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## INTERPRETING INKBLOTS: DECIPHERING AND DOING SOMETHING ABOUT MODERN STREET GANGS\*

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I very much fear that the gang has been the theoretician's Rorschach in criminology—one can easily find what he seeks. (Klein, 1971, pg. viii).

Professor Klein is right. Trying to figure out what to do about gangs proceeds with all of the subjectivity of a patient trying to decipher the inkblots on Rorschach cards—it tells us more about the political, theoretical, or psychological makeup of the researcher than it does about street gangs per se.<sup>1</sup> The chasm between empirical research on gangs and public policy is created mainly by stereotypes, subjectivity, politics, anecdotes, and back-of-the-envelope empirics of those doing the decoding rather than systematic research or intelligence. Despite the serious efforts of researchers, the highly fragmented and insular field of gang research cannot resolve its basic problems (like defining a “gang” or a “gang-related crime”) and, thus, offers very little to policy efforts—a matter worsened by the paucity of experimental research or program evaluation.<sup>2</sup> And, just when we think we have closed in on some empirical “facts,” new revelations pull the conceptual tablecloth right off the table. For example, although research has generally disproved the idea that gang violence is associated with the migration of individual gang members, the recent surge of gang violence in Latin America is being partially attributed to the forced migration (a.k.a deportation) of immigrant gang members from the United States (see, Papachristos, 2005a). Because gang research is not the make-believe world of magicians, all the dishes break.

In short, we know little about how to make sense of or what to do about modern street gangs. The previous articles offer some suggestions worth considering in terms of the application of analytic techniques and program

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1. Bursik and Grasmick (1993, Ch. 5) also reflect on Professor Klein's statement as it relates to the study of gangs.

2. For a lively discussion on the current state of gang research, see Katz and Jackson-Jacob's critique of the “criminologist's gang” (2004) and a reply by Short and Hughes (2005).

evaluation. McGloin's article demonstrates how social network analysis can literally map the gang landscape in a city and thus provide a useful guide for intervention or law enforcement strategies. Maxson et al. evaluate one of our most frequently used strategies, gang injunctions, and find mixed results of their effectiveness in mitigating gang behaviors and diminishing fear of gang crime. In this essay, I discuss the utility and problems raised by these articles and their contribution to gang research and policy. Unless we seriously consider such research, our policies are little more than ad hoc strategies based on the reading of tea leaves.

### DECIPHERING GANGS

The perennial problem of defining what constitutes a "gang" is simultaneously the most necessarily pedantic exercise and the greatest hurdle to effective gang policy. The distinctions of researchers—however well suited for the social sciences—are not necessarily well received in the "real world." We fight over the minutia that distinguish various gang "types" (we think) to better understand and control the phenomena. But such distinctions mean little to the cop on the street, the victim of gang violence, or even gang members. In Chicago and elsewhere, gang members have not used the term "gang" in years, opting instead for such labels as mobs, crews, boys, or street organizations. Whatever these groups call themselves, members know who is "in" and who is "out"<sup>3</sup> even though group boundaries are more amorphous than popular conceptions (for example, see Fleisher, 2005). Gangs neither worry about nor take seriously the semantic differences in the definitions of scholars. Gangs take their meaning instead from their function and from the consequences of their actions. Form is fluid and externally attributed, often detached from reality. That is, gangs are far too dynamic to conform to a static definition—a gang that fits one typology or definition of a "gang" today may not tomorrow.

So what difference does it make if a gang is a "hybrid" gang, a "drug" gang, or a "traditional" gang? The answer is, a lot. It matters because public policy is often crafted not from the refined categories of a researcher, but from the most readily available images—those in the media, on the Internet, from law enforcement cases, in popular fiction, and so on. Joe Citizen, and even Jane Policy-Maker, often rely on the

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3. Here it is useful to compare the term "gang" with Everett C. Hughes' (1948. [1991]) definition of an ethnic group: "An ethnic group is not one because of the degree of measurable or observable difference from other groups: it is an ethnic group, on the contrary, because the people in it and the people out of it know that it is one; because both the *ins* and *outs* talk, feel, and act as if it were a separate group" (p. 91, emphasis in original).

extremely dangerous classification system of calling any group of “inner city” (read: minority) men wearing baggy jeans and standing on street corners as “gang bangers.”<sup>4</sup> Inevitably, policies have a broad reach that snares both gang and nongang people in their net. Just as the consequences of gangs are real, so too are the consequences of legal interventions, and their misassignment has its costs.

