Criminologists of the gang struggle with what may be the most frustrating of all challenges in crime research. When they look to standard sources for data on crime and criminals, what they find is disappointing. The police, who generate data on a variety of crimes as a by-product of their working routines, do not help much in this case. They use legislative categories that define crimes when making arrests and processing complaints, but, with some idiosyncratic exceptions, no statutes outlaw street gangs. With regard to gang crimes, the police fail to perform their usual role as unwitting assistants to social researchers.

What police agencies do record about gangs and their crimes is multiply problematic when treated as data for social research. Many develop departmental ways of keeping counts of gangs and gang members but not all do. Those that do use inconsistent criteria (Maxson and Klein 1996). Those that use the same criteria apply them to diverse ethnic groups in which gangs have radically different meanings (compare Chin 1996 with Horowitz 1983). Within any given jurisdiction, police descriptions may vary radically over time for institutional reasons independent of changes in street realities (Katz in press).

Victim reports, another standard source of data on crime, are not likely to be systematically helpful for tracing gang activity. Reports made by victims who themselves are outside of gang life are dubious sources for attributing assailants’ gang identities. With respect to insiders’ reports, we have reason to suspect that such data will be unreliable if not downright delusional. Self-reports have been obtained neither through censuses nor random population surveys but through questionnaires administered primarily to adolescent school populations. If to any significant extent gang life means resisting or operating outside of educational obligations, self-reports on gang membership are of questionable value.

In part because of problems in acquiring data, criminologists have not settled on a definition of gangs nor on standards for grounding analyses in data. A currently hot debate is over whether gangs have become instrumental and entrepreneurial, as opposed to the older view of gangs as expressive and turf-defending. The controversy may be an artifact of different samples of what are very diverse phenomena. Those who see expressive street gangs and those who see entrepreneurial drug gangs may not be looking at the same thing. Gang researchers either follow idiosyncratic procedures when describing the evidentiary bases for their analysis or, as a simpler solution, present little or no data (see, e.g., Jankowski 1991).

At the individual level, being in a gang is hardly a clear-cut fact. Few gangs have formal payrolls, and even when they produce something like membership and accounting books, they do not read like standard ledgers (see, e.g., Venkatesh and Levitt 2000). The problem is not just that the researcher is an outsider. Gang membership is unclear to insiders as well. Fleisher studied the “Fremont Hustlers” of Kansas City: "‘Member’, ‘membership,’ ‘join,’ and ‘gang’ are static notions which fit neither the natural flow of Fremont social life nor the perceptions of Fremont kids” (1998: 39).

To exaggerate the point, one might say that gangs only exist to the extent that their existence is problematic. Gang life is a matter of struggling over issues of inclusion and exclusion, and about giving meaning to the obligations of membership. Everyday gang life is a matter of imaginatively incorporating past events within a gang’s history, both by keeping alive the sense of continuous collective identity and by interpreting the actions of individuals as gang actions. The personal meaning of being in a gang is defined in situationally emergent actions that recognize and
elaborate gang affiliation as penetrating, shaping and disrupting school, work, intimate and inter-generational family relationships.

We know that proving whether one is in the gang or not is often a motivating factor in such characteristic forms of gang violence as drive-by shootings (Sanders 1994). Much of the everyday reality of gang life consists of processes in street interaction of claiming gang membership and responding to coded demands to identify where one is “from” (Garot 2002). Leaving the gang is alternately reported by long-term observers of gangs as common, unproblematic and the subject of myth (Klein 1995), and by self-defined gang members as “impossible” (Decker and Winkle 1996). Some of the best gang studies have found that myth making is one of the central activities of males involved in gangs (Horowitz 1983; cf. Decker et al. 2001: 78-9). In many settings, gang life consists of recounting history-making events, celebrating resonant symbols, and posturing defiance against morally hostile forces. Fervent rituals professing commitments may be necessary because of the lack of any independent, objective reality of the gang. That the same paradox haunts and inspires religion indicates the need for some imaginative methodological thinking when studying gangs.

If measurements of gang life are untrustworthy when taken from a distance, they are vulnerable to powerful reactivity when they are attempted close up. Indeed, one of the most enduring findings in the history of gang research is that social interventions, of which close-up social research is a significant form, promote gang cohesion (Klein 1971). By conferring significance specifically on “gang” activity, social research activity inadvertently promotes the youth interaction that is then described as evidence of gang existence. When the police report that gangs are out there, one should not be too sure they are. And when researchers searching for gangs find that gangs cooperate in making an appearance, there is no less cause for suspicion.

Despite the challenges of studying gangs, American criminology has now been engaged in the effort for 75 years and shows no sign of retiring. The response to the weaknesses of data has been shrewd investigative resolution: the special research challenges in studying gangs are grounds for funding ever-new inquiries. But while admitting weakness in the literature makes perfect sense in grant applications, there is one central problem that has not been acknowledged: we have no good basis for thinking that gangs cause crime.

Without the presumptive belief that gangs cause crime, gang research, at least the specialized field of gang criminology as it has developed, makes little sense. The idea that gangs cause crime at first seems obvious. After all, just about every time we see them, we see gangs because they have been doing crime. But on examination the causal proposition becomes highly suspect.

Consider the implications of the message, told both by police sources and by well-seasoned gang researchers who have devoted careful effort to the question, that gangs have been proliferating in number and growing rapidly in membership in the US since the early 1980s. In 1983, local police departments in the U.S. reported about 2200 gangs; in 1997, over 30,000 (Curry and Decker 2003: 28). This pattern helped make sense of the rapidly rising rates of US youth violence rates in the 1980s. But the image of geometrically increasing gang life does not jibe with the sharp declines in criminal violence that came in the 1990s (Blumstein and Wallman 2000). Moreover, the dramatic rises and falls in urban crime rates over the last 20 years have been essentially the same in cities with and without celebrated gang problems (Katz in press).

