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Youth Gangs and the Work of Henry McKay

The work of Henry McKay spans almost five decades of American life. During this period substantial changes have affected many of the social circumstances and conditions that provide both the focus and the context of his major scholarly concerns, but it is evident as well that other conditions have shown very little change. A systematic consideration of these patterns—what has changed and what has remained stable, how the concepts of "change" and "stability" are defined, the analytic level at which these concepts are applied—involves an extremely complicated and critical sociological issue, that of change and stability. This issue constitutes a major theme in the work of Henry McKay, and it is a major concern of the present paper. McKay's analyses of change and stability involve a wide range of demographic variables, primarily as these affect the relation of different kinds of neighborhoods and different kinds of populations to different patterns of youth crime (Shaw and McKay 1942, 1969: 384). The present study addresses this issue with a much more limited and specific focus—American youth gangs.

Youth gangs as such do not constitute a major focus in the work of Henry McKay. But references to gangs do appear in his writings, primarily in connection with analyses of empirical findings and theoretical consideration of the nature and origins of delinquent behavior. Gangs are discussed in at least three contexts: (1) as a type of social institution (others of the type include organized and professional crime), they are part of a nonconventional or criminal tradition alternative to, and often conflicting with, the conventional tradition of law-abiding adults (Shaw and McKay 1942, McKay 1949); (2) gangs figure as a

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major object of a treatment approach, the detached worker method, developed out of community-based service techniques of the kinds pioneered by the Chicago Area project (Shaw and McKay 1942, 1969): and (3) gangs are viewed as part of the educative milieu of the local neighborhood, as exemplified in "The Neighborhood and Child Conduct" (McKay 1949). The conception of gangs forwarded therein accords closely with that of the present study.

Much of the controversy currently surrounding the character and origins of gangs can be attributed to differences among the several schools in how they define their basic concepts. It is thus essential that any treatment of gangs specify as clearly as possible the sense in which the term "gang" is used. The present approach starts with a distinction among three major concepts: "gang," "delinquency," and "subculture." The term "gang" refers to a collectivity of humans comprising identifiable persons and is conceptually analogous to terms such as "group" or "organization." "Delinquency" refers to one particular category of behavior engaged in by identifiable persons ("delinquent" behavior) and is conceptually analogous to terms such as "morality" ("moral" behavior). "Subculture" refers to a set of conceptions of appropriate practice and is roughly analogous to concepts such as "cognitive map" and "definition of the situation." Thus, the term "gang" refers to people, "delinquency" to behavior, and "subculture" to conceptions (Miller, forthcoming).

All three concepts may vary independently of the others; there are no fixed linkages among them. Delinquency may exist independently of gangs, and gangs vary greatly in their involvement in delinquency. Subcultures apply to many associational forms and behaviors other than gangs and delinquency, and the notions of a "delinquency subculture" or "delinquent subcultures" have limited explanatory utility. The definition of a "youth gang" used in the present study is as follows:

A youth gang is a group of adolescents who congregate recurrently at one or more extra-residential locales, with continued affiliation based on self-defined inclusion criteria. Recruitment, customary assemblage locales and ranging areas are based upon location within a delimited territory, over some portion of which limited use and occupancy rights are claimed. Group boundaries and the composition of subgroups are
delineated on the basis of age. The group maintains a versatile repertoire of activities with hanging, mating, recreational and illegal activity of central importance, and is internally differentiated on the basis of authority, prestige, personality-roles and clique-formation (Miller, forthcoming).

On the basis of this definition it is possible to recast the terms of McKay's description of neighborhood youth groups in the 1930s and '40s for purposes of more direct comparison with present-day gangs. As part of his analysis of the informal educative process of the local community, McKay cites three kinds of youth groups—the play group, the social and athletic club, and the delinquent gang (McKay 1949). From the present perspective each of these represents a different facet or manifestation of the same basic associational unit—the youth gang. The term "play group" applies to gangs in at least two ways: the neighborhood play group frequently represents the preadolescent stage of what will become the adolescent gang: "play" in a variety of forms is one major component of the "versatile activity repertoire" of youth gangs (McKay 1949). The "social and athletic club" generally represents the "formal organizational" mode of operations of a street gang, involving features such as scheduled meetings, elected officers, dues, and so on which are still prevalent, although the actual term "social and athletic club" was more common during earlier periods (Miller 1956). The term "delinquent" in what McKay designates as "the delinquent gang" refers, under the present definition, not to a particular type of gang (the term implies the existence of a "nondelinquent" type), but to another component of a gang's "versatile activity repertoire"—the practice of illegal behavior.

Phrased in the terms of the present study, McKay represented youth gangs in the '30s and '40s as prevalent associational units in local communities, units whose customary activities included recreational, mating, and illegal activities, which often developed out of preadolescent play groups and which embodied and inculcated a set of subcultural traditions some of whose focal concerns and customary practices were at variance with conceptions of appropriate practice of the law-abiding adult community. Given this representation of youth gangs in the earlier twentieth century, one can ask, What is the youth gang situation today? With the issue of change and stability a major focus, following sections will examine the circumstances of youth gangs during the
era of urban crisis, paying particular attention to the question of similarities to and differences from the gangs described by McKay.

The Urban Crisis Era

During the decade of the 1960s a series of developments in the United States appeared to mark a kind of domestic watershed—a transition in national life from one phase to another. Among the precedents of these developments were a massive immigration during and after World War II of southern blacks to northern cities; the adoption of major new technologies, including automated industrial production and computerized information processing; and an extended period of military involvement in Southeast Asia. The effects of these developments on two categories of citizens were subject to particular attention—categories popularly designated during this period as “youth” and “blacks.” For Americans of African background this period brought a marked acceleration of undertakings aimed at the achievement of full civil equality; an emergence of a new militancy in the pursuit of black interests and objectives; a wave of the most extensive and destructive civil disorders in the history of the country; drastic changes in the population composition of major cities and equally marked changes in the size and relation to the metropolis of the suburbs. The magnitude of these developments and the problems they posed—particularly as they affected the cities—prompted some to designate this period the era of “urban crisis.”

For the youth of the United States a dominant feature of these times was the existence of armed conflict in Asia, which confronted males with the continuing prospect of active military service in a difficult war. This circumstance fueled an unparalleled measure of youth involvement with pacifism and associated ideological movements, particularly among college youth, but other developments also affected the youth subculture. Among these were a marked increase in the use and acceptability of drugs of various kinds, predominantly marijuana; an intensification of the degree of ideological content in popular music directed at youth; increased stress on sexual freedom and an expanded acceptance of sex relations before marriage; intensified concern with social justice as it affects blacks and other categories of Americans; a heightened emphasis on the value of “inner experience” and the value of warm interpersonal interaction, and a concomitant devaluation of the “Protestant ethic” emphasis on
achievement, material success, and technological orientation associated with the "middle-class values" of the adult generation. To some, these and related developments were of sufficient magnitude and import to support a designation of "counterculture," and some even talked of a radically new order of "consciousness" among youth of the urban crisis era (see also Short, Chapter 5 in this volume).