Before we can figure out what to do about gangs or what types of policies and interventions might be most effective, we need to devise analytic strategies that help us chart the real gang landscape and not just distorted images of it. As such, taxonomies used to advance scientific understandings need to be supplemented with more realistic applications to public policy—how should strategies differ depending on whether we are dealing with a drug gang or a traditional gang? Something we have not done is to translate such theoretical issues into realistic policy strategies. Gang researchers might also begin to consider how to apply our methodologies and theories to guide serious policy and intervention efforts, something economists sometimes do to a fault. To do this, though, we must think about making theory and analysis accessible, tangible, and practical for those who might use it.

McGloin’s article is a case in point. At its foundation, social network analysis offers a theory of how the world works—the social world is constructed as patterns of regularities in relationships among interacting units that, in turn, create “structures” that influence the behavior of network units or social actors (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). For social theorists, network analysis provides an essential macro–micro link missing in grand theory or isolated field studies. For citizens of the real world, network analysis explains how people get jobs, who gets ahead, how diseases spread, and other “real” social problems.

McGloin and others (e.g. Kennedy, et al., 1997; Tita et al. 2005; Papachristos, 2005b) have shown how network analysis can transform perceptions of a “gang problem” from a fuzzy inkblot into a comprehensive blueprint by producing a highly detailed and visual way of looking at a specific gang situation. And it can also avoid the arduous task of settling on an academically ascetic definition of a “gang.” Rather, it can begin with the definition of a problem: Who are the most violent gang offenders? What does the current gang war look like? How are the various members connected with each other? What does the gang’s structure look

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4. Virginia legislatures recently debated—and almost passed—an ordinance that would have fined youth \$50 for wearing “baggy pants.” Some argued that one consequence of such an ordinance would be to provide law enforcement a legal opportunity to approach gang members.

like, and how stable is it? Who are the core and peripheral members or groups? And where might effective strategies be directed?

It does not matter whether these gangs fit the academic mold or where they fall on a typology—gangs are real because they are real in their consequences.<sup>5</sup> McGloin shows that these are real gangs and real members doing real things. I would argue that trying to construct an accurate and precise picture of the “gang problem,” whatever it might look like, is more important for public policy than simply having an agreed upon academic definition—the clearer the picture, the more precise, and potentially more effective, the intervention. Of course, academics can learn just as much from such exercises, say, by finding similarities and differences in patterns of interactions, gang structures, member behavior, and so on. Focusing on consequences, behaviors, and interactions might show us something (1) more valuable to policy efforts and (2) about group processes that make the gang a distinct social entity.<sup>6</sup>

Public health models offer a useful direction. We know where gangs concentrate spatially and socially. If regarded as “epidemics,” we could first try to understand its diffusion, mechanisms of contagion, area of infection, and so on—i.e., we can map such events and activities and then worry about whether they are “real” gang problems by academic or theoretic standards. By claiming and mapping gang areas and behaviors, you de facto claim the “gang.” This provides more leverage by encompassing observable group behaviors (gang and nongang alike) as well as the larger ecological and neighborhood context. Various academic typologies can be devised and applied afterward to guide further efforts. Such an approach begins from a position of more rather than less data on “real” social behavior of the phenomena in question.

At the least, we should consider how analyses other than those comparing costs and benefits might be of interest to policy makers. Crime mapping, for example, was highly influential in the development of “hot-spot” policing, especially as mapping software became more user friendly. Developments in spatial analysis, social network theory, cognitive mapping, correspondence analysis, econometrics, and the like might provide additional starting points for other innovative policy strategies. For instance, the idea of “set space” suggested by Tita et al. (2005a) challenges the way we think about how gangs occupy space and thus could potentially supplement traditional crime mapping strategies. Figuring out how to

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5. This is a paraphrase of W.I. Thomas' more general remarks about the social world and the social sciences. Robert Merton's (1948) “self-fulfilling prophecy” extends Thomas' observations to suggest that even if men do not define real situations as real, they are nevertheless real in their consequences.

