

THIRD EDITION

STREET
Gangs
THROUGHOUT
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HERBERT C. COVEY, PH.D.

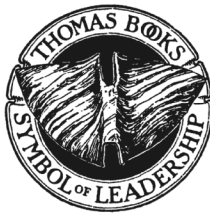
STREET GANGS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

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By

HERBERT C. COVEY, PH.D.



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To my family, Kelly, Chris, and Marty Covey

PREFACE

It has been almost 20 years since the first edition of this book. Much has changed since then. When pulling together materials for the first edition, there was difficulty to locating systematic studies of gangs outside of the United States. However, over the span of two decades, the amount of research and literature on street gangs throughout the world has grown, pardon the cliché, by leaps and bounds. While it was a challenge during the first edition locating suitable literature on gangs throughout the world, the major task today is processing the large volume of research and literature on gangs. The sheer volume of works can be overwhelming and difficult to keep astride. Pyrooz and Mitchell (2015) observed there has been a rapid expansion and refinement of the gang literature. According to Professor Pyrooz since the publication of their analysis, the rate of gang literature growth has slowed but continues to impressively expand. The complexity in the different types of literature makes any synthesis a daunting task. The risk of overlooking key developments or landmark research is much greater today than in the past. Therefore, it was with a degree of trepidation that a third edition was undertaken.

Although interest and literature has grown, there are countries and areas of the world where little is known about gangs and gang members. Even with the growth of information, academic studies and statistics on street gangs remain scarce for some regions of the world. This book provides an update on some of the information gained about street gangs since the last edition. It summarizes some of the major works on street gang phenomena outside of the United States. However, it in no way claims to capture a complete picture of street gangs in the world. It is impossible to absorb the vast volume of literature, which at the end of the day is patchy, incomplete, and lacks standardization. There remain countries and large global regions where we know little to nothing about street gangs or law-violating groups.

Previous scholars have addressed the topic of the world's street gangs. For example, Malcolm Klein and colleagues have written extensively about street gangs in Europe. His *The Eurogang Paradox: Street Gangs and Youth Groups in the U.S. and Europe* (2001) focused on Europe and led to later vol-

umes and research, such as Scott H. Decker and Frank M Weerman's (2005) *European Street Gangs and Troublesome Youth Groups*, Frank van Gemert, Dana Peterson, and Inger-Lise Lien's (2008) *Street Gangs, Migration and Ethnicity*, and Finn Aage Esbensen and Cheryl Maxson's (2012) *Youth Gangs in International Perspective*, are examples of the comparative and cross-national collections of research. There are now international groups of researchers sharing ideas and findings on a regular basis through professional associations and conferences. Other efforts to speak to the issue of gangs include those that focus on the role globalization has on gangs and vice versa, including Hagedorn's (2008) *A World of Gangs*. Melde and Weerman's (2020) *Gangs in the Era of Internet and Social Media* introduce some new perspectives on how the internet and social media relate to gangs on a global scale.

While much has been written about organized crime in several countries, street gangs remain an unexplored topic begging our attention. This book is a general review of some of what we know about street gangs throughout the world. It does not claim to cover every aspect of research nor does it purport to include every country that has gangs. Rather, this book is a general summary that focuses on those countries that have a greater presence in the literature. The chapters in order are as follows:

Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the topic of street gangs throughout the world. The chapter addresses why the study of street gangs is important and the world demographic changes that promote the development of street gangs. The chapter addresses important topics on the various definitions of gangs and youth subcultures. Although there is agreement that a uniform definition of gang is needed, the literature and definitions continue to be inconsistent. Definitions of street gangs may include motorcycle gangs, prison gangs, cartels, internet criminal groups (cyber gangs), politically motivated extremist groups, and hate groups. The chapter compares street gangs with other groups, such as hooligans and organized crime.

Chapter 2 identifies some of the challenges faced by scholars when studying gangs in different countries. The chapter addresses methodological issues, such as measuring the extent of street gang activity in different countries. In addition, the chapter highlights general themes that have surfaced in the international gang literature. Some of these themes have existed for decades and others are emerging, such as the significant role social media and the internet are playing in the evolution of gangs.