How did these developments affect the youth gangs of the United States? Gangs are represented in the present study as an associational form which maintains a high degree of formal continuity and is at the same time responsive to changing social circumstances. The perception by some that the urban crisis era brought a "new" culture to the country in general and to youth in particular engendered serious misconceptions concerning the status of youth gangs. This chapter explores the impact on gangs of selected events of the urban crisis era; it examines, first, patterns of media coverage and gang prevalence, then discusses gang involvement in civil disorders, political activism, and drugs, and concludes with an analysis of processes of change and stability as they affect gangs.

Present-day Gangs: Prevalence and Publicity

Accurate information as to the current prevalence of gangs in the many communities of the United States is not available (Short 1968). It will be instructive, however, to examine briefly the pattern of media coverage of gangs during this period, both because of the clues furnished by such coverage as to actual gang prevalence and to better understand the bases of media coverage.

The media during the 1950s—newspapers, magazines, television—devoted a good deal of attention to youth gangs, with New York and its "fighting gangs" as a major focus. Although most research evidence indicates that gangs of this type were relatively rare both in New York and elsewhere, an impression was created that New York-type fighting gangs were prevalent throughout the nation. Starting in the early 1960s New York media attention to gangs began to wane and by the middle 1960s had ceased almost entirely—a trend that was paralleled in the national media. This period of low media attention was accompanied by a belief in some quarters that gangs had died out entirely or at least experienced a major change in behavior.

In the early 1970s the New York media rediscovered the youth gang. Initial stirrings were confined to particular areas and types
of gangs (August, 1970: "Wave of Youth Gang Wars in Chinatown"; November, 1971: "The Rat Pack of New York"), but by 1972 the rediscovery burst into full flower. A March 1972 story in the New York Times, reporting a killing in the course of fighting between the Savage Nomads and Galaxies gangs, stated that there were one hundred violent gangs in the South Bronx, and a few weeks later New York magazine, in a story heralded by the front-cover banner "Are You Ready for the New Violence?" officially announced the "Return of the New York Street Gang" (Bragonier 1972).

The use of the term "gang" by the New York Times, widely regarded as the nation's top daily, dramatically illustrated the influence of reporting fashions on perceptions of gangs. The Times maintained what was essentially a moratorium on the use of the term "gang" to refer to regularly congregating youth groups for a period of approximately six years between 1966 and 1972. A 1966 feature which asserted that "suddenly, after a decade of mounting violence, the era of the fighting gangs in New York came to an end" (Buckley 1966), seemed to serve as a kind of signal that the use of the term "gang" was no longer appropriate for Times reporters. During the moratorium period the Times used terms such as "a large group of youth," "hands of youths," "neighborhood boys banding together to commit crimes," and "predatory packs." A story of a gang fight during this period was headlined, "Rival Bands Battle 2 Hours" (New York Times July 24, 1968). The word "gang" was used very occasionally and selectively during this period to refer, for example, to "tong"-like youth gangs in Chinatown and to motorcycle gangs (also called "clubs").

Then, in late 1971, the moratorium was lifted as suddenly as the Times had claimed the gangs had vanished. Less than one week after a Sunday Times magazine story (Stevens 1971) echoed Buckley's 1966 feature in proclaiming that "The big days of the big fighting gangs are gone... gone are the... adolescent armies... each with its own (name)... turf... rules... dress... and reasons for fighting," a pioneering Times reporter, in a story headlined "Street Gang Chief is Slain in the Bronx," wrote that the incident was "the outgrowth of gang battles in the neighborhoods... between the Black Spades and the Savage Skulls" (New York Times, December 3, 1971). Following this break, the term "gang" began to appear repeatedly in the Times.
The contrast between pre- and post-moratorium usage was especially marked in the reporting of school-connected violence. Prior to the break, the term “gang” was never used in this connection (February 20, 1971: “Fighting . . . between Spanish-speaking students and black students”); afterwards it was used constantly (April 19, 1972: “Students are being ‘mugged, harrassed, intimidated and stabbed’ by other students who are members of South Bronx gangs”).

A year prior to the Times report of one hundred gangs in the Bronx and many more in other boroughs, police and Youth Authority officials stated conclusively that the last gang had disappeared from the streets of the city and that there was no gang problem in New York. Assuming it to be quite unlikely that the number of gangs in the Bronx had grown from zero to one hundred in a year’s time, how can one explain the apparently sudden and mysterious “reemergence” of the gangs? The “disappearance” resulted from a combination of changes in gang and media behavior (see Miller 1969). City officials and media alike adopted a special and restricted definition of “gang.” In the early 1960s the pattern of names, jackets, and large-scale fighting which had received so much publicity during the 1950s was essentially abandoned. Despite changes in these fashion-susceptible practices, gangs as defined here remained prevalent. By choosing to regard as gangs only those groups which exhibited characteristics of the outmoded 1950s pattern, officials with an interest in controlling gangs were able to claim their elimination. Messages were dispatched to New York patrolmen informing them that “disorderly groups of youths are in the streets fighting with knives.”

Media coverage in New York, then, has been characterized by a period of considerable attention to certain types of gangs, a period of virtually no attention, and a period of renewed attention. What of the other major cities in the United States? The city with the most intensive media coverage has been Philadelphia, where headlines proclaimed, in 1965, “245 Teen-age Gangs Roaming City; 49 Capable of Killing;” in 1969, “Teen Gang Carnage Reaches Peak; 47 Dead, 519 Injured in 17 Months,” and 1972, “Is There No Way to Halt the Mad Violence of Gangs?” In Chicago, major press attention in the 1960s focused on a few well-publicized “politicized” gangs, but continuing coverage has also been directed to the activities of numerous local
neighborhood gangs, with a 1972 story reporting over seven hundred identifiable gangs involved in "violent deaths, beatings, robberies and shakedowns." Los Angeles media have maintained fairly consistent coverage of gangs (1966: "Juvenile Gangs Accepted as Part of Life in City"), but in the early 1970s a series of highly publicized gang-connected killings sparked an upsurge in media attention resembling New York's, with a 1972 story stating that gangs "have been sweeping through south central Los Angeles and Watts, beating, robbing, raping and occasionally killing" (Jansen 1972). An upsurge of gang violence in Detroit has received considerable media coverage since 1973.

Youth gangs, then, are currently subject to media attention in five of the largest cities of the nation. No clear pattern is evident with respect to other major cities. Groups of youthful thieves or muggers ranging in size from three to six or more receive attention in a number of cities, notably Washington, D.C., but the media generally have not applied the term "gang" to such groups (Stevens 1971; Rae 1972). Why the media cover gangs in some cities but not in others, the basis for coverage when it occurs, the relation between the actual gang situation and what the press reports—all, regrettably are poorly understood. Clues may be found in the following considerations.

If one assumes that newspapers, television, and other media organs, perhaps not deliberately or consciously, devote some limited portion of scarce space and time to crime and violence, one can further assume that forms of violence which are more spectacular or novel will take precedence over those which are less so. During periods when highly violent events occur with some frequency, reports of these will consume available media space; during periods when such events do not occur or are less common, the media will move down the scale of severity and select from among the less serious forms for journalistic attention. Gang violence, while it may represent a very serious problem to citizens and police in particular localities and at particular times, must be ranked among "less serious" forms of domestic violence on a scale which includes insurrection and mass rioting (Miller 1966; Klein 1969).

