Lending

ARIEL INFORMATION:

Ariel Address:  

ODYSSEY INFORMATION:

Odyssey Address: 129.219.247.12

AZN
Northern Arizona University Cline Library
Document Delivery Services
Box 6022
Building 28, Knoles Drive
Flagstaff, AZ 86011
(928) 523-6808 / (928) 523-6860 (fax)
OCLC: AZN
NAU Ariel: 134.114.228.9
document.delivery@nau.edu

TN: 430155

Borrower: AZS
Call #: HV6439.U5G36 1990
Location: Book Stacks IN LIBRARY
Special Instructions: Borrowing Notes; Please send! Thank you.
@ami/GWLA/bri acct# 51-0066/lc acct# 006457/We can pay Invoices via Credit Card /<ODYSSEY;129.219.247.12/ILL>

Shipping Address:
Interlibrary Loan
Arizona State University Libraries
PO Box 871006
300 E Orange Mall
Tempe AZ 85287-1006 (USA)

Fax: 480-965-9486
EMail: ILL@asu.edu
Notice: This material may be protected by Copyright Law (Title 17 U.S.C.).

Paged by ____ (Initials)

Reason Not Filled (check one):
□ NOS  □ NFAC (GIVE REASON)
□ LACK VOLUME/ISSUE  □ OVER 100 PAGES
□ PAGES MISSING FROM VOLUME

Rec'd: 7/16/2012 7:48:36 AM

Northern Arizona University Document Delivery Services
Why the United States Has Failed to Solve Its Youth Gang Problem

WALTER B. MILLER

In the 1950s youth gangs were widely recognized as a serious problem in major U.S. cities. The image of the fighting gang was disseminated widely, and New York gang conflict was the subject of a play that became a classic of the American theater. Millions of dollars in federal, state, and local money were spent on scores of projects and programs aimed at the prevention and control of youth gang crime.

Three decades later, youth gangs still are widely recognized as a serious problem in the United States. But there is a major difference. Youth gangs of the 1980s and 1990s are more numerous, more prevalent, and more violent than in the 1950s, probably more so than at any time in the country's history.¹

It is obvious that the United States not only has failed to solve the problem of youth gang crime but also has failed to keep it from getting worse—much worse. How can this failure be understood? The United States is one of the richest and most powerful nations in the world, with abundant resources in money and human talent. Why has its ability to secure a reasonable degree of safety and stability to millions of citizens in thousands of communities been frustrated for so long by a relatively small group of youthful males? This chapter
will suggest some answers, however incomplete, to these questions.

But before addressing the major question of this chapter, it is necessary to ask whether the question itself should even be asked. Even to suggest that the problem of youth gangs might be ameliorated—let alone “solved”—could easily be seen as naive, disingenuous, or both. The United States faces and has faced a wide range of domestic problems, and although it has “solved” or dealt quite successfully with some (e.g., the Depression, elderly poor living in poverty, infectious diseases such as polio and scarlet fever), others remain unsolved, including a set of problems called “social problems.” These include alcoholism, drug abuse, homelessness, illiteracy, public education failures, child abuse, welfare dependency, and others.

Prominent among social problems are problems of crime. Crime resulting from the use and marketing of drugs is a dominant national concern. High levels of homicide, particularly in certain urban centers, are endemic and persisting. Prison overcrowding in many states has reached unprecedented proportions. The United States has had limited success in mitigating, let alone solving, these and other serious crime problems. Why, then, is it legitimate even to imply that a long-standing problem such as youth gang crime might be more susceptible to a solution than the others?

In fact, it is quite possible to make a case that, unlike other persisting crime problems such as robbery, burglary, racketeering, white-collar fraud, and political corruption, crime by groups or gangs of youths—and particularly violent crimes—do in fact have a much better chance, not of being “solved” by elimination, but of being reduced substantially in frequency and severity. There is little doubt that there are powerful influences in many communities that undergird the formation and perpetuation of youth gangs, and that gang youth engage in more serious crimes than their nongang counterparts (W. B. Miller, 1969a; Tracy & Piper, 1981). But there are also certain characteristics of gangs and gang crime that suggest that these problems have a good potential for being mitigated by well-designed strategies.
First is the well-established finding that gang problems in particular localities wax and wane. Serious problems in some cities have diminished substantially or disappeared. Something has happened that has caused dramatic reductions. This indicates that there do exist potentially identifiable factors associated with particular gang control programs, “natural” community developments, or both that cause gang problems to diminish or disappear. Efforts to focus specifically on identifying these factors could provide major policy guidelines for future control programs.

A second and related characteristic is the fact that there are some communities with demographic characteristics generally associated with serious gang problems (e.g., low-income inner-city areas, high concentrations of “minorities”) but where gang problems are mild or absent. This again suggests that there are discoverable factors associated with the absence of gang problems.