Perhaps gangs recently have become more prudent in their use of force, more utilitarian, less wild. Perhaps, if we let theoretical imagination run free, we can believe that the increase in gang membership has been perfectly mated with a transformation of gang violence toward greater control, resulting in similar violence rates for gang and non-gang cities. But if so, then gangs can impact crime rates either by increasing or decreasing criminal violence, depending on something important other than the gang itself.

The contingencies for positive or negative effects should be at the forefront of gang research. Whether there is any systematic relationship between gang life and rates of criminal violence should be a central issue in the field. But these questions are not resolved; they are barely even raised.
We suggest that the best way to understand the criminology of the gang is by appreciating that the field is structured on a quiet agreement not to press the causal question. Not focusing on that question is essential for sustaining the myth of gangs as a transcendent evil, a force responsible for social harm independent of the responsibilities of individual members. In this essay we do not deny that there are gangs out there, and that individuals acting in their names have long been responsible for significant amounts of criminal violence. What we mean to highlight is that criminology has systematically avoided taking seriously the challenge of showing that “the gang” makes an independent, positive contribution to the level of criminal violence in communities or legal jurisdictions. Neither popular culture nor the police, neither college students in criminology classes nor funding sources in private and public agencies, worry much about the causal issue. And neither have gang criminologists, at least not until recently, and then in a way that suggests a desire to be done with a pesky issue.

The silent agreement among gang criminologists to downplay the causal question has made possible three fundamental defects in the research agenda on gangs. First, the field has long lost the healthy comparative perspective in which it was born. Frederick Thrasher began gang research with a classic scientific curiosity to describe all the instances of the phenomena he could find, and he found 1313 (Thrasher 1927). His naturalist ambitions led to a comparative appreciation of gangs among various forms of youthful peer associations. Today the study of gangs proceeds largely outside the study of youth culture.

In a second perversion of the field, criminologists have seen through the gang, using the gang as a window onto phenomena which are treated as far more important than documenting the everyday realities of gang members on their own turf and in their own terms. Like the politicians and journalists who shape popular culture, gang criminologists have been preoccupied with the gang as metonym, icon or index. The central debate is over which summary image to invoke when thinking about gangs and which background realities to bring to mind when the gang image is invoked.

The third defect in the corpus of gang research is the failure to develop the causal issues fully. At least three causal questions about the relationship of gangs and crime should be investigated. Do individuals become more criminal by virtue of joining or being in gangs? Do gangs increase the level of criminal violence in society? Taking gangs as collective phenomena, what accounts for their emergence, decline, spread, and evolution toward greater or lesser violence?

Only the first of these three questions has been asked with a modicum of intensity, and even then the answer remains unclear. But it is the second question that is the most revealing, for without the assumption that rates of criminal violence would be lower were there no gangs, the field never would have developed; or at least it would not have developed along its now-familiar lines. If everyone assumed that gangs have no systematic effect on the level of criminal violence, research funding would dry up and what remains of the gang literature would be read very differently, to the extent that it would be read at all.

1. The lost naturalistic and comparative perspective

The history of gang research can be divided into three periods. Thrasher’s *The Gang*, published in 1927 and remembered for his “Chicago School” explanation, was a promising start to the first period. Thrasher found that gangs arose in areas that were “interstitial” in the social ecology of the city, areas located between stable residential zones, pressed by encroaching business development, marked by rapid population change, and experiencing severe social disorganization.

But Thrasher’s own work was more dedicated to documenting gangs than in arguing that social ecology explained gangs. Explaining why gangs exist was a relatively minor aspect of the effort to describe a great variety of groups. The social ecology perspective was not developed in his work but in other research projects, which he merely cited as a kind of ideational boilerplate.

Subsequent researchers criticized Thrasher’s explanation as an instance of an increasingly discredited view of urban poverty as “social disorganization.” The critique of the social ecology framework helped advance the sociological study of the city by encouraging a search for internal order in poverty, or “slum,” areas (Suttles 1968). In the wake
of broadscale disenchantment with social ecological theory, Thrasher’s rich comparative description of forms of childhood social organization was ignored. Gang criminologists ridiculed the “play groups” that he abundantly described. Such innocent associations were absurdly innocuous in comparison with the seriously destructive gangs they studied.

When the naturalist impulse is killed, the opportunity to develop naturally occurring comparisons is an innocent victim. What sociology has remembered about the Chicago School has helped it forget that in its first incarnation, the field was self-consciously and vigorously tied to the discovery and descriptive thrusts of natural science inquiry. Darwin loomed larger than Marx, Weber or Durkheim in early sociology textbooks. Quite apart from the appeal of evolutionary theory, Darwin’s work represented meticulous description, the ideal of bringing nature back to the university laboratory in as much detail and with as much respect for ecological interaction as is possible (see Park and Burgess 1924). Today, virtually no student of the gang considers situating gangs among the various social forms in which adolescents associate with each other in a city.

With such comparative data in hand, criminologists might hesitate before explaining gang membership as motivated by low self-regard, a need for status, uncertainty about one’s identity, the need for a substitute “family” outside a broken biological family, etc. By comparing what the gang offers with what boys and young men can find in other forms of association, we might specify the attractions of gang life. Such data could be either synchronic/cross-sectional or diachronic/biographical. Gang members do not stay for life; they do not always leave on a stretcher or for prison terms. The very issue of what makes gangs seductive to its members has been obscured by the neglect of alternative associations outside the gang. We have no empirical basis for believing that gangs are the only way that adolescents can satisfy personal needs, make up for family failings, protest hierarchical domination, seek mobility, etc.