During the 1950s the domestic scene in the United States was relatively peaceful, and against this backdrop gang fighting provided for the media one of the more newsworthy forms of domestic violence. In the 1960s, however, gangs and their
activities were, in effect, driven from media coverage by the advent of far more serious and spectacular forms of domestic violence—massive urban riots, dramatic student demonstrations, armed conflict between police and black militants.

In the early 1970s these forms of violence, despite unequivocal predictions that each represented the start of a continuing or increasing national trend, had subsided sufficiently as to merit little media attention, and the media returned once again to publicize the activities of the ever-present youth gangs. While the absence of media coverage in a particular locality does not necessarily mean that gangs are absent, the presence of such coverage almost certainly indicates well-developed gangs. Recent survey evidence (Miller 1975) shows that gangs are numerous and active in five of the nation’s ten largest cities—New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Detroit. In the remaining five, gangs pose problems in Baltimore, Washington and Cleveland, but not in Houston or Dallas.

Gangs in Philadelphia

More direct evidence from two urban areas provides an opportunity to compare information available through public sources with research findings based on direct field reports. These cities are Philadelphia and Boston, where field data on gangs are available for both central city and suburban areas (see also Shaw and McKay 1942, 1969). In Philadelphia gangs are well publicized by the media: in Boston, virtually ignored. What do the field data show? Philadelphia gangs and their activities have received extensive press coverage; in August 1970 a major daily averaged one youth gang story every two days; several front-page headlines concerned gangs. And with good reason. The Philadelphia area in the late 1960s and early 1970s was swarming with youth gangs of every description—large and small, violent and peaceful, male and female, black and white. In 1969 a crime commission issued a report which contained a detailed summary of the gang situation to that date (Pennsylvania Crime Commission 1969). Estimates based on police reports concluded that there were in municipal Philadelphia about seventy-five gangs, mostly black, comprising about 3,500 members, which were sufficiently “active” (primarily in fighting) to be of continued concern to the police. Social agencies put the estimated number of gangs at about 200.
Between October 1962 and December 1968 gang members were reportedly involved in 257 shootings, 250 stabbings, and 205 “rumbles.” In the period between January 1968 and June 1969, 54 homicides and over 250 injuries were attributed to armed conflict between gangs. Assailants ranged in age from thirteen to twenty, with 70 percent between sixteen and eighteen. Only a minority of these gangs were named, the majority being designated according to their major congregation corner (Twelfth and Poplar, 21W’s [for 21st and Westmoreland]). In the year following the crime commission report, the number of “active” gangs approximated by the police increased from seventy-five to ninety, the number of gang members from 3,500 to 5,000. Moreover, the rate of gang-connected homicides established in 1968 and 1969, three per month, continued at a similar or higher level during the next four years.

It is important to note that the Philadelphia gangs responsible for so striking a record of violent assault do not conform to an image of the “fighting gang” developed out of some combination of sociological and journalistic reporting during the “West Side Story” era of the 1950s. Most gangs do not have gang names. There are no gang jackets. There is little evidence that gangs are specifically “organized for conflict,” or even organized, in the sense of having formalized chain-of-command titles (“warlord,” etc.), specialization of function and the like (Pennsylvania Crime Commission 1969). Instead, Philadelphia gangs in most significant respects approximate the classic urban corner groups of the 1910-60 period defined earlier: a territorial base (the term “turf” is common), strong ties to one’s corner and gang-mates (one boy said, “the gang is your mother and father”), age-defined subgroups, related female groups, and a “versatile” repertoire of activities including the conventional forms of slum youth crime—steal, vandalism, drinking, and drugs—along with less violent kinds of assault. Intergang fighting appears as only one of a range of gang activities—an activity which may be pursued by different gangs with greater or lesser frequency, and with more or less serious consequences. Involvement in gang fighting thus is a matter of degree, with the intensity and seriousness of fighting by the more highly publicized gangs falling toward the more extreme end of the scale.

A particularly interesting aspect of the Philadelphia gang situation concerns its relation to the racial issues of the “urban
crisis" era. The great majority of the more violent gangs in Philadelphia are black, during a period when issues involving race relations have been more of a national focus, and more highly charged, than at any time since the Civil War—a period which has seen the development and wide dissemination of an explicit and compelling philosophy based on the affirmation of black pride and racial solidarity. Given this ideological climate, one would expect some direct and obvious relationship between the impelling movement for black rights and the upsurge in gang violence. On the basis of black solidarity ideological emphasis, one might expect major conflicts between blacks and whites, particularly in a city where migration patterns and the spatial distribution of the races appear to create so fertile a climate for interracial conflict. Instead, the great bulk of gang clashes involves blacks versus blacks, and the great bulk of injuries and homicides is by blacks of blacks.

The reasons advanced for involvement in gang fighting have few ideological overtones; instead, they approximate the classic reasons described for traditional gangs—territorial defense, maintenance of personal and collective honor, achievement of stature and prestige through besting of one's peers. Similarly, the actual conduct of gang fighting generally follows the classic pattern of provocation, attack, and counterattack (Miller 1957, 1958, 1966; Klein 1969). Few engagements between gang members involve massed encounters with large numbers of participants. Instead, most take the more traditional form of gangster-style attacks by passing assailants (sometimes in cars) on single or paired members of rival gangs. One aspect of the Philadelphia situation does differ clearly from many past situations; firearms are widely used—the shotgun is a favored weapon. It is this fact, in all likelihood, rather than any special viciousness or blood lust on the part of Philadelphia youth, that accounts for the high incidence of gang-related homicides in Philadelphia. For the present, however, and in the absence of more extensive analysis, it would appear that traditional subcultural incentives involving adolescent status, masculinity concerns, social-class position, territorial competition, and the like are more influential in the genesis of Philadelphia gang violence than factors related in any clear fashion to new ideological currents of the urban crisis era.

It is important to note once again that the gangs involved in violent conflict, however well publicized locally, comprise only a
minority of Philadelphia's youth gangs. Field research shows that scores of street corners, parks, and schoolyards throughout the city provide hangouts for a wide variety of less violent gangs whose activities, nonetheless, are regarded with dismay by local householders and businessmen. Moreover, youth gangs are prevalent in scores of outer suburbs as well, with gangs reported for many communities, large and small, in Chester, Montgomery, Bucks, and Delaware counties. Since these communities are predominantly white, the gangs are predominantly white, although black gangs are not uncommon in some of the larger ring cities such as Reading, Norristown, and Pottstown. No generalization about the national gang situation can ignore Philadelphia; gangs in the classic tradition flourish throughout the entire region. While the fighting gangs of the inner city whose violence is so marked constitute only a small minority of gangs in the total region, activities of many of the less violent gangs also pose serious problems for law enforcement officials and are regarded, justifiably, with deep concern and apprehension by local residents.