A third characteristic is the relatively young age of gang members—particularly of the “midgets,” “pee wees,” or “wannabes” in their early teens. Despite the appeal of the gang and the influence of older adolescents and young adults as role models, most gang members simply have not made the degree of commitment to crime found in older career criminals such as mafiosi or bank robbers. For many gang membership is a passing phase, and youths “mature out” to become law-abiding adults. Pressures to leave or not to join gangs are in many cases supported by community antigang pressures—sentiments that gang membership is foolish or ill advised, articulated not only by adult females, but also very often by ex-gang members. Younger individuals are more likely to be crime novices and less likely to escape detection and arrest than older and more experienced offenders. In addition, adolescent groups generally are less integrated into established crime networks that provide protection for members through payoffs, influence with politicians, and other connections with both legitimate and illegitimate organizations.

A fourth characteristic of youth gangs lies in the positive functions they serve in the lives of their members. Youth groups
designated as "gangs" because their members customarily engage in crime are one subtype of a prevalent social form—the adolescent peer group. These groups in the United States play a major role in the socialization of youth, and in this sense are not a problem but a solution, despite perceptions to the contrary by many adults. All but a small percentage of the activities of youth gangs consist of customary and legal forms of adolescent behavior—boy-girl contacts, group participation in recreation, entertainment, dancing, music, and the like. Gangs, like other adolescent groups, enable youths to learn important social skills in a group context.

It is important to note that as individuals with a proven capacity to function in a group context, gang members do not engage in either legal or illegal activities because of physical compulsions, as is the case, for example, for many drug and alcohol users. Crime by gang members is largely a product of social and cultural learning; it lacks the element of physiological addiction that makes the rehabilitation of drug addicts and alcoholics so difficult.

A final characteristic of youth gangs affecting prospects for gang control is the degree of visibility of gang activities. A major reason that efforts to control crimes such as drug dealing, robbery, burglary, computer fraud, and illegal financial manipulations is so difficult is that major operations are conducted in secrecy by people who go to great lengths to hide their identities and activities.

Youth gangs, by contrast, are for the most part highly visible, often ostentatiously so. Members of adult crime syndicates do not wear sweaters bearing the legend "Manhattan Mafia," nor do they list the names of syndicate members as graffiti on neighborhood walls. This is not to deny some element of secrecy in gang activities, but it is minor relative to their visible activities and the secrecy of most other kinds of collective crime. Both criminal justice and social service personnel throughout the years have had relatively little difficulty in identifying members of local youth gangs and tracking their activities. This characteristic greatly facilitates the task of locating and dealing with gang crime.
History of Gang Control Efforts

The nation's failure to remedy its gang problems is not attributable to lack of effort. Scores of programs have been implemented and millions of dollars spent in efforts to cope with gang problems. A historical examination of approximately 60 such enterprises reported between 1920 and 1985 can be summarized by citing five of its conclusions (Miller, 1985). First, programs were based on a limited number of basic philosophies and methods; most programs used one or some combination of five major approaches. Second, with the exception of a small number of innovations, the great majority of programs could be described as pedestrian and unimaginative. Third, procedures were used repeatedly during the 65-year period independent of evidence on their effectiveness. Nor did the fact that a number of the most popular methods had been evaluated as ineffective keep them from being used again. Prominent among approaches showing poor results were those based on the philosophy of attempting to change gangs by changing the overall character of their communities. Finally, since the 1920s, methods based on a set of popular rallying cries—including those of "prevention" and "coordination"—have been advocated repeatedly despite little evidence of their feasibility or potential effectiveness.5

If one accepts the proposition that youth gang problems are less intransigent than many other persisting crime problems, one might have expected a better record of success than appears from the historical review. In fact, it is possible that some of the programs did have a more positive impact than can be demonstrated, but the poor quality of available evidence makes it very difficult to determine which of the methods used were better and which were worse. As a consequence, those who face today's serious gang problems do not have at their disposal reliable information on a set of methods with a proven capacity to produce positive results. This is one reason for the low rate of success in coping with gang problems. This chapter discusses this and other reasons under four major headings: strategy, resources, implementation, and social context.
Strategy

A central reason for the failure of the United States to deal effectively with youth gang problems lies in its failure to develop a comprehensive national gang control strategy. This task poses major problems of conceptualization as well as implementation, but the absence of either a guiding plan or any serious intention to develop one is a critical defect. With some exceptions, most current efforts are localized and parochial, unrelated to programs in other localities or to past experiences in their own or other communities.

What form would such a strategy take? Visualizing its character is not as difficult as one might suppose. A major precedent is provided by going back three decades to the experience of President John F. Kennedy's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime (PCJD), authorized under the Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act of 1961.

Although this program was aimed at the broader problem of juvenile delinquency, its general approach is directly applicable to the more specific problem of youth gang crime. Conceptually the strategy was relatively simple. It comprised nine major steps or phases, some of which could run currently with others:

1. Establish an office at the federal level to support and oversee the national effort.
2. Select a variety of sites throughout the country that manifest the problem at issue.
3. Develop, adopt, or adapt explanations on a general theoretical level for the problem at issue.
4. Develop remedial programs whose basic procedures are derived logically from the basic tenets of the general explanation.
5. Implement the programs.
6. Do careful evaluation research on program results.
7. Use the evaluation findings to judge the relative effectiveness of the various local programs.
(8) Develop program “models” by refining program procedures and adapting them to other locales and/or situations.

