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# History of Gangs in the United States

## Introduction

A widely respected chronicler of British crime, Luke Pike (1873), reported the first active gangs in Western civilization. While Pike documented the existence of gangs of highway robbers in England during the 17th century, it does not appear that these gangs had the features of modern-day, serious street gangs. Later in the 1600s, London was “terrorized by a series of organized gangs calling themselves the Mims, Hectors, Bugles, Dead Boys [and they] fought pitched battles among themselves dressed with colored ribbons to distinguish the different factions” (Pearson, 1983, p. 188). According to Sante (1991), the history of street gangs in the United States began with their emergence on the East Coast around 1783, as the American Revolution ended. These gangs emerged in rapidly growing eastern U.S. cities, out of the conditions created in large part by multiple waves of large-scale immigration and urban overcrowding.

This chapter examines the emergence of gang activity in four major U.S. regions, as classified by the U.S. Census Bureau: the Northeast, Midwest, West, and South. The purpose of this regional focus is to develop a better understanding of the origins of gang activity and to examine regional migration and cultural influences on gangs themselves. Unlike the South, in the Northeast, Midwest, and West regions, major phases characterize gang emergence. Table 1.1 displays these phases.

**Table 1.1** Key Timelines in U.S. Street Gang History

<p><i>Northeast Region (mainly New York City)</i></p> <p>First period: 1783–1850s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The first ganglike groups emerged immediately after the American Revolution ended, in 1783, among the White European immigrants (mainly English, Germans, and Irish).</li> <li>• Serious ganging in New York City commenced around 1820.</li> <li>• The first well-organized gang formed in 1826 in the back room of Rosanna Peers’s greengrocery.</li> </ul> <p>Second period: 1860–1920s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Chinese began setting up their own highly structured tongs around 1860.</li> <li>• The arrival of the Poles, Italians, Austrians, and other peoples in the period 1890 to 1930 created even worse slum conditions.</li> <li>• The first U.S. police war on gangs occurred in New York City in 1915–16.</li> </ul> <p>Third period: 1930s–1980s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beginning in the 1930s, the most intensive gang activity in New York City shifted from downtown (Manhattan) to both northern (East Harlem and the Bronx) and southeastern (Brooklyn) locations in the metropolitan area.</li> <li>• More fighting gangs emerged after the arrival of African American migrants from the South and Latino immigrant groups (from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Puerto Rico) in the 1930s and 1940s.</li> <li>• Black gangs appeared by the 1950s.</li> <li>• In the late 1950s, a “slum clearance” project moved several thousand poor Puerto Rican and African American families into high-rise public housing in East Harlem.</li> <li>• During the 1980s, new Asian and non–Puerto Rican Latino immigrants populated gangs.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Midwest Region (mainly Chicago)</i></p> <p>First period: 1860s–1920s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chicago’s first street gangs developed among White immigrants along ethnic lines in the 1860s—particularly Irish, German, and Lithuanian people.</li> <li>• In the 1920s, gangs became entrenched in the patronage networks operated by ward politicians, with notorious criminals and rum-runners, the most notable of which was the Al Capone gang.</li> </ul> <p>Second period: 1940s–1970s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Following the 1919 race riot, Black males formed gangs to confront hostile White gang members who were terrorizing the African American communities.</li> <li>• Mexican American gangs likely formed in the 1950s, if not earlier.</li> <li>• Chicago’s largely African American gang problem exploded in the 1960s, with more gangs and more violence.</li> <li>• Public housing high-rises became gang incubators and drug turf battlegrounds beginning in the 1970s.</li> </ul>

***West Region (mainly Los Angeles)***

First period: 1890s–1920s

- Ganglike groups of Mexican descent appeared in the West region in the 1890s.
- The first Los Angeles Mexican American gangs likely formed in the 1920s.

Second period: 1940s–1950s

- Two events in the 1940s stimulated growth of Mexican American gangs in West: the Sleepy Lagoon murder and the zoot suit riots.
- Mexican immigration accelerated in the early 1950s.

Third period: 1950s–1980s

- By the 1950s, African American gangs in Los Angeles were beginning to assume a street gang presence.
- African American gangs were well established by the 1960s in low-income housing projects.
- Mexican American gangs steadily grew following the Vietnam War, the War on Poverty, and the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s.
- By the 1970s, street gangs had emerged in most populated areas across California.
- In the 1980s, the gang culture melded with crack cocaine dealing and consumption in the African American ghettos.

***South Region***

First period: 1970s–1990s

- Gang activity likely did not emerge in the southern states prior to the 1970s.
- As of 1980, only Miami and San Antonio were considered to have a moderately serious gang problem.
- Several southern states saw sharp increases in gang activity in multiple cities and counties by 1995.
- Before the end of the 20th century, the South region matched the other major regions in the prevalence of gang activity.
- Houston emerged in the past decade as a major gang center.

## **The Influence of Population Migration Patterns on Gang Emergence**

Three large groups of early immigrants populated the Northeast and Midwest regions of the United States. According to Pincus and Erlich (1999), so-called old immigrants first came, predominantly from England and English territories, and also Dutch, German, Swedish, and Scandinavian peoples. In the second large wave, from 1865 to 1890, approximately 11 million immigrants arrived from mainly northern and western regions of Europe, especially Great Britain, Germany, and Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway, Sweden). The third group of immigrants from countries of southern and

eastern Europe—the Poles, Italians, Austrians and many others—another 11 million or so, arrived from 1890 to 1930. Largely consisting of low-skilled, low-wage laborers, not unexpectedly, the three large immigrant surges overwhelmed the housing and welfare capacity of the young northeastern and midwestern cities, contributing directly to slum conditions and the accompanying crime problems, gangs included. Street gangs emerged from similar conditions of social disorganization in Chicago.

In contrast, gangs initially grew out of the preexisting Mexican culture in the West region, and subsequent Mexican migrations continuously fueled their growth. Immigrant groups along the trail from Mexico to Los Angeles initially populated El Paso, Albuquerque, and Los Angeles. The migrants brought an embryo, or pregang, subculture called *pachuco* (Moore, 1978; Vigil, 1988, 1990) that quite likely began forming in El Paso (Moore, 2007a). Gang emergence in the South does not appear to have been grounded in any of the preexisting conditions found in the Northeast, Midwest, and West.

## Street Gang Emergence in the Northeast

New York City's Ellis Island was the major port of entry to the United States. Dutch immigrants arrived first, in the early 1600s, and as Bourgois (2003) reports, they promptly stole Manhattan island from the indigenous people who inhabited the island and hunted and fished there. The Lower East Side of the city—particularly around the Five Points—later fell victim to rapid Irish immigration and ensuing political, economic, and social disorganization (Riis, 1902/1969). Bourgois (2003) also identifies Irish and Italian immigrants as early European settlers in East Harlem. Virtually all of the Puerto Ricans arrived there much later, mainly in the two decades following World War II.

Street gangs on the East Coast developed in three phases. The first phase began after the American Revolution. These ganglike groups were not seasoned criminals—only youth fighting over local turf. The beginning of serious ganging in New York City, the second phase, commenced a few years later, around 1820, when immigration began to pick up (Pincus & Erlich, 1999). A third wave of gang activity ensued in the 1930s and 1940s when Latino and Black populations began to arrive in large numbers. Soon, according to Gannon (1967), more than two-thirds of the New York gangs were Puerto Rican or Black.

### First Period of New York City Gang Growth<sup>1</sup>

Three developments in particular appear to have contributed to the emergence of New York City's street gangs: (1) social disorganization in slum areas, (2) the establishment of greengrocery stores, and (3) the involvement of politicians in street gangs. The isolation and marginalization of early immigrants in the rapidly growing New York City may have prompted them to establish what Ley (1975) describes as “a small secure area where group control [could] be maximized against the flux and uncertainty of the . . . city” (pp. 252–53). Conflict was therefore imminent, and street gangs grew in such environments, largely motivated by a desire to exercise some power or control over a chaotic environment. Nevertheless, these first gangs were largely inconsequential.