Gangs in Boston

The most extensive current survey of gangs in a major urban region covers the area of metropolitan Boston.3 This area contains ninety-four cities, towns, and urban districts, each with its own name and police headquarters. Fifteen of these are named districts of municipal Boston, ranging in size from about 20,000 to 100,000; thirty-seven are incorporated cities and towns also ranging in size from 20,000 to 100,000 and located for the most part within an "inner" metropolitan zone beyond municipal limits; forty-two are towns ranging in size from 2,500 to 20,000 and located in an "outer" metropolitan zone.4 Between 1965 and 1972 information as to the presence of gangs was collected on a continuing basis for all ninety-four communities. Data were obtained through a variety of sources, with primary reliance on direct field observation and routine police reports (see Miller, forthcoming).5

What is the youth gang situation in the many communities of the metropolitan area? In municipal Boston itself, gangs are present in all fifteen districts. They are, in general, more numerous, active, and better developed in lower status areas. The district with the most persisting tradition of active gangs is
not black but rather the predominantly Irish district of South Boston, the past homesite of the Kennedys, McCormicks, and other eminent political families. In fact, in contrast to Philadelphia, where gangs are clearly most numerous in black neighborhoods, gangs in Roxbury, Boston's best-known black district, are less in evidence than during the 1950s and considerably less active than in lower-status white districts such as East Boston, Charlestown, and South Boston.

The pattern of gang-connected youth offenses—those forms of gang activity which routinely evoke police action—shows a high degree of stability over a five-year study period. The most common form of offense is "creating a disturbance"—a variety of activities such as noisy rough-housing, obscene conversation, impeding public passage, and the like. Next most common are relatively mild forms of the "violent crimes"—assault and property damage—also in a variety of manifestations, such asstoning passing vehicles, small-scale set-to's, breaking school windows, and so on. Third and fourth are drinking and theft of various kinds, such as stripping autos and ransacking public buildings.

Gang fighting occurs according to what might be called the "traditional" pattern; that is, fighting between rival groups occurs with some frequency and regularity when viewed as a city-wide phenomenon (although rather rarely from the point of view of the life-history of particular gangs), but such fighting rarely results in serious injuries or commands much general notice, in sharp contrast with New York in the 1950s and '70s, or Philadelphia and Chicago in the 1960s and '70s. One major reason is that the use of firearms is rare; stones, sticks, clubs, and fists still are the major weapons of fighting gang members in Boston. It is of interest as well, during a period when the use of drugs by adolescents is increasingly prevalent, that use of or involvement with drugs only rarely provides a basis for police action with respect to gangs.

The gang situation in the thirty-seven cities and towns outside of municipal Boston is of particular interest, since most of the conclusions of the past fifty years of gang studies have been based on a few of the nation's largest cities, with little attention paid to the hundreds of medium-sized cities throughout the country. In the Boston area, many of the metropolitan-area communities ranging from 20,000 to 100,000 are substantial urban centers in their right, and some, such as Cambridge, Quincy, Lynn,
Somerville, and Medford, are major industrial cities with substantial working-class populations. Gangs are present in every one of these thirty-seven cities, and their general distribution and character reflect the situation of the major urban center itself; gangs are more prevalent, active, and better developed in cities with larger lower-status populations and, within these cities, in lower-status areas. In these neighborhoods youth gangs cluster on corners, in parks, parking lots, playgrounds, and commercial sections. The pattern of offenses dealt with by the police also resembles that of the main urban center, with group disturbances, vandalism, and drinking providing the most frequent reasons for police action and drug use seldom providing a basis for such action.

The forty-two communities with populations of 2,500 to 20,000 vary widely, ranging from small residential villages with predominantly higher-status populations to industrial towns with sizable working-class populations. The gang situation presents a correspondingly mixed picture, with community size, density, social status, population composition, geography, and other factors all related to variations in numbers and kinds of gangs. Recurrently congregating groups of the kind being discussed here were noted for just about half of these forty-two suburban communities. Few present the picture of gang prevalence found in the larger ring cities. In the larger and more heavily working-class towns, however, local youth typically congregate in such locales as the town common, shopping plaza parking lots, pizza parlors, or ice cream stores. None of these gangs is black, since the population in this suburban zone is about 95 percent white, and children of local black residents are unlikely to form part of local adolescent "hanging" groups. The pattern of youth-group offenses dealt with by police resembles that already described, with the less serious forms of "group disturbance" behavior constituting a relatively higher proportion of police-handled offenses, and action involving drugs, while still infrequent, somewhat more common than in the more urbanized areas.

In many of these communities, as well as the "urban ring" cities and towns just discussed, the shopping plaza has become the new street corner for the youth gangs of the suburbs and has thus inherited many of the problems traditionally associated with the "kids on the corner" in the cities. The suburban supermarket or shopping mall youth gang has in fact become a highly prevalent phenomenon throughout the entire nation, deserving of more extensive treatment than it has yet received (King 1971).
Gang Violence and Media Coverage

A comparison of the gang situation in Philadelphia and Boston suggests several important conclusions with respect to gangs and information about gangs in the United States today. The two metropolitan areas resemble each other in that youth gangs in large numbers and of a wide variety are present in both, with locality-based groups most common; patterns of gang activity in the scores of communities surrounding the major urban center resemble those of the center itself; gangs are more in evidence in lower-status communities; congregation patterns in the suburbs of the two areas are particularly similar; the racial and ethnic composition of the gangs reflect those of their local communities. The two metropolitan areas differ in that gangs in the municipal city are predominantly black in Philadelphia and predominantly white in Boston; also, a minority of the members of a relatively small proportion of Philadelphia gangs have been pursuing a pattern of violent intergang combat resulting in a high level of gang-related homicides, whereas the fighting activities of the Boston gangs have been far less lethal and have produced few widely publicized homicides in recent years. The primary differentiating factor, then, lies not in the presence, numbers, or distribution of gangs in the two urban areas but, rather, in the frequency and severity of gang-connected violence.

It is this factor, then, which accounts primarily for the striking difference between the two cities in the availability of information about gangs. Even a casual reader of the Philadelphia dailies is well aware that gangs are numerous and active in the city; even the most careful reader of the Boston dailies has no idea whatever, unless he has access to other sources, that literally hundreds of youth gangs are present both in the municipal city and in over fifty of the nearby suburban communities. Thus, while continuing media coverage of gangs is virtually always an accurate indication that gangs are present (and generally in larger numbers than indicated by the media), the absence of media coverage is by no means an accurate indication that gangs are not present.

In summary, available evidence as to gang prevalence and publicity during the present period indicates that, despite the widely held impression during the 1960s that youth gangs had vanished or altered radically, such gangs remain a common phenomenon in the United States. 8 Youth gangs in the nation’s
five largest cities have been pursuing a pattern of intergang conflict which has resulted in a level of gang-connected homicides sufficiently high as to bring about continuing media attention. Moreover, outdoor congregation by youth groups in the “new” suburbs—now containing the largest proportion of the national population—appears to be widespread and growing, with many suburban gangs approximating the features of the classic inner-city gangs of past and present.

**Change and Continuity: Is There a “New Gang”?**

American society, along with some others, is traditionally shortsighted about the relation of the present to the past. Americans tend to be profoundly impressed with the events of the immediate present and typically assign disproportionate weight to contemporary developments when attempting to explain social phenomena. Some in each generation have attributed the very existence of gangs to the specific happenings of their own historical period. Thus, youth gangs in the late 1800s were seen as a direct product of massive waves of foreign immigration; in the 1930s as a result of a grave national economic depression; in the 1940s and ’50s as a consequence of basic changes in the character of the family unit.