The second stage in gang criminology emerged after World War II with the proliferation of a national research community. In Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and Boston, sociologists/criminologists developed portraits of gang life through their involvement in city-specific intervention programs. Primarily funded through private philanthropy and local government, these programs featured “detached workers” who variously sought to affect gang cohesion, develop community organizational resources independent of gangs, and link gang members, or would-be gang members, to community and employment opportunities. The researcher/authors typically operated between university research departments and the bureaucracies of intervention programs.

The studies emerging from the wave of intervention efforts of the 1950s and 1960s made gang criminology a notable field, even though the intervention programs were not primarily research projects. Several of the most celebrated studies were a mix of theoretical arguments geared to structuring future interventions and the product of ad hoc efforts to collect data through the access to gang life developed by previous, independent programs. Perhaps the most highly regarded publication of the period, Cloward and Ohlin’s Delinquency and Opportunity (1960), was almost completely devoid of data (see also the thin data in Albert Cohen’s Delinquent Boys, 1955).

In some program efforts, the involvement of social scientists was more a matter of field supervision than writing up research findings. An example is Hans Mattick’s involvement in the programs of the Chicago Youth Development Project (as discussed in Klein 1995). Others were the products of formal research designs (Short and Strodtbeck 1965). Some were intensive efforts to develop unprecedented measures of such matters as gang culture, gang cohesion, and careers in gang life and crime (Miller 1958; Miller et al. 1961; Klein 1971).

Overall, there appeared to be an inverse relationship between the richness of data in a publication and the recognition that the work received outside of the small corps of gang researchers, at least at the extremes (this pattern did not go without notice: Bordua 1961). Like Cloward and Ohlin’s award winning, book-length adaptation of the Mertonian theory of deviance to gang formation, Matza’s Delinquency and Drift (1964) and Sykes and Matza’s “Techniques of Neutralization” (1957), while advanced through writings devoid of data, nevertheless became, respectively, a prize-winning book and one of the most widely cited journal articles in American sociology.
Thrasher’s book had portrayed a diversity of youthful social life as a grounding for a single theoretical perspective. In neat contrast, one writer after another in the 1950s and 1960s stimulated an elaborate theoretical debate by presenting a summary view of gang life based on the model of a given program or city’s experience. In the 1960s, national political life underwrote the appreciation of summary images of gang kids and gang life. During the Kennedy presidential administration, and as the precursor to the War on Poverty program that emerged in the subsequent presidency of Lyndon Johnson, social intervention programs in which Cloward and Ohlin had been active were taken as models for planning remedial national social policy (Moynihan 1969). In the face of such political clout, the institutions shaping academic prestige in social science did not insist on the tedious business of evidentiary grounding.

When American college populations expanded rapidly in the 1960s, the simplifying narrative structure of the monographs of this period made several of the books ideal teaching tools. Insofar as causal issues were addressed, they took the form of theorizing on the motivations for joining gangs and for the rise of gangs in inner city areas. That gangs increased crime was taken for granted. The premise of most intervention programs was that gangs were bad for their members and their communities; neither the programs nor the researches based on them were structured to gather evidence on the issue.

In a rare instance, one causal issue of overriding practical significance was clearly specified: the effects of intervention programs on the delinquent careers of gang members. While many intervention programs had not planned an evaluation phase, this issue was of undisputed relevance to all. And when evidence was organized around the issue, the results undermined general presumptions. After years of personal involvement in social research/social work with gang kids in Los Angeles, Malcolm Klein (1971) concluded that ameliorative social program interventions aimed at fighting gangs often unexpectedly increased gang cohesion, a result that had the expected further consequence of increasing the criminal activity of gang members. Later, Klein (1995) saw the same effects from programs of police repression.

A third stage of gang research has developed over the last thirty years, based on a new mix of philanthropic, university, and federal government funding and conducted by researchers more firmly housed in university departments. This large wave of studies has been produced through intensive participant observation with gang members, through building interview data by snowballing to gang members, or, in an overlap with delinquency research methods, by surveying youth populations, primarily through their representation in schools. Gang research has thus remained largely separate from the quantitative, social survey and police data-set methodologies that came to dominate criminology in the 1960s.

Gang research has also remained separate from sociological studies of youth social life and culture outside of gangs. Gang studies refer primarily to other gang studies but not to studies of young male, or female, social life, violence or even criminality outside of gangs. In the broader literature, however, one can find evidence of attractions to violent versions of masculinity independent of gangs and crime (Wacquant 2000), peer groups that collectively engage in crime without the markings of street gang culture (West 1978; Sullivan 1989), and networks among youths who disproportionately and cooperatively commit crimes without generating gang identities (Sarnecki 2001). Further undermining causal inquiry, writers on street gangs often set aside studies of skinheads, soccer hooligans, and drug gangs as not comparable (e.g. Klein 1995). Studies of adolescent life cycle processes, social life in schools, and youth culture in general are almost completely ignored. Studies of inner city, low-income, ethnic minority social life that do not appear as “gang” studies (Anderson 1978; Liebow 1967) are left to other scholars to explore, even when they describe the same social milieu in which gangs are prominent.

Throughout the history of gang research, the lack of a comparative perspective has been at the root of a persistent embarrassment: the failure to define what a “gang” is. The problem has long been openly recognized, subjected to repeated agonizing, and used as a justification for national tours such as Walter Miller’s (1975) effort to collect a broad-based sample of instances that might inform an authoritative definition. Definitions that do not include dimensions of criminality are unattractive because they would capture as “gangs” social groups that are not contributing to crime rates, and because the background characteristics of non-criminal and criminal gangs would be
confounded. But definitions that do include criminality in the group definition set up analyses for tautology when investigating the impact of gangs on crime rates: criminal youth groups by definition contribute to crime.

Developments in youth culture may finally point the way to resolving the definitional dilemma. Through “gangsta,” “hip hop,” and related forms of popular culture, street gang symbolism has spread rapidly across the U.S. in the last 15 years; “gangs” have emerged in small and large communities where their presence was unknown or denied. “L.A.” gang styles have emerged in communities coast-to-coast, and after initial suggestions that “Bloods” and “Crips” from Los Angeles were developing branches elsewhere, it has become apparent that youths across the nation were responding to mass media images of performances that exploited Los Angeles gang styles (often by performers whose bases were in the east and midwest).

By necessity now, researchers who would distinguish the backgrounds of violent offenders, stages in the process of forming violent gangs, and the discrete contributions of gangs to crime rates, must distinguish among various youth associations and culture movements. In a promising new twist, Malcolm Klein has conceptualized “tipping points” at which youths associated under gang-related symbols, like “break dancers” and “taggers” (graffiti writers) begin to see themselves as in a group that requires violence. A similar sensitivity to group transformation is evident in studies of street gangs that exploit public housing communities and drug markets (Venkatesh 1997).

What a gang is, who is in it, and what being in a gang means are not in the first instance problems for researchers; they are problems for young people who challenge each other to declare membership, who test each other’s loyalty and commitment, and who are far more widely fascinated with clothing themselves in gang symbolism than in arming themselves for violence. Street gangs are inherently amorphous phenomena, and when they are not, when membership in a gang puts one on a payroll and is a matter for disciplined structuring over extended periods of time, it is likely that the group has become a drug marketing organization. An appreciation of the inherent, naturally occurring ambiguity of street gang identity should lead to a research agenda that exploits ambiguity as a central topic for comparative research rather trying to resolve it by definitional fiat (on measurement by fiat, see Cicourel 1964).

As a practical matter, the field still resists embracing the ambiguities of gang phenomena as a basis for shaping a broad research agenda. Journalists have taken a handful of inner city youth, or the young people on particular inner city blocks, and written about the variety of associations and involvements in legitimate and illegitimate activities (Butterfield 1995). But gang researchers get funded to study gangs, and even the most data rich and thoughtful investigations of the relationship of gang members to their families and communities start with samples biased toward individuals identified as criminally involved (Decker and Winkle 1996). As we explain in detail later, indications that gang members commit acts of violence at rates much higher than their peers do not speak with great authority about the effects of gangs on crime rates. And studies that develop evidence on the situational contingencies that move youth groups from flaunting gang symbolism into violent action (Sanders 1994; Fagan and Wilkinson 1998; Fagan 2000; Wilkinson 1998) are not incorporated into the theoretical discussion about the nature of the gang.

A vast array of alternative causal understandings of the significance of gangs in America has been essentially untouched by sustained research. Here are a few:

- gang are so widespread, crime cannot be attributed to the gang itself but must lie in the contingencies that turn gangs violent;
- gangs are where violent offenders belong, such that where gangs exist, violent offenders disproportionately will want to be in them;
- by concentrating violence in expressive symbolism, gangs contribute to social control by drawing the attentions of law enforcement and enabling community youth and families to understand who they need to avoid; 3
- by intensifying conflicts among violent youths, gangs reduce the level of criminal violence in the long run; 4
- many social areas lacking gangs somehow produce crime rates from their youth population equivalent to those in ‘gang-infested’ areas, indicating that the relationship of gangs and violence, where it exists, is spurious;
- the rise of gang violence is a response of the “demoralized poor” (see the discussion below) in a transitory historical period that heralds a coming decline in a population’s social pathologies.
After 75 years of gang research in the U.S., the proposition that gangs raise rates of criminal violence beyond what would obtain in their absence remains deeply problematic because of the narrowed research agenda in the field. Other critical causal issues have also been systematically obscured. Had Thrasher's example been honored, the conditions for the formation of gangs could have become a vigorous area of study. As it stands, gang criminologists explain gang formation with little more than a flourish of the explanatory wand in the direction of whichever social conditions happen to be in the background of their particular gang examples. If the gang is in the “rustbelt,” then it must be “deindustrialization,” the decline of social spending to rebuild older cities, and the flight of middle-class blacks from the inner city that is responsible (Hagedorn 1988). If the gangs are Mexican-American and located in suburban and ex-urban areas as much as in the inner cities of the booming sunbelt, then it must be that “multiple marginalities” explain the flourishing of gangs (Vigil 1988).

Significant progress in explaining gang formation awaits a research agenda that would describe the myriad social formations within which gangs emerge. There are repeated indications in the gang literature that other social relations, networks, or latent ties are mobilized in the gang formation process: family connections, institutional ties to schools and perhaps jails, neighborhood boundaries defined by the physical structure of highways and housing projects. These are never sufficient conditions, and there are indications that historically critical events are additional necessary conditions. As is often noted, one-gang cities are rare. The explanation of gang formation will require the same multi-case, multi-stage processual explanation that has been developing in the field of social movements.

What has stood in the way of developing the database for such theory development is not the lack of a model of inquiry, nor the lack of multiple social relations in the environments of youth lives. The major blockage has been the mesmerizing power of waving causal imagery at background conditions. It is time to disenchant that explanatory wand.

2. The gang as window

After Thrasher, gang researchers have had little patience for describing the people they study. Some spend years becoming familiar with gang kids up close, only to find them “boring” as they pass hour after hour “hanging out,” eating, and chatting; apparently too boring to describe (Klein 1971). Many researchers who have interviewed gang members do not bother to quote them, or if they do, they present ex-gang members who talk surprisingly like the social theorists conducting the study (Moore 1991). It is common for gang researchers to encourage gang members to summarize their lives, a shallow if convenient research strategy that dispenses with the need to describe what gang members do and say in their own milieu, outside of interview situations, when they are pressed to respond to immediate exigencies in their social worlds. Others devise multiple measures of gang members and their actions, but the resulting picture is of indicators of dimensions, not of the gang as a cultural form sustained by its members (Short and Strodtbeck 1965). Some of the most notable recent gang studies rely on members’ memories. When such memories purport to recall the relatively recent formation of specific, originally small gangs (Hagedorn 1988), they are much more trustworthy than when they are offered as bird’s eye snapshots of the experiences of thousands of people who have lived in and around gangs during a 30-year period (Venkatesh 2000).

There are exceptions to the rule against description, among them:

- a study of gang violence as it is described in police records, supplemented by fieldnotes from ride-alongs and interviews, all organized by the situated occasions of violent events (drive-bys, gangbangs, robberies, etc.)(Sanders 1994);

- an ethnographic sketch of Chicago’s “Vice Lords” in the 1960s, which remains one of the few studies that conveys the local symbolic world that sustains gang members’ involvement (Keiser 1967);

- Decker and Winkle’s (1996) report of extensive, first-person, verbatim descriptions of gang life produced by 101 members of 29 St. Louis gangs who were contacted in high-crime neighborhoods and screened with the question “Are you claiming?”.

There are also numerous gang studies that, despite their overriding concerns with explanatory language and/or standardized forms of measurement, illustrate their arguments with rich field data. Short and Strodtbeck’s (1965) study is perhaps the most industrious, collectively conducted, elaborately organized effort to understand gang life; it
reads as a wrenching, remarkably honest struggle to make inapposite theory and inelastic data procedures fit with the close-up accounts of gang life created by participant-observing “detached workers”. A more typical indicator of the stagnated methodological thinking in the field is Hagedorn’s *People and Folks* (1988). Hagedorn packages invaluable gang histories as told by “top dogs” from 19 Milwaukee gangs in a boilerplate theoretical framing about the gang-institutionalizing effects of “deindustrialization.” As noted by Walter Miller (1989), Hagedorn has no comparative data about gang life before and during the supposed sea change of “deindustrialization,” and such limited data as he does produce on the issue, most notably a list of unemployment levels in various cities, run counter to his arguments by showing relatively low unemployment rates for cities with large gang populations like Boston and Los Angeles.

It appears that no-one has attempted to describe a “day-in-the-life,” or what gang members do with others continuously and in detail, over any significant stretch of time. (But see Fleisher’s 1998 ethnography of Kansas City adolescent social circles). The work of painstakingly reconstructing lived experience is routinely by-passed in favor of summary recollections elicited in an interview. It is a revealing paradox that gang life is at once a symbolic image sufficiently powerful to justify study after study, and at the same time, never worth actually describing. How could this be?

It has been so obvious that American gangs are terribly important to understand that it has been hard to justify spending the time describing individual members in their routine activities. The problems that the gangs present are of such gravity that to take the time to describe what they do, person by person, day by day, has apparently seemed a foolish diversion from the need to comprehend the phenomenon as a whole, understand what to do about it, and institute reforms. Instead of building up a picture of gang life block-by-behaviorally-situated-block, gang researchers become acquainted with one or a few groups, summarize what they have found, and conclude by indicating how to change society to reduce the gang problem. Sometimes the researcher’s involvement extends over many years and entails intense personal challenges in relations with gang members, only to end in the urgent recommendation that what is needed is not, ironically, more personal involvement by well-meaning gang workers but structural change: ending segregation, reducing social inequality, offering decent paying jobs to the unemployed, providing childcare services for working mothers, and perhaps, for good measure, prosecuting white-collar crime in order to reduce grounds for cynicism.

After Thrasher, the criminologists’ gang became a window, something to be framed and seen through. As windows, gangs work two ways for criminologists. From one side, the criminologist sees through gangs to the social conditions that produce them. From the other side, the criminologist looks at the false stereotypes that society has produced about gangs. Throughout, the gang itself is transparent. But windows can be dangerous tools, hiding what is on the other side by trapping the viewer in an unwitting fascination with nothing more than a reflection of the gazing perspective.

Treated as transparent openings onto pathological social conditions, the American gang has been portrayed --one might justifiably say, exploited --by one prevailing theoretical perspective after another. Beginning in the 1950s, and continuing to date, wave after wave of newly outfitted theoretical perspective has seized on the gang as a proving ground for:

- social class theory, which, in one form, analyzes gangs as an outgrowth of working class culture (Miller 1958);
- Freudian-styled theories that construct gang culture as a reaction formation against the closed doors of middle class society (Cohen 1955);
- psychiatric social work, which portrays gang kids as needing ties to multiple remedial resources (Bloch and Niederhoffer 1958);
- Merton’s deviance theory which, combining a sense of social class injustice and a critique of popular culture from above, frames gangs as responses to the contradiction between materialistic values and arbitrarily limited opportunities (Cloward and Ohlin 1960);
• a perspective reflecting the American emphasis on legality in the 1960s, which imagines delinquents becoming committed to criminal ways as they see the irrationally different treatments that the criminal justice system imposes on them and their equally guilty friends (Matza 1964);

• a psychological theory holding that pathologically violent individuals are at the core of the gang problem (Yablonsky 1966);

• a post-civil rights movement perspective, which sees a combination of opening mobility doors for minorities and the loss of manufacturing jobs in the inner city as having created a new underclass (Wilson 1987);

• and most recently, a Merton-like characterization of gang members as perverse American mobility hustlers who know the sad score but don’t lie down. Gang members are characterized as defiant individualists who, like the sharpest of America’s legitimate hustlers, know the odds and respond as cold-eyed entrepreneurs, seizing opportunities where they lay, developing ties with local politicians for protection, and serving the local community’s needs by offering jobs and redistributing wealth (Jankowski 1991).

The gang has been a rich resource for telling stories formatted as social theory. Yet gangs themselves never provide the origin of the theory. The gangs are the provinces, onto which theories developed at the theoretical center are imposed.

Although Thrasher’s original finding that gangs originate in play groups has been confirmed repeatedly, and is even emphasized in some theory-heavy works (e.g., Hagedorn’s), the idea that there might be something distinctively different in the world of the gang, something that might attract members to it independent of more widespread motivational frameworks, is neglected. Again and again, the gang is treated as a type of phenomenon that demonstrates the reach of theories first introduced in domains without reference to gangs, domains such as clinical psychotherapy, Merton’s general analysis of American deviance, small-group analysis, and political-economic theory based on ideology or on quantitative studies of race, socioeconomic status, and population movements. One after another fashionable idea in academic centers is celebrated through its elaboration of gang topics, with little if any representation of native realities. If gang members think they have found a special source of motivation in their collective relations, a first cause for their commitments, an inspiration for action that exists for them but not for others of their background, it must be because they are confused.

This multi-theory interpretive feast has been made possible by a tacitly shared agreement to treat gangs as windows for seeing the troublesome structural conditions in their backgrounds. And once one has viewed the background realities through gang panes, it is a simple matter to walk to the other side and look back at the distorted stereotypes with which others have depicted gangs. Every theoretical narration of gang problems is part of a conflict within the theorizing class. Every new gang theory first sees through gangs to the root conditions that produce them, then turns around and criticizes other interpreters for projecting their own false images onto the gang screen. If gang members have needs for repairing multiple broken ties, then those who would focus on community organizing alone neglect them. If gangs are produced as part of an underclass which in turn is the upshot of historical forces that individuals cannot resist, then to focus on mending social ties is to further confound the matter. And if gang members are defiant individualists, than those who see them as defeated by their racial and class oppression convey insults that border on racism.

The criminologist’s habit of seeing through gangs in the desire to explain them has had two significant unfortunate results. The first is staining the group as a whole with an image of deviance. It is a tricky business to link the minority poor with crime in order to plead for remedial intervention or, more radically, social justice. The criminologists’ gang has been a dominant image in what outsiders imagine about the population that gangs are taken to represent. This is especially true of the Mexican-American population in the southwest. For over 60 years, since the mass prosecution of alleged gang members in the “Sleepy Lagoon” murder case (Moore 1988; Verge 1993), the gang has been a dominant image of a population growing toward majority status in the Los Angeles area. The size and internal diversity of the population should make any ethnic icon absurd. For decades grossly under-represented
in the area’s political life, living in large numbers in the shadows due to illegal residency status, compared to African-Americans, dispersed in residence around the region and relatively invisible when achieving middle-class status, the Mexican-origin population in southern California has long been grossly over-represented by gang imagery in local popular culture (Katz in press).

Not all communities are equally represented in the public mind by the gangs they produce. If the Mexican-American population is at one extreme, the Chinese-American population is at the other. Despite well-documented, sensational violence, Chinatown gangs, the image of the Chinese in the U.S. is barely scratched. Consider the contrast in the Los Angeles area. Any impressions of youth chaos associated with immigrant-filled Chinatowns are overshadowed by a series of factors:

- young Chinese men are visible in restaurant service staffs, working under the discipline of Chinese families. Compare the shallower impression of ethnic social structure conveyed by “Mexican restaurant” workers. Young Mexican and Central American service personnel work in massive numbers in chain-run, national and multinational, white managed, corporate owned “mexican” restaurants;

- offsetting the image of dense, chaotic, impoverished Chinatown populations is the simultaneous rise of affluent Chinese suburbs, such as Monterey Park east of Los Angeles. Compare the diffusion of the Mexican-origin population in low income population pockets throughout the region and the residential integration and geographic invisibility of high income Mexican-Americans;

- overriding the image of the poor Chinese immigrant is the over-representation of Chinese students on university campuses and in scientific circles. Compare the under-representation of the Mexican-origin population in higher education.

The differential power of gang images in shaping the general public understanding of ethnic and regional populations points to a second destructive result of using the gang as a window onto general background conditions: the lost opportunity to develop a comparative understanding of how gangs differentially relate to the communities from which they emerge (for a partial exception, see Spergel 1964). Put another way, the failure of gang criminology to develop a comparative analysis of gang/community relations in different times and places is evidence of the strength of the tendency to look through gangs to background conditions conceived in the terms of general social theory. Reading the major works in gang literature of the 1950s and 1960s, one learns virtually nothing about the fifties and sixties, little more about the particular conditions in the cities in which the studies were made.

