, p. 64). From its early history, ethnic succession and invasion has been a regular process in the city. "From its earliest days when the Dutch and English struggled for political and economic control, through the nineteenth century when new groups such as Germans and the

3 The term "Hispanic" is used particularly by federal and state bureaucracies to refer to persons who reside in the United States who were born in, or trace their ancestry back to, one of 23 Spanish-speaking nations (Moore and Pinderhughes, 1993, p. xi). Many of these individuals prefer to use the term "Latino," and that term is used in this report. "Chicano" is also used to refer to Mexican descendants.

Irish settled in great numbers, and up through the early twentieth century with the arrival of southern and eastern Europeans, the city has always been an ever-evolving mix of ethnic groups" (Lobo, Flores, and Salvo, 2002, p. 703).

The Five Points gangs, such as the Dead Rabbits, typically formed in the corner groggeries (selling a combination of groceries and cheap liquor) that had bars in the rear of the buildings ("speak-easies," Asbury, 1927), which became social centers. "As a social unit, the gang closely resembled such organizations as the fire company, the fraternal order, and the political club, all of these formations variously overlapped" (Sante, 1991, pp. 197–198). Bar room brawling was a common denominator. "The majority of dives featured one or another of a variation of the basic setup: bar, dance floor, private boxes, prostitution, robbery" (p. 112).

The Five Points Gang was particularly influential, such that it is said to be "the most significant street gang to form in the United States, ever!" (Savelli, 2001, p. 1). Its coleader, Johnny Torrio, became a significant member of the Sicilian Mafia (La Cosa Nostra). He recruited street hoodlums from across New York City to the Five Points Gang, including a teenaged Brooklyn boy of Italian descent named Alphonse Capone, better known as Al Capone or "Scarface." Capone became a member of the James Street Gang, which the Five Pointers considered a minor-league outfit. The Five Points Gang became the major league to many young street gangsters and a farm club for the Mafia (Savelli, 2001, p. 1). The gang also specialized in supplying bodies to political entities, in keeping unsympathetic voters away from the election center. It was a symbiotic relationship; each group benefitted from the influence of the other. The apex of its 25-year history was approximately 1857 (Sante, 1991). "By the 1870s, few gangs remained in Five Points" (Gilfoyle, 2003, p. 622). A 2002 movie, *Gangs of New York*, vividly depicted their reign, with some exaggerations and distorted history in "a blood-soaked vision of American history" (p. 621).

Years later, in 1919, being sought by authorities in connection with a gangland murder in New York, Al "Scarface" Capone moved to Chicago when Torrio needed his assistance in maintaining control of Chicago mob territories. "Al Capone eventually became the most violent and prolific gangster in Chicago, if not… the United States, that law enforcement has ever experienced" (Savelli, 2001, p. 1).

Second Period of Gang Growth in New York City

The arrival of the Poles, Italians, and Jews in New York City in the period 1880–1920 ushered in a second distinct period of gang activity in the city's slums. Jacob Riis, a journalist, photographer, and social reformer, shocked the conscience of many Americans with his factual descriptions of slum conditions in his book, *The Battle with the Slum* (1902/1969). Inundated with immigrants, New York City could not provide enough homes for the influx that occurred over the next 30 years. Tenement houses were created as a temporary solution that became permanent. Members of a select committee (cited in Riis, 1902/1969, p. 12) of the state legislature came to the city and saw how crime came to be the natural crop of people housed in crowded, filthy tenements with "dark, damp basements, leaking garrets, shops, outhouses, and stables converted into dwellings." These conditions predated the formation of the city Health Department, viable social services, and the Children's Aid Society. Moreover, the New York City Police Department was not effective in maintaining order. Gangs and other criminal groups were virtually unfettered from forging their own wedges in the social and physical disorder.

The Whyos (named for a bird-like call the members used to alert one another) is said to have been "the most powerful downtown gang between the Civil War and the 1890s" (Sante, 1991, p. 214). It appeared to have emerged from an earlier gang, the Chichesters. This transformed and far more criminal gang actually had a take-out menu of its services, including punching ($2), nose and jaw bone broken ($10), leg or arm broken ($19), shot in the leg ($25), and "doing the big job" ($100 and up) (Sante, 1991, p. 215).

> The histories of the city's gangs can be seen as running a close parallel to the progress of commerce. From small, specialized establishments narrowly identified with particular neighborhoods, gangs branched out, diversified, and merged, absorbing smaller and less well-organized units and encompassing ever-larger swaths of territory. After the Whyos, their numbers decimated by jailings and deaths, dissolved in the early 1890s, a small number of very large gangs, organized as umbrella formations made up of smaller entities, came to dominate the scene (Sante, 1991, p. 217).

Four gang alliances were longest-lived gangs on the Lower East Side of Manhattan—for nearly two decades on either side of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries: the Five Pointers, the Monk Eastman, the Gophers, and the Hudson Dusters (Sante, 1991, p. 217). Territorial disputes and reorganizations were commonplace, but the Jewish Monk Eastman Gang was particularly notable for having "terrorized New York City streets" (Savelli, 2001, p. 1).

In the meantime, the Chinese set up their own highly structured tongs around 1860, and put the street gangs to shame in running a criminal operation that controlled opium distribution, gambling, and political patronage (Chin, 1995). "The tongs merged the functions, resources, and techniques of politicians, police, financiers, and gangsters, and enforced their levy with no opposition" (Sante, 1991, p. 226). Even so, the tongs soon were matched in strength by the Mafia, which had moved from New Orleans into New York. The last major downtown gang fight occurred in 1914; soon

thereafter, "the gang situation downtown had entered its decadent phase. Gangs were splintering into tiny groups, while bands of juveniles and amateurs were coming up everywhere" (Sante, 1991, p. 231).

Third Period of Gang Growth in New York City

Youth gangs are presumed to have virtually disappeared from New York City by the 1950s, following the *West Side Story* era (Sullivan, 1993). But field observations in the city by an anthropologist and adroit gang researcher (Miller, 1974) refuted the popular media story that the gangs had dissolved. In New York City and other places, "mass migration of Southern Blacks (seeking better employment opportunities and social conditions) landed many of them in urban locales near all White neighborhoods, which sparked interracial conflict . . . White male youth groups formed and violently resisted racial integration of neighborhoods, which led to Black brotherhoods evolving into social protection groups" (Cureton, 2009, p. 351). Under these conditions, "street gangs became entrenched in the social fabric of the underclass" (p. 351).

New York City's gangs also were strengthened during this period by Latino immigrant groups (from Latin America, the Caribbean, Puerto Rico) that moved into areas of the city populated by European Americans—particularly in the South Bronx (Curtis, 2003) and Brooklyn (Sullivan, 1993).

Urban planners built high-rise public housing developments across the country (from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s). Black gangs were very prevalent in these and in segregated communities in New York City by the 1960s (Gannon, 1967; Miller, 1982/1992). On the one hand, high-rise public housing settings provided gangs with cohesion because it was an identifiable and secure home base (Monti, 1993). On the other hand, the creation of low-income, high-rise public housing shifted previous inner-city slums and ghettos to outer-city, ring-city, or suburban areas (Miller, 1982/1992). The scattering of these low-income public housing projects around the city served to diffuse to some extent the between-gang violence that developed in Chicago.

By the 1960s, more than two-thirds of the New York gangs were Puerto Rican or black (Gannon, 1967, p. 122). However, the highly organized Chinatown gangs reigned for nearly 20 years—from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s—during which they were "responsible for systematic extortion and violence" (M. L. Sullivan, 2006, p. 22). In this same period, a surging Hispanic/Latino population succeeded whites across New York City, creating a preponderance of both all-minority and multiethnic neighborhoods (Lobo et al., 2002). In the post-1990 period, newer Hispanic groups began to succeed Puerto Ricans. "In fact, by the late 1990s, Hispanics had replaced blacks as the largest minority group in the city" (p. 704). "Social observers of New York City in the 1880s, when the city was swarming with Irish gangs, would have been incredulous had they been told that within the century the police would be hard put to locate a single Irish gang in the five boroughs of the city" (Miller, 1982/1992, p. 79).

Modern-Day Eastern Gangs

In the 1990s, post-World War II urban renewal, slum clearances, and ethnic migration pitted gangs of African-American, Puerto Rican, and Euro-American youth against each other in battles to dominate changing neighborhoods, and to establish and maintain their turf and honor (Schneider, 1999). By 2008, "approximately 640 gangs with more than 17,250 members [were] criminally active in the New England region[4] " (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2008, p. 17). Most of the gang growth in this region has been in the 222 Corridor—so named because Pennsylvania Route 222 bisects five cities[5] in the state. In the decade following the late 1990s, "each of these cities experienced a dramatic increase in gangs and their associated criminal activities" (Easton Gang Prevention Task Force, 2007). "Violent gang members from major metropolitan areas such as New York City, Newark, Philadelphia, and Baltimore travel to and through the 222 Corridor using the smaller urban communities as part of their drug distribution networks" (p. 1).

Another important trend in the broader Northeast region is increasing gang-related violence as a result of competition among gangs for control of territories (FBI, 2008). According to the FBI's intelligence reports, "the most significant gangs operating in the East Region are Crips, Latin Kings, MS-13, Ñeta, and United Blood Nation" (p. 16).

A relatively new street gang in the Northeast region, the Trinitarios, meaning the Trinity or Special One, was formed during the late 1990s for protection from Dominican inmates in New York prisons (FBI, 2008). Upon leaving prison, members banded together as a street gang, calling themselves Trinitarios to separate themselves from other Dominican street gangs in New York. "Trinitarios members are establishing a reputation for extreme violence throughout the area" and this gang appears to be increasing its presence in the region (p. 16). Its members are particularly involved in drug trafficking, robberies, auto theft, and murder. Trinitarios also maintains strong, hierarchical organizations in correctional facilities.

In addition to the Trinitarios, local law enforcement agencies currently identify the East Coast Bloods and Dead Man Inc. as presenting enormous threats to public safety in the Northeast region. The East Coast Bloods were formed in New York City's Rikers Island Jail in 1993 to fight off Ñetas and Latin Kings within the facilities.[6] Members of this gang are predominantly African-American males aged 16–35 years. Some gang

4 This region extends northward from the New York border.

5 Easton, Bethlehem, Allentown, Reading, and Lancaster.

6 Capital Region Gang Prevention Center: http://www.nysgangprevention.com/).

sets[7] on Rikers require an individual to "put in work" or "eat food" (cut or slash someone) before they are considered Blood members. In the estimation of some authorities, the East Coast Bloods is reputed to be the largest street gang in New York City, and it operates in other East Coast cities as well.

Dead Man Inc. is a white prison gang that reportedly was formed in the Maryland Correctional Adjustment Center, known as Supermax. It was founded in the late 1990s by white inmates who desired affiliation with the established Black Guerrilla Family, but the group's request was denied because its white race, which conflicted with the BGFs Black membership.[8] Hence, Dead Man Inc. was formed.