(9) Keep experimenting until methods are developed that work better or, at least, fall less.

Looked at in historical perspective, this approach might appear wildly idealistic, and in fact the implementation of the program encountered major obstacles. In contrast with the simplicity and clarity of the conception, its implementation required those who ran the programs to confront extremely difficult political, procedural, and practical problems, only some of which were accommodated successfully.\(^6\)

But despite these problems, 12 major cities—including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Cleveland—formulated and implemented major prevention and control programs on the basis of national guidelines. All of these cities implemented steps 3, 4, and 5, and a few implemented step 6. The overall program was aborted not by the obstacles it faced but by the assassination of President Kennedy and a policy decision by the succeeding administration to direct the programs and resources of the PCJD into other channels.

Nothing in the experience of the program negated its basic assumption that a rational, systematic, national-level remedial program incorporating major elements of theory formulation and evaluation was workable and potentially effective. Comparing the conduct of present-day gang control programs to the conduct of the PCJD gives the impression that there has been a major step backward. The sophistication of national efforts to cope with gang problems has not kept pace with the increasing seriousness of the problem, and seems instead to have diminished. It is difficult to conceive of any current agency, public or private, proposing a gang control strategy with the scope and conceptual breadth of the PCJD.\(^7\)

Using the PCJD procedures as one model of a systematically developed strategy makes it possible to identify several elements that appear to be weak or absent in most current efforts. Three of these will be discussed briefly: national perspective, theory, and evaluation.
National Perspective

In approaching the problem of juvenile delinquency, the PCJD took as its major arena the whole of the United States, viewing the problem from a broad national perspective. By contrast, for most current efforts the arena of consideration is a single city, county, or, rarely, state.

By failing to conceptualize the youth gang problem as a national rather than a local phenomenon, the enterprise of gang control loses the advantage of powerful tools for developing better information and more effective strategies. There is at present no centralized source of national information on the most basic and fundamental facts about gangs, let alone information on the location, character, and effects of gang control efforts. No one knows, for example, how many gangs and gang members there are in the United States, the location and seriousness of gang problems, how much crime and what kinds of crime gang members are responsible for, or the social characteristics of gang members. Data-collection operations such as the routine collection of unemployment information by the Bureau of Labor Statistics or of arrest data by the Federal Bureau of Investigation have never been considered seriously, let alone implemented. The absence of this kind of basic information makes it virtually impossible to ascertain with any accuracy the scope and seriousness of gang problems, and thus the priority to be assigned to gang control efforts. Nor is there a central resource available either to cities facing new gang problems or to cities that might want to review their own past efforts—efforts for which the historical record is often lost or ignored.

Further, the failure to conceptualize the problem as a national phenomenon deprives program efforts of the power of a major analytic instrument—the comparative method. Physical science uses the device of experimental variation as a major tool; for complex social problems like youth gang crime this method is generally impractical, politically unfeasible, or both. In its place investigators have developed a technique that starts by identifying as wide as possible a set of existing variations of the phenomenon at issue, and using this observed variation as
a kind of natural experiment that can provide—among other things—important clues to critical questions of cause and of program effectiveness. Youth gangs, with their immense variety of sizes, types, and circumstances, are tailor-made for the application of the comparative method, but in the absence of a national perspective its potentially rich yield remains untapped.

Theory

It would seem logical that the prospects for developing more effective methods for dealing with a difficult social problem like youth gang crime would be enhanced greatly by the availability of an acceptable explanation of what causes that problem. What factors and conditions are associated with the emergence and persistence of law-violating youth gangs? Which of these are most susceptible to change through planned strategies, policies, and programs? Current answers to these questions are poor. One might expect that as youth gang problems have become more serious and more prevalent during the past two decades that there would have been a commensurate increase in research on basic causes—as, for example, in the case of AIDS. But in fact the opposite seems to have happened.

During the 1950s a brief period of concern with theories of youth gangs, mostly by sociologists, produced a number of theoretical formulations based on the circumstances of that period. Among these were Albert Cohen’s delinquent subculture theory, Cloward and Ohlin’s blocked opportunity theory, and Walter Miller’s lower-class subculture theory. Since that period efforts to refine old theories and/or develop new ones have decreased significantly. Some 30 years later, these formulations, along with the Chicago school explanations of the 1920s and 1930s, still constitute the major set of sociological explanations available for explaining youth gang behavior. One of the few recently developed explanatory frameworks centers on the concept of underclass, and there have been efforts to relate this notion to youth gang problems (Hagedorn, 1988; Moore, 1985). This concept will be discussed in a later section.
There have been hundreds of gang control operations and programs during the past several decades, but few of them have been based on explicitly developed theoretical formulations as was the case for the PCJD programs. Of course there have been rationales for these efforts, but for the most part these have been based largely on implicit and unexamined premises, many derived from political philosophies rather than research-based explanations.