The serious street gangs that first drove clearly defined stakes in the streets of New York in the late 18th century grew out of a second development, the establishment of greengrocery speakeasies that sold vegetables. However, in most cases, vegetable sales were nothing more than a front for the back room in which “the fiery liquor of the period” was sold at lower prices than in the respectable saloons (Asbury, 1927). As Adamson (1998) and Sante (1991) report, many of the older gang members were employed, mostly as common laborers including bouncers in saloons and dance halls, dockers, carpenters, sail makers, and shipbuilders. “They engaged in violence, but violence was a normal part of their always-contested environment; turf warfare was a condition of the neighborhood” (Sante, 1991, p. 198). Barroom brawling was a common denominator. “The majority of dives featured one or another of a variation of the basic setup: bar, dance floor, private boxes, prostitution, robbery” (p. 112). Hagan (1995) asserts that these “deviance service centers” catered to the demand for illicit sex, alcohol, guns, protection, and even murder for hire.

The first gang with a definite, acknowledged leadership—named the Forty Thieves and made up largely of local thieves, pickpockets, and thugs—formed around 1826 in the back room of Rosanna Peers’s greengrocery (Haskins, 1974). The second gang that formed in the area, the Kerryonians, named themselves after the county in Ireland from which they originated. Other similar gangs quickly formed in the Five Points area, including the Chichesters, Roach Guards, Plug Uglies (named after their large plug hats), Shirt Tails (distinguished by wearing their shirts outside their trousers), and Dead Rabbits. Haskins (1974) explains how the Dead Rabbits were so-named when, “at one of the gang’s stormy meetings someone threw a dead rabbit into the center of the room. One of the squabbling factions accepted this as an omen and its members withdrew, forming an independent gang and calling themselves the Dead Rabbits” (p. 27). Their battle symbol was a dead rabbit impaled on a pike. Haskins notes that in Five Points jargon, a rabbit was a super tough guy.

The Irish Bowery Boys soon formed in a nearby area known as the Bowery. Battles between the Bowery Boys and Dead Rabbits (claiming more than 1,000 members each) were legendary, each of which was supported by smaller gangs they had spawned. These gangs out-manned police and both the National Guard and the regular army were summoned on occasion to quell the fights. Altogether, they waged as many as 200 battles with Five Points gangs over a span of 10 years, beginning in 1834 (Asbury, 1927). A 2002 movie, *Gangs of New York*, vividly depicted these gangs, albeit with some exaggerations and distorted history.

Shrewd politicians immediately recognized the potential asset that the street gangs might represent (Haskins, 1974). In the early 1830s, several politicians (ward and district leaders) bought grocery stores in Five Points and the saloons and dance halls in the Bowery, the gathering places for the gangs. In return for their assured protection of the gangs’ meeting places, and financial rewards offered to the gangs for their loyalty, gang leaders returned the favor by taking care of jobs like blackjacking political opponents and scaring unsupporting voters away from the polls. “Nearly every shrewd ward and district leader had at least one gang working for him” (p. 32).

Sante (1991) suggests that the gangs were permitted to thrive, to kill each other and drink themselves to death, by authorities who willingly allowed the gangs to act as principal agents of natural selection in the slums of New York City. “The gangs repaid this courtesy by demonstrating their mingled respect and derision for the world outside their turf through parody: parody of order, parody of law, parody of commerce, parody of progress” (p. 235).

### **Second Period of New York City Gang Growth**

For 20 years following the Civil War, corruption and vice were rampant in New York City. Haskins (1974) pinpoints a governmental and political organization, Tammany Hall, at the center of much of the corruption—even aiding and abetting gang activity. Needless to say, gang membership grew enormously during this period:

By 1855 it was estimated that there were at least 30,000 who owed allegiance to the gang leaders and, through them, to politicians of various factions. At every election the gangs burned ballot boxes, beat up ordinary citizens trying to exercise their right to vote, and themselves voted many times over. (pp. 34–35)

Police were powerless to arrest gang members; they were also beaten when they attempted to guard polling places. By 1857, the city police force was so corrupt that the New York State legislature intervened and replaced it.

In the first decade of the 1900s, another 8.8 million immigrants reached the United States (Pincus & Ehrlich, 1999). The arrival of the Poles, Italians, Austrians, and other peoples in New York City during the period from 1890 to 1930 created even worse slum conditions (Riis, 1902/1969). Inundated with immigrants, New York City could not provide enough homes for the enormous influx. Tenement houses were created as a temporary solution that became permanent. This ethnic succession continued into the 20th century. Sante (1991) elaborates on how economic conditions and the American drive for upward mobility particularly influenced this process. It was the harshness of economic conditions that mainly accounted for the overcrowding of Manhattan’s neighborhoods and the succession of resident groups. As families bettered themselves economically, they would move to better living conditions. This signified advancement as assimilated Americans. In turn, newer immigrants would occupy the lower rung in society that advancing families vacated. “Meanwhile, the physical fabric of the original slums rotted away even as they continued to be overpopulated, and nobody cared very much, not even the inhabitants, as long as they thought they had a chance to move elsewhere” (p. 22)

Gangs and other criminal groups were virtually unfettered from forging their own wedges in the social and physical disorder. In fact, Asbury (1927) reports that around 1913, “there were more gangs in New York than at any other period in the history of the metropolis” (p. 360). This shifted by 1916, when, according to Haskins (1974), police “smashed” most of the large gangs in the first U.S. war on gangs. Police beat and arrested gang members, and criminal courts imprisoned more than 200 of the most important gang leaders. The gang action then moved to Chinatown and other outlying areas of New York City.

The Chinese began setting up their own highly structured tongs around 1860. Chin (1996, 2000) suggests that these eventually put the street gangs to shame in running a criminal operation that controlled opium distribution, gambling, and political patronage. By the 1870s, highly organized Chinatown gangs had established a notable street presence as a result of their active involvement in extortion, robbery, debt collection, and protection of Asian-owned vice businesses. Sante (1991) describes how the Chinese immigrants established this influence early with no opposition, merging “the functions, resources, and techniques of politicians, police, financiers, and gangsters” (p. 226).

Philadelphia and Boston could also lay claim to having substantial street gangs before the Civil War. Adamson (2000) asserts that Philadelphia’s *Public Ledger* identified nearly 50 Philadelphia gangs between 1840 and 1870. These gangs persisted. Davis and Haller (1973) document how Blumin, a *New York Tribune* reporter, described the northern suburbs of Philadelphia in 1948 and 1949 as swarming with gangs. However, these gangs do not appear to have been well organized and certainly not as ferocious as the New York gangs.

### Third Period of New York City Gang Growth

Beginning in the 1930s, the most intensive gang activity in New York City shifted from downtown (Manhattan) to both northern (Harlem and the Bronx) and southeastern (Brooklyn) locations in the metropolitan area. German and Irish Catholics already populated the northern areas of the city, and rural southern Italians arrived at the turn of the century, to face ethnic hostility from English Americans and the Irish in particular. Gangs were visible in East Harlem and that area would be a gang hot spot, although when they formed there is uncertain. Bourgois (2003) suggests that it was quite likely by the early 1900s, growing out of ethnic Irish and Italian clashes. Soon more African Americans would arrive, in the Great Migration of Blacks from the rural South northward between 1910 and 1930, making up 14% of New York City’s population by the end of that period. By the time of World War II, Harlem was one of the first Black ghettos in America, and “the area could not have been riper for the sprouting of street gangs” (Haskins, 1974, p. 80).

More fighting gangs took root after the arrival of Latinos (from Central America, South America, and the Caribbean) in the 1930s and 1940s, who settled in areas of the city populated by European Americans—particularly in East Harlem, the South Bronx, and Brooklyn. Bourgois (2003) describes how the largest new group of immigrants, 1.5 million Puerto Ricans, “were wrenched from sugar cane fields, shantytowns, and highland villages to be confined to New York City tenements and later to high-rise public housing projects in the two decades following World War II” (p. 51).

By the 1940s, three-way race riots involved Italian Americans, Puerto Ricans, and African Americans in Harlem (Bourgois, 2003).<sup>2</sup> Ethnic succession was a key precipitating factor. With the massive influx of Puerto Ricans, the previously fashionable countryside retreat for wealthy New Yorkers called East Harlem, later dubbed Italian Harlem, would soon be known as El Barrio, and informally as Spanish Harlem in reference to Puerto Ricans’ Spanish culture and language heritage. (*El Barrio* in New York City now refers specifically to East Harlem.)

In East Harlem, adolescent gang fights between Italians and Puerto Ricans were depicted vividly in Leonard Bernstein's classic musical *West Side Story*. Gang members appeared younger than in the past, and primarily non-White (Black, Mexican American, and Latino).<sup>3</sup> Haskins (1974) contends the new gangs were more organized, better armed, and often involved in drug activity. Following another wave of Black migration beginning in the 1950s, some Black gangs were very prevalent in East Harlem and other segregated communities in New York City. By 1950 there were 800,000 Blacks in the city (Haskins, 1974).