Street Gang Emergence in Chicago

Chicago emerged as an industrial hub between the Civil War and the end of the 19th century. The city's capacity to produce gangs was enhanced when it recruited a massive labor force from the peasantry of Southern and Eastern Europe, becoming "a latter-day tower of Babel" (Finestone, 1976, p. 6). Gangs that flourished in Chicago in the early part of the 1900s grew mainly from the same immigrant groups that populated the early serious street gangs of New York City (Thrasher, 1927/2000). By the early 20th century, Polish and Italian gangs were the most numerous in Chicago. Only 7 percent were black. Much like the early New York scene, gangs of mixed nationalities were common; in fact, ethnically mixed gangs represented almost 40 percent of all gangs in Chicago by 1925 (p. 68). Another parallel is that the social dynamics associated with gang formation were similar in the two cities. Thrasher (1927/2000) stated the case for Chicago. The gang, he said, "is one manifestation of the disorganization incident to the cultural conflict among diverse nations and races gathered in one place and themselves in contact with a civilization foreign and largely inimical to them" (p. 76).

Thrasher (1927/1963) dubbed this "economic, moral, and cultural frontier" the "zone in transition." This "gangland" between the thriving downtown business district and neighborhoods filled with stable, working-class families was "unattractive, dirty, and filled with industry, railroad yards, ghettos, and the city's recent immigrants" (Monti, 1993, p. 4). Thrasher's study was a very broad one. In addition to gangs, he discusses other criminal groups: adult hoodlum bands, rings, syndicates, political machines, bootleggers, robbers, gambling houses, vice resorts, and other crime fixtures in the urban landscape of rapidly developing Chicago. Of the more than 1,300 gangs that he catalogued, he was able to classify 90 percent: 530 were clearly delinquent or criminal; 609 were dubious in character; and only 52 were clearly not delinquent. But this characterization masked the truly dangerous gangs that already existed in the city of Chicago at that time.

First Period of Chicago Gang Growth

Chicago's first street gangs developed among white immigrants along ethnic lines before the American Civil War.[9] Perkins (1987) found evidence of white gangs "roving the streets" in the city as far back as the 1860s, but it would be 20 years before street gangs had a notable presence. Many of the early white gangs may have emerged from fire departments. Carrying names such as "Fire Kings," these companies of young working-class men brawled in the streets and sponsored social events. After the official creation of fire departments forced volunteer operations to disband, gang activities shifted into saloons.

Predominant large Irish gangs included the Dukies and the Shielders, which exerted a powerful influence on the streets around the stockyards—robbing men leaving work, fighting among themselves, and terrorizing the German, Jewish, and Polish immigrants who settled there from the 1870s to the 1890s. These gangs fought constantly among themselves, but they occasionally united to battle nearby black gangs.[10] Black gangs did not appear until the 1920s, although "the impact of Black street gangs on the Black community was minimal, at best, prior to the 1940s" (Perkins, 1987, pp. 19, 25).

During this period, gangs became entrenched in the patronage networks operated by ward politicians (Adamson, 2000), and the city's gangs "thrived on political corruption" (Moore, 1998, p. 76). Cook County Commissioner Frank Ragen established the Ragen Athletic Club—home of the Ragen's Colts gang—on Chicago's Halsted Street. This gang's mantra was "Hit me and you hit a thousand" (p. 278). "The gang masqueraded as an athletic club but in fact controlled and protected [its] turf, particularly from Blacks who either worked in the area or traveled through the area on their way to and from work" (Arrendondo, 2004, p. 406). With members ranging in age from 17 to 30, it also "provided a *de facto* policing service for the community" (Adamson, 2000, p. 278). Several other athletic clubs hosted gangs, and gangs also assisted union leaders and factory workers in the protection of their interests (Spergel, 1995).

During the "Roaring Twenties," violence among warring gangs was a frequent occurrence in Chicago (Block, 1977). Organized crime mobs were also prevalent, the most notable of which was the Al Capone gang (Peterson, 1963). Street gangs were said to "prosper in the very shadow of these institutions" (McKay, 1949, p. 36). Thrasher described the key characteristics of most

7 Gang subgroups or sections.

8 According to intelligence information compiled by the Gang Identification Task Force: http://whiteprisongangs.blogspot.com/2009/05/dead-man-inc.html.

9 The author's main source for this early history of Chicago gangs is the Encyclopedia of Chicago History: http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/27.html. Accessed December 28, 2009.

10 The author's main source for this early history of Chicago gangs is the Encyclopedia of Chicago History: http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/27.html. Accessed December 28, 2009.

Chicago's Gangland

Source: Thrasher, 1927/2000

Gangland stretched in a broad semicircular zone about the central business district, called the Loop of Chicago, and "in general forms a sort of interstitial barrier between the Loop and the better residential areas" (p. 1). Thrasher mapped the gang regions as the "Southside badlands," the "Northside jungles," and the "West Side wilderness." In the 1920s, most Chicago gangs were of Polish stock, for the city had at least "150,000 more persons of Polish extraction than any other nationality except the German" (p. 2).

The Southside badlands produced the earliest serious street gangs in the city, which Thrasher (p. 4) traced back to 1867 in available urban documents. The unnamed group, about a dozen young men aged 17–22, were fond of gambling and robbing men as they headed home with their pay. The gangsters were said to have killed and thrown some victims into a creek. This slum area also gave rise to a number of small criminal organizations and unofficially was called "the aristocracy of gangland" (p. 5). Indeed, Ragen Colts, a notorious Irish gang that flourished on the Southside during the period 1912–1927, claimed up to 3,000 members (Short, 1974, p. 12).

Gangs in the Northside jungles continually waged war across river bridges with their enemies, gangs in the West Side wilderness. But the most notorious gangs in the Northside jungles were found in "Little Sicily," which came to be known as "Little Hell." Notably, "Death Corner" in this area was the scene of frequent murders. A Polish colony, "Pojay Town," also received considerable respect.

The West Side wilderness was a slum of 50,000 people per square mile with "a gang in almost every block" (p. 2). This area was home to the Polish Blackspots, a perennial community terror, and the fighting "West Siders," who constantly battled the "Pojay Town" from the Northside jungles. "The notorious and daring 'Deadshots' and the adventure-loving Irish and Italian 'Black Handers' [were] among the groups which [carried] on hostilities with the [black] gangs from Lake Street and the Jews to the west and south" (p. 3). The Black Handers, who specialized in blackmail, were named after secret societies in Southern Italy and Sicily (p. 72).

of the 1,313 gangs (with some 25,000 members)[11] that he found in Chicago and plotted their location on a map of the city. This exercise revealed Chicago's "gangland" (see Sidebar: Chicago's Gangland) within what Thrasher called the "interstitial" or rapidly deteriorating transitional areas (ghettos and slums) between the central city and the better residential areas.

The heyday of Chicago's white ethnic gangs soon came to an end, however. As Moore (1998, p. 68) explains it, "the gangs of the 1920s were largely "a one-generation immigrant ghetto phenomenon." Perhaps the most important reason for the gangs' dissolution is that their immigrant families were able to move out of Chicago's downtown ghettos and into better areas, into a social and economic mainstream. But "they did not take their gangs with them." These remained and more gangs soon would emerge because the whites moved to the suburbs, making room for the incipient influx of African Americans in the more impoverished central city.

Second Period of Chicago Gang Growth

The second period of gang growth in Chicago commenced in the 1930s as the result of a steady migration of Mexicans and blacks to northern cities. Black immigrants arrived first, following the U.S. Civil War, to escape the misery of Jim Crow laws and the sharecropper's life in the southern states. Between 1910 and 1930, during the "Great Migration" of more than a million blacks from the rural South to the urban North for jobs, Chicago gained almost 200,000 black residents (Marks, 1985; Miller, 2008), giving the city an enormous urban black population—along with New York City, Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia, and other Northeast and Midwest cities. From 1940 to 1950, the Chicago black population nearly doubled, from 278,000 to nearly 500,000 (Miller, 2008). Most of the immigrant blacks in Chicago settled in the area known as the Black Belt, a geographic area along State Street on the South Side, where abject poverty was concentrated (Wilson, 1987).

Large numbers of black workers were inspired "to leave family and friends and seek their fortunes in the North" (Marks, 1985, p. 5). But they faced formidable challenges. Many observers thought the black migrants were unqualified for the upward mobility paths that white immigrants had used in Northeast cities. However, "the reason for non-assimilation of Black migrants into American society was not because Blacks were non-urban or unskilled. It owed substantially… to racial segmentation of the labor force structured to keep them at what they had been recruited for, a source of cheap labor" (Marks, 1985, p. 22).

The origins of Chicago's serious street gangs can be traced to blacks' disproportionate residency in socially disorganized inner-city areas, dating back to the period between 1917 and the early 1920s (Cureton, 2009).[12] "As more and more Blacks populated Chicago, there was an increase in delinquency among Black youth as well… As one might anticipate, these activities invariably led

11 This number may not be exact. Legend has it that student research assistants played a joke on Professor Thrasher in representing 1,313 as the total number of gangs in the study (Short, 2006). This number was the address of a nearby brothel.

12 See Perkins, 1987, pp. 19–32 for a first-hand and detailed account of the early formation of black gangs in Chicago.

to Black youth hanging out together and forming cliques, major ingredients for the formation of street gangs" (Perkins, 1987, p. 20). In addition, "athletics played an important role in the development of early Black street gangs" (p. 21). The games fueled conflicts between rival teams. By the mid-fifties, Black street gangs "began to vent their frustration and perpetrate violence against the Black community."

The race riot of 1919, in which black males united to confront hostile white gang members who were terrorizing the black community, also contributed directly to black gang formation in Chicago (Perkins, 1987). White and black youth battled fiercely "as each group declared street supremacy and control over streets, alleys, railroad tracks, storefronts, building stoops, and small waterfronts" (p. 353). Although some black gangs likely formed to counter the aggressive white youth, the unorganized black youth were no match for the well-organized, all-white gangs that were centered in their athletic clubs. These confrontations declined between the 1920s and the early 1940s, but interracial conflict continued, along with competition for the ghetto's scarce resources.

Three major street gang organizations were formed between the 1940s and early 1960s (i.e., Devil's Disciples, P-Stones, and Vice Lords). Two of these gangs, the Vice Lords (1958) and the Black P-Stone Nation/Black Stone Rangers (1959), were created in the Illinois State Reformatory School at Saint Charles (p. 353; see also Dawley, 1992). The Latin Kings was also formed in this era. Established in 1960, the Devil's Disciples gang splintered into three warring factions between 1960 and 1973: the Black Disciples, the Black Gangster Disciples, and the Gangster Disciples (p. 354). Gang wars occurred frequently among these large gangs in the late 1960s (Block, 1977; Block and Block, 1993).

To make matters worse, officials constructed 51 high-rise public housing projects, virtually all of which were built in the 20 years following World War II within existing black ghetto sites (Miller, 2008). As a result of blacks' continuing population growth in Chicago, in the 1950s city planners framed another black ghetto on the west side of the city, barricaded by a freeway and an extended row of more than a dozen high-rise apartments. By many accounts, the public housing high-rises were eventually dirty, crime-ridden, and in disrepair, having become gang incubators and battlegrounds (Kotlowitz, 1992). Arguably, erecting many of the high-rise units adjacent to each other was the worst mistake that city planners made (Moore and Pinderhughes, 1993). This setting provided a strong base for gangs, but also brought them into regular and direct contact. Gangs not only grew stronger in the buildings but in several instances took control of them, literally turning them into high-rise forts.

Three gangs in particular ruled from within the public housing projects and controlled drug distribution operations: the Conservative Vice Lords, the Gangster Disciples, and the Black P. Stones (Cureton, 2009; Venkatesh, 1996).[13] Gang wars erupted, and Chicago's largely black gang problem "exploded" in the 1960s, a period of increased gang "expansion and turbulence" in Chicago (Perkins, 1987, p. 74) with the formation of so-called "super gangs" with 1,000 members or more (Chicago Crime Commission, 1995; Short, 1974). Several already sizeable gangs "were joining forces and becoming larger, structured organizations" and each of them controlled large sectors of the city (Chicago Crime Commission, 2009, pp. 11, 13). The major black street gangs were the Black Gangster Disciple Nation, Black P. Stones, Cobra Stones, and El Rukins (Perkins, 1987, p. 79).

Along with the high-rise gang incubators, it seems evident that racial unrest was a key factor accounting for this rapid period of gang growth (Cureton, 2009; Diamond, 2001; Perkins, 1987). The rise of the Black Panthers instilled black pride, and their demise stirred resentment. At the same time, "the Civil Rights Movement was advocating nonviolence, racial pride, and unity. But black students who were having nonviolent demonstrations in the South had little influence on black street gang members [in Chicago] who were having their own distinctly more violent demonstrations" (Perkins, 1987, p. 29). The black gangs that were prevalent in Chicago in the 1960s "lived and acted in a world that overlapped with that of other youths [and the gang members] were surely participants in a street culture" that promoted racial empowerment and racial unity (Diamond, 2001, p. 677). Diamond emphatically asserts that "the fact that organized gangs, per se, were not easy to spot as leaders or even actors in . . . collective responses to political and economic injustices does not necessarily mean that they did not provide an infrastructure within which sensibilities of racial anger formed and circulated" (p. 674). The youth subculture was a ready source of distinctive clothing, hairstyles, music, and other symbols including clenched fists. Diamond's research on Chicago gangs revealed that these strong sentiments fueled manly and neighborhood honor, gang growth, and conflicts that developed in conjunction with large-scale migration of blacks and both Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, in particular.

Latino gang emergence in Chicago, however, is not well-documented (Arredondo, 2004). The continuous presence of Mexicans in the city dates only from the turn of the 20th century (Valdés, 1999). The early immigrants were restricted to primarily black areas (Arredondo, 2004) and both Mexican and black youth were attacked by the reigning Polish gang, Ragen's Colts, in marking the racialized boundaries of "their" space. Other white gangs also patrolled that area. "Reportedly, young Irish men, particularly on the east side of the yards, applied violent tactics similar to those of Ragen's Colts, waylaying Mexicans and beating them up" (p. 406).

None of the gangs in Thrasher's (1927–2000, p. 68) enumeration of Chicago groups was of Mexican descent. The first major wave of Mexican migration to Chicago

13 "Gangland," The History Channel, aired April 15, 2009.

during the years 1919–1939 was instigated by the revolutionary period in Mexico and new employment opportunities in the city—particularly in the meat-packing and steel industries (Arredondo, 2008). Most of the immigrants traveled to and from Texas, Arizona, and California, but a small proportion got jobs on rail lines. Railroads in Mexico linked with the rails in Texas and elsewhere in the Southwest, and these connected with multiple railways leading to Chicago (via Laredo, San Antonio, and Kansas City). "Through track work and rail-related jobs, the first significant numbers of Mexicans worked their way to Chicago… as early as 1910, working for a variety of railroad companies" (p. 22). Soon the first colony of Mexican workers was recruited and transported by rail into Chicago by packing companies, mills, and rail yards. By the 1940s, the Mexican migration into Chicago had swelled, and it reached 56,000 by 1960, prompting residents to dub the city as the "Mexico of the Midwest."[14]

The post-World War II period also saw another surge of Mexican and Latino workers move into Midwest cities, including Chicago and Detroit (Pachon and Moore, 1981). Partly in reaction to racial violence, gangs began emerging in Mexican barrios in the 1940–1950s, notably the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation (ALKQN). Soon, Mexican immigrants spread into two Chicago communities that had long been settled by the Irish, Germans, Czechs, and Poles (Pilsen and Little Village),[15] wherein Latino gangs grew to join the ranks of the most violent gangs in the city (Spergel, 2007). As noted below, the Latin Disciples and the Latin Kings would expand to become two of the four largest Chicago gangs in the 1990s.

People and Folk

In the mid-1970s, Latino gangs, black gangs, and Caucasian gangs in Chicago formed two major alliances, the "People" and the "Folk" (see Sidebar: Gang Names and Alliances). A third group of independents was not aligned with either. It is said that the People and the Folk were formed in the penitentiary system by incarcerated gang members seeking protection through coalition building (Chicago Crime Commission, 2009). The two alliances were said to have carved out turf boundaries similar to agreements among modern nations. "Until recent years, these alliances were respectfully maintained on Chicago's streets and the People and the Folk were strong rivals… Now, although street gangs still align themselves with the People and the Folk, law enforcement agencies all seem to agree that these alliances mean little" (p. 11). Nevertheless, "the Chicago style of gangsterism stretches to Gary, Indiana, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where alliances are fragile enough to promote interracial mistrust and solid enough to fuel feuds lasting for decades" (Cureton, 2009, p. 354).

Modern-Day Midwest Gangs

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, just 4 of the 40 major gangs in Chicago had a total membership of approximately 19,000 (the Black Gangster Disciple Nation, the Latin Disciples, the Latin Kings, and the Vice Lords). In the period between 1987 and

14 The Encyclopedia of Chicago History: http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/27.html. Accessed December 28, 2009.

15 The Encyclopedia of Chicago History: http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/27.html. Accessed December 28, 2009.

Gang Names and Alliances

Source: Miller, 2001, pp. 43–44

During much of the past century, most gangs were locality-based groups, often taking their names from the neighborhoods where they assembled and carried on their activities (e.g., Southside Raiders, Twelfth Street Locos, Jackson Park Boys). Other gangs adopted nonlocality-based names of their own choosing (e.g., Cobras, Warriors, Los Diablos, Mafia Emperors). Most gangs were autonomous and independently named. During the 1960s, a pattern of gang branches became popular in some cities, whereby a number of gangs adopted a variant of a common gang name. In Chicago in the 1960s, the Vicelord name was used by about ten local gangs, including the California Lords, War Lords, Fifth Avenue Lords, and Maniac Lords. These gangs claimed to be part of a common organization—the Vicelord Nation—related to one another by ties of alliance and capable of engaging in centrally directed activity (Keiser, 1969).

In the 1980s, the pattern of adopting a common name and claiming a federated relationship with other gangs expanded enormously. The most prominent of these were the Crips and Bloods—two rival gangs originally formed in Los Angeles—with locality designations reflecting neighborhoods in that city (e.g., Hoover Crips, East Side 40th Street Gangster Crips, Hacienda Village Bloods, and 42nd Street Piru Bloods). Many of the Bloods and Crips gangs or "sets" regarded one another as mortal enemies and engaged in a continuing blood feud. In succeeding years, hundreds of gangs across the United States adopted the Bloods and Crips names. A 1994 survey counted more than 1,100 gangs in 115 cities throughout the nation with Bloods or Crips in their names.

Another gang name widely used throughout the nation was the Latin Kings—a name originally used in Chicago in the 1940s. Another development during the late 1900s was the practice by gangs of identifying themselves with named alliances or federations that had become nationally, rather than locally or regionally, prevalent, often as paired antagonists (i.e., traditional rivals). Prominent among these "families" or "nations" were the People and the Folks.

1990, these four gangs were responsible for nearly seven out of ten of the city's street gang-motivated crimes and more than five out of ten street gang-motivated homicides (Block and Block, 1993).

The most recent chapter in Chicago gang history is the proliferation of gangs outside the city of Chicago, in the surrounding county and beyond. Street gangs were pushed outward to the suburbs with the gentrification of the inner city and the destruction of high-rise housing units. By 2006, 19 gang turfs were scattered around Chicago, throughout Cook County (Chicago Crime Commission, 2009, p. 119). Next, gangs began emerging in the larger region surrounding Chicago on the North, West, and South sides. At the present, "Chicago style of gangsterism stretches to Gary, Indiana, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin" (Cureton, 2009).

Chicago is not the only city in the Central region that reports serious gang problems (FBI, 2008, p. 18). Other cities in this region that have extensive gang activity include Cleveland, Detroit, Joliet, Kansas City, Minneapolis, Omaha, and St. Louis. According to the FBI (2008), Latino gangs with ties to the southern California-based Mexican Mafia (La Eme) prison gang have established a presence in the Central region and are attempting to expand their influence there. Hispanic Sureños 13 members have also been reported in the region (p. 15). In addition, several Latino gangs are said to be involved in drug trafficking with the Mexican drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs) operating along the U.S.–Mexico border (p. 11).

Despite these developments, traditional Chicago gangs still have the strongest presence within the Midwest region. Gang growth among several of them has continued to the present time, and some reformation has taken place. In 2008, "the largest street gangs in Chicago appear to be the Gangster Disciple Nation (GDN), Black Gangsters/New Breeds (BG), Latin Kings (LKs), Black P. Stone Nation, Vice Lords (VLs), the Four Corner Hustlers and the Maniac Latin Disciples (MLDs)" (Chicago Crime Commission, 2009, p. 11).

Gang Growth in the West

The existence of the Mexican population in the United States dates back to the 16th century, when Spanish explorers settled what was then northern Mexico and is currently the American West (Moore and Pinderhughes, 1993). In Los Angeles and Albuquerque, the downtown plazas were original settlement areas, around which these cities grew. Spanish and Mexican settlers who already lived in that region became United States citizens following the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848, although Mexican immigration in large numbers did not begin until the turn of the 20th century (Pachon and Moore, 1981).