Chapter 3 reviews some of the basic research on street gangs in the United States and Canada. This chapter provides a cursory overview of street gangs in the United States but does not provide details. There are many well-written books about gangs in the United States to do justice to the topic in one chapter. The chapter covers examples of American gangs and directs the reader to more comprehensive sources. While it would be impos-

sible to provide adequate coverage of all of the literature on street gangs in a single volume, it is possible to highlight some of the main studies and recent findings regarding American street gangs. The chapter includes a section on Canadian gangs. It identifies Canadian gang and member characteristics that seem remarkably similar to the United States, but also identifies differences.

Chapter 4 covers what is known about street gangs in Europe and Russia. Because street gangs have been present in some European countries for centuries, a special section is devoted to historical references to European gangs. Street gangs in Britain, Northern Ireland, Scotland, France, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and Eastern European countries are presented. Most of the materials in the chapter focus on street gangs in England. In addition, the amount of research on gangs in Russia has grown substantially. The chapter reviews some of the unique characteristics of Russian gangs.

Chapter 5 reviews the literature on street gangs in one of the hottest areas of the world for gangs, Central America. In addition, the chapter examines South American and Caribbean gangs. The assumption is made that the United States has had a major influence on street gangs in this region. Street gangs in Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, Jamaica, Brazil, Mexico, Nicaragua, Trinidad, and other countries are covered. The presence of street gangs and gang violence in these and other countries has been identified as a major factor in the mass migration of refugees to the United States. The growth and history of mara gangs in the region, such as 18th Street and MS-13 in Central American countries are covered. Considerable attention is paid to these two mara gangs, as they receive extensive attention from the media, academics, and governments.

Chapter 6 reports on the street gangs of Africa. Research on gangs in South Africa goes back decades and the country has a unique history on how gangs evolved. Other countries, such as Egypt, Nigeria, and Kenya are developing a body of literature that highlights the distinctive nature of gangs and gang members in these countries. With population growth exploding in these countries, they merit watching in the future.

Chapter 7 addresses street gangs in Asia, including China, India, Hong Kong (post-reunification), Japan, and other countries. The chapter provides rare glimpses of gangs in China, a relatively secretive country. Although different in many ways from gangs in Asia, Australia and New Zealand are included in this chapter out of convenience. Both of these countries have bodies of literature that are well worth reviewing.

From the start, I want to thank Michael Thomas for his unwavering support for this book and my previous publications. Over the years, I have had a great partnership with Charles C Thomas, Publisher.

I have received ideas and support from an old friend and prior office mate, Finn Aage Esbensen. He has established himself as one of the foremost world experts on gangs, as witnessed by the large number of his publications referenced in this book. I was very fortunate to benefit from his friendship and ideas. Scott Menard and Robert Franzese provide support and encouragement for my academic journeys. There are other gang experts most notably Malcolm W. Klein, David Pyrooz, Scott Decker, James Diego Vigil, Cheryl Maxson, Dennis Rodgers, Frank van Gemert, to name a few that although I do not know them personally, I have grown greatly from their contributions. Finally, one of the most important people is Marty Covey, my partner and wife. As an independent scholar and not linked to a department or network of colleagues, I am very dependent on her to review my drafts. She is as much of this book as I am and I appreciate her patience with me and her much needed input. Anything inaccurate is fully attributed to me.

H.C.C.

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STREET GANGS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

Chapter 1

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON STREET GANGS

For centuries street gangs and gang-like groups have been present. Until the early twentieth century, gangs did not garner much attention and what was known was limited to studies in the United States. These early studies, such as by Thrasher's (1927) research in Chicago, determined much of our thinking about gangs for decades. By the mid-21st century, it became evident that gangs could be found in many regions of the world (Covey, 2003; Hazen & Rodgers, 2014; Hazlehurst & Hazlehurst, 1998). As Pyrooz and Mitchell (2015:43) observed, there was an "international turn" in the interest and study of gangs from the United States to other regions of the world (especially Europe).

Early research on gangs outside of the United States relied on official records and case studies. In addition, much of what we learned about gangs internationally came from journalists and media accounts. At the start of the 21st century, international gang research became more complex, comparative, longitudinal, and multidisciplinary. This more sophisticated research led scholars to challenge old assumptions about gangs, such as the basic question of how to define gangs. Scholars are now incorporating concepts such as agency, economic exclusion, social capital, life course, multiple marginalization, risk and protective factors, developmental stages, and globalization to understanding gang phenomena. For instance, Pinnock (2016) relied on developmental trajectories and criminal career pathways to help understand gang membership in Cape Flats South Africa.