Two positions have been particularly influential: an “individual responsibility” position favored by conservatives and a “social injustice” position favored by liberals. The first blames youth gang problems on personal failings of gang members, their families, and their communities, related to a general decline in public morality. The second blames gang problems on discriminatory and exploitative policies by the larger society that foster inequality, race discrimination, and blocked opportunities.

It is unrealistic to expect the development of general explanations that are free of political philosophies, but it does seem reasonable to advocate a renewed effort to develop explanations that present their basic premises openly and rationally, and are derived as much as possible from conclusions based on careful research.

**Evaluation**

The PCJD required its programs to include an evaluation component on the assumption that without systematic evaluation it is impossible to present credible evidence on program impact. Evaluation research on social programs is a highly developed field with an extensive literature that describes specific techniques and specifies in detail research designs for a variety of evaluation contexts and objectives.

The execution of a sound evaluation design poses difficult problems, technical and political. In the 1960s serious efforts were made to identify and overcome these problems. As a result, a number of successful evaluations of gang programs were completed. Wright and Dixon (1977) describe six gang program evaluations conducted between 1959 and 1971, along
with 12 evaluations of Area and Youth Service projects, some of which included gang components.

In recent years, as gang problems have increased, the conduct of program evaluation has decreased. A bibliography of juvenile gangs prepared in 1983 by the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice cites 115 documents; of these, only two are evaluation studies, and only one of these reports results (Seidman, 1983). Irving Spergel's 1989 survey of 45 cities with gang programs found only two evaluation reports, neither of which—according to Spergel—constitutes a comprehensive outcome evaluation (Spergel, Curry, Ross, & Chance, 1989).\(^9\)

The virtual abandonment of sound evaluation of gang control efforts is a major reason for our failure to reduce gang problems. Evaluation research permits rational, systematic progress in developing more effective methods by making it possible to decrease the use of methods that are shown to be less effective and to refine and increase the use of more effective methods. In the absence of the kind of outcome evidence provided by sound evaluation, officials can and often do make exaggerated claims of success without credible supporting evidence.\(^10\) Without evaluation the choice of gang control methods is speculative and inefficient. Any hope of developing more effective methods requires that evaluation research on gang programs be resumed.

**Resources**

Those who have access to financial and human resources must be willing to direct those resources to the solution of particular social problems if effective remedial methods are to be developed and implemented. Despite the popular slogan that social problems are not solved by throwing money at them, progress in coping with difficult problems such as youth gang crime is next to impossible without adequate financing. Resources available to youth gang control in the 1990s are meager in both absolute and relative terms.

Accurate information on the exact amounts of money allocated to gang control is difficult to obtain. One reason for this
is that most gang control activity is conducted on the local level by criminal justice agencies as part of their overall crime control operations. Calculating the proportion of a general operating budget that goes to support gang control as such, while theoretically possible, is in most instances difficult in practice.

But what limited information is available strongly suggests that if the importance of a social problem is measured by the amount of money allocated to it, youth gang problems rank very low in the nation's priorities. Some evidence on the importance of gang problems at the federal level is provided by the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance Programs. The 1989 edition lists 1,139 grant programs under approximately 535 major subject categories, including alcoholism, crime, and juvenile delinquency. Youth gangs are not listed as a major or minor category. Of the 1,139 listed programs, the term gang appears in descriptions of four programs, or about one-third of 1% of all programs; of these, two involve gang control as such, another a conference on gangs, and a fourth a program of drug abuse prevention and education as it relates to youth gangs. By contrast, there are 23 grant programs for alcoholism, 37 for narcotics, 16 for recreation, and 19 for youth programs not involving gangs (U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 1989).

The 1990 federal budget allocates about $10 billion to drug programs administered by the Office of National Drug Control Policy. There is no Office of National Gang Control Policy, and a generous estimate of the amounts allocated at the federal level to all gang-related enterprises produces a figure that is less than 1% of this amount. This follows a year that recorded the highest number of gang-related homicides in history for a single county—at least 570 gang homicide victims in 1989 in Los Angeles County (Hormell, 1990).

How can one explain why the federal government places such a low priority on youth gang problems? Some see it as one consequence of a general reluctance by recent conservative administrations to allocate needed funds to domestic social programs; this is particularly evident, the argument goes, during periods of severe budget constraints. But this factor
alone is not enough to account for the low priority. As just shown, another domestic problem, drugs, is granted a very high priority at the federal level. In addition, low funding for gang control has prevailed during both conservative and liberal administrations.

The difference between the priorities accorded to gangs and to drugs raises the issue of what it is that determines the priority of social problems. This complex issue cannot be examined here, but one important element is the role of victimization. Groups such as the homeless, abused children, or battered women are readily perceived as pitiable victims and thus more easily command higher priorities. Victimization in connection with gang crime is more ambiguous. There are thousands of individual victims of gang violence each year, but most of these share the same social characteristics as their victimizers; the same people are often both victims and assailants. It is hard to enlist the degree of sympathy evoked by a homeless mother with three small children for an 18-year-old minority youth shot in a gang dispute.

