

■ Increasing the Peace

One hopeful sign is that many gang members see membership as a means to an end—often, an economic one. Gangbanging isn't a lifetime calling, and gangs fade as members change and their lives evolve.

That fact puts the ball back where it belongs: onto the court of the larger, "decent" society, where we can do something to help—if we have the courage and the humanity.



Because even though gangs have long been part of the background of city life, they broke out at the same time that social forces were deserting the inner cities, as factories shut their doors and social services were dismantled.

The jobs may not have been fast-track, but they provided paychecks—and self-respect to the people who earned them. The programs may not have been perfect, but they did offer evidence that society cared about inner-city residents—at least a little.

If we expect respect for the rule of law, we need to pay attention to a more basic law—that of cause and effect, especially when it plays out so plainly in front of us. Because ultimately, the only way we can increase the peace is by jacking up the supply of "juice" (or respect) that flows from "us" to "them."

That doesn't mean turning our cities over to gangs. They're a symptom of a disease we have to cure. But to do it, we have to get serious about providing jobs, education, and basic services for *all* our people, especially those who have nothing.

Because the bottom-line message gangs deliver is one that's as old as the jungle and as real as the victims on tonight's late-night news: Don't expect respect if you don't give it. ■



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Do It Now Foundation

Box 27568 ■ Tempe, AZ 85285-7568 ■ 480.736.0599

Street Gangs



The View From The Street

A Do It Now Foundation Publication by Jim Parker

■ The View from the Street

They are citizens of a parallel universe, one in which the United States—"the last, best hope of the earth," in Abraham Lincoln's words—is a heartless, racist, police state controlled by corporate greed and governmental neglect.

In the dimension they inhabit, kids go to bed underfed and often untended and learn to step over discarded hypodermic syringes and broken bodies in unlit hallways and garbage-strewn streets as soon as they're able to walk.

TV is more than a "vast wasteland" here; it's an interactive learning experience played out on 32-inch screens that's turning the world into a replica of hell itself—where violence is viewed, then meted out in dizzying displays of brutality and unfocused rage upon total strangers.



Growing up 'hard.' Life is hard—and often brutal—in our inner cities, especially for kids.

It's a dimension of crime and poverty and decay and politicians who blame the victims for the problems that are swallowing up their lives.

It's a world where social programs are cut because they can't capture a tidal wave in a teacup, and the only governmental program that's expanding is the one to build bigger, more-secure fortresses for the largest—and fastest-growing—prison population in the world.

It's a home to continual discomfort and disappointment, where dwellings are too hot or too cold, people are too poor and too uneducated to do much about it, where the odds of success are printed on the backs of Powerball tickets, and the best anyone can realistically hope for is to limit their dreams to contain their pain.

It's a tough place to grow up in, but it's not a parallel dimension, after all.

It's America in the first years of the 21st Century, or at least the way it looks from the street—or, more precisely, from the point of view of the street gangs that increasingly seem to run things in the slums that form the core of our cities.

Citizens here learned to ignore the outstretched palms of beggars 10 years ago; lately, they've learned to flip their remotes past the victims of drive-by shootings and the sullen faces that blur by in the reports on gangs on the 10 or 11 o'clock news. But they can't flip past the reality of street gangs altogether.

It's not *that* kind of world. ►

Reality Squared

What kind of world is it? It's a tough world, a post-modern jungle, where the strong survive and the weak suffer in silence. It's a world with its own language, logic, history, and code of ethics.

Still, if you think it's just a mirror-image of the other, "decent" world we all inhabit, think again. Because when you see it from the street up, rather than the executive suite down, it's not that different from the "real" world, after all.

Consider: From here, it may look different, at least on the surface, but underneath, it's so similar it's scary. The crew at the top just has more dirt under their fingernails, that's all.

Oh, sure, drugs get sold and people get killed—but the people who do the selling and killing on the street think it's kinder to kill somebody all at once, instead of little by little, over a lifetime. That's the way *they* look at it, anyway.

Another way of looking at it is from the vantage point of normal, straight society. From here, gangs are just plain bad, and kids ought to have the gumption to just say "no" to them and the drugs and easy money they can provide. *Right*.

Reality—as it has a habit of doing—seems to lie somewhere in the middle.

Because gangbangers aren't completely misinformed; they *have* been dealt terrible cards in the poker game of life, and their view of the inequities in the distribution of money and power is pretty factual, as far as it goes.

On the other hand, today's gangs *aren't* Robin Hood and his Merry Men, and gang members aren't angels with dirty faces, either. They can be tough and inhumane, even brutal. They honor a code of ethics based on the giving and getting of respect, and those who transgress the code—knowingly or not—are often executed on the spot. No fear, no mercy, no apologies.