6. Essentially, this is an expansion of “process”-oriented definitions of gangs (e.g., Short, 1997). For a review, see Bursik and Grasmick (1993).

translate such findings and techniques for use by law enforcement and policy makers is an essential task.

## DOING SOMETHING

Not doing something about gangs simply because of definitional disputes is totally impractical and, to some, morally offensive. As a consequence, though, we scramble to piece together strategies that have not been subjected to empirical testing or evaluation. For example, the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention operates one of the city's and the nation's most highly praised gang violence reduction programs even though it has not yet undergone any external evaluation.<sup>7</sup> This is not unusual—even the most well implemented gang strategies are rarely subject to rigorous evaluation. The result is that problems in gang research, or in translating gang research into effective and testable strategies, are simply recycled and reinvented. Innovation and experimentation are casualties of this conceptual navel-gazing. In this final section, I briefly discuss three approaches to gang abatement and how they simply recirculate the major problems of gang research: gang loitering laws, the Gangbuster's Bill, and gang injunctions.

### *Gang Loitering Laws*

The theory behind gang loitering laws is straightforward. The public nature of gang activities increases community fear of gang violence. By attacking the public signs and cues that legitimate gang behaviors, Meares and Kahn (1998) argue that loitering laws reinforce prosocial norms that such behaviors are unacceptable even in the most gang-ridden communities. The counter-argument suggests that such laws are highly arbitrary and promote discriminatory enforcement practices. The Supreme Court ultimately agreed with the latter position ruling in *The City of Chicago vs. Morales* (1999) that gang loitering laws violated the vagueness doctrine of the Fourteenth Amendment and substantive due process in that the ordinance failed to specify the types of prohibited behaviors and an accurate definition of a gang and gang member.

This brings us yet again back to the original problem of deciphering gangs. Although it is not clear that the Supreme Court would be swayed by academic typologies, Chicago did rewrite its ordinance in accordance with the decision. To do so, the city (1) specified its definition of a "gang,"

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7. In June 2005, First Lady Laura Bush met with several of the program's outreach workers and their gang member clients lauding the program as a model of how to help at-risk youth. And although the program has conducted internal evaluations, only now more than 5 years after it began, has there been any call for proposals to evaluate the program.

gang members, and gang crimes similar to those found in the Gangbuster's Bill described below, (2) limited the enforcement of the ordinance to designated gang "hot spots," (3) limited the authority to define a "gang" and "known gang member" to specialized gang intelligence officers, and (4) limited enforcement ability to gang tactical officers. Unfortunately, like so many other gang strategies, Chicago's gang loitering ordinance has not been systematically evaluated.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Gangbuster's Bill*

As this issue goes to press, Congress debates the merits of the Gang Deterrence and Community Protection Act of 2005, affectionately known as the "Gangbusters Bill," that calls for increased national intelligence and enhanced penalties for certain gang crimes. The Bill presents some potentially mixed results. On the one hand, there is a great need for increased intelligence and research on gangs that brings together local, regional, and, yes, global actors. If gangs cross borders, whatever those borders might be, it is important to possess the most accurate information to address such issues, i.e., there is no other way to decipher the gang situation without such data. Gang researchers have been pushing for the systematic collection of national gang data for decades, and there now seems to be enough interest to push this agenda to the benefit of academics, criminal justice agents, and policy makers.

On the other hand, the Gangbuster's Bill gives us more of the same in terms of enforcement—exaggerated definitions of "gangs" and enforcement strategies not based on program evaluations. To this first point, the Bill addresses the definitional issue similar to Chicago's revised gang loitering ordinance by defining a "criminal street gang" as a formal or informal group or association of three or more individuals who commit two or more "gang crimes" in two or more separate criminal episodes, in relation to the group or association. "Gang crime" refers to any federal or state crime, punishable by imprisonment for more than one year, but especially crimes of violence, contract killings, witness intimidation, obstruction of justice, various narcotics violations, racketeering, and certain gun crimes.