Studies comparing gangs and non-gang groups and gang members with non-gang members between countries are now available, such as Esbensen and Weerman (2005), Olate, Salas-Wright, and Vaughn (2011), and Winfree (2012). A group of gang researchers, under the banner of the Eurogang Project, has generated and continues to conduct valuable data driven research on gangs. There are also studies that draw data from international databases, such as Gatti, Haymoz, and Schadee's (2011) research which compared

data from 30 countries to assess whether gang (deviant youth group) membership resulted in more antisocial behavior, such as crime. Another example is Higginson, Benier, Shenderovich, Bedford, Mazerolle, and Murray's (2018) comprehensive review of gang membership in nine countries. In addition, cross-national meta-analyses, such as Pyrooz, Turanovic, Decker, and Wu (2016) pulled together numerous gang studies.

Despite increased research on gangs in many countries, gang experts continue to comment on the paucity of information and studies of gangs in the world. For example, Chu, Daffern, Thomas, and Lim (2012) observed a scarcity of gang research outside of Europe and the United States. Moore (2007:189) wrote, "There is virtually no literature on female gangs outside of the United States." Pyrooz and Decker (2013) in their study of gangs in China noted the absence of research in that populous country. There are other countries and regions where little is known other than gangs exist. With few exceptions, there is also lack of longitudinal studies on gangs (Hazen & Rodgers, 2014). Nevertheless, compared to the past, research on gangs throughout the world has greatly expanded.

Despite advances in the literature, some issues remain unresolved and elusive, such as how to define a gang. The importance of delinquency and criminal behavior in defining a gang is a point of contention among scholars. The role of gangs and gang members play in the distribution of illicit drugs continues to garner conflicting findings. Gang scholars are now raising questions about gangs being recruiting grounds for terrorist organizations. The relationship between gang formation and economies, the root causes for why youth join gangs, globalization and gangs, the role of social media and gangs, are but a few continuing topics where more information is needed.

WORLD CONTEXT

Most street gangs are predominantly comprised of youth and young adults. Therefore, it is important to understand what is occurring to the world's population of youth. The increasing number of impoverished street children in the world is a major social problem that has definite ramifications for the spread and development of street gangs. In the case of developing countries, a 2007 World Bank Report estimated that there were 1.5 billion people aged between 12 and 24 and 1.3 billion of which were living in developing countries (World Bank, 2007). For 2020, the United Nations (2019) estimated the world's population of youth aged between 10 and 24 years to be 1.85 billion. A large portion of these youth were living in urban settings that lack the infrastructures to meet their needs. Similar patterns are present

for urban youth living in developed countries. The result is that many youth fall prey to criminal exploitation and turn to crime for protection and survival.

The world's growing youth and young adult population is expanding without corresponding increases for their labor. Changes in the global economy have promoted high youth unemployment in metropolitan areas and the migration of rural populations to urban areas have resulted in a new context for gang studies. Opportunities in some regions for legitimate gainful employment are limited leaving people, including youth, to rely on small scale low paying household businesses or informal or underground economies for survival. Much of the world relies on informal or underground economies. Several scholars have acknowledged and described informal and underground economies in the United States and other countries. There are indications that in some regions of the world, circumstances for youth may increasingly move them to rely more on underground economies for support. Improved health care and decreasing death rates are increasing the pool of unemployed and marginalized youth. Concentrations of these youth in some countries will diminish capital formation and economic modernization and likely increase dependency on the streets and informal economic activities, legal and illegal. In a very real sense, underground economies have become the dominant economies in many countries. These underground economies are usually a combination of legitimate and illegitimate activities. Legitimate activities include a combination of scavenging, recycling, street hustles, wheeling and dealing, peddling, day labor, cottage industries, and hawking goods in open markets. Illegal underground activities include gambling, illicit drug sales, extortion, prostitution, human trafficking, selling stolen goods, pimping, stealing vehicles, and other property crimes.