Even further, there are those in public positions who privately consider youth gang violence as a solution, not a problem (see Miller, 1982). Priority considerations are affected by a cynical "let them kill each other off" philosophy. This position obscures the issue of victimization in its broader sense, and illuminates the differences between federal authorities and lower-class communities with respect to priorities. Few middle-class communities are victimized by gangs; it is in the nation's slums, ghettos, and barrios that one finds the principal victims of gang activity. In these communities are many residents whose dominant concern is the security and stability of community life—a security that gangs seriously jeopardize. Prominent among these residents are mothers whose children are at risk. These are the Americans who are most directly victimized by gangs, and it these Americans for whom gang control is a major priority.

Here one finds a serious disparity between priorities and resources. In most cases these communities have limited political power, and hence little access to potential resources. Gang control is a low national priority in large part because...
those with good access to resources put a low priority on gang problems and those who put a high priority on gang problems have poor access to resources.

Implementation

There is not a single organized agency in the United States, public or private, that takes specific responsibility for youth gangs as a national problem. There are thousands of organizations and associations conducting programs and advocating remedial measures for such problems as alcoholism, firearms use, abused children, or race relations, but there is no National Organization for Gang Control and no federal Office of Gang Control.

As in the case of street crime in general, the traditional position of federal authorities is that youth gangs are a local problem and should be handled at the local level. There is no doubt that there are essential gang control tasks that can be performed only at the local level, but it is also true that there are other important tasks that locals are in not in a position to perform. Previous sections have described a variety of elements needed for the development of more effective methods. These include the formulation of a comprehensive national strategy, basic research and theory development, evaluation research, and conducting operations in the context of a national arena.

By and large, workers at the local level are concerned primarily with conducting agency service operations, and some regard activities such as evaluation or theory development as irrelevant if not harmful. And even those who do see value in such elements are seldom in a position to act on their beliefs. Without local efforts a national strategy has no substance, but without a national strategy local efforts are denied the potential of powerful operational assets.

What type of organization should assume primary responsibility for youth gang problems? Organizations that in the past have played a major role are private foundations, universities, and the federal government. All have conducted important gang control activities, often in conjunction with one another.
For a variety of reasons, including its organizational continuity and access to resources as well as its constitutional obligation to ensure domestic tranquility, the federal government appears as the most appropriate locus of responsibility. But throughout the years federal agencies have shown little inclination to assume major responsibility for gang problems, and have even—in some instances—evinced antagonism to the idea.

In 1978, for example, the Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency of the Judiciary Committee of the U.S. Senate held hearings on serious juvenile crime. A witness had submitted a detailed proposal for the establishment of a federal gang control operation, and cited that proposal in his oral testimony. The idea was rejected decisively and unconditionally by the committee chairman, a liberal Democrat (Miller, 1976).

Federal agencies have in the past and still do support programs relevant to gang control, but these have been sporadic, unrelated to any coherent strategy, and scattered among various agencies without effective coordination. There is nothing like a federal Office of Gang Control, analogous to the Office of Drug Control Strategy, located in a cabinet-level department or in an office with the responsibility for coordinating programs in several departments. Without a center of responsibility at the federal level—an office with the authority and resources to develop a national strategy and monitor efforts at the national, state, and local levels—the enterprise of gang control is severely handicapped.

Social Context

A particularly vexing reason for the nation's failure to solve its gang problem lies in a pervasive reluctance to face squarely the issue of the social context of gang crime. The social context of gang life and the social characteristics of most gang members entail a set of extremely sensitive issues involving social class and ethnicity that are highly charged in U.S. society, and evoke strong passions.
During the 1950s most sociologists studying gangs were in essential agreement that there was a special relation between youth gangs and the population at lower social levels. There was less agreement on how to refer to this population and exactly what characteristics to use to define it, and even less agreement on how it came into being and was sustained over time (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Miller, 1958; Rodman, 1963).  

But beyond these differences there was a fair consensus that there was an American lower class, and that most youth gangs were in some way a product of the life circumstances of that class. In the succeeding years the existence and special characteristics of the lower class have become more firmly established, and the link between gangs and the lower class has grown even stronger. But during this time the willingness of most policymakers and planners to utilize this link as a central key to gang control strategy has diminished.

My own position in the 1950s was based on three major premises: that there are identifiable social classes in the United States; that one of these classes, centered on the circumstances of low-skilled labor, can be called the lower class; and that this class, in common with others, has a subculture with distinctive characteristics as well as characteristics shared with other class subcultures (Miller, 1958, 1959).

During the last 30 years few public figures have agreed with the last two premises. The terms used to refer to this population reveal a deep reluctance to characterize it in social class terms, let alone perceive the class as having a distinctive subculture. Commonly used terms include the disadvantaged, the underprivileged, inner-city residents, and the culturally deprived. Even during the height of national concern with this population, in the War on Poverty in the 1960s, the primary term used to refer to the population was the poor, a term based on income rather than on class.