Overall, by this time, Gannon (1967) reports more than two-thirds of the New York gangs were Puerto Rican or Black. During this same period, a surging Hispanic/Latino population succeeded Whites across New York City, creating a preponderance of both all-minority and multiethnic neighborhoods (Lobo et al., 2002). More serious gang fights ensued in the late 1950s, following a "slum clearance" project that moved several thousand poor Puerto Rican and African American families into high-rise public housing in East Harlem, making it what Bourgois (2003) calls "one of the most concentrated foci of dislocated poverty and anomic infrastructure in all of New York City" (p. 65).

Throughout the 1940s to 1970s, a mixture of youth gangs remained in both the northern and southern areas of New York City. In the southernmost sections—Brooklyn, the South Bronx, and Chinatown—a variety of gangs had emerged (Sullivan, 1993). Originally comprised of Italians and Irish, the newer gangs in the South Bronx and Chinatown were populated by much older members involved in organized crime, and the Brooklyn (Sunset Park, largely poor Puerto Rican Latino) gangs were classic fighting youth gangs that drew widespread media attention for the large number of murders. The 1970s and 1980s brought another large wave of migrants to the United States, around 7 million people, respectively (Pincus & Erlich, 1999). Sullivan (1993) asserts that during the 1980s, many of the new immigrants into Brooklyn were Asian and non-Puerto Rican Latinos, especially Dominicans followed by Central and South Americans. The newer Hispanic groups began to succeed Puerto Ricans. "In fact, by the late 1990s, Hispanics had replaced Blacks as the largest minority group in the city" (Lobo et al., 2002, p. 704). Overall, according to Bourgois (2003), 51% of Harlem residents were Latino/Puerto Rican, 39% were African Americans, and the remainders (only 10%) were Whites and other groups.

### **Modern-Day Eastern Gangs**

New York City is no longer the epicenter of serious street gang activity in the Northeast, as was the case in the early 1900s. In the 1980s and 1990s, the New York Police Department (NYPD) successfully thwarted drug trafficking and associated violence among New York City's gangs (Hagedorn & Rauch, 2007). Nevertheless, many gangs remain active in the city. In the 1990s, post-World War II urban renewal, slum clearances, and ethnic migration pitted gangs of African American, Puerto Rican, and Euro-American youth against each other in battles in New York City to dominate changing neighborhoods, and to establish and maintain their turf and honor (Schneider, 1999). The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, 2009) shows a similar trend evident in



the broader Northeast region, with increasing gang-related violence as a result of competition among gangs for control of territories.

Gradually, gang activity in this region expanded to include other New England states, particularly Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Connecticut. According to the FBI's (2009) intelligence reports, "the most significant gangs operating in the East Region are Crip, Latin King, MS-13, Neta, and United Blood Nation" (p. 16).

## Street Gang Emergence in the Midwest

Chicago emerged as an industrial hub between the Civil War and the end of the 19th century. The city's capacity to produce gangs was enhanced when it recruited a massive labor force from the peasantry of southern and eastern Europe, becoming what Finestone (1976) calls "a latter-day tower of Babel" (p. 6). Gangs that flourished in Chicago grew mainly from the same immigrant groups that populated the early serious street gangs of New York City. Polish and Italian gangs were the most numerous early gangs in Chicago.

### First Period of Chicago Gang Growth

Chicago's street gangs developed among White immigrants along ethnic lines, mainly Irish, German, and Lithuanian (Thrasher, 1927/2000). While these were merely mischievous groups at first, by the 1860s, more menacing gangs of Irish and German youth had clubrooms in the basement of saloons. By the 1880s, large Irish gangs (e.g., the Dukies and the Shielders) exerted a powerful influence on the streets around the stockyards—robbing men leaving work, fighting among themselves, and terrorizing the German, Jewish, and Polish immigrants who settled there from the 1870s to the 1890s. These gangs fought constantly among themselves, but they occasionally united to battle nearby Black gangs. The Black immigrants had arrived following the U.S. Civil War, to escape the misery of Jim Crow laws and the sharecropper's life in the southern states. But serious Black gangs likely did not appear until the 1920s, and Perkins (1987) asserts that "the impact of Black street gangs on the Black community was minimal, at best, prior to the 1940s" (pp. 19, 25).

Soon street gangs became entrenched in the patronage networks operated by ward politicians (Adamson, 2000), and the city's gangs "thrived on political corruption" (Moore, 1998, p. 76). Diamond (2005) further asserts that they stuffed ballot boxes and intimidated potential voters to ensure the elections of their political patrons. Moreover, Arrendondo (2004) claims the reigning Irish gang, Ragen's Colts, in marking the racialized boundaries of "their" space, attacked both Mexican American and Black youth. Other White gangs also patrolled that area. "Reportedly, young Irish men, particularly on the east side of the yards, applied violent tactics similar to those of Ragen's Colts, waylaying Mexicans and beating them up" (p. 406).

Notorious criminals and rum-runners headed some of the early Chicago gangs (Thrasher, 1927/2000) and organized crime groups were very prevalent. Peterson (1963) identifies the Al Capone gang as most notable, while McKay describes how street gangs thrived "in the very shadow of these institutions" (p. 36).

In his 1927 book, Thrasher plotted on a map of the city the location of the 1,313 early gangs (with some 25,000 members) that he found in Chicago.<sup>4</sup> This exercise revealed Chicago's "gangland." The heyday of Chicago's White ethnic gangs came to an end soon after Thrasher's research was completed, however. As Moore (1998) explains, "The gangs of the 1920s were largely a one-generation immigrant ghetto phenomenon" (p. 68).

### **Second Period of Chicago Gang Growth**

Mexican American and Black gangs became prominent in the second period of Chicago gang growth. None of the Chicago gangs that Thrasher (1927/2000) classified in the 1920s was of Mexican descent and only 7% (63 gangs) were Black. This rapidly changed, beginning in the 1940s, after massive migration of both groups into Chicago.

Although some Mexican Americans already had a continuous presence in Chicago (Valdés, 1999), the first major wave of Mexican migration occurred during the years 1919 to 1939. According to Arredondo (2004), it was instigated by the revolutionary period in Mexico and new employment opportunities in Chicago, particularly in the meatpacking and steel industries. Soon, Mexican immigrants spread into two Chicago communities that had long been settled by the Irish, Germans, Czecs, and Poles (Pilsen and Little Village), wherein Spergel (2007) suggests Mexican American gangs grew to join the ranks of the most violent gangs in the city. By the 1940s, the Mexican migration into Chicago had swelled, and it reached 56,000 by 1960, prompting residents to dub the city as the "Mexico of the Midwest." Partly in response to what Diamond (2005) tags as growing racial and ethnic violence, Black, Puerto Rican, and Mexican American gangs proliferated in the late 1950s.

Between 1910 and 1930, during the Great Migration of more than a million Blacks from the rural South to the urban North for jobs, Chicago gained almost 200,000 Black residents (Marks, 1985; B. Miller, 2008), giving the city an enormous urban Black population—along with New York City, Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia, and other Northeast and Midwest cities. Cureton (2009) traces the origin of Chicago's serious Black street gangs to this peoples' segregated residency in inner-city areas, beginning in the early 1900s. Black gangs likely formed to counter the aggressive White youth, but these relatively unorganized groups at first were no match for the well-organized, all-White gangs that were centered in their athletic clubs. Perkins (1987) directly attributes the race riot of 1919—in which Black males united to confront hostile White gang members who were terrorizing the Black community—to gang formation. Diamond (2005) also believes Black, Puerto Rican, and Mexican American gangs alike proliferated in the late 1950s partly in response to growing racial and ethnic violence.

From 1940 to 1950, the Chicago Black population nearly doubled, from 278,000 to nearly 500,000 (B. Miller, 2008). Most of the immigrant Blacks in Chicago settled in the area known as the Black Belt (a 30-block stretch of dilapidated housing along State Street on the south side), where abject poverty was concentrated. To alleviate the housing shortage and better the lives of poor city residents, from 1955 to 1968 the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) constructed 21,000 low-income family apartments (90% of

which were in high-rise buildings), the best known of which is Robert Taylor Homes. Venkatesh (2000, 2008) reports that this complex consisted of 28 16-story buildings in uniform groups of two and three along a 2-mile stretch from the industrial area near downtown into the ghetto. Believed to be the biggest public housing project in the world, Robert Taylor Homes housed approximately 30,000 poor people, and 90% of the adults reported welfare as their sole source of support. In time, the public housing high-rises became gang incubators and drug turf battlegrounds. This setting not only provided a strong base for gangs, but also brought them into regular and direct contact. Gangs grew stronger in the buildings, and also in several instances took control of them, literally turning them into high-rise forts. Venkatesh (2008) notes, “Most remarkably, law enforcement officials deemed Robert Taylor Homes too dangerous to patrol” (p. 36) and this particular high-rise was widely recognized as “the hub of Chicago’s gang and drug problem” (p. 37). Gang wars erupted, and Chicago’s largely Black gang problem “exploded” in the 1960s, a period of increased gang “expansion and turbulence” in Chicago (Perkins, 1987, p. 74).

Cureton (2009) identifies three major Black street gang organizations formed in Chicago during the latter years of 1950s and early 1960s: the Devil’s Disciples, P-Stones, and Vice Lords. Two of these gangs, the Vice Lords and the Black P-Stone Nation/Black Stone Rangers, were created in the Illinois State Reformatory School at Saint Charles (p. 353). Established in 1960, the Devil’s Disciples gang splintered into three warring factions between 1960 and 1973: the Black Disciples, Black Gangster Disciples, and Gangster Disciples (p. 354). Gang wars occurred frequently among these large gangs in the late 1960s (Block, 1977; Block & Block, 1993). Perkins describes some of the implications:

By the early sixties, Chicago’s Black street gangs had grown to such proportions that they not only posed a threat to themselves but to the Black community as well... [These gangs] were being perceived as predators who preyed on whomever they felt infringed on their lust for power [and] they turned to more criminal activities’ and the control of turf became their number one priority.... by controlling turf, gangs were able to exercise their muscles to extort monies from businesses and intimate the Black community. (p. 32)

Perkins adds that those who dared resist often found themselves in confrontational situations that usually led to intimidation, threats, or bodily harm. “In fact, in some communities, it got to the point where being a gang member was the safest thing to do” (p. 32).

Racial unrest also contributed to rapid gang growth in Chicago. “The Civil Rights Movement was advocating nonviolence, racial pride, and unity. But black students who were having nonviolent demonstrations in the South had little influence on black street gang members [in Chicago] who were having their own distinctly more violent demonstrations” (Perkins, 1987, p. 29). The rise of the Black Panthers instilled Black pride, and their demise stirred resentment. Diamond (2001) describes how the Black gangs that were prevalent in Chicago in the 1960s “lived and acted in a world that overlapped with that of other youths [and the gang members] were surely participants in a street culture” that promoted racial empowerment and racial unity (p. 677). The

youth subculture was a ready source of distinctive clothing, hairstyles, music, and other symbols including clenched fists.

### Modern-Day Midwest Gangs

In the mid-1970s, Latino gangs, Black gangs, and Caucasian gangs in Chicago formed loose alliances such as the People and the Folk. The remaining gangs were independents, and were not aligned with either of these groups. Until recent years, these alliances were respectfully maintained on Chicago's streets and the People and the Folk were strong rivals. "Now, although street gangs still align themselves with the People and the Folk, law enforcement agencies all seem to agree that these alliances mean little" (Chicago Crime Commission, 2006, p. 11). Nevertheless, Cureton (2009) explains, "the Chicago style of gangsterism stretches to Gary, Indiana, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where alliances are fragile enough to promote interracial mistrust and solid enough to fuel feuds lasting for decades" (p. 354). But Maxson (1998) contends that few, if any, of these situations can be attributed to gang expansion.

## In Focus 1.1 Gang Names and Alliances

### Chicago Gang Alliances and Supergangs

During the 1960s, a pattern of gang branches became popular in some cities, whereby a number of gangs adopted a variant of a common gang name. In Chicago in the 1960s, about 10 local gangs used the Vicelord name, including the California Lords, War Lords, Fifth Avenue Lords, and Maniac Lords. These gangs claimed to be part of a common organization—the Vicelord Nation—related to one another by ties of alliance and capable of engaging in centrally directed activity (Keiser, 1969).

In the mid-1970s, Latino gangs, Black gangs, and Caucasian gangs in Chicago formed two major alliances, the People and the Folk. The remainder were independents and not aligned with either the People or Folk. According to the Chicago Crime Commission (2009), the People and the Folk were formed in the penitentiary system by incarcerated gang members seeking protection through coalition building. The two alliances apparently carved out turf boundaries similar to agreements among modern nations. "Until recent years, these alliances were respectfully maintained on Chicago's streets and the People and the Folk were strong rivals....Now, although street gangs still align themselves with the People and the Folk, law enforcement agencies all seem to agree that these alliances mean little" (p. 11).

In the 1980s, Chicago's African American and Latino gangs claimed affiliations of various sorts including *families*, *coalitions*, *confederations*, *nations*, and *supergangs*. These were not intentional expansions, however. Rather, Venkatesh (2000) says "they followed from incidental contacts in prison and juvenile detention facilities, non-neighborhood recruitment, family movement, and seasonal residence patterns" (p. 216). Based on his research, Venkatesh notes that available data do not support the existence of well-coordinated supergangs in Chicago.

## Los Angeles Gang Alliances

From the 1960s onward, the pattern of claiming a federated relationship with other gangs grew in popularity in Los Angeles. The most prominent of these were the Crips and Bloods—two rival gangs originally formed in Los Angeles—with locality designations reflecting neighborhoods in that city (e.g., Hoover Crips, East Side 40th Street Gangster Crips, Hacienda Village Bloods, and 42nd Street Piru Bloods). Many of the Bloods and Crips gangs or “sets” regarded one another as mortal enemies and engaged in a continuing blood feud. In succeeding years, hundreds of gangs across America adopted the Bloods and Crips names. A 1994 survey counted more than 1,100 gangs in 115 cities throughout the nation with Bloods or Crips in their names.

## Surenos and Nortenos

In the 1960s, Al Valdez (2007) reports a rivalry that developed in California’s prison system between northern and southern gang members. Many Southern California gangsters aligned with La Eme, a southern-based Mexican prison gang. Southern California gangsters began using terms like *Sureno* (meaning southerner, often expressed as *Sur*) to refer to themselves, along with the 13th letter of the alphabet, *M*, which is *Eme* in Spanish. La Eme’s recruitment efforts prompted the formation of Nuestra Familia, a second Mexican prison-based gang which recruited members from Northern California. Northern California street and prison gang members began to use the number 14 (representing the 14th letter, *N*) to identify with *Norteno* (the Spanish word for northerner). “Rival Southern California Hispanic street gangs then had one thing in common, they were enemies with anyone from Northern California. This rivalry would unite them in jail and in state prisons. The same was true for Northern Hispanic street gang members, except their enemy was any gang member from the south” (p. 139). The north–south barrier is north of the city of San Jose. From time to time, members of these gang alliances, and sets claiming allegiances, have been documented in other regions of the United States.

Primary sources: People and Folk: W.B. Miller, 2001, pp. 43–44; Surenos and Nortenos: Al Valdez, 2007, pp. 137–143.

Traditional Chicago gangs still have the strongest presence in the Midwest region. The most recent chapter in Chicago gang history is the proliferation of gangs to suburban areas. By 2006, the Chicago Crime Commission (2006) reports 19 gang turfs were scattered around Chicago, throughout Cook County. Other cities in this region that have extensive gang activity include Cleveland, Detroit, Joliet, Kansas City, Minneapolis, Omaha, and St. Louis. According to the FBI (2009), Mexican American gangs with ties to the Southern California–based Mexican Mafia (La Eme) prison gang have established a presence in the central region and are attempting to expand their influence there. Hispanic Sureños’ 13 members have also been reported in the region.

## Street Gang Emergence in the West

The existence of the Mexican population in the United States dates back to the 16th century, when people of Indian, Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo backgrounds inhabited

a broad region that was then northern Mexico and is currently the American Southwest, encompassing parts of present-day Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah. Telles and Ortiz (2008) note that Mexicans constitute the largest contemporary immigrant group and also largest immigrant group in American history.

Ganglike groups are said to have first appeared in the West region as early as the 1890s (Redfield, 1941; Rubel, 1965). Both Moore (1978, 1991) and Vigil (1990, 1998), widely recognized experts on Mexican American gang origins, suggest that the precursors of urban gangs in the West region were the *palomilla* (meaning literally, flock of doves). These are best described as small groups of young Mexican men that formed out of what Rubel (1965) calls a “male cohorting tradition,” first reported in south Texas in the early 1900s. These nascent gangs, according to Vigil (1998), grew within Mexican culture along the immigration trail that originated in Mexico and continued along a route through El Paso and Albuquerque, and onward to Los Angeles (Vigil, 1998). Seemingly coalesced under urban social pressures, the first Mexican Los Angeles gangs, that Bogardus called “boy gangs” in 1926, clearly were patterned after the *palomilla* (Moore, 1978; Vigil, 1990, 1998).

Mexican immigration was greatly accelerated as a result of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), Mexico’s new rail system, and the labor needs of the Southwest and the Midwest. Telles and Ortiz (2008) documented these three factors combined to draw 700,000 legal Mexican immigrants to the United States from 1911 to 1930. The trail from Mexico to Los Angeles would come to resemble a well-traveled road, with a multigeneration tradition of migration to and from Mexico and the United States. In fact, Vigil (1998) contends that events leading to the presence of Mexican street gangs in Los Angeles and the entire West region began long before the first gangs appeared there. Following the end of the war between the United States and Mexico, under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (in 1848), the Mexican government ceded a large southwestern region to the U.S. Mexican citizens in the area now known as California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Texas; residents in parts of New Mexico and Colorado also became naturalized U.S. citizens. Even though they were naturalized citizens, the Mexicans became alienated in their own homeland. Valdez (2007) explains:

Many Mexican street gang members felt—and still feel—that the United States stole this part of their country from their ancestors....They often were treated as second-class citizens and were told to go back to their home, Mexico. In their mind, they were home, but now [their homeland] was part of the United States because of the annexation. They were in a country where they were not wanted, but they could not return to Mexico because of their new status with the United States. (p. 94)

The unwelcoming surroundings prompted the Mexican Americans to form barrios and rural *colonias* (colonies) to protect and maintain ethnic traditions (Vigil, 1998).

### **First Period of Los Angeles Gang Growth**

Two forces served to incubate street gangs of Mexican origin in Los Angeles and in other Western cities: physical and cultural “marginalization” (Vigil, 1988, 2002, 2008).

The barrios in which the earliest and most firmly established gangs developed were well-demarcated settlements of Mexican immigrants. Moore (1993) asserts that the Mexican American gangs in the barrios (neighborhoods) of East Los Angeles typically formed in adolescent friendship groups in the 1930s and 1940s, although Bogardus (1926) suggests the first ones appeared in the 1920s. Moore (1993) and Vigil (1993) both believe conflict with groups of youth in other barrios, school officials, police, and other authorities solidified them as highly visible groups. This intense bonding to barrios and gangs is unique to Los Angeles and other southwestern cities. Vigil and Long (1990) explain: “Each new wave of immigrants has settled in or near existing barrios and created new ones, [providing] a new generation of poorly schooled and partially acculturated youths from which the gangs draw their membership” (p. 56). Thus, isolationism and stigmatization were major contributing factors to gang growth and expansion.

### In Focus 1.2 Gaining Admission to Mexican American Gangs

Admission of nonresidents into gangs can occur thorough kinship, alliance in fights, extensions of barrio boundaries, and forming branches.

*Kinship.* Gang membership is readily extended to relatives who live outside the barrio. For *Chicano* gang boys, a *homeboy* (fellow gang member) is the equivalent of a *carrial* (blood) brother. In the time-honored Mexican cultural norm, the gang takes on kinlike characteristics, especially mutual obligations among gang members.

*Alliance.* The defining characteristic of barrio gangs is fighting, particularly with another gang. “In essence, the gang is a group of boys who are allied in fights, and boys from other communities can be pressed into service” (Moore et al., 1983, p. 186).

*Expansion of boundaries.* Gang boundaries may extend into several barrios when members of multiple gangs live within them. Expansion typically works as follows: As a gang recruits one or two boys who live a block or so outside one of its boundaries, it becomes more difficult for a rival gang to defend that area. Thus the gang begins to claim that area as its own. Eventually, the rival gang ceases to claim its original turf and the successful recruiting gang has expanded into the area.

*Forming branches.* Extension from the home barrio by forming branches can mean forming *klikas* in noncontiguous areas. This typically happens when new Chicanos move into the general area.

Regardless of the method of bringing nonresidents into gangs, Moore and colleagues assert “expansion feeds upon itself” because “expansion through kinship and alliances enhances the feelings of mutual attachment and the fighting strength of the gang and lets it prosper, thus legitimating more non-residents and further expansion of territory” (p. 189).

*Source:* Reprinted from Moore, J.W., Vigil, D., & Garcia, R. (1983). Residence and territoriality in Chicano gangs. *Social Problems*, 31, 182–194. Copyright © 1983 the Society for the Study of Social Problems Inc. Reprinted with permission.

This history is not all that distinguishes Mexican American gangs from those in New York and Chicago. Another main difference Adamson (1998, 2000) notes is that gangs in these two cities emanated from conflicts with other racial/ethnic groups, whereas the first Mexican American gangs drew enormous strength from their own ethnic history. A second main difference is that the Mexican American gangs in the West region did not grow out of severe social disorganization, as appeared to be the case in the evolutionary history of New York and Chicago gangs. Generally speaking, Moore and Pinderhughes (1993) emphasize that poverty did not become as concentrated in Mexican American neighborhoods in Los Angeles as in Chicago or New York City. But, Wilson (1987) adds that later in Chicago, abject poverty and racism undergirded Mexican American gangs.

### **Second Period of Los Angeles Gang Growth**

Following a hiatus during the Great Depression, Mexican immigration accelerated again, beginning in the early 1950s, bringing what Tells and Ortiz (2008) pinpoint as almost 1.4 million more persons by 1980. The Mexican-origin population in the United States grew from 2.5 million to 8.7 million during this period. The Los Angeles area received the most Mexican immigrants. Indeed, “Los Angeles has long been the Latino ‘capital’ of the United States, housing more people of Mexican descent than most cities in Mexico” (Moore & Vigil, 1993, p. 27).

Two other historic events proved pivotal in the growth of Mexican American gangs in the West: the Sleepy Lagoon murder and the zoot suit riots. Sleepy Lagoon was a popular swimming hole in what is now East Los Angeles. A Mexican youngster was killed there in 1942, and members of the 38th Street Mexican American gang were arrested and charged with murder by the Los Angeles Police Department. Unfortunately, the criminal trial resembled a “kangaroo court,” in which five of the gang members were convicted and sentenced to prison. Al Valdez (2007) details the magnitude of this event: “Mexican street gangs changed forever because of these convictions. The jail sentences also acted as a glue to unite the Mexican community in a common cause, a fight against class distinction based on prejudice and racism, a fight against the establishment” (p. 98). The 38th Street gang members’ cause continued in prison. They maintained their dignity and “demonstrated a type of gang pride and resolve never seen before. These behaviors also elevated the incarcerated 38th Street gang members to folk hero status in the Mexican community. The street gang members especially held them in high esteem” (p. 99).

The zoot suit riots had a similar unifying effect for Mexican Americans and fueled gang recruitment. Zoot suits were a fashionable clothing trend in the late 1920s and popularized in the nightclubs of Harlem. The exaggerated zoot suit included an oversized jacket with wide lapels and shoulders, and baggy pants that narrowed at the ankles, typically accompanied by a wide-brimmed hat. The style traveled west and south into Mexico and, most likely, was introduced into California via the El Paso Mexican street gang population. According to Katz and Webb (2006), by 1943, the Anglo community, the police, and the media began to view the zoot suiters as a savage



group that presumably had attacked vulnerable White women and was also said to be responsible for several local homicides. Vigil (2002) elaborates that military personnel on leave and citizen mobs chased and beat anyone wearing a zoot suit—Chicano and Black youth alike—during a 5-day riotous period.