Gang-like groups are said to have first appeared in the Western region as early as the 1890s (Redfield, 1941; Rubel, 1965). Widely recognized experts on Latino gang origins (Moore, 1978, 1991; Vigil, 1990) suggest that the precursors of Latino or Chicano (American-born) urban gangs in the Western region were the *palomilla* (meaning literally, flock of doves). These are best described as small groups of young Mexican men that formed out of a "male cohorting tradition," first reported in south Texas in the early 1900s (Rubel, 1965). These nascent gangs appear to have migrated along the trail that originated in Mexico and continued along a route through El Paso and Albuquerque, and onward to Los Angeles. The first Los Angeles gangs, called "boy gangs" (Bogardus, 1926), clearly were patterned after the *palomilla* (Moore, 1978; Vigil, 1990).

The trail from Mexico to Los Angeles would later come to resemble a well-traveled road. Gangs exist in Mexican states from which migration to the United States has been most common, including in states such as Jalisco and Michoacan, with a generations-old tradition of migration to and from the United States (Moore, 2007). In fact, events that led to the presence of Mexican street gangs in Los Angeles and the entire Western region began long before the first gangs appeared there (Valdez, 2007, pp. 93–136). Following the end of the war between the United States and Mexico, under the Treaty of Hidalgo (in 1848), the Mexican government ceded a large southwestern region to the United States. Mexican citizens in the area we now know as California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and half of Colorado became naturalized U.S. citizens. "Many Mexican street gang members felt—and still feel—that the United States stole this part of their country from their ancestors" (p. 94).

Worse yet, the Mexicans became alienated in their own homeland. Even though they were naturalized citizens, "they often were treated as second-class citizens and were told to go back to their home, Mexico. In their mind, they were home, but now [their homeland] was part of the United States because of the annexation. They were in a country where they were not wanted, but they could not return to Mexico because of their new status with the United States" (p. 94). Over the next half-century, these alienated people were slowly joined by other migrants from Mexico. Then Mexican immigration was greatly accelerated by the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) and the labor needs of the Southwest and the Midwest. These two factors combined to draw up to 2 million Mexican immigrants to the United States in the next 20 years (Vigil, 1988).

Two forces served to incubate street gangs of Mexican origin in Los Angeles and in other Western cities: physical and cultural "marginalization" (Vigil, 1988, 2002, 2008). The barrios in which the earliest and most firmly established gangs developed were well-demarcated settlements of Mexican immigrants. "They were located in geographically isolated areas that other settlers and developers had bypassed as less appropriate for habitation, and were further isolated by cultural, racial, and socioeconomic barriers enforced by ingrained prejudices of the Anglo-American community" (Vigil,

1993, p. 95). This rendered the barrios more impermeable to outside influences.

Mexican immigrants were culturally marginalized between their society of origin and the dominant American culture to which they had migrated. *Cholo* youth, the poorest of the poor marginalized immigrants, could not fully assimilate into Anglo culture or develop a unique identity incorporating aspects of both Anglo and Latino culture (Horowitz, 1983; Vigil, 1988, 1990). This group comprises the cholo subculture (Lopez and Brummett, 2003). Being a cholo allows such youth to assert a Latino identity, take pride in it, and deny "being *enbacheado* (Anglicized)" (Vigil, 1988, p. 42). In other words, these street youth shaped their own *cholo* (a derivative of the Spanish *solo*, meaning "alone") subculture.

Gangs more territorially structured than the *palomilla* and *cholo* groups were populated by second-generation children of Mexican Americans who gathered in groups to "give themselves emotional and psychological support in a defeating world" (Pachon and Moore, 1981, pp. 119–120). The nuclei of the gangs that emerged in the barrios were street youth "who saw little to aspire to in their parents' difficult circumstances and received little guidance from other adults" (Vigil, 1993, p. 96). They were formed among youth who were culturally and socially alienated and gravitated to barrio hangouts.

First Period of Gang Growth in Los Angeles

The Latino gangs in the barrios (neighborhoods) of East Los Angeles typically formed in adolescent friendship groups in the 1930s and 1940s (Moore, 1993), although the first ones appeared in the 1920s as "boy gangs" (Bogardus, 1926). Conflict with groups of youth in other barrios, school officials, police, and other authorities solidified them as highly visible groups (Moore, 1993; Vigil, 1993). Core members of the gangs that flourish in these barrios tended to come from among those cholos with the weakest ties to either the Mexican-American or Anglo-American cultures. Thus the gang subculture provided a means of social adjustment or adaptation for marginalized youth. The earlier "boy gangs" were now transformed into street gangs (Vigil, 1990), in a ritualized "street baptism" (Vigil, 2004).

Each day, "conflict with rival gangs provides an arena for the demonstration of street-learned skills, values, and loyalties" (Vigil, 1993, p. 98). A territorial-based rationale for conflict became institutionalized that is distinguished by "defense of the barrio and fighting for one's 'homeboys,'" for the honor of both (p. 96). "Mi barrio" (my neighborhood) became synonymous with "my gang." "The interchangeability of these terms is important in the gang subculture; a boy is a member of a gang, of a neighborhood, and of a barrio" (Moore, Vigil, and Garcia, 1983, p. 184). "They fought other gangs and they sprayed their graffiti all over the place" (Moore, 1993, p. 35). Latino gangs became cultural institutions in Latino communities on the East Los Angeles streets and in several other southwestern cities (Moore, 1978).

This intense bonding to barrios and gangs is unique to Los Angeles and other Western cities. "In Chicago, no such well-defined Mexican, Latino, or youth-gang subculture has developed, in large part because the major barrios were not settled until the 1960s" (Hutchison, 1993, p. 164). In contrast, "the long duration of gangs in barrios throughout Southern California has created both a model and a direct impetus for the formation of other gangs in nearby areas" (Vigil, 1993, p. 97). "Each new wave of immigrants has settled in or near existing barrios and created new ones, [providing] a new generation of poorly schooled and partially acculturated youths from which the gangs draw their membership" (Vigil and Long, 1990, p. 56). Moore and Pinderhughes (1993) contrast this process of gang institutionalization in the American Southwest with the establishment of gangs in Chicago and other urban centers, where gangs formed simultaneously with "ethnic succession."

This history is not all that distinguishes Latino or Mexican-American gangs from those in New York and Chicago. Another main difference is that gangs in these two cities emanated from conflicts with other racial/ethnic groups (Adamson, 1998, 2000). In contrast, Latino gangs drew more of their strength from their own ethnic history. A second main difference is that the Western Latino gangs did not grow out of severe social disorganization, as was claimed in the evolutionary history of New York and Chicago gangs. Generally speaking, poverty did not become as concentrated in Latino neighborhoods as in Chicago or New York City (Moore and Pinderhughes, 1993, p. xxx).

Second Period of Gang Growth in Los Angeles

From 1940 to 1964, another 4 million Mexicans settled in the United States, followed by an additional 6 to 12 million in the 1970s (Vigil, 2002). The Los Angeles area received the most Mexican immigrants. "By 1990 the number of native Mexican Americans and immigrant Mexicans in Los Angeles County exceeded three million" (Vigil, 2002, p. 30). As a result, the city grew enormously "between 1930 and 1990, adding more than six million people for a total of nearly nine million residents" (Moore and Vigil, 1993, p. 30), becoming the second-largest city in the nation. Los Angeles became heavily populated with an unusual mixture of native-born urban Americans, Mexican Americans from other parts of the Southwest, new immigrants from Mexico, and third-generation Latinos who had long lived in the intermixed barrios (Moore, 1978). Indeed, "Los Angeles has long been the Latino 'capital' of the United States, housing more people of Mexican descent than most cities in Mexico" (Moore and Vigil, 1993, p. 27).

Two other historic events in the 1940s would prove pivotal in the development of Mexican-American gangs in the Southwest: the Sleepy Lagoon murder, and the Zoot Suit Riots. Sleepy Lagoon was a popular swimming hole in what is now East Los Angeles. A Mexican youngster was killed there in 1942, and members of the 38th Street Mexican gang were arrested and charged with murder by the Los Angeles Police Department (Valdez, 2007, pp. 98–99). Unfortunately, the criminal trial resembled a "kangaroo court," in which five of the gang members were convicted and sentenced to prison. "Mexican street gangs changed forever because of these convictions. The jail sentences also acted as a glue to unite the Mexican community in a common cause, a fight against class distinction based on prejudice and racism, a fight against the establishment" (p. 98). The 38th Street gang members' cause continued in prison. They maintained their dignity and "demonstrated a type of gang pride and resolve never seen before. These behaviors also elevated the incarcerated 38th Street gang members to folk hero status in the Mexican community. The street gang members especially held them in high esteem" (p. 99).

The Zoot Suit Riots had a similar unifying effect for Mexican Americans. Zoot suits were a fashionable clothing trend in the late 1920s and popularized in the nightclubs of Harlem (Valdez, 2007, p. 96). The exaggerated zoot suit included an oversized jacket with wide lapels and shoulders, and baggy pants that narrowed at the ankles, typically accompanied by a wide-brimmed hat. The style traveled west and south into Mexico and, most likely, was introduced into California via the El Paso Mexican street gang population. By 1943, the Anglo community, the police, and the media began to view the zoot suiters as a savage group that presumably had attacked vulnerable white women and was also said to be responsible for several local homicides (Katz and Webb, 2006, p. 44). Military personnel and citizen mobs chased and beat anyone wearing a zoot suit—Latino and black youth alike—during a five-day riotous period (Vigil, 2002, p. 68).

Third Period of Gang Growth in Los Angeles

In this third stage, the development of black gangs in Los Angeles follows a pattern that is similar to the emergence of black gangs in Chicago. As in Chicago, a pattern of south-to-north black migration fueled the growth of black gangs in Los Angeles (Cureton, 2009). But gang formation in Los Angeles developed in two phases (Alonso, 2004): post-World War II to 1965, and between 1970–1972. In both periods, "racial intimidation, school and residential segregation, extreme marginalization, and racial exclusion from mainstream Los Angeles" played significant roles in black gang formation (Alonso, 2004, p. 659).

The influx of black immigrants came in two waves, between 1915 and 1929 and from 1940 to 1950, with most newcomers coming from the Deep South (Vigil, 2002, pp. 63–68). "Southern blacks were simply looking for a better life, and the West was considered the land of prosperity because of employment opportunities in factories" (Cureton, 2009, p. 355). Instead, institutional inequality (in housing, education, and employment), and restrictive housing covenants legalized in the 1920s rendered much of Los Angeles off-limits to most minorities (Alonso, 2004; Cureton, 2009). Black residents challenged these covenants, leading to violent clashes between white social clubs and clusters of black youth. "Fear of attack from Whites was widespread and this intimidation led to the early formation of Black social street clubs aimed at protecting Black youths against persistent White violence directed at the Black community" (Cureton, 2009, p. 664).