The urban crisis era provides no exception to this predilection. There are those who feel that many of the numerous gangs of the present period represent a radical departure from past forms—that contemporary events have affected gangs so fundamentally that continuity with the past has been drastically attenuated or even lost (Yablonsky 1963; Gannon 1967; Poston 1971; Bragonier 1972). Of the major developments of the urban crisis period noted earlier, three in particular have been adduced to account for the emergence of the “new gang.” Two are directly related to the massive civil rights movements of the period—an increased measure of militancy and readiness to employ force by urban blacks, and an increased involvement in political and/or ideological activism by residents of low-status communities. The third is the substantial growth in the acceptability and use of drugs among adolescents, accompanied in some instances by an ideological perspective characterized as “countercultural.”

Since these developments directly involve population groups whose circumstances affect the existence and nature of gangs—youth, urbanites, and low-status populations—it is scarcely con-
ceivable that they could fail to have an impact on present-day gangs. The issue, however, is whether that impact has been of sufficient magnitude as to justify speaking of a new gang, whose form, orientation, and customary pursuits represent a sharp break with the past rather than a contemporary version of traditional forms.

**Transformation through Protest:**

**Youth Gangs and Civil Disorders**

Of all the forms of domestic violence which marked the urban crisis era, the form which almost certainly had the most profound impact on public consciousness was a kind of collective social event designated, in more formal terms, as a "civil disturbance" or "civil disorder," and less formally as "rioting." Hundreds of such events occurred in the United States during this period. The basic pattern was set in 1963 and 1964; the rioting reached a peak in 1967-68, and diminished thereafter. These riots were subject to voluminous reports by many writers, several governmental commissions, and scores of social analysts (Lachman and Singer 1968; Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders 1968; Wolfgang 1968; Hubbard 1969; Civil Disorder Digest 1969; Marx 1970; Baskin et al. 1972).

What part did youth gangs play in the disorders? Participation by youth gangs in urban rioting is nothing new; the activities of gangs during the "race riot" period of 1915-19 have, in particular, been well documented (see Thrasher, 1927. pp. 47, 53, 62, 138, 201-3, 373, 472; Rudwick 1966). But the nature of gang participation during this period differed significantly from that of the more recent period. The basic and most obvious fact about gangs and riots in the urban crisis era is that both the locale of the major riots (urban slum areas) and the social characteristics of the most active rioters (male youth and young adults) are coterminous with those of the classic urban youth gang. The riots occurred in their own home territory; the gangs were there, the riots were there, and hundreds of groups of black males were clearly in evidence, active and ubiquitous.

The character of gang participation in the rioting—what gang members did as well as what they did not do—deserves attention because of the light it throws both on the nature of the gangs and the nature of the rioting. It is important to note, in the first place, that in virtually no instance did the gangs start the rioting,
either in the sense that they agitated actively for the advent of riot
conditions or that incidents involving gangs served as major
trigger events. Once the riots were under way, however, gang
members were among the most ardent and energetic participants.
The zeal of gang-member participation in the riots should
come as no surprise. The vital concerns of gang members revolve
around such matters as excitement, risk, daring, adventure,
action, defiance of authority, freedom from constraint. Gangs
are attracted to situations involving “trouble,” and pursue their
ends in a vigorous, activistic fashion (Miller 1958). It is hard to
imagine a milieu more precisely calculated to promote the pursuit
of these concerns. To the average member of the average black
gang the riot represented an extraordinary convergence of desir-
able conditions, a situation of unparalleled opportunity: people
milling in the streets, buildings in flames, police and fire vehicles
rushing to and fro, the crash of breaking glass, the hubbub of
police radios, the unstilled clangor of unattended burglar alarms.
Observers of gang behavior during the rioting were struck by
what appeared as a current of enormous excitement—an almost
ecstatic perception that all things were possible, all delights
within grasp. It was the sense conveyed in those kinds of
ritualized events—the bacchanalia, the mardi gras, the cor-
roborec—when ordinary rules of conduct are suspended and one
is granted special license to pursue with fervor that which is
denied in ordinary times. Even in those cases where the triggering
incident was most unequivocally perceived as a racial affront,
media observers of the 1965 Watts and 1967 Newark riots noted
that the dominant emotions of most gang members appeared to
be closer to elation than anger.

The pattern of participation by youth gangs in the classic civil
disorders of the urban crisis era may be summarized by consid-
ering the relationship between gang behavior during the riots and
during ordinary times. Analyses based primarily on a careful
examination of the forms and frequencies of gang-member
activity during the riots reveal a degree of regularity, rationality,
and patterning which does not accord with a conception of
youthful riot behavior as an irrational and uncontrolled outburst
of long-suppressed emotions. The identity of targets of theft,
assault, and property destruction reflects a process guided by
orderly principles of selection. In particular, riot-period gang
behavior does not support the thesis that racial hatred was the
dominant motive for the rioting. Racial hostility was clearly a significant factor, but it was only one of a set of coexisting motives, many of which are common to American youth of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, to those familiar with the behavior of urban low-status youth in ordinary times, the riot-period behavior of gang members appeared less a unique response to unique conditions than a logically continuous extension of customary motives and concerns. Riot conditions provided an extraordinary climate of opportunity for the actualization of these concerns, but the fact that gang members chose to pursue more avidly during the riots the same kinds of ends they ordinarily pursue attests to the enormous influence of motives derived from their subcultural status as males, as adolescents, city dwellers, and residents of low-status communities. The riot experience served to illuminate with great clarity the potency of those forces which engender gang behavior during ordinary times.

Transformation through Commitment: Gangs and Political Activism

The notion of "transforming" gangs by diverting their energies from traditional forms of gang activity—particularly illegal forms—and channeling them into "constructive" activities is probably as old, in the United States, as gangs themselves. Thus, in the 1960s, when a series of social movements aimed at elevating the lot of the poor through ideologically oriented, citizen-executed political activism became widely current, it was perhaps inevitable that the idea be applied to gangs. The basic notion is simplicity itself. Once gang members can be brought to see that their energies should be devoted to a set of social reform and/or community betterment enterprises, great amounts of potentially productive energy can be harnessed to the achievement of needed social change, at the same time reducing the amount of energy available for criminal and other traditional forms of gang behavior. Two major models of activism were current: a more radical "militant" model, which saw gangs as a spearhead of a forceful attempt to undermine established sources of power (often white power), and a less radical "social betterment" model, which conceived gangs as the basis of a kind of indigenous community-services-delivery enterprise. The simplicity of this notion and the perceived desirability of social/
reform, and efforts to change union membership policies. More "militant" activities included participation in protest demonstrations and stockpiling arms and ammunition (see Short's discussion, 1974, and in the present volume). In addition, there were a few other nonblack associational units in Chicago and elsewhere whose activities importantly involved similar undertakings (e.g., the Young Lords, Spanish American, in Chicago, New York, and elsewhere; the Young Patriots, whites, in Chicago). The basic issue here, however, is just how prevalent were " politicized" gangs in the city where this phenomenon was best developed?