In pursuing the "juice" of respect and carving out their version of economic justice, gangs have turned the streets of our cities into war zones and residents into hostages. Police have two roles there now—as peace-keeping forces and targets. Residents of the neighborhoods the gangs control have only one: innocent bystanders.



Welcome to the world of U.S. street gangs, circa today.

It's weird here, *through-the-looking-glass* weird. Except the looking-glass here is a broken crack vial on a city street and the Cheshire Cat is a snarling pit bull, guarding a gang clubhouse.

That's why we've put together this pamphlet.

Because even though gang members *are* people and they are worthy of respect, and even if gangs reflect, in many ways, the society that shaped them, much of what they reflect is the least attractive, most abhorrent side of American life—the competitiveness and materialism and greed—stood on its head in front of a fun-house mirror, and passed off as the real thing.

It's not. In fact, the brutality and violence that gangs embrace is, quite simply, the opposite of who we are and what we value, and what we must never allow ourselves to become.

And the only way to prevent it is to understand it.

■ Gangbanging 101

Understanding gangs, though, is something that's easier if we look backward before we try looking forward. Because from a historical perspective, gangs and gang-related violence are as American as, well, the Boston Tea Party.

Long before the Revolutionary War, outlaw groups (with names like the Sons of Liberty and the Green Mountain Men) banded together throughout the colonies to meet and grumble about British rule.

They eventually won their "turf war" with the British, but not before they formed their own version of a "supergang."

That gave them the "heart" they needed to "move on" the British, who thought they could get away with "dissing" the homeboys, but who ended up getting smoked, instead.

As immigration increased to the nation our "forebangers" founded, ethnic gangs became a fact of life in American cities.

Gangs have turned the streets of our cities into war zones and citizens into hostages. Police have two roles there now—as peacekeeping forces and targets. Residents have only one: innocent bystanders.

Still, for the most part, urban gangs of the 19th and early 20th Century were transitional—groups of young men who banded together for companionship and petty crime, but which faded as their members were assimilated into the larger society.

But that was then. *This* is now. The vision of America as a melting pot of cultures and beliefs has itself melted down. The operating metaphor today is America as a pressure-cooker, where anxiety and rage alternate as prevailing emotions in a society seemingly held together only by law and the fear of chaos.



Dust 2 dust. A lot of ghetto kids can't picture themselves living much past 20 or 25. That's one reason so many don't.

The newest reality lurched into being sometime between the '70s and now, as politics and lifestyles heated up and the American economy cooled down. Living conditions in the inner cities—never rosy to begin with—deteriorated even further, as American politics shifted from "Great Society" initiatives to "Contract with America" cutbacks, and the short-lived "War on Poverty" gave way to a never-ending "War on Drugs."

And ironically, it was early, short-term successes by the government in the drug war, combined with a faltering economy and declining job opportunities in the inner city, that set the stage for the explosive growth of street gangs in the 1980's.

Because as the "War" escalated, drug prices soared so high that gangs simply couldn't stay out of the action.

"Crack" only added to the problem. The new, easily-made, smokable form of cocaine turned what had long been a "rich man's drug" into an affordable luxury on the street, and provided enormous wealth to tough, well-connected thugs who were ruthless enough (and immune enough from pangs of conscience) to destroy anyone who got out of line or in the way.

And there were thousands ruthless and connected and conscienceless enough to do that, and thousands more who got in their way. And *that's* how we got to where we are today. ▶

Do or die. A young member of a Little Rock gang proudly displays the firepower that makes him feared—and a target for other gangs.





'Family' album: One member says goodbye to another (top); "beating in" a new initiate (2); "tagging" turf (3); girl gangstas (4 & 5).

One recent survey set the number of U.S. gangs at about 23,000, with an estimated membership of 665,000.

■ 'Gangsta' Nation: Walking The Walk

Today, gangs are virtually everywhere—in inner cities and suburbs, in small towns, even Indian reservations. Signs of gangs' influence are everywhere, too: "tags" of graffiti shriek a mindless message of turf and machismo from sea to shining sea, while gang apparel—T-shirts and baseball caps, baggy pants and bandannas—have achieved critical mass acceptance in the marketplace and the minds of young people as a defining aspect of today's cool.

Thousands of gangbangers make ends meet with drug-dollars, and others resort to other illegal ventures, while still others just hang in "clubs" or "sets" because they like the glamor of gangbanging.

And "banging" (as members refer to participation in a gang) *is* glamorous—to some people. One reason is the influence of pop culture in recent years—as movies and "gangsta" rappers have milked gang culture for all it's worth, extending the influence of gangbangers far beyond the dismal city slums that gave them their start.