Although Chicago had its own race riot, racial violence played a much stronger role in the formation of black street gangs in Los Angeles than was the case in Chicago (Alonso, 2004; Cureton, 2009). The first black gangs formed in Los Angeles in the late 1940s as a defensive response to white youth violence in the schools (Vigil, 2002, p. 68), from which they spread south and westward (Alonso, 2004). But the gangs that grew in the 1950s and 1960s were far more serious gangs than the earlier ones. These grew out of black clubs and nascent gangs that played a central role in developing resistance strategies to counter white intimidation. "As white clubs began to fade from the scene, eventually the black clubs, which were first organized as protectors of the community, began to engage in conflicts with other black clubs. "Black gang activity [soon] represented a significant proportion of gang incidents" across Los Angeles (p. 665).

By the mid-1950s, South Central black gangs "served as the architects of social space in the new, usually hostile, settings" (Alonso, 2004, p. 68). Generally speaking, in the ghetto areas of the southside and the eastside of Los Angeles, "where tens of thousands of 1940s and 1950s Black immigrants were crammed into the overcrowded, absentee-landlord housing, youth gangs offered 'cool worlds' of street socialization for poor young newcomers from rural Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi" (p. 68). With time, blacks "were able to escape the ghetto to surrounding communities, but in doing so they merely widened the ghetto's boundaries" (p. 69).

"The end of the 1960s was the last chapter of the political, social, and civil rights movement by Black groups in LA, and a turning point away from the development of positive Black identity in the city" (Alonso, 2004, p. 668). But the "deeply racialized context coincided with the resurgence of new emerging street groups" between 1970 and 1972 (p. 668). Black Los Angeles youth searching for a new identity began to mobilize as street groups. This process also widened the base of black gangs into two camps, Crips and Bloods.

The Crips and Bloods began to emulate the territory-marking practices that had been developed by the early Los Angeles Latino gangs (Valdez, 2007, p. 186).[16]

Crips wore blue clothing; the Bloods chose red. The Crips led the way in using graffiti to mark their territories. They often listed core members of their gangs. Their claimed areas came to be known as "hoods." They developed a mantra, "Crips don't die, they multiply." Indeed, the Crips grew enormously throughout Los Angeles County, particularly in the public housing projects, "insuring that available positive role models were kept to a minimum and that the role models who were around belonged to the street" (Vigil, 2002, p. 77). Both the Bloods and the Crips grew in these settings (Valdez, 2007, Vigil, 2002), particularly in the housing projects built in Watts in the 1950s—in Jordan Downs, William Nickerson, Jr. Gardens, and Imperial Courts—and blacks made up nearly 95 percent of these two gangs (Vigil, 2002, p. 76).

The Los Angeles gang culture soon began to draw the attention of youth in nearby cities. By the 1970s, street gangs had emerged in most populated areas across California (Miller, 1982/1992, pp. 35–36). At that time, there were 20 cities in California with populations of 100,000 or more. Of these, 19 reported gang problems, and altogether street gangs were reported in more than 100 cities and towns across the state. "The numbers of cities and towns with gang problems in the extended Los Angeles metropolitan area, along with the size of the population aggregates affected, were… without precedent in American history" (p. 37).

Modern-Day Western Gangs

The Bloods became particularly strong in the black communities in South Central Los Angeles—especially in places on its periphery such as Compton—and in outlying communities such as Pacoima, Pasadena, and Pomona (Alonso, 2004; Vigil, 2002). By 1972, there were 18 Crips and Bloods gangs in Los Angeles, and these were the largest of the more than 500 active gangs in the city in the 1970s (Vigil, 2002, p. 76). In the 1980s, the most prominent of the Los Angeles Crips and Bloods were the Hoover Crips, East Side 40th Street Gangster Crips, Hacienda Village Bloods, and 42nd Street Piru Bloods (Miller, 2001). Many of the Bloods and Crips gangs regarded one another as mortal enemies and engaged in a continuing blood feud. In succeeding years, hundreds of gangs in the Southwest—and also in other parts of the United States—adopted the Bloods and Crips names. "Today, all west coast black street gang members affiliate themselves with the Bloods or Crips" (Valdez, 2007, p. 189).

The significant street and prison Latino gangs operating in the Western and Pacific regions (particularly California, Nevada, and Hawaii) are La Eme, 18th Street, Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13), and Nuestra Familia, (FBI, 2008, p. 19). The most prominent Mexican gangs among these are 18th Street, La Eme, and Nuestra Familia. The FBI considers the California-based Mexican Mafia (La Eme) to be one of seven major prison gangs.[17]

The Mexican Mafia prison gang was formed in the late 1950s within the California Department of Corrections (FBI, 2008). It is loosely structured and has strict rules that must be followed by members. Altogether, the Mexican Mafia controls approximately 50,000 to 75,000 California Sureños gang members and associates (p. 7). Most members are Mexican-American males who previously belonged to a southern California street gang. Although the Mexican Mafia is active in the Southwestern and Pacific regions of the United States, its power base is in California. The gang's main source of income is extorting drug distributors outside prison and distributing methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin, and marijuana within prison systems and on the streets. Some members have direct links to Mexican drug-trafficking organizations, which is examined in more detail in the following section. The Mexican Mafia also is involved in other criminal activities, including controlling gambling and homosexual prostitution in prison.

Two notorious gangs, MS-13 and the 18th Street gang, both of which originated in the Los Angeles area, are examined below, as possible "transnational gangs."

Street Gang Emergence in the South

The Southern region[18] emerged much later as an important gang territory. For one thing, it lacked a central large city within which early gang activity was concentrated. The early immigrant groups were dispersed across the area. Moreover, gang activity likely did not emerge in the southern states prior to the 1970s

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16 There are other competing accounts of how Bloods and Crips gangs formed. Prominent among these is Cureton's (2009, pp. 356–357). Based on his research, former Black Panther president Bunchy Carter and Raymond Washington formed the Crips in 1969 out of disappointment with the failure of the Black Panther Party to achieve its goals. The Crips were originally organized to be a community help association; however, following Carter's death, the Crips' leadership shifted its focus "to drug and gun sales that involved much violence." Street gang feuds soon erupted. Neighborhood groups who opposed the Crips formed an umbrella organization to unify these groups. "Hence, the Bloods were born (1973 to 1975), and their philosophy was that a far more ruthless approach was needed to compensate for being outnumbered by the Crips… The Crips and Blood feuds were historic, featuring the rise and fall of peace treaties, community stress, shock, and sorrow over the unforgiving nature of fatal violence." For yet another competing account of Bloods and Crips origins, see Valdez (2007, pp. 186–87).

17 The others are Aryan Brotherhood, Barrio Azteca, Black Guerrilla Family, Hermanos de Pistoleros Latinos, Mexikanemi (also known as Texas Mexican Mafia or Emi), and Ñeta. See FBI, 2008, pp. 28–29 for more detailed information on each of these.

18 Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia.

(Miller, 1982/1992).[19] Toward the end of that decade, only four southern cities reported gang activity (Dallas, Fort Worth, New Orleans, Miami, and San Antonio) (pp. 42, 110). Among these cities, only Miami and San Antonio were considered to have a moderately serious gang problem at that time (pp. 45, 110). Actually, Dallas, San Antonio, St. Louis, Fort Worth, and Miami reported a greater problem with disruptive local groups than gangs in the 1970s (p. 68).

Gang activity grew significantly across the South from the 1970s through the 1990s but remained dispersed across the Southern region (Miller, 2001, p. 26). Several southern states saw sharp increases in the number of new gang counties by 1995: Florida (23 percent), South Carolina (15 percent), Alabama (12 percent), and Texas (8 percent). In addition, gang activity emerged in multiple cities in a number of southern counties by 1995, including Dallas County, Texas (18 cities); Broward County, Florida (15 cities); Palm Beach County, Florida (11 cities); Dade County, Florida (8 cities); and St. Louis County, Missouri (6 cities). From the 1970s through 1995, the Southern region led the nation in the number of new gang cities, a 32 percent increase, versus increases of 26 percent in the Midwest, 6 percent in the Northeast, and 3 percent in the West (p. 32).

By 1998, the states with the largest number of gang-problem *cities* were California (363), Illinois (261), Texas (156), and Florida (125) (Miller, 2001, p. 60). Of these, only two, California and Illinois, reported large numbers of cities with gang problems in the 1970s. The states with the largest number of gang *counties* in 1998 were Texas (82), Georgia (61), California (50), Illinois (42), and Florida (40), with the South replacing the Northeast as the region with the most top-ranking states (p. 63). Hence, the Southern region appeared to catch up with other regions in the prevalence of gang activity just before the turn of the century.

Another Wave of Immigrant Groups

Another mixture of immigrant groups would arrive after the mid-1960s. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 ended the national quotas on foreigners in the U.S. This led to a shift in immigration to the U.S., from European origins to Central and South America and Asia (Bankston, 1998). The new groups consisted largely of Asians (Cambodians, Filipinos, Koreans, Samoans, Thais, Vietnamese, and others) and Latin Americans (Colombians, Cubans, Dominicans, Ecuadorians, Mexicans, Panamanians, Puerto Ricans, and others) (Miller, 2001, pp. 45–46). By the late 1980s, the children of many American-born or Americanized parents among the new immigrants, dubbed "the new second generation," had reached adolescence or young adulthood (Portes and Zhou, 1993), and these youth "formed gangs in the classic immigrant gang tradition" (Miller, 2001, p. 46).

The urban areas where these members of the new second generation settled "experienced increased juvenile crime in recent years, in addition to increased ethnic diversity" (Bankston, 1998, p. 36). Gang-related crime in many cities increased during the same era. The number of gang cities started accelerating in the 1980s and grew steadily through the 1990s (Miller, 2001, pp. 64–68). "Youth gangs of the 1980s and 1990s are more numerous, more prevalent, and more violent than in the 1950s, probably more so than at any time in the country's history" (Miller, 1990, p. 263; see also Spergel, 1995, pp. 33–42). Miller, Moore, and Spergel draw attention to distinct racial/ethnic components of the elevated gang violence. "There can be little doubt that the new immigrants have contributed to the growth of gangs" (Miller, 2001, p. 46).

However, the faces of gang members soon changed nationwide in three other important respects, the widespread involvement of white youth, females, and youth from all socioeconomic strata. By the middle of this decade, studies showed relatively equal proportions of racial/ethnic groups in young samples. For example in a 15-city sample, racial and ethnic proportions were quite similar for whites (7 percent), blacks (8 percent), and Hispanics (9 percent), but slightly larger (13 percent) for multiracial groups (Esbensen, Brick, Melde, et al., 2008). Differences between female versus male gang membership rates also gradually became minimal. In this same 15-city sample where gangs are active, 9 percent of boys and 8 percent of girls were classified as current gang members. Nationwide, in the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, the male-to-female ratio was approximately 2:1 (11 percent of males versus 6 percent of females) (Snyder and Sickmund, 2006, p. 70).

"Transnational" Gangs

If one is using this term broadly to mean multinationality of membership, then transnational gangs are not a new phenomenon in the United States (Franco, 2008b). So-labeled gangs in the United States "have included [those] composed of members of Asian, Russian, African, Serbian, Bosnian, Jamaican, and other races, ethnicities, and nationalities. Some of these transnational gangs have evolved into highly organized and sophisticated criminal enterprises known for influencing government officials and the judiciary in the countries in which they operate. In the United States, the most well-known example of this type of crime syndicate is the Mafia, or La Cosa Nostra, composed of members of Sicilian descent" (p. 2).

There is no single definition of a transnational gang. Various definitions have cited one or more of the following characteristics (Franco, 2008b, p. 2):

- Such gangs are criminally active and operational in more than one country.

19 Mexican-American gangs actually existed in San Antonio before the 1970s (Valdez, 2007, p. 43). But Valdez notes that these early multigenerational barrio gangs in the city were not connected to others that emerged later.

- Criminal activities committed by gang members in one country are planned, directed, and controlled by gang leaders in another country.
- Such gangs tend to be mobile and adapt to new areas.
- The criminal activities of such gangs tend to be sophisticated and transcend borders.

For a gang to be considered transnational, Franco suggests that it should have more than one of the above characteristics; however, "much of the literature characterizes . . . gangs as transnational merely because they are present in more than one country" (p. 2).

The notorious 18th Street gang (M-18) and Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) Los Angeles gangs have been called transnational gangs. Both gangs became aligned to the Mexican Mafia prison gang and thus became Sureños, adopting the number 13 into their iconography (for the letter "M," the 13th letter of the alphabet). As a result, Mara Salvatrucha is often known as MS-13.

18th Street Gang

The 18th Street gang (also called Calle 18, Barrio 18, or M-18) emerged in the 1960s (Valdez, 2000b). The 18th Street gang was created because a local Mexican gang, Clanton Street, rejected all youths who could not prove 100% Mexican ancestry. "As a result, the kids from the Clanton Street neighborhood who were denied membership because of their tainted ancestry formed their own gang. They became the original 18th Street gang" (p. 146). To date, it "is probably one of the largest Hispanic street gangs in the country and it has become established nationally and internationally" (Valdez, 2007, p. 145). It was formed in Los Angeles as a result of prejudice on the part of Mexican street gang members against mixed-race Mexicans and non-Mexicans.

Because it broke the racial barrier in accepting largely immigrant youths and those of mixed racial backgrounds, the 18th Street gang quickly grew enormously. "Predominately composed of Hispanics, some cliques of the 18th Street gang have even recruited African Americans, Asians, Whites, and Native Americans for membership . . . . Another unique aspect about the 18th Street gang is that, although it was primarily turf-oriented, some gang members traveled to other areas and states to establish cliques and start illegal activities" (Valdez, 2007, p. 146).

The size of the 18th Street gang is phenomenal. Some estimates have assessed the 18th Street gang as having more than 20,000 members in California, other states, and a few other countries (Valdez, 2007, p. 145). The 18th Street gang epitomizes the enormity of the Mexican gang phenomenon that Los Angeles produced.

> "Like most gangs, 18th Street is involved in many types of criminal activities including auto theft, car-jacking, drive-by shootings, drug sales, arms trafficking, extortion, rape, murder, and murder for hire. Although national and international drug trafficking seems to be the main criminal activity that the 18th Street gang is involved in, it is helpful to know that the 18th Street gang also established ties with the Mexican and Columbian [sic] drug cartels. Because of the amount of drugs being distributed and sold, 18th Street also has connections with the Mexican Mafia prison gang and many African American street gangs" (Valdez, 2007, p. 147).

Mara Salvatrucha 13

As Central American gang experts explain, the word *mara* is a Spanish word for "gang," coming from a type of ant in Central America known for its ferocity. *Trucha* means "trout" but is also a slang term for "shrewd Salvadoran" (Manwaring, 2005b, p. 44; see also Franco, 2008a; McGuire, 2007). Thus, Mara Salvatrucha specifically refers to a gang of shrewd Salvadorans. Generally speaking, though, the term *maras* can also be used to denote Central American gangs.

Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) originated in gang-infested neighborhoods of Los Angeles in the 1980s among refugees of the Salvadoran civil war (1979–1992) who had fled to the United States. Originally, MS-13 had only native El Salvadoran members (Valdez, 2007, pp. 149–151; Valdez, 2000a). Salvadoran youth faced a choice: either join 18th Street or form their own gang to combat it. A number of them chose the latter option, thus forming what became known as Mara Salvatrucha, and the rivalry between the two groups began. Soon members from Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, and a few blacks from the southern United States were allowed to join Mara Salvatrucha and the gang grew in strength.

The main "international" feature of the MS-13 gang stems from U.S. immigration policies. "Once gangs had begun to emerge in the Central American immigrant communities in the United States, U.S. deportation policies helped spread their names, their style, and their influence back to Central America" (McGuire, 2007, p. 5). The key gang diffusion mechanism was the release of convicted felons from prisons in the United States back to their countries of origin (Manwaring, 2005a, p. 1). McGuire details this important phase of the "internationalization" process:

> "Beginning in the mid 1990s, the U.S. adopted a new, more aggressive approach to deportation, identifying and deporting not only undocumented and legal non-citizen convicts as they completed federal prison sentences, but reaching out to identify and deport undocumented and non-citizen felons as they completed sentences in state and local prisons. The increasing deportation of gang-involved Central Americans from the United States fed an already-existing gang problem in Central American countries, which have many

> fewer resources than does the U.S. to address the societal threats that gangs pose. After arriving in the country to which they have been deported, with few networks and sometimes little or no working knowledge of Spanish, many gang members are likely to join forces and establish or join up with gangs in their home country, in prisons and in the streets" (McGuire, 2007, p. 5).

The U.S. deportation policies also served to strengthen the maras in Central America and other gangs in Mexico:

> "This resulted in Central American and Mexican gangs adopting more sophisticated gang techniques [that had] originated on the streets of urban America. In addition, these gangs became increasingly connected to their gang affiliates in the U.S., which has continued to facilitate cross-border communication, organization, and growth among gang members in the U.S., Central America, and Mexico" (U.S. Agency for International Development [USAID], 2006, p. 6).

Criminal opportunity is another factor that has contributed to the transnationalization of gang activity. "For example, Central American gang members consider southern Mexico to be a lucrative business environment where one can profit from the cross-border trafficking of drugs, weapons, and humans. On Mexico's northern border, gangs are reportedly hired by international drug cartels for various services such as drug distribution and assassinations" (USAID, 2006, p. 18). In June 2005, the FBI gathered information showing that some gang members are involved in transnational gang activity (p. 19):

> The FBI MS-13 National Task Force traveled to Chiapas, Mexico, on a fact-finding mission. On that trip, the FBI obtained 180 fingerprint records of gang members. These records were later shared with ICE and U.S. Customs and Border Protection. The interagency partners determined that 46 of those same individuals had already been identified in the United States. Although it was not clear from the June fact-finding mission in which direction—north or south—the gang members were heading, it was evident that there is frequent transnational movement by gang members throughout the region.

The MS-13 and 18th Street gangs currently receive considerable attention among broadcast media, law enforcement, and the U.S. Congress because of their widely publicized connections with gangs in Mexico and Central America (Franco, 2008a, 2008b). U.S. government figures place the total number of MS-13 and 18th Street gang members in the United States at roughly 38,000 (USAID, 2006, p. 17). Another 20,000 gang members are estimated to be active in gangs along the Mexico border. Both of these figures are largely based on information provided to the USAID (p. 17) by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration rather than on official Mexican and Central American records.

A United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2007) assessment produced an estimate (Box 1) of the total number of gang members in each of the Central America countries (69,145). This latter study also produced estimates of the number of gangs and gang members. Two of these estimates are particularly noteworthy. First, Honduras—not El Salvador—is believed to have the most gang members among these countries (36,000). Second, El Salvador is believed to have very few gangs (only four), but they are far larger than gangs in other countries in the region, averaging 2,625 members each. These two countries and Guatemala appear to be most affected by gang activity.

Box 1. Central American Gang Member Estimates

Country	Number of Gangs	Total Membership	Average Number of Members Per Gang
Panama	94	1,385	15
Nicaragua	268	4,500	17
Guatemala	434	14,000	32
Belize	2	100	50
Honduras	112	36,000	321
Costa Rica	6	2,660	443
El Salvador	4	10,500	2,625
Total		69,145	

Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2007, p. 60)

Extremely dire social and economic conditions in this region provide ideal gang incubating conditions. As explained by Manwaring (2007, p. 14): "The root causes of gang activity in Central American countries and Mexico are also similar. They include gang members growing up in marginal areas with minimal access to basic social services; high levels of youth unemployment, compounded by insufficient access to educational and other public benefits; overwhelmed, ineffective, and often corrupt police and justice systems; easy access to weapons; dysfunctional families; and high levels of intra-familial and intra-community violence." Although "press reports and some current and former Central American officials have blamed MS-13 and other gangs for a large percentage of violent crimes committed in those countries . . . some analysts assert that those claims may be exaggerated" (Seelke, 2008, p. 4). As Seelke notes, "other gang experts have argued that, although gangs may be more visible than other criminal groups, gang violence is only one part of a broad spectrum of violence in Central America" (Thale, 2007, citied in Seelke, 2008, p. 4).

The UNODC (2007) Central America study[20] concluded that Guatemala and El Salvador are internationally among the most violent countries for which standardized data have been collected, and that Central American countries are particularly vulnerable to violent crime fueled by drug trafficking and corruption because they are geographically located between the world's largest drug-producing and drug-consuming countries. After assessing violence in Central America, the UNODC (2007, pp. 16–17) made these observations, based on the limited crime data that are available:

> "In El Salvador, it is claimed that 60 percent of all intentional homicides are carried out by the maras, but again, the evidence for this conclusion is unclear. Research by the Salvadoran Institute of Forensic Medicine was only able to attribute some 8 percent of the firearm homicides in 2000 to mara activity. In Guatemala, a recent police study of the 427 intentional homicides that occurred in that country in January 2006 could only attribute 58 of these to gang activity (14 percent), 40 in urban areas and 18 in the countryside . . . Violence appears to be endemic, and gang members represent the demographic group most at risk of violence in any society."

Even less information is available on specific crimes that can be attributed to the 18th Street and MS-13 gangs. An assessment of gang activity in Mexico and Central American countries conducted by the U.S. Agency for International Development supported the following general conclusion: "Gangs such as MS-13 and 18th Street conduct business internationally, engaging in kidnapping, robbery, extortion, assassinations, and the trafficking of people and contraband across borders" (USAID, 2006, p. 6). MS-13 members are reportedly being contracted on an ad-hoc basis by Mexico's warring cartels to carry out revenge killings, and regional and U.S. authorities have confirmed gang involvement in regional drug trafficking (Ribando, 2007, pp. 1–2). But the question remains as to the extent to which the U.S.-based gangs are involved with drug cartels in the region. The UNODC (2007) concluded that "while some drug trafficking may involve gang members, the backbone of the flow seems to be in the hands of more sophisticated organized crime operations."