During the 1965–70 period the Chicago police estimated that there were approximately 900 "youth groups" in the city, of which about 200 were sufficiently troublesome to be designated "gangs" and about 20 difficult enough to be termed "hard core" (figures furnished by the Gang Intelligence Unit, 1966 and 1971). While reliable prevalence estimates in a loose and rapidly changing situation of this kind are extremely difficult to derive, a rough and generous estimate of the number of identifiable units and/or subdivisions affiliated in some manner with the major " politicized" gang names in Chicago (Rangers, Disciples, Vice Lords, a few others) would indicate something on the order of 80 units—less than 10 percent of the total number of youth gang units in the city. During the heyday of the " politicized" gang in the city with the highest number of such gangs, about 90 percent were not significantly involved in political activism. The politicization of the gang hardly represents a major national development. For the rest of the nation, including those Spanish-American units modelled in some degree after the adult Black Panthers, the proportion of nonpolitcized gangs was probably closer to 95 percent.

Claims that the " politicized" gang had become the modern type of United States gang provide a classic instance of the principle whereby a small and atypical portion of the total population at issue becomes subject to extensive attention, and is then represented as a general and prevalent phenomenon (see Short, in this volume).

By the early 1970s it was apparent that one predicted product of the civil rights movement of the 1960s—a new, politicized gang, transformed by ideological commitment—simply had not developed. The media stopped heralding the politicized gang, headlining instead the rising rate of gang-connected homicide in major cities.
A more relevant question than “Did the civil-rights movement of the 1960s ‘politicize’ the gang?” would be “What was the impact of the movement on gangs in general and black gangs in particular?” A comprehensive analysis of this issue would have to entertain, among other results, the idea that one product of the movement was an important addition to the language used by some to characterize gang behavior. Many blacks and some Spanish-Americans—both gang members and others—added an important new kind of justificational vocabulary to the repertoire of traditional modes for explaining gang activity (see Sykes and Matza 1957; Matza 1964, chap. 10). This new vocabulary incorporated basic ideological tenets of the black rights movement and applied to customary forms of gang behavior concepts such as exploitation by the power structure, restitution for past injustices, brutalization by the system, and the like. It is particularly important in this context to distinguish verbal behavior from actual practice. Black gang members continue, by and large, to do much the same kinds of things, but for some there have been changes in the ways they characterize and justify these practices. This must be seen as one effect on gangs of the civil rights movement, but it is not the kind of effect required to produce a new type of ideologically activist gang.

Transformation through Enhanced Experience: Gangs and Drug Use

During the urban crisis era a prime candidate for the paramount youth problem of the times (and as such subject to intensive attention and concern by the media, professionals, and the public) was the use of drugs. Given a widespread perception that “drug abuse” had become endemic among youth, it was perhaps inevitable that youth gangs be perceived in these terms. In fact, the prospect of increased drug use by gang members was suggested as early as the 1950s, on the basis of theoretical premises similar to those which produced predictions of the “politicized” gang and which served in part to motivate researchers to search for “drug-using” or “drug-addicted” gangs. The predicted emergence of such gangs as a major new development, as was the case for predictions of politicized gangs, failed to materialize, although in both instances it has been possible to characterize a relatively small proportion of all gangs in these terms (Russell n.d.; Klein and Phillips 1968).

The issue of drug use by gangs provides a clear example of a
process whereby a phenomenon perceived as a reigning social ill is granted great power to affect sundry other phenomena. During the urban crisis era drug use figured as a major element in a scheme used to explain both the death and rebirth of "the fighting gang." This formulation—which in some quarters, especially the New York area, became part of the conventional folklore of gangs—runs as follows. The fighting gangs of the 1950s were knocked out (sometimes snuffed out) by the advent of hard drugs, particularly heroin. Gang members took to heroin primarily out of frustration engendered by the exclusionism of a discriminatory society which afforded them only a few modes of response to their frustration, among which fighting and drug-use figured prominently. Thus, when gang fighting was made less practicable by police pressures, less untrammelled by social-work intervention, and less modish by an ascendency of "cool" over "heart" as a valued quality, gang members were virtually forced into drug use as one of their few remaining outlets.

Then in the 1960s the intensification of civil rights activities provided a new outlet for their frustrated energies, and they abandoned heroin for political activism. Through the civil rights movement they came to realize that one could take action against the system instead of retreating into drugs, that the drug traffic was another means used by the power structure to exploit the poor, and that it served the interest of the establishment to cripple potential activists by pressing them into addiction. By the late 1960s the antidrug ethic of the gang members had become so powerful that they became increasingly frustrated by the apparently deliberate ineffectiveness of officialdom in coping with the problem and were thus impelled, again in line with the new activism, to themselves undertake the policing functions necessary to purge their communities of drugs. However, once having re-formed their gangs for these purposes, rather than devoting their aggressive energies to driving out the pushers and exposing the corrupt policemen, they began to direct them instead—for reasons not fully understood—toward their fellow gang members. Thus occurred a rebirth of a pattern of intergang violence much like the one that had been abandoned ten years before—with frustration-engendered violence intensified, if anything, by the failure of the recently attempted activism to effect any really significant changes in the social order.

The need for devising this rather imaginative scenario—fight-
ing gang to narcotized gang to politicized gang to fighting gang in ten years—was brought about, as shown earlier, by a prevalent impression that gangs had somehow flourished, been knocked out, and then revived—an impression not supported by available evidence. Note also that this explanation, while pivoting on drug use as its major dynamic, also works in the notion of politicization, just discussed. As is always the case for conventional-wisdom explanations of this kind, there are important elements of factual accuracy interwoven throughout its fabric. The problem of drug use in gangs can be more profitably addressed, however, through the question “What was the impact of increasing use and availability of drugs among American adolescents?” Analysis should encompass the situation not only of black gangs and/or the New York City area, and the use of hard drugs only, but the use of various types of drugs by the range of different kinds of gangs in all sections of the country.

The increased availability of certain drugs appears to have fitted quite readily into an established niche. The “versatile repertoire” of gang activities noted earlier traditionally involves the use of what might be called “experience enhancing” substances, a practice arising quite naturally from the “excitement” focal concern of the adolescent subculture which serves as a major influence on gang behavior (Miller, forthcoming). Such substances serve largely to enhance and facilitate participation in a range of activities such as mating and recreational activities. For the average gang member the use of such substances is governed by relatively simple criteria; he wants something which is easy to get and which will provide a quick but not too potent “high” at minimum cost. Traditionally these criteria have been met primarily by alcoholic substances, principally beer. However, use of drug and/or narcotic substances, particularly those involving easier-to-obtain substances (pills, glue, “bennies,” cough medicine containing codeine) has been familiar to gang members in many locales for quite some time. Such gangs have often employed a pragmatic “mix” of alcohol and drugs. A major consequence of the increasing acceptability of drug use among adolescents (principally of marijuana) and the concomitant increased availability of certain drugs (again, primarily, marijuana) has been to increase the proportion of drugs to alcohol in the drug-alcohol mix of many gangs.