From safety and enforcement perspectives, these definitions focus on those groups whose criminal activity draws the attention of law enforcement—these are the types of activities that gang policy and interventions should try to abate. Yet, decades of gang research has shown that most street gangs engage in haphazard patterns of crime and delinquency, or what Klein calls "cafeteria style crime"—a little bit of drug use, a smattering of larceny, a dab of truancy, and so on. The image of gangs invoked by

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8. For a review of the current state of research on policing and gangs, see Decker (2003).

this Bill is drawn from a handful of extreme and highly organized gangs—such as the Gangster Disciples, the Latin Kings, and MS-13—that possess the capacity to operate interstate criminal activity (Papachristos, 2005a). These gangs are anomalies. They represent the worst that gangs can become rather than what most gangs in fact are.

Although such criminal groups demand the utmost attention from policy makers, law enforcement, and researchers, using them as the foundation for broad sweeping gang policy further smears the inkblots already used to decipher “gangs.” Furthermore, it may have long lasting negative effects, as did the War on Drugs, by solidifying a legal code that (un)intentionally targets the urban poor and minorities. For instance, the image of gangs as organized drug-dealing entities dominates the public consciousness even though estimates find that only 34% of all reported gangs sell drugs (National Youth Gang Center, 1995). Moreover, outside of cities like Chicago, most drug-selling gangs do so in a disorganized fashion; even in highly organized drug gangs, street-level dealers make less than minimum wage (Levitt and Venkatesh, 2000). The language of the Gangbuster’s Bill, however, suggests otherwise, portraying street gangs as the new inheritors of organized crime. In fact, much of the Bill reads like a ganged-up version of RICO statutes used against the Mob.

In terms of its enforcement measures, as the formal title of the Bill suggests, it seeks to promote “gang deterrence” through classic law enforcement initiatives such as increasing the number of prosecutors assigned to gang cases, enhanced penalties for gang crimes, and transferring juveniles to adult court for certain gang crimes. This approach is also more of the same—we do not know if such strategies actually deter gang crime. A point solidified by Maxson et al. in their research on gang injunctions.

### *Gang Injunctions*

The previous article by Maxson, et al. provides the most detailed evaluation of gang injunctions to date. Although not all gang injunctions do so, the ones they study are specific in their target locale, gangs, and gang members. That is, like McGloin’s use of network analysis, the injunctions in question try to concretely identify points of intervention. At the least, there is a serious effort by law enforcement to delineate its efforts according to the best available data. Unfortunately, Maxson et al. report mixed results. Although there does seem to be some short-term decrease in gang crime and fear of crime in some injunction areas, the long-term effects are questionable and there seems to be little change to neighborhood social organization. If the effect of such targeted enforcement efforts at the neighborhood level is questionable at best, what evidence do we have that their expansion to the federal level in the Gangbuster’s Bill will be any more effective?



## CONCLUSION

Gang research and gang policy need to be free from some of their bad habits. One way to do so is to borrow, and steal if necessary, from other research and policy arenas. For instance, we know that highly targeted policing efforts in other contexts seem to be effective. Even in this essay, I argue for such an approach. Yet, a handful of empirical studies provide mixed and contrasting results. I offer simply a word of caution: If something does not work, or if we are unsure of its value, we should hesitate to a craft federal policy out of it. The gap between gang policy and research can be bridged only by thinking more creatively and pushing our theoretical and methodological horizons. Like the previous articles by McGloin and Maxson et al., we should begin to employ methodologies that can (1) provide concrete overviews of specific gang situations and (2) forward research designs that speak to issues of causality and effectiveness. One or two studies will not cut it. We must pursue a new ethos in gang research based not only on scientific rigor but also on a practical understanding of reality and policy. We must continue to try our hardest to decipher real and not just theoretical gang situations. Reality just might offer something more rewarding than our prized nomenclature. Otherwise, we're just interpreting inkblots.

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