What had been a virtual taboo among public figures against characterizing low-status populations as a class finally came to an end in the 1980s, with the surprisingly rapid acceptance and spread of the term underclass. Most analysts in the 1980s who examined the links between youth gangs and the lower
class utilized the underclass concept—a concept whose connotation in the 1980s derived largely from a seminal study of young Black males in the Watts district of Los Angeles in the 1960s (Auletta, 1982; Glasgow, 1980; Wilson, 1987).  

The gangs and underclass position is essentially a variant of Cloward and Ohlin’s blocked opportunity theory of the 1960s. Underclass theory postulates a new social class created by a new set of demographic, technological, and economic conditions whereby the demand for low-skilled workers in an increasingly service-oriented high-tech economy has been reduced drastically, permanently locking them out of the labor market and cutting off upward mobility routes available to earlier generations. At the same time, the sense of community formerly found in lower-class neighborhoods has weakened, alienating inner-city minorities not only from the society at large but from higher-status members of their own ethnic groups. The formation of gangs is a response by alienated minority youth to the unavailability of legitimate employment and potential for fulfillment in their local communities.

Briefly, the underclass is a product of technological and economic changes coupled with persisting racism in U.S. society. In common with Cloward and Ohlin, underclass theorists see economic forces and their impact on the availability of jobs as the primary forces that generate and sustain the underclass.

The subcultural position views the contemporary lower class quite differently. It is not outside the system, it is not new, and it is sustained by important subcultural influences that arise from a variety of social forces in addition to economic circumstances. Unlike the underclass position—which depicts the underclass as not only outside of, but permanently excluded from the existing social class system of the United States—the contemporary lower class is seen as an intrinsic part of that system, sharing countless cultural characteristics with members of other social classes as well as manifesting distinctive characteristics. Lower-class citizens are as much a part of American society as their fellow citizens in other classes.

Rather than representing a “new” social class that manifests a sharp break with the past—a difference in kind, not degree—
the contemporary lower class represents a logical historical development of a traditional population category. Major features used in the past to characterize this class, such as prevalence of female-based households, limited involvement in formal education, reliance on public welfare, and prevalence of births out of wedlock, have not disappeared or diminished significantly. On the contrary, many have become more prevalent. The contemporary lower class is not a new class, but a further developed and more distinctive version of a traditional class.  

Despite differences in conceptions and definitions of the lower class, underclass theorists agree with other analysts on the "special link" noted earlier between gangs and the lower class. If the existence and importance of this special link is accepted, the question of its policy implications for gang control becomes relevant.

One logical policy option can be stated simply, but raises very complicated issues. If youth gangs are a product of the circumstances of the lower class, eliminating or substantially changing these circumstances will eliminate or substantially reduce gang problems. This position is seldom stated this baldly, but the general notion has served on some level as a rationale for many programs, past and proposed. If characteristics such as female-headed households, limited educational background, intermittent employment and low-skilled jobs, poor housing, inferior health resources, and others contribute to the persistence of the lower class, then successful efforts to raise job skill levels, ensure steady employment, and improve education, housing, health, and other services will change its essential character and ameliorate its major social problems—including high crime rates and youth gang crime.

There are serious problems with this formulation. As noted in the historical review of gang programs, major programs based on this approach were not successful. An important reason is that the major premise, that gangs arise out of the circumstances of lower-class life, is inadequate. It is almost always true that where you find youth gangs you will find lower-class communities, but the obverse does not obtain. As noted earlier, there are numerous lower-class communities
that do not have youth gangs.) This suggests that there are certain critical features of lower-class life whose presence enhances the development of gangs, and whose absence inhibits that development; what these are is not known (Delaney & Miller, 1977).

Taking the position that it is the totality of lower-class life that produces gangs and that this totality must be changed to affect gangs is like trying to kill a gnat with a pile driver. However desirable such change might be, if gang control is in fact one's objective a policy of effecting major changes in the character of lower-class life and the complex set of societywide forces that sustain it is misdirected, inefficient, and uneconomical. Even if prospects for success were far better than they now appear, it would take many years to achieve results that would affect gangs; meanwhile, millions of lower-class citizens continue to suffer bitterly because of youth gang violence.

As suggested by Spergel and his colleagues (1989b), what is needed are carefully targeted programs focused on specific objectives and based on explicit explications of how achieving specific program objectives will affect gangs. How can we know which elements are most critically associated with the presence or absence of gangs? As suggested earlier, we can use the fact of the absence of gangs in many lower-class communities and their intermittent absence in others as a key to research aimed at detecting and identifying these critical elements—elements known to be changeable because they have changed—and use this knowledge as a basis for devising more focused programs and policies. As noted earlier, compared to such "core" characteristics of lower-class life as female-headed households and low-skilled labor, youth gangs are less intrinsic to the subculture, and thus less resistant to change.