Increases in the extent of drug use by both gang and nongang
adolescents have been accompanied by the development of serious misconceptions on the part of many adults. The fact that many gang members use drugs to greater or lesser degrees makes it possible to talk of "drug-using" gangs. This does not mean, however, that drug use is the central or defining activity of any significant proportion of gangs, any more than the almost universal use of alcohol justifies the term "the drinking gang" as a primary designation. Moreover, outside of some inevitable experimentation, the most common types of drugs used by gang members are the "soft" drugs, primarily marijuana and "pills." Heroin is rare and "psychedelic" drugs such as LSD even rarer. Furthermore, as is the case for the adolescent population in general, alcohol remains far and away the most common form of experience-enhancing substance for gang members, with beer, the traditional staple, the most common form of alcohol. Also, contrary to one prevalent notion, most gang members do not turn to drugs as a vehicle of withdrawal, passive escape, "dropping out," or "retreatism" but rather use them in much the same fashion and for much the same purposes as alcohol—to enhance or heighten the quality of active involvement with music, courtship, adventure-seeking, group conversation, eating and drinking, and other traditional gang pursuits.

An additional important point concerns the relationship of gang-member drug use to criminal behavior. The possession and/or use of narcotic substances for nonmedical purposes is in itself illegal in many jurisdictions. It is not this kind of law violation which poses a major problem for law enforcement agencies, however, but those forms of traditional youth crime such as robbery, burglary, and violent offenses which may be related to drug use. In practice, as in the case of youthful drinking, police seldom take action on the basis of drug "use" or "possession" alone, if those using marijuana or other "soft" drugs do not at the same time engage in other more disruptive forms of behavior.

What is the relationship of gang-member drug use to other forms of crime? Two apparently inconsistent positions are current. The first sees drug use as inhibiting crime, the second as enhancing it. The inhibition position argues that drug use serves as a surrogate for more serious forms of crime, in that drug users, unlike drinkers, are generally content with legally benign activities such as "digging" sounds or "rapping," whereas alcohol serves to spur more "aggressive" activities such as fighting, car theft, or
dangerous driving. The enhancement position argues from a well-established “conventional wisdom” formulation which sees the use of relatively inexpensive “soft” drugs inevitably leading to costly “hard” drugs and the necessity for those thus addicted to engage in serious forms of non-“use” crimes in order to support their habits.

Neither the inhibition nor the enhancement positions, whatever their degree of validity, appear to have much application to gang-member crime. Although evidence in this area is fragmentary, it would appear quite tentatively that patterns of criminal activity (theft, assault, and so on) of contemporary gangs who may use drugs in greater or lesser measure do not differ significantly from those of analogous gangs in the predrug period. A major factor here is that the pattern of drug use among typical gang members (mostly “soft” drugs) is not very costly and thus does not provide the incentive for intensified involvement in robbery or burglary postulated by the enhancement position as a major element in the behavior of hard-core addicts in communities such as Harlem or Berkeley. Certainly the contemporary gangs of Philadelphia, the Bronx, and Los Angeles are not abstaining from violence as a consequence of drug use (inhibition position), and there is little evidence which links rising rates of robbery and burglary with increases in the use of drugs by gang members (enhancement position).

It is significant that two of the inaccurately predicted or perceived bases of transformation of the American youth gang—politicization and narcotization—accord with theoretical premises of the “counterculture” movement which enjoyed considerable currency among some proportion of college-level youth during the 1960s. Evidence from the present study indicating that neither the political/ideological nor the drug-use orientations represents significant developments among youth gangs recruited primarily from lower- and working-class populations constitutes one important kind of evidence that the influence of a “counterculture” was of a very low order among that portion of the population represented by youth gang members.

Conclusion: Cyclical Elaboration and Perceptions of Newness

Conclusions drawn from this examination of American youth gangs in the urban crisis era afford an unusual opportunity to
address the issue of change and stability in gangs, since major
developments of this period would appear, on their face, to have
harbored an unusual potential for altering established societal
forms. Three developments in particular might have been
expected to have had an especially significant impact on gangs.
First, a marked increase in the acceptability and availability of
drugs—because this exerted its most direct influence on persons in
those age categories from which gangs most typically recruit.
Second, a period of unusually intense activity involving race
relations—since its most violent and dramatic events transpired
in those locales where gangs are most typically found. Third, a
vogue for an ideologically based rebellion against established
forms—the “counterculture” movement—because it found its
primary adherents among the young, depicted as “alienated”
many persons whose behavior failed to conform to conventional
middle-class ideals, and aimed to erode established forms, among
which the gang must be counted.

This paper has concluded that, in common with others of this
period, none of these developments, despite their potential for
effecting change, had very much impact on American youth
gangs. At the beginning of the period youth gangs, some quite
violent, flourished throughout the nation, particularly in slum
areas of the largest urban centers; at the end, youth gangs, some
quite violent, flourished throughout the nation, particularly in
slum areas of the largest cities. The basic forms and characteristic
pursuits of these gangs, while certainly reflecting the changing
fashions of the larger adolescent subculture, showed a high
degree of continuity. If one grants validity to this conclusion, two
additional questions at once present themselves. First, why do
gangs persist, and why do their characteristic pursuits retain
considerable stability in the face of changing circumstances?
Second, how can one account for recurring representations that
gangs have been substantially changed, radically transformed, or
even extinguished entirely?

Answers to the first question can be presented here only in the
most condensed form (see Miller 1971, and forthcoming). The
youth gang remains as a persisting form because it is a product of
a set of conditions that lie close to the basic building blocks of our
social order. These include the necessary division of labor
between the family and the peer group in the socialization of
adolescents, the masculinity and collective-action emphases of
the male subculture, the stress on excitement, congregation, and
mating in the adolescent subculture, the importance of toughness, smartness, and trouble in the subcultures of lower-status populations, the density conditions and territoriality patterns which figure in the subcultures of urban and urbanized locales. It is these social conditions and their related subcultures which, taken in conjunction, generate the American youth gang, and, insofar as these conditions and subcultural concerns retain continuity through time, so does the gang—their product—retain continuity.

How, then, to account for recurring perceptions that gangs come and go, and that current manifestations represent “new” forms? The average youth gang, as has been shown, is a “generalized” rather than a specialized form, with a versatile rather than constricted repertoire of activities. Gangs, in common with other generalized and versatile societal forms, are sensitive to a wide variety of environmental developments, which are reflected in periodic modifications in gang characteristics (Miller 1959). These modifications, however, for the most part take the form of stylistic elaborations of existing forms and practices rather than “inventions”—genuinely original additions to or changes in traditional features. Insofar as particular gangs devote significant portions of their energies to such elaborations, they move toward the “specialization” pole of a generalized-specialized continuum.

The fate of these elaborations varies. In some instances they remain localized; in others they spread to gangs in other areas through media publicization and other means. In the 1950s some gangs in other cities emulated, in varying degrees, the New York fighting-gang model; in the 1970s some New York gangs began to pursue the intensified patterns of homicide by firearms developed in Philadelphia some five years before. The bulk of the elaborations—especially those involving extreme manifestations of a form or practice—are relatively short-lived. Sometimes the more extreme manifestations leave a residue in the form of a more moderate version of the elaboration, as a vogue for intensive use of hard drugs in certain gangs was transmuted over time to a more moderate use of soft drugs as a continuing component of the gangs’ repertoire of experience-enhancing substances. By and large gangs do not sustain for long those elaborations whose continued practice threatens to make substantially more difficult the conduct of other components of their customary patterns of activity.¹⁶

Once a type of elaboration achieves a sufficient degree of
development it begins to engage the attention of nongang societal agencies, which then undertake a characteristic set of responsive actions which in turn are reacted to by gangs as part of a complex process of mutual feedback and interactive influence. Among these agencies are those of control (police, probation agents), social service (social workers, youth workers), and government (elected officials, bureau personnel). Agencies whose responses bear most directly on the perception-of-newness phenomenon are the communications/information specialists, primarily media writers and social analysts. To professionals in these fields, "newness" is money in the bank, and "not-much-different-than-before" is of negligible value. Since the investment in newness as a salable commodity is generally coupled with a short time-perspective, periodic elaborations of gang behavior are seized upon and marketed not as recurrent stylistic variations in a continuing pattern but as the new, the spectacular, the sensational.