U.S. Gang Involvement in Drug Trafficking Along the U.S.-Mexico Border

It is difficult to determine at this time the extent of U.S. gang or Central America *maras* involvement in drug trafficking in the Mexico-Central America region. Figure 1 shows the five major drug-trafficking cartels, their sphere of operations, most commonly trafficked drugs, and affected counties. Other Mexican drug cartels also operate in the region, including La Familia Michoacana (LFM), Los Zetas, Tijuana, and the Beltran-Leyva Organization, and they have been battling among themselves, and with other drug-trafficking organizations and Colombian cartels over the past several years, for lucrative smuggling routes (Figure 1) (Danelo, 2009; Manwaring, 2009a, 2009b; West and Burton, 2009).

Among these, LFM has drawn the most attention in the U.S. government because of its vigilante origins and acclaimed extensions into the United States, as far north as Chicago (West and Burton, 2009). In addition, homicides related to drug trafficking in Mexico more than doubled last year, from 2,275 in 2007 to 5,207 in 2008. The Michoacana family, or La Familia, is an increasingly important contributor to this ghastly mayhem in the extremely bloody drug wars among Mexican cartels (Grayson, 2009). Evidence is lacking with respect to U.S. gang involvement in these wars. It also is difficult to draw a bright line between traditional street gangs, paramilitary organizations, and other criminal groups that operate in Mexico, Central America, and South America (Manwaring, 2009b; Sullivan, 2006; Sullivan and Bunker, 2002).

Unfortunately, according to Manwaring (2009a, p. 11):

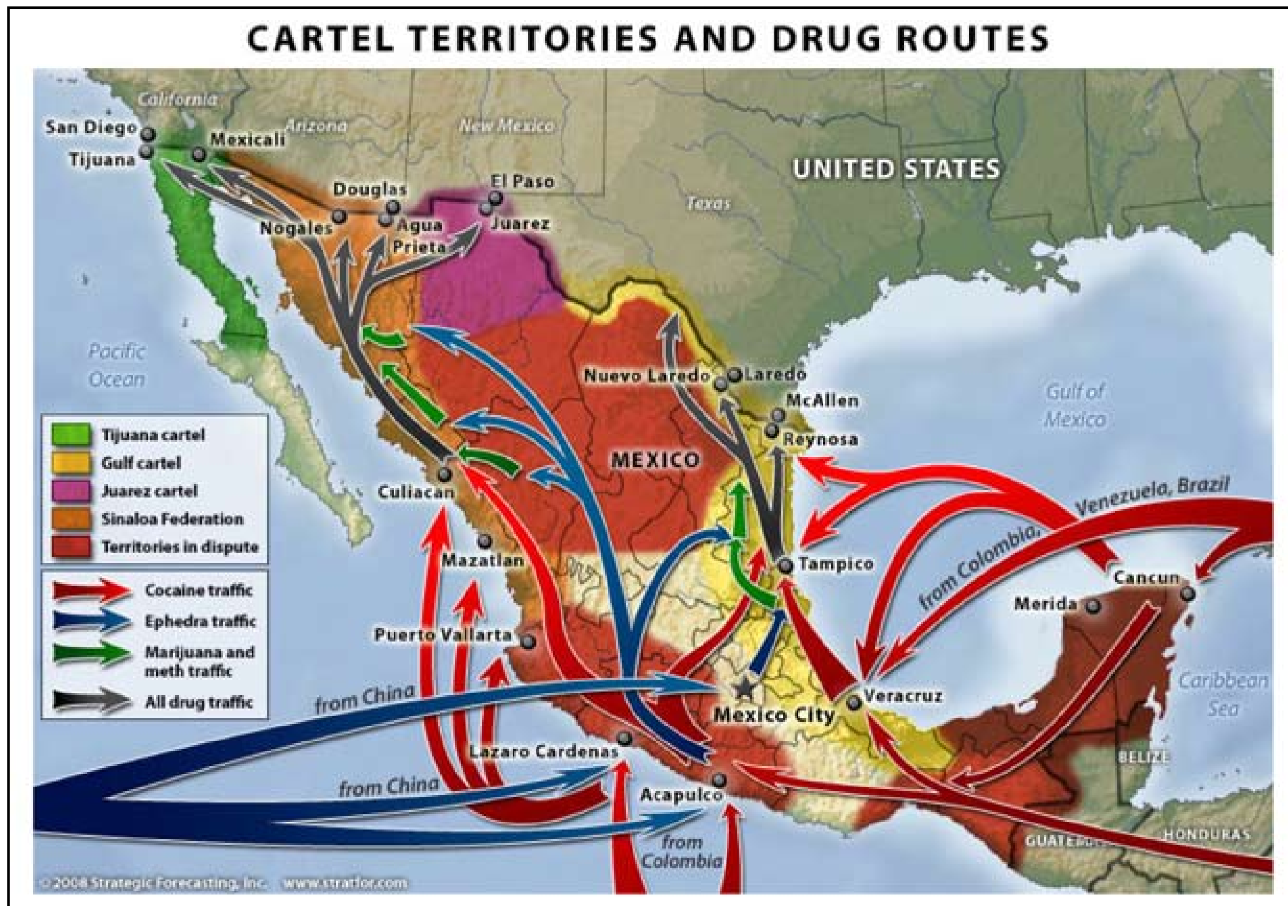
> Authorities have no consistent or reliable data on the gang-TCO [transnational criminal organization] phenomenon in Mexico. Nevertheless, the gang phenomenon in that country is acknowledged to be large and complex. In addition, the gang situation is known to be different in the north (along the U.S. border) than it is in the south (along the Guatemala-Belize borders). Second, the phenomenon is different in the areas between the northern and southern borders of Mexico. Third, a formidable gang presence is known to exist throughout the entire country (regardless of the accuracy of the data estimating the size and extent of this gang presence), and—given the weakness of national political-economic institutions—criminality has considerable opportunity to prosper."

Still, there are gaps in knowledge of U.S. gang involvement in drug trafficking with Mexican DTOs. "The exact nature of the relationship between Mexican cartels and U.S. gangs is very murky, and it appears to be handled on such an individual basis that making generalizations is difficult. Another intelligence gap is how deeply involved the cartels are in the U.S. distribution network." No doubt, some U.S. gangs play an active role in street-level drug marketing north of the border. "However, the U.S. gangs do not constitute formal extensions of the Mexican DTOs. Border gangs … have their own histories, traditions, structures and turf, and they remain independent. Their involvement in narcotics is similar to that of a contractor who can provide certain services, such as labor and protection, while drugs move across gang territory, but drug money is not usually their sole source of income."[21]

20 Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama.

21 This paragraph contains verbatim extracts (with minimal editing) from Stratfor Global Intelligence (Burton and West, 2009).

Figure 1: Major Mexican Drug Cartels *Source: © Stratfor (Burton and West, 2009)*



"Street gangs are present in virtually every U.S. city and town of significant size along the border and are obvious pools of labor for distributing narcotics once they hit the United States (see Figure 2 for a partial listing). The largest of these street gangs are MS-13 and the Mexican Mafia. The Mexican Mafia (also known as La Eme; Eme is the Spanish word for the letter M in the alphabet) works with allied gangs in the American Southwest to control large swaths of territory along both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border." Note that the Mexican Mafia is active in five of the seven drug distribution points along this border (Figure 2).[22]

"These gangs are organized to interact directly with traffickers in Mexico and oversee trans-border shipments as well as distribution inside the United States. Operating underneath the big gang players are hundreds of smaller city gangs in neighborhoods all along the border. These gangs are typically involved in property theft, drug dealing, turf battles, and other forms of street crime that can be handled by local police. However, even these gangs can become involved in cross-border smuggling."[23]

"While territorial rivalries between drug traffickers have led to thousands of deaths in Mexico, these Mexican rivalries do not appear to be spilling over into the U.S. border gangs, who are engaged in their own rivalries, feuds and acts of violence. Nor do the more gruesome aspects of violence in Mexico, such as torture and beheadings." In addition, "U.S. gangs can serve more than one cartel, which appears to be fine with the cartels; they need these retail distribution services north of the border in order to make a profit. Likewise, city gangs that control less territory are more limited geographically in terms of which cartels they can work with."[24]

There is growing concern in the U.S. government that the connection between gangs from Mexico and Central America with gangs in the Western and Eastern states is strengthening. This approximate transnational gang flow (shown in Figure 3) is based on the U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement's (ICE) intelligence information from Operation Community Shield. "The arrows indicate tendencies or patterns of gang member migration. The circles are representative of areas where large numbers of gang members were processed" (USAID, 2006, p. 25).

A related concern is that Mara Salvatrucha is said to be involved in selling drugs at street level in a number

22 This paragraph contains verbatim extracts (with minimal editing) from Stratfor Global Intelligence (Burton and West, 2009).
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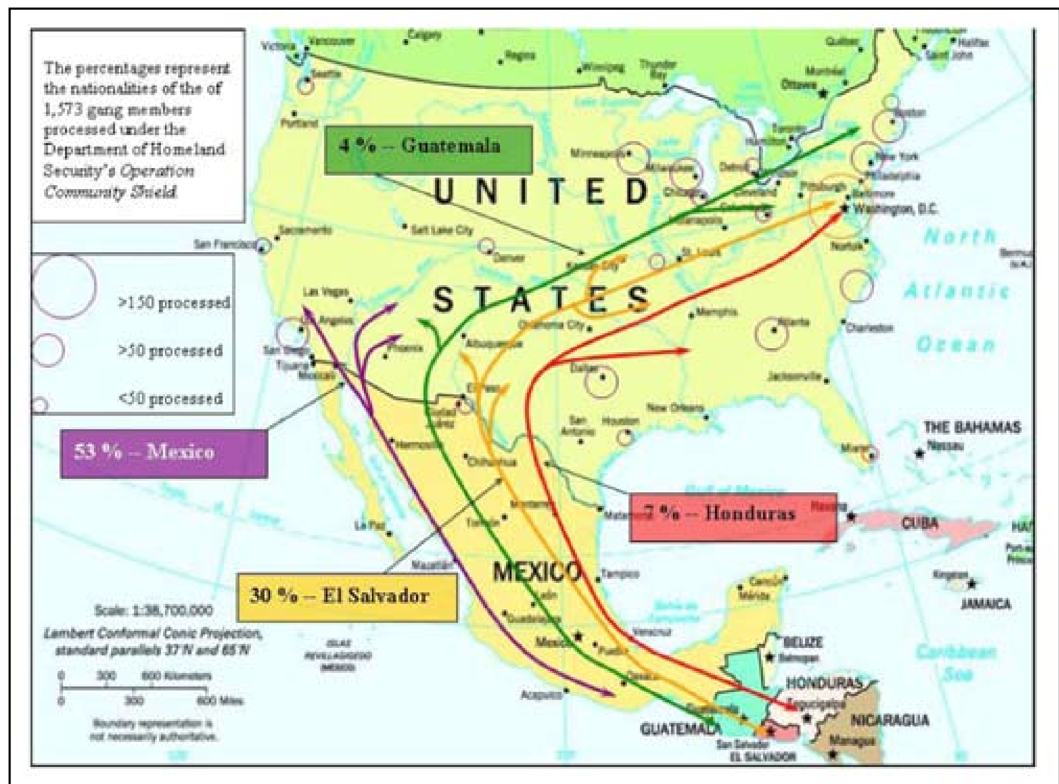
Figure 2: U.S. Gangs
Source: © Stratfor (Burton and West, 2009)

