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### Introduction

This is a study of two Chicano gangs in East Los Angeles and how they have changed over time. The gangs originated in the 1940s in a climate of hysteria. They continue to operate in a climate of renewed hysteria. American cities are swept by periodic waves of fear and outrage about poor and racially distinctive young men. These outbreaks of fear usually begin with reports from law enforcement people, and are greatly helped along by newspapers and other media and especially by television in recent years. “Moral panic” is perhaps the most useful phrase: it was coined by an English observer of these epidemic affairs (Cohen, 1980).

These moral panics occur periodically, almost by generations. Sometimes the activities that frighten people are defined as “riots” or “rebellions.” Black ghettos erupted in the 1920s, the 1940s, and the 1960s. Hispanics also rioted in the 1960s. Sometimes the fear is generated by gangs. In the 1950s, Los Angeles was terrified by “ratpacks” of Mexican teenagers, and in the late 1980s the nation was swept by a panic about drug-dealing black and Hispanic gangs. When these panics are under way, virtually everything that we learn about what’s really happening comes from only two urban institutions — police and media — both with powerful, self-interested motives. The police need recognition and funds: the media need audiences.

Two successive moral panics in the city of Los Angeles are particularly important. One was in the 1940s, and the two gangs we study were part of that scene. The other is contemporary. In both events, the media reported directly as truth and as fact the opinions of the police establishment.<sup>1</sup>

The first moral panic was a response to the famous Zoot-Suit Riots. In

1942, a young Chicano was killed in a gang-related incident now famous as the "Sleepy Lagoon" case. All twenty-two members of a gang were arrested on charges of conspiracy to commit murder. Seventeen of the gang members were convicted. Three were found guilty of first degree murder, nine were found guilty of second degree murder, and five were convicted of other offenses. The newspapers and radio burst into a blare of publicity about the dangers of Mexican zoot-suit gangs. Police began a series of what they called preventive actions. Mostly this meant sweep arrests and dragnet raids, which involved more than six hundred young Chicanos.

In this atmosphere a group of Anglo servicemen on leave in the city got into a series of short but bloody clashes with anybody they defined as gang members. Usually this included zoot-suited Mexican bystanders with no gang involvement whatsoever (Dieppa, 1973:9; Gonzalez, 1981; Mazón, 1985). State and national public opinion condemned the riots as racist. The trial itself **was** very biased. In fact, by late 1944 all 17 of the Sleepy Lagoon convictions were overturned. But local authorities, and local media, persisted in focusing on gangs as the problem, and specifically **as** a Mexican problem.

This sudden violent reaction to a group of people who had lived in Los Angeles since the earliest days provoked a great deal of attention. Los Angeles had rioted against Mexicans before (from the earliest days of the city), but now social scientists of the 1940s began to study the zoot-suit gangs quite seriously, asking, in effect, if there **was** anything to fear. Most researchers discounted any serious problems (Bogardus, 1943; McWilliams, 1943). They saw the gangs as typical responses of troubled second-generation youngsters caught up in a tangle of confusion about opportunity and acculturation (see Griffith, 1948). The Chicano gangs of the 1940s were described as very similar to the gangs that had been studied a generation previously, in immigrant Chicago, by Frederick Thrasher (1927). Chicago's gangs disappeared as the immigrant communities were absorbed into the larger economy. Thus it was reasonable to believe that **the** Chicano gangs would also disappear **as** matters improved for the Mexican-American population.

In short, it appeared that the zoot-suit panic had very little to do with **the** violence and criminality of young Mexican-American men, and a lot to do with how Anglos saw Mexicans in Los Angeles. These gangs were *not*

to disappear, of course: they are the progenitors of the gangs discussed in this book.