'Streetism' is a relatively new term which means living on the streets or being of the streets. For many of the world's low-income youth, the streets are a focal point where they live out there years hustling and doing what they can to cope (Anderson, 1999). They do so whether they live with their families or on the streets. The streets are where gangs spend much of their time, thus it is no accident that the streets are where gangs attract members. Some youth look to gangs for economic and social survival, identity, social capital, sense of belonging, protection, excitement, status, and other reasons. Street gang members, as well as others in impoverished neighborhoods, spend much of their time involved with the underground economies. For example, street gangs have increasingly become involved with illegal drug sales as part of the informal economy in the United States and other less developed countries (Rogerson, 2000). Street gangs play an important roles in the local economies excluded from the mainstream. The unfulfilled promise

of the good life promotes the expansion of street gangs, as they are assumed to be the only mechanism available to some to survive or live better.

STARTING POINT—DEFINING GANGS

Currently, there are no estimates of the total number of gangs and gang members in the world. To date, no international agency or government has developed a worldwide estimate of gangs or gang members. Rather, there are regional or country specific estimates that are usually prepared by government agencies. There are several reasons why worldwide gang estimates have been out of reach and no agency is responsible for collecting data on the presence of gangs across the globe. Gangs are often short-lived and do not exist for prolonged time spans, although a few become institutionalized and thus endure. Many gangs have fluid organizational boundaries and determining actual membership is difficult to know. While some gangs seek public recognition and reputations, others operate in relative secrecy making it difficult to know their characteristics and numbers. Media and law enforcement perceptions of the extent of gangs and gang membership can be exaggerated resulting in overestimates of gang presence and activities. Studies have found the media distort the true nature and extent of gangs (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007). Public perceptions of groups is critical to whether they are seen and counted as gangs.

An important reason why estimating the prevalence of gangs and gang membership is difficult because there is the lack of consensus on how to define gangs. Currently, there is no universally accepted definition of a gang (Chu, Daffern, Thomas, Ang, & Long, 2014; Goldson, 2011; Hazen & Rodgers, 2014; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Developing a definition of a gang that all scholars can agree upon has been elusive and there is no current consensus of what a gang is or does. Consensus on a definition may be impossible. Petersen (2000) suggested over 20 years ago that a universal definition of a gang may never occur because gangs differ among societies and are seen differently. What would be viewed as a gang in one county would be a social group in another. The same is true within societies and jurisdictions, as there are differences in definitions and social perceptions of gangs.

Different gang definitions have implications for measuring the extent of gang activities and their characteristics. For decades, gang authorities have acknowledged definitional issues (Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Competing definitions have impeded theoretical advancement and understanding. Franzese, Covey, and Menard (2006) argued that the lack of agreement on what a gang is impacts how scholars and policy makers perceive and tackle gang problems. Studies show that different

definitions produce significantly different results regarding accessing gang numbers and gang related crime.

In addition, lacking clear definitions and perceptions can lead to reification of groups into gangs when they are not (see Sullivan, 2006) and corresponding moral panics (Cohen, 2011; Zatz, 1987). Sullivan concluded that because gang subculture is sometimes embraced by non-gang youth, communities falsely label any group delinquency as gang-related. This exaggerates the perception of gang presence and reifies groups into gangs when they are not. In addition, how gang members define what is a gang is also important (Bjerregaard, 2002). Self-definition of gang and gang membership can play critical roles in determining what is or is not linked to gangs.

Worldwide, scholars have used different definitions of gang. One example is the U.S. Department of Justice (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018:np), which defined a gang as:

A group of 3 or more people who adopt a group identity by using a common name, slogan, identifying sign, symbol, tattoo or other physical markings, style or color of clothing, hairstyle, hand sign or graffiti to create an atmosphere of fear or intimidation in the community. The group engages in criminal activity and uses violence or intimidation to advance its criminal objectives with the intent to increase or preserve the gang's power, reputation, or economic resources. The gang may also have some of the following features: The members employ rules for joining and operating, the members meet on a recurring basis, the gang provides protection of its members from other criminals and gangs, the gang exercises control over a particular location, or it may merely defend its perceived interests against rivals, or the association has a distinguishable organization.

Eurogang Definition

There have been attempts at defining gangs, such as Thrasher's (1927:57) often cited definition:

A gang is an interstitial group, originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following types of behavior: meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning. The result of this collective behavior is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory.

More recently, some gang authorities have embraced the definition of a gang developed by the Eurogang Program group. Examples of its use include studies by Haymoz, Maxson, and Killias (2014), and Klein, Weerman, and Thornberry (2006). The Eurogang group defines a gang as: