

Myths and Realities of Youth Gangs

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INTRODUCTION

Because of their criminal activities and deliberate efforts to control the streets, gangs can engender enormous fear in community adults and youths (Lane & Meeker, 2000, 2003). But two groups in particular have a tendency to exaggerate the nature and seriousness of gangs: the broadcast media and the gangs themselves (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Howell, 2007; Thompson, Young, & Burns, 2000). J. Moore (1993) explains,

Most typically, [the media stereotype] is that gangs are composed of late-adolescent males, who are violent, drug- and alcohol-soaked, sexually hyperactive, unpredictable, confrontational, drug-dealing criminals. . . . They are demonic, and all the worse for being in a group. (p. 28)

In many communities, when gangs are enshrouded in images such as this, the determination of appropriate community responses can be thwarted.

This chapter presents several popular gang myths along with research that substantiates realities that contradict the myths, or at least brings them into serious question. Technically speaking, *myths* refers to beliefs that are strongly held and convenient to believe but are based on little factual information; they are not necessarily false (Bernard, 1992). Beliefs that are unequivocally false are properly labeled *fallacies*. Although useful, such a clear-cut distinction often cannot be made in reference to gangs because, depending on how they are defined, at least one exception may be found to every myth; thus the more inclusive term is used herein.

Felson (2006) argues that the gangs themselves complicate community action by creating myths as part of what he calls their *big gang theory*. The process often transpires as follows: Youths sometimes feel that they need protection on the streets in their communities. The gang provides this service. However, few members of the younger gangs are nasty enough to be particularly effective in protecting youths. Hence, they need to appear more dangerous than they actually are to provide maximum protection. Felson observed that gangs use a ploy found in nature to maximize the protection they seek to provide. To scare off threatening predators, some harmless animals and insects will mimic a more dangerous member of their species. In turn, predators learn to avoid all species—both harmless and dangerous—that look alike. For example, Felson notes that the coral snake, an extremely dangerous viper, is mimicked by the scarlet king

snake, which is often called the *false coral snake* because of its similar colors and patterns. Although the latter snake is not venomous at all, it scares off potential predators by virtue of its appearance.

Felson (2006) suggests that gangs use the same strategy, providing signals for local gang members to make their gangs resemble truly dangerous big city gangs. These standardized signals or symbols typically consist of hand signs, colors, graffiti, clothes, and language content. Gang members can display these scary signals at will to create a more menacing image. Employing a famous gang name will help them intimidate others. Once enough people believe their overblown dangerous image, it becomes accepted as reality.

CONSIDERATION OF KEY MYTHS ABOUT GANGS

Misrepresentations of gangs in the print media have been well documented in four analyses covering articles published over the past four decades (Best & Hutchinson, 1996; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; W. Miller 1974a; Thompson et al., 2000). As Bjerregaard (2003) notes, legislators also sometimes foster overreactions to gangs with very broad laws that prescribe severe penalties for any type of gang involvement. Almost invariably, though, newspaper accounts, popular magazine articles, and electronic media broadcasts on youth gangs contain at least one myth or fallacy. First, the leading newsweeklies and most major newspapers consider “gangs” to be a monolithic phenomenon and do not describe the diversity among distinctively different types of gangs, such as prison gangs versus drug gangs and youth gangs. Second, the demographic image of gang members as exclusively males and racial or ethnic minorities is perpetuated. Third, news outlets portray gangs as an urban problem that has spread to new areas, as part of a conspiracy to establish satellite sects across the country. Fourth, most gangs are characterized as hierarchical organizations with established leaders and operating rules. Fifth, the pervasiveness of violence is exaggerated. And the members themselves are prone to overstatements, for example, always claiming they were victorious in fights (Klein, 1995; Al Valdez, 2007).

Myth 1: Most Gangs Have a Formal Organization

A key premise of the big gang theory is that modern-day gangs are highly organized and function in a ruthless manner, much like organized crime groups or drug cartels. A main reason why a gang appears to be more menacing than a mere collection or group of lawbreakers is that the term *gang* implies that its members are organized, commit crimes in groups, and are thus resolutely committed to violence and mayhem (McCorkle & Miethe, 2002).

Reality

A few street gangs have evolved into highly organized, entrepreneurial adult criminal organizations (Coughlin & Venkatesh, 2003; Papachristos, 2001, 2004). However, studies

in a growing number of cities show that gangs are far less organized than expected. “Gangs,” says Klein (1995), “are not committees, ball teams, task forces, production teams, or research teams. . . . They do not gather to achieve a common, agreed-upon end” (p. 80). In fact, very few youth gangs could meet the essential criteria for classification as “organized crime” (Decker, Bynum, & Weisel, 1998; Klein, 1995). As Klein (2004) notes,

Organized crime groups such as drug cartels must have strong leadership, codes of loyalty, severe sanctions for failure to abide by these codes, and a level of entrepreneurial expertise that enables them to accumulate and invest proceeds from drug sales. (pp. 57–59)

Such criminal gangs and organized crime networks are often highly structured. In the most definitive study of the extent of gang organization conducted to date, Decker and colleagues (1998) compared two gangs in Chicago with two San Diego gangs; police had described all four gangs as the most highly organized gangs in these cities. The researchers found that the Chicago Gangster Disciples were far more organized than either the Latin Kings from Chicago or the two San Diego gangs but that none of the gangs exhibited the extremely high level of organization attributed to them by law enforcement. In another example, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (2009) intelligence reports, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) was a predominant gang in Washington, DC. McGuire (2007) found only small cliques of MS-13 in that city.

In contrast, street gangs are generally loosely organized groups that are constantly changing—consolidating, reorganizing, and splintering (Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2004; Monti, 1993; Weisel, 2002a, 2002b). Chapters 3 and 8 reference various street gang structures, and none of these resembles a corporate structure; typically, there is only an informal division of labor with “shot callers” who play a key leadership role, and these may change from one gang activity to another. Tita, Cohen, and Engberg (2005) contend that gangs’ public image and reputations are very large, yet their set spaces are very small, typically much smaller than neighborhoods or even census tracts—even, as R. Block (2000) notes, for very violent Chicago gangs.

Myth 2: Gangs of the Same Name Are Connected

This myth—that big city gangs spawn small local gangs of the same name—is a key premise of the big gang theory and broadcast media presentations. Local gangs that call themselves Crips and Bloods, for example, are assumed to be affiliated with parent gangs of the same names in distant cities.

Reality

The common notion that local gangs are affiliated with big city gangs persists because of the similarity of their names and symbols, which mimicry or imitation explains. An analogy helps reveal the reality of the situation. Local Little League baseball teams

may appear to be affiliated with major league baseball teams because of similar names and uniforms, but there is no connection between local youth teams and professional baseball clubs. So it is with gangs; there rarely is any connection whatsoever between local gangs and big city gangs known by the same names. The reality is that local gangs often “cut and paste” bits of Hollywood images of gangs and big-city gang lore into their local versions of gangs (Starbuck, Howell, & Lindquist, 2001). And they often do a poor job of this copying—perhaps using the wrong colors, distorting the original gang’s symbols, and so on. To illustrate the point, Fleisher (1998) documents a gang of youths in Kansas City who said they were affiliated with the Chicago Folks gang, but when asked about the nature of their affiliation, they couldn’t explain it. They said that they just liked to draw the Folks’ pitchfork symbol.

Local gangs also like to create the impression that they are composed of numerous “sets” or cliques and, as Felson (2006) suggests, to promote a nastier image. Rather than one big gang with many branches, most communities have several small gangs (discussed in Chapter 3), and even though some of them may use a common name, there rarely is any connection between them. Notable exceptions are the Chicago-based Gangster Disciples (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009) and both 18th Street (M-18) and MS-13, Los Angeles-based gangs with connections to *maras* (gangs) they enhanced in Central America (Cruz, 2010), as discussed in Chapter 8.

Myth 3: Our Gangs Came From Somewhere Else

Gang migration refers to the movement of gang members from one geographic area to another (Maxson, 1998), and the gang migration myth presumes that street gangs migrate across the country to establish satellite sets. The most predominant myth is that they likely came to the local city or town to set up a drug-trafficking operation. The story of migrating, cocaine-trafficking street gangs became widely accepted, and it was elaborated to embrace the notion that Southern California and Chicago gangs formed alliances in their respective regions and expanded across the United States, radiating out from the areas where they originated—up the West Coast to Vancouver; to Chicago, Kansas City, and Denver in the Midwest; and to the East Coast (U.S. Attorney General, 1989). Readers may have seen arrows superimposed on national maps to illustrate the supposed movement of gangs across the country to set up branch operations.

Reality

Mapped gang movement routes describe exceptions rather than the rule. Klein (1995, 2004) asserts that most youth gang problems are homegrown, and gang *members* relocate in the course of family moves. When families move, their gang-involved offspring usually move with them. This reality explains most so-called gang migration. More consistent with the reality, Maxson (1998) notes that gang networks and connections generally extend not more than 100 miles from the city of origin, and rarely farther. Of course, there are exceptions. Fleisher (1995) found that some Compton and Hover Crips from Los Angeles moved north to Seattle, Washington, and set up drug-trafficking gangs there. Other instances are noted elsewhere in this book. The

National Alliance of Gang Investigators' Associations (2005) contends that a few gangs do have the capacity to expand into other regions, but McGuire (2007) along with van Gemert, Peterson, and Lien (2008) debunk the notion of international migration of gangs. However, W. Miller (2001) claims some gang member migration occurred in conjunction with the enormous U.S. population shift during the 1980s and 1990s from metropolitan to suburban and rural areas. Maxson's (1998) research shows that the most common reason—in more than half the instances—behind the migration of gang members is social considerations, including family moves to improve the quality of life and to be near relatives and friends.

Myth 4: The Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and 18th Street (M-18) Gangs Are Spreading Across the United States

As Central American gang expert Cruz (2010) explains, the word *mara* in the Salvadoran vernacular commonly refers to any group of people and is widely synonymous with *folks* and also is slang for *gang*. *Trucha* is a slang word meaning “stay alert.” The term *maras* is used to denote Central American gangs. These gangs originated in El Salvador in the 1960s, born in poor neighborhoods and dysfunctional families—conditions of multiple marginality (Cruz, 2014). Mexican immigrants formed M-18 under similar conditions in Los Angeles barrios (Vigil, 1988, 2006) because a local gang, Clanton Street, rejected all youths who could not prove 100% Mexican ancestry. Soon MS-13 and M-18 battled for territorial and identity allegiances of Mexican American, Salvadoran, and youths of other nationalities in Los Angeles (Cruz, 2014). This war continued in El Salvador as deported immigrants, including prison inmates, were returned from Los Angeles to their native country. According to the U.S. Department of Justice's Organized Crime and Gang Section (2015), in 2015 MS-13 was present in 46 states and the District of Columbia, totaling 8,000 to 10,000 residents.

Reality

The large estimates of membership in these two gangs cannot be verified. For one thing, common immigration patterns cannot be separated from gang-related activity in these numbers. In addition, Franco (2010) relays that various estimates of the membership of these two gangs “are difficult to corroborate” (p. 8). 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 M-18, at that time, did not “have a strong presence in the DC area,” but that MS-13 “does have a presence in the Washington area” (pp. 1–2). Although the WOLA research found that “the evidence supports the argument that [these] gangs are not a major public security issue in the Washington D.C. area,” the study concluded that “Central American gangs do affect specific communities in a serious way, however, and they need to be addressed” (p. 40). Similar research to determine the actual presence of these gangs has not been conducted in other regions of the United States. Chapter 8 addresses the extent to which these gangs are transnational in scope and dangerous.

Myth 5: Gangs, Drugs, and Violence Are Inexorably Linked

This myth is another product of the big gang theory that imaginative gang inmates told to researchers in the late 1980s. Their tales and the subsequent media accounts vividly described violent money-making gangs that intended to wipe out local drug dealers as they presumably marched across the country. The gangs-drugs-violence myth soon was revived again in the broadcast media (K. Johnson, 2006). In sum, the gangs-drugs-violence myth ties together three big gang theory components—(1) migrating gangs, (2) gang drug trafficking, and (3) the inevitable violence—wherever migrating gangs take their drug operations, either locally or to other cities.

Reality

The gangs-drugs-violence myth is a complex one that must be dissected in parts. The migrating gang notion is a key to the first part; the second one is gang control of drug trafficking; the third part is the related violence.

As explained previously, in clarifying the fourth myth, the migrating-gang myth has been refuted in two independent national surveys of law enforcement: in Maxson's (1998) work and by respondents in the National Youth Gang Survey (detailed in Chapter 8). Law enforcement officers do not view migrating gangs as the predominant factor contributing to gang violence. They claim that drug involvement and intergang conflicts are far more important factors.

Coughlin and Venkatesh (2003) state, "The consensus appears to be that drug trafficking is usually a secondary interest compared to identity construction, protecting neighborhood territory, and recreation" (p. 44). It may come as a surprise to many readers to learn that, although street gang members often are actively involved in drug sales, gang research confirms that *few street gangs control drug distribution operations*. While research does indicate that some drug distribution operations are managed by former youth gangs that transformed themselves into drug gangs or by drug gangs initially formed as such, further studies show most drug-trafficking operations are managed by adult drug cartels or syndicates (Eddy, Sabogal, & Walden, 1988). J. Fagan and Chin (1989) note active street-level groups include drug "crews" and "posses," while Klein and Maxson (1994) and J. Moore (1993) add traditional narcotics operatives. The groups may also include new adult criminal organizations formed in some cities to service the growing drug market.

Important distinctions between youthful street gangs and drug gangs (cartels or syndicates) are shown in Table 2.1. Drug gangs are very common. For example, Braga, Kennedy, and Tita's (2002) assessment of homicide incidents in Baltimore identified some 325 drug-trafficking groups, but few of them were youth gangs. However, gang member involvement at the level of street sales brings gangs into the mix, because their members very often use drugs and need to procure them. As Av. Valdez and Sifaneck (2004) assert, the gang collectively encourages this and sometimes provides protection for its drug-selling members even though the gang itself may not benefit from the sales.

Another important question surrounds the violence connection: whether street gang involvement in the drug business typically leads to violence comparable to strictly drug gangs and the associated drug wars among cartels (Eddy et al., 1988; Gugliotta & Leen,

TABLE 2.1**Common Differences Between Street Gangs and Drug Gangs**

Street Gangs	Drug Gangs
Versatile (“cafeteria-style”) crime	Crime focused on drug business
Larger structures	Smaller structures
Less cohesive	More cohesive
Looser leadership	More centralized leadership
Ill-defined roles	Market-defined roles
Code of loyalty	Requirement of loyalty
Residential territories	Sales market territories
Members may sell drugs	Members do sell drugs
Intergang rivalries	Competition controlled
Younger on average, but wider age range	Older on average, but narrower age range

Source: OUP material: Klein (1995, Table 4.4, p. 132). Reprinted with permission from Oxford University Press.

1989; Leinwald, 2007). The reality is that it sometimes does, but as discussed in Chapter 8, youth gang-related violence mainly emanates from other conflicts.

Street gang wars over market control sometimes produce a large number of homicides. Block, Christakos, Jacob, and Przybylski (1996) report one set of ongoing gang drug wars in Chicago that involved two “brother” gangs, the Black Gangster Disciples and the Black Disciples; in another case, the Black P. Stones committed a substantial number of homicides in the course of their push to reestablish themselves in the drug market. But as Tita and his colleagues observe regarding the gangs–drugs–violence intersection in Los Angeles, “even in situations where gangs, drugs, and homicides coincided, the motivation for those homicides was much more likely to stem from an argument over quantity/quality of the drugs, payment, or robbery of a drug dealer or customer than from two groups fighting for market control” (Tita, Riley, Ridgeway, et al., 2003, pp. 5, 36).

Myth 6: A “Wanna-Be” Is a “Gonna-Be”

This myth speaks to the inevitability of becoming an actual gang member once a youth begins to display some affinity to gang culture. If a youth associates with gang members and toys with gang lifestyles, then joining is virtually presumed in accordance with this myth.

Reality

This assumption is misleading. Youths who associate with a gang do not necessarily become members. In a St. Louis study of middle school students across the city, Curry, Decker, and Egley (2002) found that more than half of the surveyed youngsters who reported never having been in a gang said they had engaged in at least one kind of gang

involvement. More than a third of them had gang members as friends, nearly one-third had worn gang colors, nearly one-quarter had hung out with gang members, and one-fifth had flashed gang signs. In another study of a Florida sample of nearly 10,000 middle school students, Eitle, Gunkel, and Gundy (2004) reported that only 5% of the sample self-reported having joined a gang, but half of the nongang youths engaged in one or more behaviors that suggested “gang orientations”: They had flashed gang signs, worn gang colors on purpose, drank alcohol or gotten high with gang members, or hung out with gang members. Girls sometimes have continuous associations with gangs but never join, as Av. Valdez, Cepeda, and Kaplan’s (2009) multiyear San Antonio study illustrated.

Myth 7: Children Are Joining Gangs at Younger and Younger Ages

No gang myth is repeated in broadcast media more often than this one. The youngest reported gang member is said to be 4 years of age.¹

Reality

In the first citywide gang study, Thrasher (1927/2000) classified 18 children under age 10 as gang members, although they were associated with what he called *child gangs* or play groups. Technically speaking, then, for a child to join a “gang” is nothing new. In the modern era, quite likely only children who are born into gangs (referred to as *blessed in*) by virtue of intergenerational traditions are actually bona fide gang members below age 10. Below this age, few children are sufficiently exposed to gangs (although Kotlowitz [1992] notes exceptions in Chicago public housing), and adolescents prefer not to hang out with children. As discussed in Chapter 3, gang joining typically begins during the transition from elementary school to middle school. It is at this point that children first experience some freedom from adult supervision, experience exposure to gangs, and are sufficiently alienated from parents and school to find them inviting.

Myth 8: Gang Members Spend Most of Their Time Planning or Committing Crimes

A popular notion about gangs is that they constantly and indiscriminately perpetrate violence. Bjerregaard (2003) explains how the media frequently “use narratives to help convey the danger associated with gang activities frequently relying on stories of drive-by shootings that killed innocent victims” (p. 175).

Reality

Klein (1995) summarized gang life as being

a very dull life. For the most part, gang members do very little—sleep, get up late, hang around, brag a lot, eat again, drink, hang around some more. It’s a boring life; the only thing that is equally boring is being a researcher watching gang members. (p. 11)

Esbensen (2000) concurs: “For the majority of the time, gang youth engage in the same activities as other youth—sleeping, attending school, hanging out, and working odd jobs. Only a fraction of their time is dedicated to gang activity” (p. 2). W. Miller’s (1966) well-trained street workers intensively observed seven gangs over a 2-year period and recorded some 54,000 behavioral sequences in 60 categories. Among these, only 3% related to assaultive behavior.

In addition, Maxson and Klein (1990) show that failure to distinguish *gang-motivated* crime from *gang-related* crime greatly exaggerates the extent of planned gang crime. The former term applies to crimes committed on behalf of the gang or in furtherance of a gang function; the latter term—the more general measure—requires only that a gang member was involved, regardless of the type of crime or circumstances surrounding it.

Myth 9: Gangs Often Have Highly Unusual Initiation Rites

This popular myth holds that to become a full-fledged member, without exception, youths who join a gang must participate in an initiation ritual, and perhaps commit a serious violent act against a stranger, chosen at random (Best & Hutchinson, 1996).

Reality

Vigil (2004) asserts that gang initiations often require initiates to endure a character test in what are called *beat-downs* or *jump-ins*. But requiring inductees to victimize innocent members of the public is extremely rare. There are several versions of ritual-associated myths, which periodically circulate on the Internet in the form of “urban legends.” For example, Fernandez (1998) recounts the flickered-headlights myth, which refers to a legend that gang members must drive after dark with their headlights turned off to choose victims. According to this myth, if an approaching motorist flashes his or her headlights at the gang members’ car (presumably in a friendly attempt to alert the driver that the lights are off), the gangsters must chase down and kill the motorist. Saunders (2011) identifies another media-induced hysteria that gangs from Mexico are robbing women in Walmart parking lots. Each of these urban legends and many others are nothing but hoaxes that are quickly debunked by law enforcement and skeptical observers.

Myth 10: Most Youths Are Pressured to Join Gangs

A commonly held notion about gang involvement is that youths are surely pressured to join gangs. Otherwise, why would youngsters become involved in these terrible groups?

Reality

As unlikely as it may seem, many youths who join very much *want* to belong to gangs, because gangs often are at the center of appealing social action—parties, hanging out, music, dancing, drugs, and opportunities to participate in social activities with members of the opposite sex. Other adolescents often look up to gang members because of their

rebellious and defiant demeanor. For example, Wiist, Jackson, and Jackson's (1996) survey of Houston middle school students revealed that the classmates whom they looked up to as peer leaders did not have the qualities one might expect: 1 in 4 had beaten or punched another person, and nearly 2 in 10 had been in a gang fight.

Social interaction and a need for protection are main reasons that youths give when asked why they joined a gang. They want to feel safe and secure, and they want to be an integral part of the social scene. They may seek support that their own parents and family do not provide. The pressures they may feel to join the gang are usually associated with family relations and normal peer influences, or come from gang members who warn them that they may be without protection if they do not join—particularly in correctional institutions. Most youths can manage these circumstances without reprisal from other gang members (Decker & Kempf-Leonard, 1991).

The gang-joining process is generally similar to the manner in which most of us would go about joining an organization. It is a gradual process that may consume multiple years. A youngster typically begins hanging out with gang members at age 12 or 13 (even younger in some instances), and joins the gang between age 13 and 15—typically taking from 6 months to a year or two from the time of initial associations (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Huff, 1996, 1998; Vigil, 1993). But many associates never join.

I guess we were all looking for a feeling of being wanted, so we went and did it. We were all fighting and what have you. Then they handed us a can of spray paint and some baggies and we were on our way.

—Anonymous member of the Ganzas gang
(in J. Moore, 1991, p. 34)

Myth 11: Adults Recruit Adolescents to Join Gangs

It is widely believed that adult gang members apply pressure to children and adolescents to join gangs. Legislators and media reports often presume that sinister adult gang operatives are using their stealth to draw younger and younger victims into their clutches, often around schools, much like pedophiles. The illogic of this presumption is never explored in such broadcasts. A corollary view is that adult gangs recruit youngsters to act as runners in their lucrative drug trade. Because of these concerns, some state anti-gang laws include enhanced penalties for adults who recruit children into gangs.

Reality

Almost without exception, other youngsters recruit gang members. Although youths commonly report ordinary peer pressure (from friends who are in the gang and siblings), the reality is that the adult gang members' recruitment of youths is extremely rare. Just as children and adolescents are recruited into cliques, friendship groups, and gangs by peers who are members or interested in joining themselves, it typically is similar-aged peers who exercise the most influence. Gangs sometimes apply peer

pressure on recruits in the course of gang expansion (J. Moore, Vigil, & Garcia, 1983). To be sure, and as Fleisher and Decker (2001) confirm, prison gangs actively recruit new members through threats, force, and protection offers; Sheley and Wright (1995) believe this likely occurs more often than reported in juvenile correctional facilities as well. Moreover, very few gang studies have documented the use of juveniles in drug running; the best example is likely Bynum and Varano's (2003) Detroit study. Interestingly, Hagedorn (1994) found that Milwaukee's older gang members actually refused to allow juveniles to get involved in the drug trade, because of the dangers involved. More common, it seems, is the use of coercion by older gang members, "pressing younger dudes into taking the fall" when arrested (D. Weisel, personal communication, January 21, 2009).

We started it, me and Pelona and Maggie and India, just hanging around together and meeting at each other's house. More girls started coming over and then the boys started naming us "honey-drippers" cause we used to have this record . . . we used to play over and over.

—Anonymous female member of the White Fence gang
(in J. Moore, 1991, p. 29)

Myth 12: Once Kids Join a Gang, They're Pretty Much Lost for Good

Gang involvement is seen as a permanent condition; once youths join a gang, there is no turning back. The grip of the gang is said to be permanent. This myth has its origins in the mystique of dominating gangs, first promulgated in the romantic movie *West Side Story* with the claim "Once you're a Jet, you're a Jet all the way, from your first cigarette to your last dying day" and also in the "blood in; blood out" credo.

Reality

Gang involvement is rarely a permanent status. Field studies, community youth interviews, and surveys of students find that "for many youth, actual membership in the gang is a short-term fling" (J. Moore, 2007, p. x). Excluding cities with a large number of intergenerational gangs, multiple studies conclude that about half of the youngsters who claim membership in a gang typically leave it within a year. In Rochester, New York, Krohn and Thornberry (2008) found that half of the boys (50%) and two-thirds of the girls reported being a gang member for 1 year or less; and only 22% of the boys and 5% of the girls remained members for 3 or 4 years. In Pittsburgh, R. A. Gordon and colleagues (2004) determined almost half (48%) of the boys were gang members for only 1 year, and just 25% for up to 2 years. Seattle researchers Hill, Lui, and Hawkins (2001) reported that 31% belonged for longer than a year, but only 1% belonged for 5 years. In Denver, Esbensen and Huizinga (1993) found that 67% were members for just 1 year, and only 3% belonged for all 4 years. Interestingly, most (60%) of the active Denver gang members "indicated that they would like not to be a gang member and expected to leave the gang in the future" (p. 582). Nationwide data collected by Bjerregaard (2010) also show that gang involvement is "a transient phenomenon" among teenagers.

Adolescence is a time of changing peer relations and fleeting allegiances to both friends (Warr, 2002) and gangs (Decker & Curry, 2000; Fleisher, 1998). Involvement in a variety of peer groups is common during the adolescent period. However, multiyear and intergenerational gang membership is far more common in cities with long-standing gang problems, such as Chicago (Horowitz, 1983) and Los Angeles (J. Moore, 1978).

I'd dress my kids in gang clothes. I thought they were so cute. I thought I was so smart. I dropped out of school and there I was, a baby mamma with two kids in Florencia-13 clothes.

—Joanna (in Leap, 2012, pp. 61–62)

Other studies in traditional gang cities also found that gang membership was a relatively temporary experience for the majority of gang-involved youths (Hagedorn, 1998; Klein, 1971; Short & Strodbeck, 1965/1974; Vigil, 1988; Yablonsky, 1967). Prison gangs are a different matter, to be sure. Fleisher (1995) notes the “blood in; blood out” credo is shared among prison gangs, including the Mexican Mafia, La Nuestra Familia, Texas Syndicate, and Mexicanemi. Other gangs have death penalty offenses, which “include but are not limited to: stealing drugs or drug money for personal use, testifying in open court against another member, failing to kill someone after being directed to do it, or betraying gang loyalty” (p. 141).

Myth 13: The Gang’s Here for Good

It is commonly believed that once gangs appear, they become a permanent fixture in communities. As J. Moore (1993) suggests, this notion seems to be based on the view that gangs thrive only “in inner-city neighborhoods where they dominate, intimidate, and prey upon” innocent citizens (p. 28).

Reality

Howell and Egley (2005a) report national survey data showing that in cities with populations under 50,000, gang problems regularly wax and wane. In smaller areas with populations under 25,000, only 10% of the localities reported persistent gang problems. Having a gang problem is certainly not a permanent condition in sparsely populated areas. Moreover, in these smaller areas, gang problems are, comparatively speaking, relatively minor in terms of size (e.g., number of gangs and gang members) and impact on the community. Hence, Howell (2006) asserts the probability of permanent gang problems is far greater in the nation’s large cities than in the smaller ones and in rural counties—although experiencing gangs forever once they appear is not by any means a certainty, even in large cities (discussed further in Chapter 7).

Myth 14: Gang Members Are a New Wave of Super Predators

John DiIulio (1995a, 1995b) coined the term *super predator* to call public attention to what he characterized as a “new breed” of offenders, “kids that have absolutely no

respect for human life and no sense of the future. . . . These are stone-cold predators!” (DiIulio, 1995b, p. 23). Elsewhere, DiIulio and coauthors have described these young people as “radically impulsive, brutally remorseless youngsters . . . who murder, assault, rob, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, join gun-toting gangs, and create serious [linked] disorders” (Bennett, DiIulio, & Waters, 1996, p. 27). DiIulio (1995b) warned that juvenile super predators would be “flooding the nation’s streets,” coming “at us in waves over the next 20 years. . . . Time is running out” (p. 25). DiIulio (1995b, 1997) and J. Wilson (1995) predicted a new “wave” of juvenile violence to occur between about 1995 and 2010, which they based in part on a projected increase in the under-18 population. The sharp increase in adolescent and young adult homicides in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Blumstein, 1995a, 1995b) was tied to the presumed new wave of juvenile super predators, and attributable partly to drug-trafficking gangs that supposedly grew to profit from the so-called crack cocaine epidemic. Several popular magazines featured stories on the predicted crime wave, and many depicted on their covers young Black thugs—often gang members—holding handguns. Stories that played to readers’ fears were common. The dire warnings of a coming generation of super predators supported what Esbensen and Tusinski (2007) assert was a helpless feeling that the young minority gang-involved offenders were beyond redemption.

Reality

None of these assumptions proved to be correct. The new wave of super predators never arrived. Several researchers have debunked this myth and the associated doomsday projections; the anticipated increase in juvenile violence was vastly exaggerated (Howell, Lipsey, & Wilson, 2014). A new wave of minority super predators did not develop, nor did a general wave of juvenile violence occur. Public policy analysts and the research communities attribute the dramatic growth in homicide largely to the availability of firearms—primarily handguns—the involvement of young people in illicit drug markets, and an increase in gang homicide (C. Block & Block, 1993; Cook & Laub, 1998; Howell, 1999).

M. Fishman (1978) first discovered *crime reporting waves*, which begin as crime themes that journalists develop, often from police sources, in the process of gathering information, organizing it, and selecting news to be presented to the public. Journalists routinely rely on one another for newsworthy crime trends. Fishman noted how additional media outlets ran a story after seeing the initial attention that it garnered, and how the original story was embellished as it was repeated in another locality. In this manner, a crime theme spreads throughout a community of news organizations, as one media outlet after another repeats the story. Hence, a crime reporting wave may develop as the story is recounted, expanded, and often embellished.

In another example, an experienced gang researcher tested the veracity of a broadcast warning of a coming wave of gang activity in New York City. The media stories concentrated on large gangs that presumably were present in New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago: Bloods, Crips, Latin Kings, and Netas. M. Sullivan (2006) explains, “The nationally famous gangs finally came to New York City in 1997, at least in name” (p. 22). Furthermore, “many stories were told of the rituals supposedly associated with Blood

membership” (p. 30). In the most widely circulated version, induction into the Bloods gang required recruits to commit random violent acts, such as slashing the face of a total stranger with a razor. In an embellished claim, the slashing victim had to be a family member, including one’s mother. The crescendo of this hysteria was reached on Halloween 1997: “As the day approached, rumors circulated throughout New York City that Halloween would be a day of a massive Blood initiation” (p. 30). Alas, “the mass slayings never occurred. The hysteria subsided, and the media lost interest” (p. 31). Data that Sullivan collected in the three neighborhood areas proved that nothing happened in the way of a surge in gang activity, only a spike in media reports.

Myth 15: Gangs Were Actively Involved in the Crack Cocaine Epidemic

Skolnick (1989, 1990) interviewed imprisoned members of the California Crips and Bloods in the late 1980s. The gang members said they were transforming themselves into formal criminal organizations to profit from the “crack cocaine epidemic.” They also claimed they were expanding their criminal operations across the country. The California gang members’ story influenced public perceptions of gangs via broadcast media in several ways. The myth of formal organization is particularly important. The notion that gangs were becoming huge powerful criminal organizations—much like highly structured corporations—became widely accepted. A national conference concluded that “it is well known that gang members are key players in the illegal drug trade,” and that “there is clear evidence . . . that the demand for drugs, especially crack cocaine, has led to the migration of Los Angeles gang members across the country” (Bryant, 1989, pp. 2–3). The threat drug-trafficking youth gangs represented to the nation seemed apparent. “The fierce circle of drugs, profits, and violence threatens the freedom and public safety of citizens from coast to coast. It holds in its grip large jurisdictions and small ones, urban areas and rural ones” (T. Donahue, in Bryant, 1989, p. 1). Representatives in other levels of the federal government immediately began promoting this assumption (Hayeslip, 1989; U.S. Attorney General, 1989; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1989).

Because the growth in youth gun violence in the period from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s coincided with the so-called crack cocaine epidemic, a couple of researchers suggested that these developments were related and could involve gang members. Blumstein and Rosenfeld (1999) stated the assumed connection:

As the crack epidemic spread in the mid- and late-1980s, so did the danger around inner city drug markets, driving up the incentive for more kids to arm themselves in an increasingly threatening environment. That environment also became a prime recruiting ground for urban street gangs. (p. 162)

Reality

It is difficult to find convincing empirical evidence of a nationwide crack cocaine epidemic in the scholarly literature (for convincing evidence to the contrary, see Hartman & Golub, 1999; Reeves & Campbell, 1994). Only a few cities appear to

have experienced such widespread cocaine use to qualify as an “epidemic,” principally Los Angeles, Oakland, New York City, Detroit, Miami, and Washington, DC (Reeves & Campbell, 1994, p. 160). Street gangs’ involvement was very limited. There is evidence that some Los Angeles Crips and Bloods gangs were involved in large-scale cocaine trafficking (Cockburn & St. Clair, 1998). However, more extensive research showed that street gang involvement in cocaine drug trafficking in California was overstated (Klein, Maxson, & Cunningham, 1991; Maxson, 1998; Maxson, Woods, & Klein, 1996). In general, empirical support for Blumstein and Rosenfeld’s (1999) hypothesis is not convincing. In two studies these widely respected scholars cite, Cork (1999) and Grogger and Willis (1998) attempted to show a causal connection between youth violence and a presumed crack cocaine epidemic, but actual crack use could not be distinguished from other more widespread means of ingesting cocaine (Golub & Johnson, 1997), and neither of these studies empirically established the expected connection directly to gangs.

The crack cocaine phenomenon was not as widespread as Blumstein and Rosenfeld presumed; it was limited to a few cities. Moreover, Ousey and Lee (2004) note that “different drug ‘epidemics’ have hit different cities at different points in time”; hence, Blumstein and Rosenfeld’s hypothesis does not universally apply. In reality, drug distribution and related drug wars are overwhelmingly the province of adult criminal organizations and cartels (Eddy et al., 1988; Gugliotta & Leen, 1989; Klein, 2004), not street gangs that are without the financial backing and access to banks for money laundering that adult organized crime groups enjoy. Researchers have long doubted that gangs composed largely of adolescents could manage interstate drug-trafficking operations (Howell & Decker, 1999). There are a few exceptions, of course, and Pittsburgh and Detroit are two of these, in which gang involvement in drug trafficking was extensive (see Chapter 8). But the most authoritative sources are in agreement that the so-called crack cocaine epidemic was an instrumental part of the Reagan administration’s “war on drugs” (Brownstein, 1996; Reeves & Campbell, 1994).

Myth 16: Zero Tolerance of Gang Behaviors Will Eliminate Gangs From Schools

Calls for increased law enforcement presence in schools commenced in the late 1980s with the Reagan administration’s policy of aggressive enforcement of antidrug laws. By 1993, *zero-tolerance* (ZT) policies were adopted by school boards across the country, often broadened to include not only drugs and weapons but also tobacco use and school disruption. In 1994, President Clinton signed the Gun-Free Schools Act into law (Public Law 103-227) that mandates an expulsion of one calendar year for possession of a weapon and referral of students who violate the law to the criminal or juvenile justice system. By the late 1990s, at least three-fourths of all schools reporting to the National Center for Education Statistics said that they had ZT policies in place for various student offenses, including bringing firearms or other weapons to school; gang activity; alcohol, drug, and tobacco offenses; and physical attacks or fighting (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). These policies specify predetermined mandatory consequences or punishments for specific offenses. In the school setting, ZT is a disciplinary policy that

sends this message by punishing all offenses severely, no matter how minor, and suspension from school is the most common punishment. There is no room for discretion. ZT policies are also called *one strike and you're out* policies. These policies are based on deterrence philosophy, and they originally targeted drug use, gang involvement, and gun possession.

Reality

To enforce school-based ZT policies, armed police are increasingly placed in schools, the end result of which appears mainly to be sending more children to juvenile courts for minor forms of misbehavior that should have been addressed as disciplinary matters (Figure 2.1). A Texas study of nearly 1 million Texas public secondary school students shocked the public in finding that among students who were followed for more than 6 years beginning in 2000, nearly 60% were suspended or expelled from school (Fabelo et al., 2011). It turns out that only 3% of the total disciplinary actions were in response to conduct for which state law mandated suspensions and expulsions; virtually all were made at the discretion of school officials, presumably in response to violations of local schools' conduct codes.

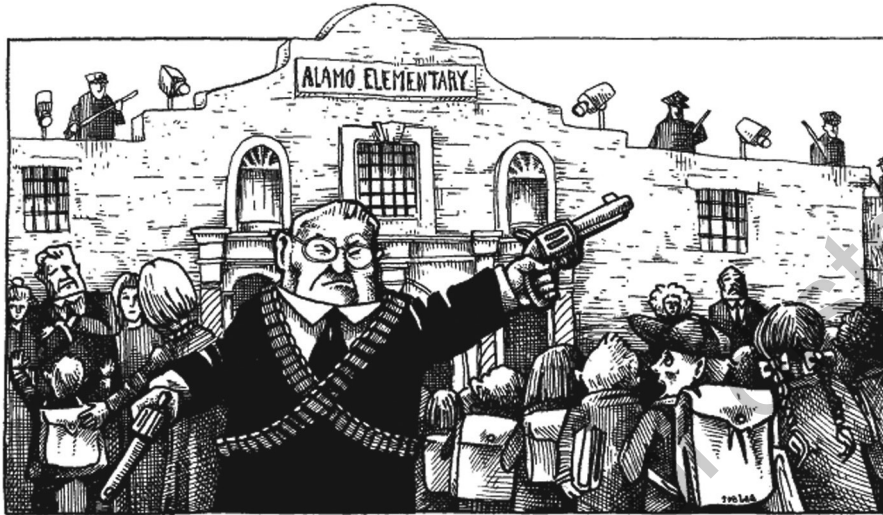
This research pinpoints a highly controversial performance issue, one that has surrounded the placement of law enforcement officers in schools from the beginning: the prospect of widening the net of the juvenile justice system over minor offenders. ZT policies have had the effect of clogging juvenile justice systems with low-risk offenders, and school resource officers are viewed as key players in this undesirable outcome. Many public schools "have turned into feeder schools for the juvenile and criminal justice systems" (Advancement Project, 2005, p. 11). The Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice recently filed a lawsuit charging that Meridian, Mississippi, officials are running a "school-to-prison pipeline" in violation of the constitutional rights of students who are wrongfully reported by public schools to law enforcement for minor disobedience.

ZT policies can have a cumulative effect, as follows:

- The "difficult schools" with ZT policies can increase future delinquency by imposing more severe sanctions (Kaplan & Damphouse, 1997).
- Suspension and expulsions from school often mean that students are removed from adult supervision and, in turn, experience more exposure to delinquent peers, which can lead to delinquency onset (Hemphill, Toumborou, Herrenkohl, McMorris, & Catalano, 2006).
- Delinquency involvement can increase gang membership and court referral (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003).
- Teenagers who experience juvenile justice system intervention are substantially more likely than their peers to become members of a gang (Bernburg, Krohn, & Rivera, 2006).

FIGURE 2.1

Schoolhouse Zero Tolerance



Source: Skiba and Peterson (1999). Illustration by Joseph E. Lee. Reprinted by permission.

Myth 17: Sole Reliance on Law Enforcement Will Wipe Out Gangs

Because gangs are commonly believed to have come from somewhere else, it is presumed that law enforcement agencies can turn them away at the city or county borders, or remove all of them from the area by arrest, prosecution, and confinement. This deterrence strategy is called *gang suppression*.

Reality

When used as a single strategy, gang suppression tactics do not have a history of success. The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) has long been a leader in the use of these tactics. The most notorious gang sweep, Operation Hammer, was an LAPD Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) unit operation (Klein, 1995). It started in South Central Los Angeles in 1988, when a force of a thousand police officers swept through the area on a Friday night and again on Saturday, arresting presumed gang members on a wide variety of offenses, including existing warrants, new traffic citations, curfew violations, illegal gang-related behaviors, and observed criminal activities. All of the 1,453 people arrested were taken to a mobile booking operation adjacent to the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.

Most of the arrested youths were released without charges. Slightly more than half were gang members. There were only 60 felony arrests, and charges were filed on only 32 of them. As Klein (1995) describes it, “This remarkably inefficient process was repeated many times, although with smaller forces—more typically one hundred or two hundred

officers” (p. 162). Incredibly, the Rampart CRASH officers, who were fiercely involved in fighting gangs, came to act like gang members themselves. Leinwald (2000) describes how the CRASH officers wore special tattoos and pledged their loyalty to the anti-gang unit with a code of silence. They protected their turf by intimidating Rampart-area gang members with unprovoked beatings and threats. Rafael Perez, an officer in the Rampart Division who was arrested in 1998 for stealing cocaine from a police warehouse, provided testimony for CRASH officers’ arrests when he implicated 70 officers in a variety of illegal activities: planting evidence, intimidating witnesses, beating suspects, giving false testimony, selling drugs, and covering up unjustified shootings.

The Operation Hammer incident illustrates how it is unfair and unrealistic to expect that law enforcement can succeed in extinguishing street gangs by the use of gang suppression tactics. Street gangs are a product of U.S. history and are homegrown.

Myth 18: Nothing Works With Gangs

There is a tendency to believe that the gang problem is too complex to be solved, or that prior attempts have been misguided and ineffective.

Reality

In the words of the renowned meta-analyst Lipsey (1995), when speaking about juvenile delinquency,

It is no longer constructive for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to argue about whether delinquency treatment and related rehabilitative approaches “work,” as if that were a question that could be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” As a generality, treatment clearly works. (p. 78)

So it is with the gang field. It is no longer constructive to say that nothing works strictly because a blue-ribbon program that consistently shows large reductions does not exist. On occasion, even homegrown programs can outperform blueprint juvenile delinquency programs (Lipsey & Howell, 2012). More than a dozen gang programs show measurable reductions in some form of gang-related behavior; others show either reductions in risk factors or protective benefits. In the gang world, it would be unrealistic to expect large reductions in gang-related crime, because of the intractability of gangs, given that they are anchored in cracks in societies and gang members often suffer from multiple marginality in key sectors of their lives. The larger issue is what works, for whom, and under what circumstances.

Relying largely on an outdated review of gang programs that was published more than a decade ago, Klein and Maxson (2006) perpetuated the misleading notion that anti-gang programming in the United States is unproven or at best merely promising. Several programs have proven effective, and these are reviewed in Chapters 9 and 10.

One of the effective gang programs (the Comprehensive Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression Program) demonstrated crime reductions in controlled studies in five cities (Chapter 10), specifically contradicting Klein and Maxson's critique of this particular program. A highly reliable meta-analysis of comprehensive gang programs by Hodgkinson and colleagues (2009) also revealed other gang programs that were effective, though published after Klein and Maxson's review in 2006. It should also be recognized that programs that have proven effective in reducing gang violence have not produced particularly large reductions, though statistically significant.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Gang problems are often difficult to assess, and gangs are often shrouded in myths, which can lead to ineffective community responses. For example, if it is believed that local gangs migrated from distant cities such as Los Angeles or Chicago, officials may assume that the newly arrived gang members can be driven out. If they and their families are established residents of the city, however, this approach is unlikely to work.

In the 1980s and 1990s, myths and stereotypes about gangs and gang members contributed to moral panic in America. In this state of moral panic, political and social leaders suddenly defined a specific group of people as a major threat to our values and behavioral standards.

A "war on gangs" was declared. The LAPD's Operation Hammer is a reminder of the futility of singular suppression strategies, particularly street sweeps.

The myths and stereotypes, coupled with a lack of research to address their validity, contribute to our lack of ability to address the gang problem effectively. The first responsible step in every community that suspects it has a gang problem is an objective, interagency, and community-wide assessment to determine if in fact a gang problem exists and, if so, to identify the dimensions of the problem. Every effort must be made to discard preconceived notions in this assessment, because many of these are based on gang myths.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. From your perspective, what is the most surprising gang myth?
2. Review several newspaper or magazine articles on gangs and see how many myths you can identify.
3. Why are gang myths so popular, and who benefits from gang myths besides broadcast media?
4. How can gang myths be countered?
5. Dissect the so-called crack cocaine epidemic. Did it actually happen? Why was it promoted? What role did politics play in promoting it? Why is it still considered by many criminologists to have happened?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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NOTE

1. Among thousands of print and broadcast reports of very young gang members over a decade (A. Egley, personal communication, February 24, 2011).