Gang Life: Q&A

So what's up today with street gangs?

That's a complicated question, because gangs aren't all the same and can be a *lot* of things to the people whose lives they touch.

In fact, gangs are complex enough—and touch upon so many complex social issues—that they're probably easier to understand by breaking up that central question into smaller questions—and looking at them one question at a time.

■ How do you define a gang?

That's a good place to start.

The FBI defines a gang as "a group of three or more individuals bonded together by race, national origin, culture, or territory, who associate on a continual basis for the purpose of committing criminal acts."

That covers a lot of ground and includes a lot of people that most of us wouldn't normally consider gangsters—white-collar criminals, for example. Probably a more useful distinction involves the different forms gangs can take.

■ How many kinds of gangs are there?

Gangs are as different as their members, but in general, they fall into one of three categories.

► **"Hedonistic" gangs.** Mostly social groups, the main focus of these gangs is partying and getting high. Members may commit property crimes, but not usually as a gang activity. If they fight at all, it's more often for the right to party than for turf.

► **"Instrumental" gangs.** These gangs are more likely to commit crimes against property (car theft, burglary, etc.) than crimes of violence against people. They may do drugs and deal them individually, but their main motivation is money, not power.

► **"Predatory" gangs.** Social predators commit the violent crimes—drive-by shootings, carjackings, and organized drug dealing—most often associated with gangs. They may use "disinhibitory" drugs like crystal meth and crack, which can fuel a tendency toward violence, and feed on the fear they inspire, using it as a means of domination and control.

Although most gangs are a product of a specific neighborhood or locale, in recent years a number of predatory gangs have gone national, establishing "franchises" far from their home bases.

A prime example is the Jamaican drug-dealing "posses," but the Los

Angeles gangster "nations," the Bloods and Crips, and the Chicago-based Black Gangster Disciples have also cloned "sets" throughout the nation.

■ How many gangs are there today?

That's a hard question to answer, mostly due to the secrecy of gangs and the difficulty of factoring in all the middle-class "crews" and gangbanging "wannabes" on the street, posing as gangs and gangbangers.

Still, one recent survey set the number of U.S. gangs at about 23,000, with an estimated membership of 665,000.

That seems about right, if you figure in a recent estimate by the Los Angeles District Attorney's office, which put the number of gangs in L.A. County alone at 1,000, with as many as 150,000 members.

■ Why do people join gangs?

For a lot of reasons, but mostly because gangs fill a need, or appear to, that isn't being met in members' lives in some other way.

That need can be any one of a number of individual drives, but more likely, it's a knot of needs so pervasive and so unmet that the person would probably even have a hard time untangling all the strings. Still, the most common factors that pull people towards gangs include:

► **Poverty.** For many inner-city kids, gangs are one of the only available ways of making money. It's no coincidence that gangs surged in the 1980s as the number of decent jobs in the inner city declined.

► **Emotional Needs:** Various factors—including overcrowding, single-parent (or even no-parent) families, and poverty—make it hard for many young people to have normal ego needs met, including the need for status, excitement, and power. Gangs—and gang rituals and camaraderie—satisfy those needs, at least in part.

► **Protection:** In many ways, gangs are the human equivalent of the "safety in numbers" herd-survival mechanism seen throughout nature. But gangs do more than just protect members; they drive up the ante so high that challenges to members are reduced.

► **Social Support:** Gangs are social structures in places where there are few competitors. And even though they're based more on tribal values than family values, the feeling of belonging that gangs provide is one of the strongest ties binding members. Also, gangs are so entrenched in some areas that membership is now a family tradition. Kids join the set or posse or crew their father or uncles or cousins joined before them.

■ Why are gangs so violent?

There are a lot of answers to that question, including a lengthy analysis of what happens to people in overcrowded, hostile environments who have next to nothing and virtually no chances at improving their status.

But the fact is that gangs have always tended towards violence. It's part of what happens to individuals in groups—especially loosely-structured groups that prize toughness and the ability to fight and command respect.

Still, violence is one thing; murder is something else.

And gang violence has never been deadlier than it is now, thanks to drugs and guns. They've pushed gang violence into the stratosphere over the past decade as gangs have warred over the drug trade with assault weapons and other deadly firearms.

Not all gang-related violence is drug-related, though. In fact, probably a majority are simple fights over everyday events that go over the top. The primary sources of conflict are primeval: turf, status, respect, revenge. An instigating incident can be as minor as a bump or even making eye contact with the wrong person in the wrong frame of mind.