The second moral panic centered on minority gangs of the 1980s. More narrowly, in Los Angeles a series of particularly brutal street shootings by black gangs began a long and intense reaction. The impact was very sharp. In 1977 the *Los Angeles Times* printed only thirty-six stories about gangs: only fifteen were printed in 1978. In 1987, sixty-nine articles appeared, and in 1988 an amazing 267, nearly all of them dealing with police sweeps, revenge shootings, murder trials, and other criminal matters. Nearly all were reports about black gangs, although usually they were not identified as such.<sup>2</sup>

Two particularly dramatic happenings kept gang stories on television every night and in the newspapers almost every day. First, early in 1988, a young woman was shot to death on a busy street in Westwood Village, a rich university community in West Los Angeles. Second, there was a series of massive police sweeps in "gang areas" — mostly in South Central Los Angeles. Most of these events concerned black gangs in black areas, but usually Los Angelenos were left to themselves to decide whether Hispanics or blacks were the victims or the perpetrators. Both the Westwood shooting and the police sweeps raised critical racial questions. An editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* said, "At issue in the growing debate are delicate matters of race, economics and politics, and how Los Angeles' richest and poorest residents see themselves and each other" (January 4, 1988). After the killing of Karen Toshima in Westwood, the city assigned thirty detectives and fourteen foot officers to the case and posted \$35,000 in rewards to find her murderer. Both the Hispanic and the black communities complained that no comparable effort was made for gang killings of minority people in poor areas.

The sweeps raised yet other questions. During their most intense phase, the police sweeps (officially coded "The Hammer") lasted four straight weekends with two hundred extra officers on the streets and up to sixteen hundred persons either arrested or cited. The police technique was basically to arrest, cite, or make field reports on every male encountered on the street except those of advanced age. Most of the police activity was directed toward "drug gangs," although the drug-related results were often very small. The first four sweeps of 1988, for example, resulted in 563 arrests (mostly on warrants) and precisely

three ounces of cocaine, two pounds of marijuana, and drug-related cash totaling \$9,000. The resulting rage in the communities was considerable. There were many charges of police brutality and insensitivity to minority feelings, both Hispanic and black. Some serious depredations were committed by over-enthusiastic officers, including the virtual demolition of an apartment house in South Central Los Angeles, ostensibly while searching for drugs.

Virtually all of the shootings, sweep arrests, and associated bad publicity involved black gangs. The county sheriff, whose jurisdiction covers most of the Chicano gang areas, said he felt no need for sweeps, though an influential county supervisor publicly demanded the use of the National Guard. Some of the black groups were deeply involved in criminal activity. Yet the avoidance of racial labels in the newspapers and the loose and general use of the word "gang" embroiled all gangs, no matter their ethnicity or harmlessness.

In summary: the newspaper reports during 1988 and 1989 in the most conservative newspaper in the city, the *Los Angeles Times*, gave the impression that there was a *continual crisis*. Gang crime was felt to be quite beyond the bounds of any normal latitude for aggressive minority youth. The media felt that strenuous retaliation was justified and, in fact, most Los Angeles citizens told poll-takers that they agreed.

Although it was obvious that black and Hispanic gangs were forming in many smaller cities and many regions of the country, attention centered on Los Angeles. Law-enforcement people began describing Los Angeles as the nation's gang capital. Some claimed that gangs dealing with crack were being franchised in smaller cities in order to establish broad drug-marketing networks.

This series of sensational and often contradictory reports raises considerable doubt about the validity of police and media interpretations. For example, both police and media assumed that the increase in gang-related violence was related to the increase in gang involvement in the sales of cocaine and crack. However, when these assumptions were actually tested with Los Angeles Police Department data for the period from 1983 to 1985, they proved to be wrong (Klein, Maxson, and Cunningham, 1988). Involvement in drug sales of individuals identified as gang members did increase slightly, but the overwhelming majority of individuals arrested in these five South Central stations (75 percent) were *not* gang

members. Cocaine may have had a big impact in generating violence but it was not because of gang involvement.

Los Angeles had seen similar misdirected panics before, and there is always some residual effect on legislation, in police practice, and in public opinion. Thus the California state legislature responded from 1984 to 1987 by passing eighty-three separate bills designed to suppress gang activity—and in particular to control alleged drug connections. The laws ranged from new penalties for the operators of drug laboratories (with little effect on street gangs) to greatly increasing the penalty for being under the influence of PCP (with considerable effect on street gang members). In 1989, the state senate passed a law permitting random stop-and-searches for firearms; later that same year the district attorney announced that he would no longer permit plea bargaining for any offense involving gang members. His reasoning: gang members belonged in prison.