Throughout the progression of recurrent elaborations youth gangs continually scan, select from, modify, and absorb available subcultural materials and, as the new gang of today's writer becomes the old gang of tomorrow's historian, continue to thrive as a vital and adaptive form. Youth gangs in the urban crisis era show marked similarities to their predecessors in the earlier periods described by McKay.

Notes

1. Interviews with officials of the New York City Police Department Planning Division, and of the Youth Services Agency of the Human Resources Administration, November, 1970. Police figures indicating a twentyfold increase in three and one-half years in the number of groups recognized by the police as "gangs," and a fiftyfold increase in the number designated as gang members (December 1969, 18 gangs, 380 members; July 1973, 348 gangs, 19,000 members), strongly suggest that what had changed was not so much the number of congregating youth groups as the willingness of the police to designate such groups as "gangs" on the basis of particular kinds of activities.

2. Direct field observation by the author.

3. As noted by Short (1968: 10) comprehensive studies of the numbers, sizes, and characteristic activity patterns of gangs in larger geographical areas (metropolitan areas, countries, states, regions) are virtually nonexistent. So far as is known, the present report on gangs in the Boston metropolitan area, while substantially falling short of the degree of depth and comprehensiveness necessary to an adequate study,
is the first published report based on a survey of all named communities
in a standard metropolitan statistical area.

cities is based on population counts of the federal censuses of 1960 and

5. Sources of presently reported empirical findings include a ten-year
study by the author of youth gangs in inner-city Boston, a five-year
study of urban and suburban delinquency in the eastern Massachusetts
metropolitan area, and a series of irregularly recurrent site visits of
varying durations to approximately 220 American urban area communi-
ties in twenty-one states outside the areas just cited. These include six
of the ten largest cities, and nine of the twenty largest.

6. Figures presented in Miller (1975) provide estimates that the
number of police-identified gangs in the nation’s five largest cities ranges
between 740 and 2,700, and the number of gang members between
28,450 and 81,500 (table 15). These numbers would appear as an
absolute floor for the current number of gangs and gang members in
major cities.

7. For the three-year period between 1972 and 1974 Philadelphia led
in the rate of gang-connected homicides (number of police-reported
homicides per year per 10,000 male youth) with a rate of 7.4, followed
by Los Angeles (6.0), Chicago (3.5), and New York (2.1) (Miller 1975,
table 16).

8. This conclusion is based on an examination of accounts of “trigger
events” sufficiently detailed as to yield evidence of gang participation in
the case of approximately 130 civil disorders occurring between 1963
and 1968.

9. An example is furnished by a member of the Young Lords of
Chicago: “You got to understand, man, that even before [our gang
turned to activism] we were in some ways already revolutionary,
dig? . . . what we were doing as a gang had to be against the capitalist
institutions that are oppressing us” (Browning 1970).

10. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) provide the basis of two formulations;
one, that the “bopping” gang would be replaced by the drug-centered
gang (p. 183), and, two, that habitual use of hard narcotics and gang
membership are incompatible (see also Wilmer, Rosenfeld et al. 1957).
Neither of these formulations was borne out by the events of the next
decade. Gangs appropriately characterizable as “drug-centered”
appeared to be rare or nonexistent (Short and Strodtbeck 1965: 11–13),
and the notion that drugs would replace gang fighting was badly
weakened by the fact that gang violence remained prevalent in Philadel-
phia and Chicago during a period when drug use was increasing. An
increase in drugs was accompanied by a decrease in gang violence in
New York City during the 1960s, but in the 1970s gang violence again
increased, with little commensurate decrease in drug use. A Spanish
area of Los Angeles containing an active network of fighting gangs in the
1970s was “saturated with drugs.”

11. Thrasher notes the “drug addict” as a type of gang member in the
1920s (Thrasher 1927: 340). Klein and Phillips report a peak of heroin
use and/or experimentation by members of white gangs in Queens County, N.Y., around 1953, with a subsequent decline in use of “hard” drugs (Klein and Phillips 1968). Varying use-patterns are reported in Wilmer, Rosenfeld et al. 1957; Klein and Phillips 1968; Chien 1956; Markham 1972.

12. A review of findings of a variety of local and national-level studies shows that approximately 85 percent of gang-age (ca. 12–18) youth reported no experience whatever with any form of narcotic drug and that “serious” or habitual use and/or any experience with “hard” drugs was reported by 5 percent or fewer. Reported use of alcohol was far higher; while 40 percent of one sample of older (15–18) adolescents reported some experience with drugs the previous year (only 3 percent claimed “habitual” use), 93 percent reported use of alcohol.

13. Despite claims that drug use has become an increasingly serious problem for suburban police, of 305 juvenile and youth violations reported by police in selected Boston suburbs during 325 evening hours in the late 1960s, 24 percent involved drinking, and only 1 (0.3 percent) drug use (Miller 1968). In one Massachusetts community, of forty-six high school students reported to have used drugs during the previous year, not one was booked on any drug charge (Gelineau et al. 1970).

14. Chien and his associates found little impact of drug use on involvement in traditional offenses (Wilmer, Rosenfeld et al. 1957). One recent study reports with respect to “acts of vandalism, shoplifting, stealing from institutions, stealing from individuals, fighting, being picked up and/or booked by the police [on nondrug charges] [involvement by drug users is] far higher than other young people” (Gelineau et al. 1970), suggesting a relationship of drug use to volume rather than character of crime.

15. Despite wide acceptance of the thesis that increasing rates of crime (particularly burglary and robbery) are attributable primarily or largely to addicts driven to constant theft to “support their habits” and the patent plausibility of the claimed relationship, little reliable evidence has been presented as to just what proportion of crime increases can be attributed to addict theft. One of the few careful studies of the crime-drugs relationship shows that of 441 adults arrested for “index-crimes” in 1971 by Chicago police, only about 12 percent were known to have any “narcotics involvement or background” (City of Chicago Department of Police 1971).

16. The relation between periodic elaborations by particular gangs, responses by external agencies, impact of these responses by external agencies, impact of these responses on gangs, impact of gang responses on further responses, and so on, is extremely complex. Elaborations in the area of illegal behavior, particularly violent forms, are most likely to engender strong responses, and their appearance brings into play actions by police, social agencies, government, and others aimed at their inhibition or extinction. Such actions appear under some circumstances to reinforce elaborations, under others to inhibit them, under others to produce an initial enhancement followed by a diminution, in complex combinations. Results of a limited number of alternative responses are discussed in Klein (1971).
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