But when justice is meted out with a "deuce-deuce" (.22 caliber pistol) or a Tec-9 (semi-automatic 9 mm handgun), it can set in motion wars that play out for months or even years and that echo for eternity—when the original transgression is all but forgotten.

In fact, one war between rival Crips factions in Los Angeles was traced back to a conflict over a junior-high romance. Before it was over, some two dozen people had been killed in the crossfire.

■ Are gang members worth saving?

Yes. In spite of their tough-guy (and bad-girl) posturing, it's important to remember that gang members are kids—or, at least, started out that way.

Some didn't have much of a choice—or didn't know they did—when they were coming up. Gangs were like the Boys' Club or the "Y" in their neighborhood, and they joined because it gave them something to do and a place to be.

They didn't create the crumbling community they were born into and they didn't choose the poverty and squalor all around them.

Kids who join gangs are often just trying to adapt and, if anything, they're only guilty of obeying the laws of survival.

That doesn't mean gang members ought to be excused for criminal acts. What's wrong is wrong, period. And crimes—particularly crimes of violence—shouldn't go unpunished.

What it does mean is that, contrary to the images we see in the media, a majority of gangbangers really *are* worth saving—if we have the will and the compassion.

■ How do we do that?

By changing. We could start by acknowledging our stake in the quality of life for residents of our inner cities.

We might even stop calling our inner cities "inner cities" altogether (as if the misery there were somehow a function of geography, rather than history and sociology and economics), and start calling them what they are: "ghettos" and "slums."

We could stop letting politicians play games with race and poverty, and make them begin the work of redeveloping our cities and empowering the people who live there to build their future.

We could enact serious measures to crack down on gangs and gang-related crime, balancing them with equally-tough measures to eliminate the factors that contribute to the appeal of gangs and the allure of crime among poor people.

A good place to start would be to provide recreational facilities for kids both inside the city and out, and making sure they're safe—and not just extensions of the gangbangers' turf.

We should expand social services, not do away with them. And in spite of the political rhetoric, we should pay for what's needed by asking the people who profit most from the status quo to pay a bigger share to help those who profit from it least.

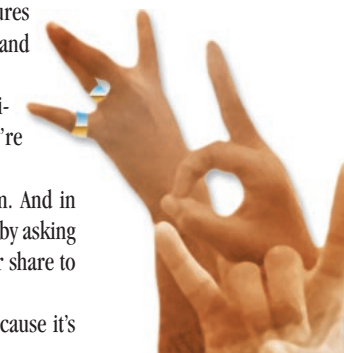
If we can't do it because it's right, maybe we can do it because it's cheaper.

"We can't look a kid in the eye and tell him that we can't spend a thousand dollars on him when he's 12 or 13 but that we'll be happy to reserve a jail cell for him and spend a hundred grand a year on him later," argues North Carolina Attorney General Mike Easley.

"It's not just bad policy; it's bad arithmetic." ►



When 'justice' is meted out with a 'deuce-deuce' or a Tec-9, it can set in motion wars that play out for years and that echo for eternity.



Signs of the times: Hand signals serve different purposes, but are one way of identifying members when they're not wearing colors.

■ GangSlang: Talking the Talk

Due to the success of "gangsta" rap and films in recent years, even little old ladies know bits and pieces of gang slang—usually everyday words like "homeboy" and "the hood."

But there's a lot more to the language of gangs than the buzzwords that filter into pop culture. In fact, gangslang is a form of mental shorthand, in which group values are codified and collapsed into words and phrases that are meaningless outside the group, but loaded with import for people on the inside.

Since the world view of gang members is shaped and reinforced to such a great extent by language, we present the glossary that follows not as a definitive guide (because like any other form of insider-speak, gangslang changes constantly, as outsiders learn the code), but as a way of glimpsing the values gangsters share and the complex, violent world they inhabit.

<p>"cap," "bust a cap"—to shoot someone "claim"—seek membership "club"—alternative gang name "crew"—small gang organized around criminal activity "dis"—show disrespect, disdain "front off"—in-your-face challenge "G"—fellow gang member "hard"—tough, merciless</p>	<p>"heart"—courage "jack up"—beat up "juice"—respect "jumpin' in," "courted in,"—going through gang initiation "kickin' it"—partying "mission"—gang-related incursion into enemy territory "move on"—challenge "nation"—regional or national gang confederation</p>	<p>"O.G."—original gangster (founding or long-time member) "peevee"—junior member or "little gangster" "quoted"—completed initiation "smoke"—to shoot someone "strapped"—armed "set"—subset of a larger gang "tried"—challenged by another "wanna-be"—apprentice G or a pretender</p>
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