of cities (FBI, 2008, p. 26). Specifically, according to most of the reports by state law enforcement authorities to the National Drug Intelligence Center, "Mara Salvatrucha is mainly involved in distributing cannabis and methamphetamine. Most cannabis sold in the United States is either domestically produced or imported from Mexico and Canada. Little if any is imported from or through Central America" (UNODC, 2007, pp. 63–64). This area is also not a likely source of methamphetamine for U.S. consumers, because "most methamphetamine sold in the U.S. is produced in the United States and Mexico. Linkages to gangs located in Central America are not needed to source these drugs, and it appears both are mainly sourced from the Mexican drug trafficking organisations that control U.S. drug markets" (p. 64). The UNODC report goes further in questioning this linkage:

> "The maras are often referred to as 'transnational' in their character, as groups exist with the same name in different countries. Since some mareros are former deportees, it would [be] odd if there were not some communication between these groups. But the spectre of 'mega gangs', responding to a single command structure and involved in sophisticated trafficking operations, does not, at present, seem to have been realised, at least insofar as drug trafficking is concerned. It is likely that the gang members are preoccupied with more local, neighbourhood issues" (p. 64).

Figure 3: The Revolving Door of Transnational Gang Member Migration
Source: USAID, 2006, p. 25



The FBI's 2009 National Gang Threat Assessment (FBI, 2008, p. 26) contains the following information on MS-13:

> "Traditionally, the gang consisted of loosely affiliated groups known as cliques; however, law enforcement officials have reported increased coordination of criminal activity among Mara Salvatrucha cliques in the Atlanta, Dallas, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and New York metropolitan areas. The gang is estimated to have 30,000 to 50,000 members and associate members worldwide, 8,000 to 10,000 of whom reside in the United States. Members smuggle illicit drugs, primarily powder cocaine and marijuana, into the United States and transport and distribute the drugs throughout the country. Some members also are involved in alien smuggling, assault, drive-by shootings, homicide, identity theft, prostitution operations, robbery, and weapons trafficking."

Reports to Congress have suggested an MS-13 presence in a relatively large number of states (Franco, 2008a). However, the size and strength of MS-13 gangs outside Los Angeles have been questioned. The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) conducted a brief evaluation and analysis of the characteristics, both local and transnational, of Central American gangs in the Washington, DC, area (McGuire, 2007). This study revealed that 18th Street, at that time, did not "have a strong presence in the DC area, though small cliques may form and disband occasionally. *Mara Salvatrucha*, perhaps the most well known of the gangs that exist in Central America and the U.S., does have a presence in the Washington area" (pp. 1–2). Four major conclusions were made (p. 2):

- First, despite sensationalist media coverage of gang violence (some of it driven by the demonization of Central American youth as a result of anti-immigration sentiment in the region and nationally), Central American youth gangs are a relatively minor security problem in the DC area. The problem is significant for particular communities, especially for the youth who get drawn into the gang life. But relative to other public security threats in the area, Central American gangs are not a high-priority concern for area law enforcement.
- Second, based on the experience of former gang members interviewed for the study, the nature of youth involvement in a gang varies significantly from individual to individual. The decision to join or to leave a gang, and how an individual participates in a gang, does not follow a single, simple pattern; widely held stereotypes about gangs and gang members are oversimplified and often inaccurate.
- Third, there are important examples of "best practices" in responding to youth gang violence in the DC area. Many local governments have implemented a three-pronged approach, which includes prevention, intervention, and enforcement efforts, rather than focusing exclusively on policing. These approaches may be succeeding in reducing gang violence and helping at-risk youth avoid joining Central American youth gangs.
- Finally, despite the positive approaches being implemented in the area, many youth are still at risk. Prevention efforts are underfunded, and the needs of Latino immigrant youth (especially those at risk of joining Central American gangs) need to be more fully recognized and addressed.

The study also concluded that "While there are cases of Central American gangs attacking random citizens, the overwhelming majority of their crimes are perpetrated against rival gangs, or against other Latinos in their communities" (p. 29). Noting sensational media coverage of Central American gangs, the report makes the following comment on media portrayals of MS-13 (p. 33):

> "The sensational portrayals of gang-members in the media—in the region as well as in the U.S. are a significant part of the 'problem' that advocates face when searching for a constructive response to the phenomenon. One documentary, which perhaps received the most media coverage on the topic in the United States, is a National Geographic special about *Mara Salvatrucha* entitled, 'The World's Most Dangerous Gang.' In this documentary, *Mara Salvatrucha* is characterized as a uniform, transnational enterprise that 'could be in a neighborhood near you.' These sensationalist and inaccurate portrayals of Central American gangs are perilous because they shape public perception of the problem, and further stigmatize young people who become gang involved."

Conclusion

Important differences in the history of gang emergence are apparent in the four major U.S. gang regions. In both New York and Chicago, the earliest gangs arose in concert with external migration of European origins—the traditional classic ethnics of the 1783–1860 period (particularly German, French, British, Scandinavian). Other groups of white ethnics soon arrived during the 1880–1920 period—mainly Irish, Italians, Jews, and Poles. The latter nationalities almost exclusively populated the early serious street gangs of New York and Chicago. By the 1960s and 1970s, the predominance of European ethnic groups had dissipated, and the composition of gangs had changed dramatically in both of these cities, with a far greater proportion of black and Latino members (Miller, 1982/1992). The Western gang history contrasts sharply with that in the Northeast and Midwest. Western gangs never had a white ethnic history. Instead, for at least half a century, virtually all of the gangs were of Mexican descent.

In both New York City and Chicago, street gangs originated among adult-dominated groups engaged in criminal activity—largely volunteer firemen, laborers,

and bar room brawlers. Mobsters and shady political operators, mixed with adult criminal groups, controlled the streets in both cities. Younger street gangs likely emerged from their influences and flourished in their shadows. Gangs also grew in these cities amidst physical and social disorder; within the cracks of governmental and social agencies.

In contrast, street gangs in the Western region appear to have emerged from aggressive groups of young Mexican men, nascent gangs called the *palomilla*, that were attached to barrios in Mexico and also in Los Angeles. In this region, a youth subculture, dubbed *cholo*, provided the street lifestyle that supported gang formation. Abject poverty appears to have been less important than cultural pride that arose as a result of extreme social and cultural isolation, that is, "marginalization." This national pride has long been a characteristic feature of the Latino gangs in the United States.

Each of the four regions also saw a pronounced second wave of black gang development as a result of internal migration. However, it appears that the impact of this population shift from South to North and West on gang emergence differs among the four regions. Notably, black gangs that developed in conjunction with this migration do not appear to have gained the foothold in New York City that they gained in the Midwest and West. Factors that might account for this difference are not readily apparent.

Another important cross-region distinction is that gangs of Mexican descent in the Western region were not only populated by waves of newly arriving immigrants, but also by families with gang-ready youths. In the first phase of cultural diffusion (Vigil, 2008), when they arrived in the United States, street gangs were already present in the barrios into which they moved. In the second phase, gang culture in Mexico was enriched by reverse migration. Children often came to the United States, stayed for a period, and returned home, having learned a gang culture. In turn, they introduced American gang lifestyle to younger youths in Mexico and Central America, so that in the third phase, the next generation of immigrants arrived in the United States fully prepared for active gang involvement. To this day, gang culture in the Western region is continually reinforced with wave after wave of immigrants from Mexico and Central America (Vigil, 2008).

A common denominator fueling gang growth in New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles is the policy of concentrating poverty in the high-rise public housing units. But this urban planning blunder victimized black immigrants far more than Latinos in Chicago and New York City—suggesting an important point—each city's gang dynamics differ in some respects; sweeping generalizations are ill-advised.

For example, gang emergence in the West was not stimulated by racial and ethnic clashes or by immigrant succession and replacement as in the Northeast and Midwest. A different resolve—cultural traditions and barrio identification—served to fuel gang growth and maintain its presence in the West. This unique characteristic of Latino gangs in the Western and Southwestern regions would give rise to purported "transnational" gangs. Initial cultural connections were transmitted along a mere migration trail that originated in Mexico and continued along a route through El Paso and Albuquerque, and onward to Los Angeles. Later, U.S. deportation policies would inadvertently turn this trail into a well-travelled road.

While we recognize that these gang members are transnational in that members are deported to El Salvador, and many return to the United States and even smuggle goods over the border, they are the strongest, most influential, and most dangerous in Central American countries, not in the United States. In Central America, these gangs threaten to destabilize neighborhoods, and in Mexico, some gangs have links to narcotics-trafficking cartels that go head-to-head with the military. At the present time, political and governmental conditions in these countries are more conducive to gang development and expansion than in the United States.

Yet recent developments have extended and expanded the scope and dangerousness of three U.S. street gangs—MS-13, 18th Street, and the Mexican Mafia—in particular. First, the funneling of major drug-trafficking routes from air transport and sea-crossing to the overland route via Central America and Mexico has opened more lucrative drug-trafficking opportunities to U.S. gangs along the border and within the Southwestern and Western regions. Second, expanded and intensified interactions with Mexico and Central American countries over the past 20 years or so have contributed to the growth of the MS-13 and 18th Street gangs.

The extent of collusion among U.S. gangs, DTOs, and other criminal organizations along the U.S.-Mexico border is not clear. Nevertheless, this intermingling is not a welcomed development for MS-13 and 18th Street that already are considered to be among the most dangerous in this country. The involvement of the Mexican Mafia and other prison gangs in the Western-Southwestern region is also an unwelcomed development of great concern, along with the peripheral involvement of local U.S. gangs along the U.S.-Mexico border. These situations represent formidable challenges to U.S. public safety in the Western and Southwestern regions, gang policies, and programs.

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This partnership works to provide professionals in the field of gangs with tools that can be used in a comprehensive range of strategies to respond to street gangs, from prevention and intervention to criminal justice strategies such as suppression, prosecution, and re-entry.

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