(The social class status of contemporary youth gang members is close to that of their counterparts in the 1950s; the same cannot be said of their ethnic status. In the 1950s a substantial proportion of gang members were Caucasian; in the 1990s almost all gang members belong to a category designated as "minority." This has made the task of developing solutions to the gang problem more difficult, both conceptually and tactically.)
Present-day lower-class populations, as in the past, comprise a wide variety of subtypes. Differences among subtypes are based on ethnicity (e.g., Black, Hispanic), region (southern, northern), location (urban-rural), religion, and other bases of subcultural differentiation. Of particular relevance to youth gang policy are subtypes based on recency of immigration. Today, as in the past, one can divide these populations into two gross categories—newcomers (more recently arrived) and established minorities (less recent).

It is likely that youth gangs belonging to these two categories come into being and are sustained by different kinds of causal influences, and would require significantly different remedial strategies. In the 1990s the established minority category consists primarily of youth of Puerto Rican, Mexican, and African backgrounds; the newcomer category is much more heterogeneous, comprising a variety of Latin American groups (Panamanians, Nicaraguans, and others) and about 10 different Asian nationalities.

Youth gangs in the newcomer populations show many similarities to the gangs of the 1910s and 1920s described by Frederick Thrasher (1927), and can be seen, now as then, as occupying a transitional status as part of the process of Americanization (Launer & Palenski, 1989). A major difference between the newcomers and the established minorities is their potential for upward social mobility. If history is any guide, gangs in most of the newcomer groups will cease being a problem after a few generations of normal acculturation and upward mobility. The underclass explanation for gangs, which postulates little or no mobility for its minorities, has limited relevance to the newcomer gang phenomenon.

(If it is the problem of gangs among the established minorities that raises the most complicated and painful policy issues, because it taps into one of the most divisive and intractable issues in the history of the republic—that of race relations. There is deep concern in minority communities over tendencies in the media and elsewhere to stereotype gangs as a minority phenomenon. Programs aimed at controlling gangs in minority communities may face opposition from one community faction for unfairly stigmatizing minorities or violating their
civil liberties while being supported by another faction as a necessary measure for protecting the safety of law-abiding citizens. For some the explanation that minority gang problems are a product of racism is so compelling and complete as to obviate the need for further research into causes. Another issue is that of the ethnic status of personnel involved in gang programs. In the 1950s there was a fair amount of cross-ethnic involvement in gang work. In some cases Black adults provided services and guidance for White gangs, and Whites worked with Black gangs (W. B. Miller, 1969a). In the 1990s this kind of relationship is rare. Many minority workers claim a special competence and a special right to work with youth of their own ethnic status, and are inhospitable to the involvement of persons of different backgrounds. There are certainly good grounds for the claim of special competence, but there is also a danger that capable and dedicated people of other ethnic statuses will be discouraged from contributing to an enterprise that needs all the help it can get.

Conclusion

This chapter has explained the nation's failure to solve its youth gang problems as a consequence of major procedural and policy deficiencies. The following reasons for the failure have been presented: The nation has failed to develop a comprehensive gang control strategy. The problem is viewed in local and parochial terms instead of from a national perspective. Programs are implemented in the absence of demonstrably valid theoretical rationales. Efforts to systematically evaluate program effectiveness have been virtually abandoned. Resources allocated to the gang problem are incommensurate with the severity of the problem. There is no organizational center of responsibility for gang problems anywhere in the United States. There is a deep-rooted reluctance to face up to the implications of the social context of gang life.

But such a catalogue of deficiencies becomes valuable only insofar as it provides the basis of proposals for more effective
policies. A comprehensive national gang control strategy must be developed. Efforts in local communities should be informed by policies based on a national-level perspective. Gang control operations should be undergirded by sound theoretical rationales. The determination of which methods are most effective must be based on carefully conducted evaluation research. Serious efforts must be made to convince those who control resources that gang control should be granted a much higher priority. A federal office of youth gang control should be established. Accurate information on the social class and ethnic characteristics of gang communities should be used as a major element in the development of more effective gang control strategies.

This is admittedly a very ambitious set of recommendations, and there is little likelihood at present that even a few might be considered seriously. But they will have served some useful purpose if they can be seen as indicating general directions for developing a more effective national youth gang policy.

Notes

1. In the absence of accurate national data for the current period as well as for previous periods, trends in the number of gangs, of gang members, the volume and forms of gang crime, and other indices of gang problems can only be estimated. Evidence presented in the most recent national-level gang survey presenting these kinds of data, however, supported the conclusion that problems in 1980 were more serious than at any previous time. In the succeeding decade all available evidence strongly suggests further worsening of gang problems (see Miller, 1982).

2. The two cities whose gang problems received most national attention in the late 1960s and early 1970s were New York and Philadelphia. Philadelphia reported a record 47 gang-related homicides in 1970; New York, a record 57 in 1972. In 1978 only one gang-related homicide was reported for Philadelphia, and in 1988, none. In 1988 the Philadelphia police had no unit or officers with a specialized gang function. New York in 1971 had an active gang intelligence unit with special gang officers in Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island. In 1988 there were two gang officers in the police department, and gang homicides—no longer separately tabulated—were estimated by police at less than 5.