Some social scientists used the same framework to interpret the gangs of the 1980s as was used to interpret the gangs of the 1940s. In this view, gangs stem from culturally distinctive populations, and their activities must be explained in light of that cultural distinctiveness (see Horowitz, 1983). In time, of course, this distinctiveness vanishes. Such recent observers may have abandoned their beliefs that Chicanos will become absorbed into the larger society. Still, this cultural interpretation is “optimistic” in its implication that the gangs are nothing much for people to get upset about. Other social scientists view gang activity as reminiscent of the origins of organized crime, and argue that these new gangs foreshadow an evolution of youthful deviance into adult criminality (see Kornblum, 1987). This, indeed was something to be concerned about?

I take a different view of the gang realities behind the 1980s moral panic. I also clearly distinguish between black and Chicano gangs, which developed in very different culture areas of the city. Like many other social scientists I am impressed by the critical changes in the barrios and ghettos over more than forty years—nearly two generations. Of course there is still poverty and there is still a miasmic air of discrimination, less sharp than in the 1940s, perhaps, but definitely a factor in life choices and opportunities. But there appears to be something new—what some have rather controversially called an “underclass”—a kind of *lumpen-proletariat*, a stratum of men and women who simply cycle around and

around with little if any chance to climb out of the realities of their decayed and defeated neighborhoods. This **was** the view of William Julius Wilson (1987).

New gangs began to appear in cities that had not seen such phenomena for decades. Nearly always this happened in black and Hispanic communities. In rustbelt cities that had seen good factory jobs disappear, the new gangs were beginning to be seen as part of a growing underclass (Hagedorn, 1988; Huff, 1988). In many communities—like Los Angeles, El Paso, and Chicago—gangs that were established decades earlier had become quasi-institutionalized. For some young men and women the gangs functioned somewhat the way male age groups functioned in some African and Australian tribes studied years ago (Warner, 1937; Wilson, 1951). They developed a clear-cut age stratification, with one clique succeeding another in rather orderly fashion. Each clique had a name and a separate identity. (See Chapter Three for a list of the cliques in the gangs we studied.) **At** least partially, they helped order adolescents' lives. They provided outlets for sociability, for courtship, and other normal adolescent activities. But they did more: They also tolerated and even encouraged fighting and delinquency (Moore and Vigil, 1987). The legitimate institutions of socialization—family and schools—had become less salient, and “street socialization” (see Vigil, 1988c) began to compete **with** or supplement the legitimate institutions.

These are the gangs I report on in this book—longstanding Chicano barrio gangs. When these gangs first got started, families were mostly immigrants—like those of Thrasher's 1920s Chicago—and many had difficulty guiding their children through the American experience (see Vigil 1988a). The schools were also marginal. In Thrasher's Chicago, the gangs faded because the populations became absorbed into the larger system. Unfortunately in the communities I studied there were persistent problems in integrating the population into the system as well as continuing immigration from Mexico. This meant that the legitimate institutions remained comparatively marginal and the alternative structure—the gang—could become institutionalized.

As we will see later in much more detail, today's gangs are different from those of the 1940s. Any hope for careers for this generation of young men and women had been drastically curtailed by the disappearance of decent jobs and job ladders. This difference is not confined to Los Angeles. It has serious implications for **all** American cities. As the

institutions ordering the role transitions to young adulthood—work and family—become less salient in changing circumstances, these adolescent quasi-institutions begin to be a focus of the lives of young adults, as well.

It is obvious that moral panics build on exaggerated fears of something “new” in the ghettos and barrios. But let’s take the fear seriously for a moment, especially the fear of gangs. Let’s assume that what people are afraid of is something that might actually happen. Are the gangs going to develop into new forms of organized crime? Are they going to become revolutionaries? Both of these worries may be disguised forms of racism. It is not possible to deal with either fear unless we have much more of the most basic kind of information: we must also clear up some ambiguities about youth gang members. That is the purpose of this book. Following the data and some new research, I will take a long perspective, measure some changes, and try to decide how much two Chicano youth gangs have changed since the first, well-documented moral panic of the World War II years.