### **Third Period of Los Angeles Gang Growth**

In this third stage, the development of Black gangs in Los Angeles follows a pattern that is similar to the emergence of Black gangs in Chicago. As in Chicago, Harrison (1999) shows a pattern of south-to-north Black migration in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Cureton (2009) believes this subsequently fueled the growth of Black gangs in Los Angeles, stating, “Southern Blacks were simply looking for a better life, and the West was considered the land of prosperity because of employment opportunities in factories” (p. 355). Instead, institutional inequality (in housing, education, and employment) and restrictive housing covenants legalized in the 1920s rendered much of Los Angeles off-limits to most minorities (Alonso, 2004; Cureton, 2009). Black residents challenged these covenants, leading to violent clashes between White social clubs and clusters of Black youth. Cureton explains, “Fear of attack from Whites was widespread and this intimidation led to the early formation of Black social street clubs aimed at protecting Black youths against persistent White violence directed at the Black community” (p. 664).

Alonso (2004) documents Black gang formation in Los Angeles principally in two phases: in the late 1940s and in the 1970s. Several observers report that Black Los Angeles gangs formed in the late 1940s, as a defensive response to White violence in the schools. Vigil (2002) reports the first racial gang wars to have occurred “at Manual Arts High in 1946, at Canoga Park High in 1947, and at John Adams Junior High in 1949” (p. 68). Quite likely, many of these Black gangs and others initially formed in the marginal areas of communities, typically close to Whites, which permitted the Black gangs to draw more members. “Black youths were thus able to vie with whites over the social space of the schools and entertainment areas” (p. 68). In the second phase, the effects of residential segregation (particularly in public housing projects), police brutality, and racially motivated violence in the aftermath of the 1960s civil rights conflicts “created a breeding ground for gang formation in the early 1970s” (Alonso, 2004, p. 659).

Unlike the Mexican American gangs, which were located in geographically restricted barrios, territorial boundaries were less important to the Black gangs, allowing them to encompass a wider area, creating gangs that were more confederations than single entities (Vigil, 2002). Thus, it is not surprising that the gangs that grew in the 1950s and 1960s were far more serious gangs than the earlier ones. Vigil (1988) explains that beginning as early as 1940, low-income housing projects helped to curb social problems for impoverished Los Angeles families, but these large-scale settlements also contributed to gang growth among Black and Mexican youths alike. Five such projects in East Los Angeles have become barrios in their own right. But Black gangs appear to have evolved principally out of Black–White racial conflicts, and Black clubs that played a central role in developing resistance strategies to counter White

intimidation. “As white clubs began to fade from the scene, eventually the black clubs, which were first organized as protectors of the community, began to engage in conflicts with other black clubs. Black gang activity [soon] represented a significant proportion of gang incidents” across Los Angeles (Alonso, 2004, p. 665).

Cureton (2009) attributes the Black civil rights movement (1955 to 1965) to an underclass-specific, socially disorganized, and isolated Black community. Alonso (2004) elaborates:

The end of the 1960s was the last chapter of the political, social, and civil rights movement by Black groups in LA, and a turning point away from the development of positive Black identity in the city...[But the] deeply racialized context coincided with the resurgence of new emerging street groups [between 1970 and 1972]. (p. 668)

According to Davis (2006), this occurred in large part because of poverty and high unemployment rates that were most prevalent amongst Black youth.

The emergence of a wide variety of street groups also expanded the base of Black gangs into two camps, Crips and Bloods, yet there are competing accounts of how Bloods and Crips gangs formed. Prominent among these is Cureton’s (2009) research, indicating former Black Panther president Bunchy Carter and Raymond Washington formed the Crips in 1969 out of disappointment with the failure of the Black Panther Party to achieve its goals. According to Cureton, the Crips originally were organized to be a community self-help association; however, following Carter’s death, the Crips’ leadership shifted its focus to “drug (marijuana, PCP, and heroin) and gun (Uzi, AK-47, and Colt AR-15 assault rifles) sales that involved much violence and crime” (p. 356). Street gang feuds soon erupted. Neighborhood groups who opposed the Crips formed an umbrella organization to unify themselves.

Regardless of the disputed formation, the Crips and Bloods began to emulate the territory-marking practices that the early Los Angeles Mexican American gangs developed (Valdez, 2007). Crips wore blue clothing; the Bloods chose red. Both the Bloods and the Crips drew large memberships in the public housing projects built in the 1950s. Valdez (2002) reports Blacks made up nearly 95% of the membership of these two gangs, whose presence, according to Alonso (2004), quickly spread into other areas of South Los Angeles, including Compton and Inglewood. “Crip identity took over the streets of South L.A. and swept Southside schools in an epidemic of gang shootings and street fights by 1972,” first involving 18 Black gangs, that multiplied to 60 by 1978 and to 270 throughout Los Angeles County by the 1990s (p. 669).

Mexican American gangs also steadily grew in number during this period, fueled by three historical developments: the Vietnam War, the War on Poverty, and the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Acuna, 1981). Vigil (1990) contends that the Vietnam War depleted the barrios of a generation of positive role models. The ending of the War on Poverty eliminated jobs and increased marginalization. Perhaps most important, the Chicano civil rights movement “brought attention to the overall plight of the Mexican-American people, particularly long-suffering barrio populations” (p. 126). Moore and Vigil (1993) assert that its climax occurred with regionwide

participation in the Chicano Moratorium march in East Los Angeles on August 29, 1970: “The event ended in death and destruction: a crowd dispersed by police and tear gas reacted by looting and destroying stores in the commercial section of East Los Angeles” (p. 37). In the meantime, major demographic shifts occurred throughout the greater Los Angeles area as another surge of Mexican immigrants that arrived in the 1960s joined the other Latino groups that began migrating to Los Angeles in the late 1970s:

These first-generation residents have replaced heretofore Black and third-generation Latino ghettos and barrios, respectively; established new barrios in multistoried downtown apartments while making over the downtown shopping district; and generally transformed the spatial and social fabric of greater Los Angeles. (Vigil, 1990, pp. 126–27).

The Los Angeles gang culture soon began to draw the attention of youth in nearby cities. By the 1970s, according to Miller (1982/2992), street gangs had emerged in most populated areas across California. The Bloods became particularly strong in the Black communities in South Central Los Angeles—especially in places on its periphery such as Compton—and in outlying communities such as Pacoima, Pasadena, and Pomona (Alonso, 2004; Vigil, 2002). By 1972, Vigil (2002) reports there were 18 Crips and Bloods gangs in Los Angeles, and these were the largest of the more than 500 active gangs in the city in the 1970s.

### **Modern-Day Western Gangs**

Southern California has produced four gang forms that have gained national prominence in the past two decades: (1) the traditional Black Bloods and Crips, (2) a mixture of prison gangs, (3) the highly publicized Mexican American 18th Street gang and Salvadorian *Mara Salvatrucha* gang—both of which are viewed by the media and federal agencies to be transnational gangs, and (4) Asian gangs.

By the 1980s, Black gangs had become “a major street force” (Vigil, 2002, p. xvi), and the gangs and other street groups melded the gang culture with crack dealing and consumption in the ghettos of South Central Los Angeles in the 1980s (Cockburn & St. Clair, 1998). This development expanded the visibility of both Black and Mexican American street gangs and quickly drew media (Campbell & Reeves, 1994) and police attention (GAO, 1996). Today, this visibility has led, according to Valdez (2007), to all West Coast Black street gang members affiliating themselves with the Bloods or Crips. Many other gangs and naïve youth across the America mimic them and adopt their symbols and other elements of their gang culture. This phenomenon is equally pronounced—if not more so—among Mexican American gangs (Martinez, Rodriguez, & Rodriguez, 1998; Vigil, 2002).

Several prison gangs have gained notoriety in the West region in the past two decades. The Mexican Mafia is one of the oldest such gangs, having formed in California prisons in the late 1950s (FBI, 2009). (See Chapter 7 for a brief history of this gang and others in the West and Southwest regions.) Altogether, the Mexican Mafia is said to control approximately 50,000 to 75,000 California Sureños gang members and associates (GAO, 2010). The significant street and prison gangs operating in

the West and Pacific regions (particularly California, Nevada, and Hawaii) are La Eme, 18th Street, Mara Salvatrucha, and Nuestra Familia, (FBI, 2009). The most prominent Mexican American gangs among these are 18th Street, La Eme, and Nuestra Familia. The FBI considers the California-based Mexican Mafia (La Eme) to be one of seven major prison gangs. (The others are Aryan Brotherhood, Barrio Azteca, Black Guerrilla Family, Hermanos de Pistoleros Latinos, Mexikanemi—also known as Texas Mexican Mafia or Emi—and Ñeta.) The Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2010) classifies the main criminal activities of prison gangs as assault, carjacking, homicide, robbery, distributing illegal drugs within the prison system and on the streets, and extortion of drug distributors outside prison. Decker (2007) describes the incidence of prison crimes connected to the outside: “Many incidents in prison [are] linked to the street and many incidents of street violence [are] linked to prison violence” (p. 399).

Los Angeles gang culture produced two gangs that have been called *transnational gangs* and no other street gangs exceed them in generating widespread public fear. These are the notorious 18th Street Mexican American gang, and Mara Salvatrucha, a Salvadorian Los Angeles gang. There is no single definition of a transnational gang. Franco (2008b) cites one or more of the following characteristics in various definitions:

- Such gangs are criminally active and operational in more than one country.
- Criminal activities gang members commit in one country are planned, directed, and controlled by gang leaders in another country.
- Such gangs tend to be mobile and adapt to new areas.
- The criminal activities of such gangs tend to be sophisticated and transcend borders. (p. 2)

For a gang to be considered transnational, Franco (2008b) suggests that it should have more than one of the preceding characteristics; however, this rule is not followed in much of the literature and media coverage which characterizes gangs as transnational merely because they are present in more than one country. Both the 18th Street Mexican American gang and Mara Salvatrucha have been said to be involved to some extent with major drug cartels in Central America and Mexico, but more likely only along the U.S.–Mexico border. (These gangs are described in more detail in Chapter 7.)

The West region is also known for its Asian gangs that grew there in the 1990s and first decade of the 21st century among Filipinos, Koreans, Samoans, and Southeast Asians (Cambodians, Thais, and Vietnamese) (Al Valdez, 2007; Vigil, 2002; Vigil & Yun, 1990). Among these immigrant groups, the Vietnamese gangs seem to have drawn the most attention, because of their nonterritorial style, avoidance of monikers, and fluid structure (incessant changing membership). Vigil (2002) notes that these features contrast them sharply with typical Black and Mexican American gangs, while Al Valdez (2007) explains they also can be highly mobile, using their networked connections with one another to execute multicity and multistate robberies.

## Street Gang Emergence in the South

The broad South region emerged much later than other regions as an important gang territory. First, it lacked a central large city that could have provided a springboard for

gang growth. For many years, as Tells and Ortiz (2008) note, San Antonio was the only large city, but it was too isolated to extend its gang influence. Second, the early immigrant groups were dispersed across the area. Hence, Miller (1982/1992) concludes gang activity likely did not emerge in the southern states prior to the 1970s. Toward the end of that decade, only six southern cities reported gang activity— Dallas, Texas; Durham, North Carolina; Fort Worth, Texas; New Orleans, Louisiana; Miami, Florida; and San Antonio, Texas. Among these cities, only Miami and San Antonio were considered to have a moderately serious gang problem at that time. Actually, Dallas, San Antonio, St. Louis, Fort Worth, and Miami reported a greater problem with disruptive local groups than gangs in the 1970s.

However, before the end of the 20th century, Miller (1982/1992) claims the South region matched the other major regions in the prevalence of gang activity. Several southern states saw sharp increases in the number of new gang counties by 1995: Florida (23%), South Carolina (15%), Alabama (12%), and Texas (8%). From the 1970s through 1995, the South region led the nation in the number of new gang cities, a 32% increase, versus increases of 26% in the Midwest, 6% in the Northeast, and 3% in the West. In addition, gang activity emerged in multiple cities in a number of southern counties by 1995, including Dallas County, Texas (18 cities); Broward County, Florida (15 cities); Palm Beach County, Florida (11 cities); Dade County, Florida (8 cities); and St. Louis County, Missouri (6 cities).

Texas is particularly noted for its prison gangs. Vogel (2007) asserts the two best-known Mexican prison gangs are the Texas Syndicate and Mexican Mafia, and have been for decades. A third major Texas prison gang, Tango Blast, was established inside Texas's state prisons during the early 1990s to shield inmates from other prison gangs (FBI, 2009; Vogel, 2007). A unique feature of Tango Blast is its lateral organizational structure, which is divided up by cities, or hometowns, for expansive protection. The Houstone Tango Blast prison gang is the overall fastest growing gang in Houston, with a current membership of 2,759 documented members, and its membership extends into 12 of 17 nearby counties (Houston Intelligence Support Center, 2010).

Houston emerged in the past decade as a major gang center in the South. In addition to Tango Blast and Houstone Tango Blast, the Latin Disciples is another regional gang that operates in Houston, along with more than 20 local gangs that present a significant threat, according to the Houston Multi-Agency Gang Task Force (n.d.). Aside from Houstone Tango Blast, the Houston Intelligence Support Center (2010) identifies the next largest gangs in the city as the 52 Hoover Crips, 59 Bounty Hunters, Southwest Cholos, Bloods (general), Mara Salvatrucha, 59 Piru, Treetop Piru, and La Primera—each with more than 300 members.

## Another Wave of Immigrant Groups

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 ended the national quotas on foreigners in the United States. This led to a shift in immigration to the states, from European origins to Central and South America and Asia (Bankston, 1998). The next 25 years brought in a many groups of Asians (Cambodians, Filipinos, Koreans, Samoans, Thais,

Vietnamese, and others) and Latin Americans (Colombians, Cubans, Dominicans, Ecuadorians, Mexicans, Panamanians, Puerto Ricans, and others) (W. Miller, 2001)—altogether about 16.6 million people of all nationalities (Pincus & Erlich, 1999). Native American gangs also would emerge much later (Bell & Lim, 2005; Major et al., 2004). In 1975, Miller concluded the majority of gangs in America were no longer White, with various European backgrounds. By the late 1980s, the children of many American-born or Americanized parents among the new immigrants, dubbed “the new second generation” of the post-1960s immigrant groups (principally Asian and Latin Americans) had reached adolescence or young adulthood (Portes & Rumbaut, 1995; Portes & Zhou, 1993), and many of them joined gangs. Studies show that because of the successful assimilation early European migrant groups into American society, gangs virtually disappeared by the third generation (Telles & Ortiz, 2008; Waters, 1999).

This has not been the case with Mexican Americans. With each generation, familiarity with the gang lifestyle increased and thus gang involvement grew, at least through the fourth generation (Telles & Ortiz, 2008). Overall, the fact that emergence of Black gangs occurred more rapidly in those three regions than in the South leads Alba and Ne (2003) to strongly suggest that failed or prohibited assimilation of Black families into American society was a main factor contributing to gang involvement. Continuous immigration has produced more hybrid gangs. Greater prevalence of *ethnic churning*—the process of racial/ethnic transition in a neighborhood and changes in the proportions of each racial/ethnic group (Pastor, Sadd, & Hipp, 2001)—surely contributes to more multiracial gangs that have been reported recently (Esbensen et al., 2008).

### Hybrid Gangs

By the 1980s, law enforcement began reporting *hybrid gangs*. These are distinguished in particular by racial/ethnic mixing (Al Valdez, 2007; Starbuck, Howell, & Lindquist 2001). No doubt, as Telles and Ortiz (2008) note, immigrant groups that came to the United States in the past 40 years have contributed significantly to racial/ethnic mixtures seen in street gangs, with each successive generation. In a recent multicity survey, Esbensen and fellow researchers (2008) found that about one-quarter of White and Black youth said their gangs had members with other racial/ethnic origins.

Hybrid gangs were first documented by David Starbuck, then a sergeant in the Kansas City Missouri Police Department Gang Unit, in the Midwest in the early 1980s (Starbuck et al., 2001). Once he began observing hybrid gangs in Kansas City, Starbuck came to the realization that the city was “a textbook example of a locality experiencing gang migration. Located in almost the geographical center of the continental United States, Kansas City [soon] had approximately 5,000 documented gang members and affiliates and numerous Chicago- and California-style gangs in the metropolitan area” (Personal communication, May 5, 2009). Motivated to come to Kansas City for drug trafficking opportunities, they brought with them the gang culture from their cities of origin:

Now hundreds of cities and towns across the United States report the presence of gangs that bear names of old time large LA gangs such as Rollin 60s Crip, Inglewood Family Gangster Bloods etc., or Chicago origin gangs such as Latin Kings and Gangster Disciples.

However, a large percentage of these gangs have little or no real connection to the original gangs and often put their own variations into the way they operate. (Personal communication, May 5, 2009)

By the latter part of the 1990s, a *hybrid gang culture* was evident in a number of jurisdictions across the United States (Howell, Egley, & Gleason, 2002; Starbuck et al., 2001). Indeed, as Maxson (1998) reports, this is largely attributable to widespread population movement of families for social reasons; Egley, Howell, and Major (2006) find that a majority of law enforcement agencies report hybrid gangs across all population sizes, indicating a nationwide prevalence of these types of gangs. In addition, Al Valdez (2007) notes certain large-scale gangs even have a mixture of race/ethnicities such as the Los Angeles 18th Street gang. Chettleburgh (2003) concludes hybrid gangs are also common in Canada. Furthermore, Van Gemert, Lien, and Peterson (2008) document hybrid gangs in some European countries, with racial and ethnic migration along with diffusion of the gang culture, also a very important factor.

Jankowski's (1991) participant observation study of 37 gangs in New York, Boston, and Los Angeles over a 11-year period (1978–1989) found distinctive gangs of a wide variety of ethnicities including Black, Jamaican, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Mexican American, Central American, and Irish. Several of the gangs were comprised of ethnic mixtures: Blacks with Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans with Central Americans, and Irish with other Whites.

In sum, the U.S. hybrid gangs tend to have the following nontraditional features:

- They may or may not have an allegiance to a traditional gang color. In fact, much of the hybrid gang graffiti in the United States is a composite of multiple gangs with conflicting symbols. For example, Crip gang graffiti painted in red (the color the rival Blood gang uses) would be unheard of in California but have appeared elsewhere in the hybrid gang culture.
- Local gangs may adopt the symbols of large gangs in more than one city. For example, a locally based gang named after the Los Angeles Bloods may also use symbols from the Chicago People Nation, such as five-pointed stars and downward-pointed pitchforks.
- Gang members may switch their affiliation from one gang to another, and more than once, and existing gangs may change their names or suddenly merge with other gangs to form new ones.
- Although many gangs continue to be based on race/ethnicity, many of them are increasingly diverse. Esbensen and colleagues (2008) support this in their multicity U.S. study, in which 28% of White gang members and 27% of Black gang members said most or all of their gang members were not of the same race/ethnicity. A much smaller proportion of Mexican Americans (only 10%) said their gang membership was diverse in this respect.
- Southern California hybrid gangs, according to Al Valdez (2007), are characterized by mixed gender and mixed race/ethnicity. They are also less territorial and apt to not reside in the same area or even the same city. Their gang colors are nontraditional and they tend to wear a variety of tattoos.

The early American gangs were very homogenous with respect to race/ethnicity of members and gang culture itself. This changed over time, owing to three main factors.

First, continuous immigration of peoples of varying nationalities naturally instigated some mixing. Second, the mobility of gangs themselves promoted diversity of gang culture, signs, symbols, clothing, and so on. Third, diffusion of the gang culture in popular media contributed to more cosmopolitan gangs.

## Concluding Observations

Important differences in the history of gang emergence are apparent in the four major U.S. gang regions. First, the timing differed. Serious gangs first emerged on the East Coast in the 1820s, led by New York City. A half-century passed before gangs emerged in the Midwest (Chicago), while West (Los Angeles) regions saw significant gang development a full century later than New York City. The South would not experience significant gang problems for another half-century, in the 1970s. Second, the racial or ethnic composition of gangs in each region varied over time. In both New York and Chicago, the earliest gangs arose in concert with external migration of European origins—the traditional classic ethnics of the period from 1783 to 1860 period (particularly German, French, British, Scandinavian). Other groups of White ethnics soon arrived during 1880 to 1920—mainly Irish, Italians, Jews, and Poles—and the second-generation youth were most susceptible to gang involvement. The latter nationalities almost exclusively populated the early serious street gangs of New York and Chicago. By the 1960s and 1970s, the gang composition had changed dramatically in both of these cities, with a far greater proportion of Black and Latino members. A new wave of immigrants, principally Asians and Latinos, was welcomed into the United States in the mid-1990s by permissive immigration policies. The story of gang involvement among their future generations is yet to be told because gang involvement tends to increase in each successive generation of immigrants.

The West region gang history contrasts sharply with that in the Northeast and Midwest. Western gangs never had a White ethnic history. Instead, for at least half a century, virtually all of the gangs were of Mexican descent. In contrast with New York and Chicago, street gangs in the West region appear to have emerged from aggressive groups of young Mexican men, age-graded Mexican *palomilla* cohorts, and nascent gang forms. These groups developed into boy gangs that were attached to barrios in Mexico and also in Los Angeles. In this region, a youth subculture that grew among the *cholo* (marginalized) youth provided the street lifestyle that supported gang formation. Extreme poverty appears to have been less important than cultural pride that arose as a result of extreme social and cultural isolation. This national pride has long been a characteristic feature of the Chicano gangs in the United States. However, the failed or blocked assimilation of Mexican American families into American society is likely the most predominant factor contributing to gang involvement.

Each of the three major gang regions also saw a pronounced second wave of Black gang development as a result of internal migration. However, it appears that the impact of this population shift from South to Northeast, Midwest, and West on gang emergence differs among the regions. Notably, Black gangs that developed in conjunction with this migration do not appear to have gained the foothold in New York City



that they gained in the Midwest and West. Factors that might account for this difference are not readily apparent.

It also appears certain that the formation of civil rights and social movements in the 1960s had long-term impacts on street gangs in each of the regions. Several Black gang historians demonstrate that the resurgence of new emerging street groups in Chicago and Los Angeles coincided with the political, social, and civil rights movements, particularly the Black Panther Party and the U.S. Organization (both of which were racially motivated entities). But in Chicago, the ambivalence of civil rights leaders toward street gangs sent a mixed signal.

In Los Angeles, White street clubs that intimidated Black youth directly led to formation of similar Black clubs. It also is apparent that Los Angeles gangs were strengthened by the Chicano civil rights movement that drew attention to the overall plight of the long-suffering Mexican American people in barrios in multiple cities.

A common denominator of gang growth in New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles is the policy of concentrating poverty in the high-rise public housing units—a remarkable urban planning blunder. In major cities, high-rise public housing settings provided gangs with cohesion because it was a clearly identified and secure home base. But this policy was carried out far more widely in Chicago and Los Angeles than in New York City, and stimulated gang growth much more in the “Windy City” than either in New York or Los Angeles.

Another key cross-region difference is that the early Mexican American gangs in the West region were not only populated by waves of newly arriving immigrants, but also by families with gang-ready youths. In the first phase of cultural diffusion, when they arrived in the United States, street gangs were already present in the barrios into which they moved. In the second phase, gang culture in Mexico was enriched by reverse migration. Children often came to the United States, stayed for a period, and returned home, having learned a gang culture. In turn, they introduced American gang lifestyle to younger youths in Mexico and Central America, so that in the third phase, the next generation of immigrants arrived in the states fully prepared for active gang involvement. To this day, gang culture in the West region is continually reinforced with wave after wave of immigrants from Mexico and Central America—suggesting an important point—regions’ and cities’ gang dynamics clearly differ in some respects; sweeping generalizations are ill-advised.

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. Why do street gangs exist? What explanations does history suggest?
2. What role did racial/ethnic conflict, organized crime, and political corruption play in the development of street gangs? Which of these factors was more important in each region?
3. Why are immigration and internal migration important?
4. Why is the South region so different in its street gang history?
5. Why was high-rise public housing such an important contributor to street gang problems? To emergence or seriousness?

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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## Major Gangs in all Regions

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### Notes

1 A 2002 movie, *Gangs of New York*, vividly depicted these gangs, albeit with some exaggerations and distorted history in “a blood-soaked vision of American history” (Gilfoyle, 2003, p. 621).

2 *Ethnicity* merely reflects cultural differences, whereas *race* overlaps with ethnicity and “refers to a group that is defined as culturally or physically distinct and, furthermore, ranked on a social hierarchy of worth and desirability” (Telles & Ortiz, 2008, p. 23). Mexican Americans have an ambiguous status. “Although Mexican Americans are often referred to as an ethnic group and not as a race, they were referred to as the latter in earlier times and arguably continue to be referred to and treated as such in societal interactions today” (p. 24).

3 In deference to Black scholars who commonly use this term, we also do. Persons in the United States of Mexican descent who have established citizenship prefer to be called Mexican Americans (Telles & Ortiz, 2008).

4 This number may not be exact. Legend has it that student research assistants played a joke on Professor Thrasher in representing 1,313 as the total number of gangs in the study (Short, 2006). This number was the address of a nearby brothel.