3. A preliminary attempt to identify measurable characteristics associated with the level of seriousness of gang problems in different cities is
reported in Delaney and Miller (1977). Twenty-three cities were ranked according to seriousness of gang problems, and data on 426 demographic and other variables were collected for each city; a subset of 90 variables was used for analysis. A variety of statistical techniques, including clustering and factor analysis, was used. A few variables such as population density were associated with differences among cities, but in general the techniques used were unable to identify the critical elements associated with more serious gang problems.

4. Terms used here follow the usage recommended in Miller (1989). The term gang is applied only to groups that engage routinely in illegal activity.

5. Discussions and general recommendations with respect to prevention and coordination have shown a high degree of continuity over the last 60 years. See, for example, Peyser (1932), National School Safety Center (1988), Rubinow (1954), and Bryant (1989).

6. The President’s Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime is discussed in Moynihan (1969) and in Maris and Rein (1967). Outcomes of PCJD programs are discussed in Miller (1966a).

7. There is one contemporary gang control project whose design incorporates many of the elements of the PCJD—the National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Project, directed by Irving A. Spergel under the auspices of the University of Chicago’s School of Social Service Administration and the Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The major objective of the project is to locate those current gang control efforts in the United States that appear most effective or most promising, analyze their techniques, and construct program models that could serve as a basis for more effective programs throughout the country. The project has conducted a wide variety of activities in connection with this objective, including the production of what is probably the best general review of the youth gang literature ever compiled. Like the PCJD, Spergel’s project takes the whole nation as its arena, examines a wide variety of sites with differing conditions, and ties its programmatic proposals to a specific theoretical explanation for the existence of gang problems. One difference between the PCJD and Spergel’s project in this respect is that the PCJD utilized a number of different theories as the basis for different kinds of program strategies: Spergel’s project uses a single theory—community disorganization—one of the principal gang theories, but still only one.

8. Outside of the PCJD, no known project has used the technique of indirectly testing the validity of particular theories by measuring the effectiveness of programs developed out of or corresponding to those theories. One major project, however, did take a significant step in this direction by designing a research program explicitly as a test of several competing theories of gangs (see Short & Strodbeck, 1965).

10. Following the decline in gang activity in Philadelphia in the 1970s, representatives of more than a half dozen agencies or programs, including the police department, claimed primary credit for the outcome. It is still impossible to know which programs or combinations of programs, if any, were responsible for the change. A recent example of unsubstantiated claims of effectiveness appears in *Gangs in Schools*, which states that "there is unanimous agreement that this type of early prevention is the most effective way to stem gang delinquency" (National School Safety Center, 1988). In addition to the problem of demonstrating that no one in the country disagrees with this proposition, there has been no systematic evaluation research showing that this method is effective at all, let alone the most effective of all known methods.

11. There have been some attempts to organize gang control efforts on other than a strictly local basis. California has a statewide organization for police officers working in gang control. A national-level data base on street gangs was initiated in 1989 by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and the National Association of Chiefs of Police. The data base, however, is not intended to serve the general purposes of gang control throughout the nation but rather as a specific aid to law enforcement agencies engaged in drug control activities. Gang-related programs are conducted by different federal agencies, including the Family and Youth Service Bureau of the Department of Health and Human Services, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Drug Enforcement Administration of the Department of Justice, but there are no organizational arrangements for coordinating these efforts.

12. Cloward and Ohlin, Miller, Rodman, and others used the term *lower class* to refer to the population at issue; Cohen used the term *working class*, but in effect the population he was concerned with was similar to that of the other writers.

13. In earlier years the term *underclass* was classified along with terms such as *lumpenproletariat* as a pejorative term. See W. B. Miller (1969b).

14. Accurate data on historical changes in the subcultural characteristics of the U.S. lower class are difficult to obtain. W. B. Miller (1969) defined the lower class in subcultural terms as manifesting "a characteristic set of life conditions and customary behavioral practices" and discussed 10 of these, including involvement in low-skilled labor, prevalence of female-headed households, and limited educational attainment. Data on these conditions and practices available through routine data collection operations are rough surrogates at best. Some available information, however—such as the Census Bureau data on the "population below the poverty level," a population that overlaps to a considerable degree the subculturally defined lower class—provides some relevant evidence. The data suggest that during the past several decades many lower-class subcultural practices have become more firmly established and more distinctive when compared with equivalent practices by other social classes. For example, in 1959 the percentage of female-headed households in the poverty-level population was about 23%; in 1966,
about 30%; and in 1984, about 48%. Other characteristics show analogous trends. One exception relating to formal education involves the practice of dropping out of high school. In 1975 about two-thirds of poverty-level youth left high school before graduation, but by 1982 this figure had fallen to about 54%. This could indicate a weakening of the "limited concern with formal education" characteristic. It could also reflect an easing of requirements for graduation in some areas.

15. The term minority has been and is still used to refer to a wide variety of different population categories. At the turn of the century, the term was used primarily to refer to ethnic populations of Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Slavic backgrounds. In recent years the term has been used to designate a variety of different populations, ethnic and nonethnic, including women, although women in fact constitute a majority of the population. In contemporary usage the term minority is used most commonly to refer to populations of Hispanic and Black African background, along with some of the more recently arrived ethnic populations.