American media grow a little more efficient every generation, so it is not surprising that the most recent panic was national in scope. Otherwise, the most recent panic is very much like the earlier ones. One feature of moral panics is that they seem to involve a rather diffuse fear of all minorities, rather than fear of a single group. In the 1980s, “gangs” were the focus of that fear, and it made no difference to the media that Chicano gangs were very different from black gangs. “In fact, there is good reason to believe that, as Thrasher claimed, “all gangs are different” (1927:45). Even within one city, gangs of the same ethnicity behave differently. It is certain that there are major differences from one city to another as well as from one ethnic group to another, and even between gangs of the same ethnic group in the same city.

This book deals with a number of these different interpretations. The focus is on gangs that became quasi-institutionalized over the past forty-odd years in two Chicano barrios in East Los Angeles. Gangs have persisted in these communities since the late 1930s (in El Hoyo Maravilla) and the early 1940s (in White Fence). There may well be observable changes—and they may be important in understanding how gangs impinge on the larger society. These changes may also shed some light on an even more critical question: Are there signs that an underclass is forming in these Chicano communities in large cities?

There is yet the question of data. It is reasonable to assume that adolescent semidelinquents are very difficult to survey and to study. In an earlier study we overcame some of these difficulties by a collaborative effort between academics and ex-offender gang *veteranos*, mostly young or middle-aged men and women. That research group is described in detail in the report of the study (Moore et al., 1978). It had its origin in organizations that reflected the ideals of the Chicano Movement, developing both in prison and in the free world. The original team incorporated itself in 1980 as the Chicano Pinto Research Project with Robert Garcia as president. Under his leadership, research teams were reconstituted for several subsequent projects, including the study reported in this book.

The essence of this collaborative research means that ex-gang member staff are involved at every stage of the research, from design of the interview guide through critical review of written reports? The staff knew—or could locate—gang members from almost any clique. This meant that we were able to create something that is unique in gang research—a random sample of 156 men and women who had been members of these two gangs. We interviewed them in 1985, when they were all adults. It is important to emphasize that we interviewed women as well as men. Gang researchers often neglect female members, but a full third of the sample were female, and this accurately reflects the proportion of girls that were active in the gangs.

Forty percent of our respondents were what we could call “old-timers,” those who joined the gang during the late 1940s and early 1950s. The remainder had been active in more recent years—the 1960s and 1970s. Because we talked at length with members from the earliest days of the first cliques up to very recent cliques of these gangs, we know a great deal about their changes and evolution. Those we interviewed were selected randomly from rosters of the 635 original participants in these particular cliques of the gangs. Details on the complex sampling procedure are provided in the appendix.

Behind all these data is an important set of economic and social changes in these two communities between the 1950s and the 1970s. These provide the substantive context for the analysis of changes in the gangs. I describe those changes in Chapter Two. Once done, it will be possible to discuss theoretical issues—and to deal with the concept of the underclass as applied to Hispanics and to gangs. In Chapter Three



I begin this discussion, focusing on the origins, structure, and institutionalization of the gangs. Throughout this and succeeding chapters, I deal consistently with differences between males and females, as well as searching for evidence of change. In Chapter Three I also touch on various ways of interpreting the changes in the gangs during this period. In Chapters Four and Five I deal substantively with these changes, and the extent to which the gangs have become more deviant and more isolated from conventional agents of socialization.

Institutions develop where there are gaps in the existing institutional structure. Gangs as youth groups develop among the socially marginal adolescents for whom school and family do not fill socialization needs. In Chapter Six I discuss the families of these gang members. But gangs persist as young-adult institutions in a changed society, in which the labor market is not filling the needs of the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. It is not that they are rebels, rather it is that they are left out of the credentialed, ordered society. The adult lives of more recent members are quite different in some ways from those of members of earlier cliques, and that is the topic of Chapter Seven.

Finally, we must return to some of the questions we have raised in this introduction. We must not only assess gangs as neighborhood institutions in these communities but we must see how their fate and the fate of their members are also linked to changes in the larger system. And beyond the objective realities, minority **gangs** continue to symbolize and reaffirm both racial and gender cleavages in this society.