The third wave of gang research offers little more on local community background realities. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) theorized that local area differences would produce different kinds of gangs, but their analysis, although rooted in New York experiences, was both abstracted from geo-political place and narrowly focused on opportunities for illicit gain. Ethnic culture and the history of ethnic community were essentially ignored. When a large-scale research project, working with service and police agencies with intimate knowledge of delinquency areas, attempted to test delinquent opportunity theory in Chicago, the researchers failed to locate cases that would fit the three hypothesized types of gangs, which were [a] criminal (innovative, rationally organized pursuit of criminal profits), [b] retreatist (drug using, self-absorbed) or [c] conflict (fighting). They noted:

[This] failure...is a ‘finding’ of some importance, for it casts doubt on the generality of these phenomena. ... We were led in the end to seek groups not primarily oriented around fighting, but with extensive involvement in the pursuit of ‘kicks’ or various forms of theft. (Short and Strodtbeck 1965: 13)

In the current phase of gang research, when background conditions are described, they are in highly generalized demographic terms and refer only very broadly to socio-economic trends. Chin’s (1996) study of Chinatown gangs is an exception that indicates the value of the research opportunities that have been lost. Chin provides a history of the rise of gangs and gang violence in New York’s Chinatown since the 1960s. Groups that began as martial arts clubs became street gangs and then tools of tongs that organize and exploit commercial activity in the immigrant-receiving area. Here, gangs are understood in the web of social ecological relationships that tie together various forms of social organization in local Chinese society, including family structure, affiliation to groups based on
originating districts in China, commercial needs, and the specialized law enforcement attentions of a variety of local policing and prosecution offices.

That Chin could portray gang context and activities with unusual richness was not due to unusual ease of access. Notoriously hard to penetrate, and especially hostile to Americanized Chinese, underworld Chinatown offers a challenge to gang researchers that is equal or greater than those faced by researchers focused on other ethnic populations. While Chin ends with recommended reforms of immigration policy, community and business organization, and a plea for removing the fraudulent “patriotic” image that has protected tongs from closer scrutiny, the argument is little more than a convenient way to end the book: he does not treat the Chinatown gang as a transparent medium to make those more general, policy-oriented arguments.

The example of Chinatown gangs, and Asian-American gangs more generally, is a sign that gang criminology will have to change to reflect the exploding ethnic diversity of the U.S. Most of the gang literature of the last 50 years has been based on mid-western and east coast populations, mostly African-American and, to a lesser extent, Puerto Rican and Mexican-American. An understanding of black and Mexican-origin youth gangs should have long ago inspired a study of their respective relationships to segments of pop youth culture. The rise of gangs from different Asian-origin populations, and immigrant gangs from different cultures of the ex-Soviet Union, may make it harder to avoid a comparative analysis of ethnic history, culture and social structure (Song et al. 1992).

In its narrative qualities, gang research is a unique field in criminology. In crime studies, the typical research strategy is to link variation in criminal conduct with variation in background characteristics of individuals, social settings or historical periods. On the explanatory side, the units of analysis are individuals, areas, or epochs; on the side of the explanandum, individual actions or population rates. The central message is about responsible social structure and history. The image of the individual criminal - the kind of person the criminal is, his/her motives, outlooks, character - is only indirectly implied. Not so when the topic is the gang, for which metonymic resonances leap to prominence. The central argument in the gang literature is over iconography. After Thrasher, criminologists have essentially been engaged in a graffiti war, competing to tag the gang and the gang member.

As a collective noun, the “gang” appears to sum up something important about what membership means to members. The risks that members run by affiliating with the group’s symbolic identity imply that something revealing must be at hand. Young men at times are willing to reduce all the potential of their lives, all the meanings that their identities have with all the others in their life, to express in a brief moment the honor of the gang and something they presume essential about themselves.

In its typical form, as a study of a given gang or of gangs in a given city or region, the argument is almost always about a summary image. Even if more than one type of gang is recognized in the study, typically there are only two or three types. It is taken for granted that for members, gangs summarize something important about their lives; the point of gang research is to provide a summary about that summary.

At a first level of metonymy, the individual’s gang membership characterizes the individual. At a second level, the individual’s portrait characterizes the gang. At a third level of metonymy, the gang stands for all gangs. At a fourth level, studying gangs is appealing as a summary way of understanding youth criminality in general. And, at a fifth level, the gang is a trope for the low-income, young, inner city, minority male. Gang members seem aware of the heavy baggage they carry with their insubstantial symbols; they presume to conjure up some kind of profound generalization with their hand gestures. Academics agree; an irony that should give pause. The weightiness that a slim gang monograph can have in academic discourse indicates that it is not only the author/researcher who is ready to generalize liberally from his or her case study. The metonymic resonances of gang research are built upon conventions used by a community of readers.

The deepest concern brought to the reading of gang criminology is the image of the low-income, minority male. Images matter because it is not an array of statistical correlations but summarizing images, or less politely, stereotypes, that go into the voting booth and haunt the shadows of policy making across all levels and branches of governmental power. This is why it matters whether we see the gang as psychopathologically violent men,
expressive youngsters epitomizing lower class culture, adolescents dependent on the respect of peers, ghetto youth hopelessly lost in self-destructive hedonism, unemployed labor frustrated with the boredom imposed by deindustrialization, entrepreneurs spreading L.A. gang organization across the country to control valuable drug markets, representatives of populations oppressed by racism and creating otherwise absent “social capital” to forge links to mobility routes, or as boys redefining their maintenance of childish ways with violent dispositions until they mature out of the extended youth that American affluence now makes possible for an “underclass” that suits up for battle in designer-labeled, “knock off” and stolen clothes. Given the lack of individual descriptions of the lived reality of gang social life, gang research, as it has developed in the US, is essentially an argument over the correct description of a ghost.

3. Gangs, crime and causal analysis
The causal proposition that gangs significantly elevate levels of crime is essential to their metonymic power. If gangs were no more criminal than a random sample of the youth populations from which they emerge, why base theory and policy on images of gangs as opposed to the social dimensions of that larger population? Implicitly, gang criminology has been based on the claim that gangs are a strategic focus for crime research. This is because gangs contain an over-representation of criminal individuals and activities, and more, that they not only collect criminality but produce it.

After Thrasher (1927), gang criminologists began depicting gang members, without qualification, as more violent and delinquent than their non-gang counterparts. For decades, virtually the only evidence that gangs cause crime consisted of scattered qualitative descriptions and quantitative data in the form of correlations and cross-tabulations that describe the gang youth of some time and place as in more trouble than non-gang youth (see, e.g., Short and Strodtbeck 1965; Suttles 1968; Johnstone 1981; and the evidence critiqued in Zatz 1987). Only in the 1990’s has the causal issue been given sustained attention. Enough work has been done that it is appropriate to consider the strength of the evidence that gangs increase the level of criminal violence beyond what would exist without the presence of gangs. It is notable that nearly as soon as the results of these studies were published researchers began treating the issue as closed (see, for example, Bjerregaard and Smith 1993; Klein 1995; Rosenfeld et al. 1997). Thus, without citing evidence, Decker and Curry claim:

Gangs facilitate the commission of crime. To ignore that is to ignore (or worse, to excuse) the violence gang members commit against each other and their communities. (1997: 514)

We are warned: raising doubt about the causal nexus of gangs and crime is not only empirically wrong, it is morally problematic!

The idea that gangs cause violence has been appealing on at least two levels. On the level of individual biography, it might be that individuals become more violent when they join gangs. On the collective level, it might be that the rate of violence would be lower were it not for the presence of gangs in the community. Both ideas appear to be confirmed by data that describe gang youth as more violent than non-gang youth, and youths as more violent during periods in which they are in a gang. But there are several plausible alternative understandings that indicate why the causal issue should not be laid to rest:

1. Folk wisdom. When surveyed in school, student respondents are biased towards reporting that gang members are criminal because that is conventional wisdom. They use folk ideas in perceiving peers and in defining their own lives.

2. Sampling and data-elicitation biases. Gangs are showy symbolic vehicles for professing criminality. Gang members are especially willing to express their criminality, thus especially likely to be known by their peers. Non-gang criminal youth are less inclined to indicate their criminality and are not as readily known to those who are sampled. Acts of violence carried out to honor the gang generate news stories, enhanced police attention, and excited talk on the streets.
3. **Circular labeling.** The category “gang” is not applied to individuals by youths in the community, social scientists, or police unless they have been associated with crime, especially violent crime. The gang does not cause members to be violent; violence causes youth to be seen as gang members. When an interviewer asks “So the reason you call it a gang basically is why?”, Money Love, a twenty-year-old Insane Gangster Disciple, responds “Because I beat up on folks and shoot them. The last person I shot, I was in jail for five years”. Or, again, when Paul, an eighteen-year-old 107 Hoover Crip, is asked “What makes you all a gang?”, it makes sense for him to respond “The things we do. Fighting, shooting, selling drugs” (Decker and Winkle 1996: 64).

4. **Where violent youth belong.** The decision to join and stay in a gang is fueled by the desire to get involved in more violence. Violent youth, often ostracized because of their violence, find in gangs a place to belong. And, because violence is attractive to them for reasons they do not understand, the gang is especially attractive as a context in which violence makes accepted sense to members and gang rivals, and even to outsiders who condemn gang violence but accept that it makes sense according to gang understandings. Through tortuous biographical journeys, individuals first come to appreciate violence, which imposes or insists on immediate, vivid subordination, as an attractive response to chaotic social environments. Gangs then provide conventionally understood explanations for what otherwise might appear to be irrational, idiosyncratic, or even emotionally disturbed behavior. Gangs strut themes of dominance in heroic and collectively celebrated styles. “We grew up fightin, we just grew up fightin and everybody hangin around so they decided to call they self somethin...”(Decker and Winkle 1996: 56). Gangs shape the form but not the incidence of violence.

5. **A means and a protective habitat.** Youths who feel threatened and who expect to be in violent conflicts find gangs to be attractive vehicles for coping with risks that are endemic to their social areas. Thus violence causes gangs. Historically, a high level of violence in a social area is a pre-condition for gang formation. But gangs may as often provide a sense of security that makes violence unnecessary as they occasion outbreaks of violence. Gangs have the same ambivalent relationship to violence as do military organizations. Armies may be necessary for war but they are not sufficient causes of conflict. Indeed, by creating an organized interest group that risks getting killed if war breaks out, they may reduce the outbreak of violence.

6. **Violence makes youth groups into gangs.** Young people associate in many different social forms. Violence is a critical “tipping point” for turning peer groups into gangs. Gangs do not make groups violent; violence makes groups into gangs.

It may well be that violence causes gangs much more powerfully than gangs cause violence. A few short-lived acts of violence can generate gangs that live over generations. Thus the causal impact of violence in constructing gangs is often far greater in temporal reach than the impact of gangs on violence. Gangs only sporadically produce temporal concentrations of violent actions.

Indeed, following the analogy to the military and war, the very ongoing-ness of the gang makes it unlikely that gangs will be closely associated with the incidence of crimes. The critical causal contingencies are not likely to be “the gang” but short-lived conditions that mobilize gang members into criminal activity. A study of gang homicides in Chicago found that they were rarely drug-related and were committed by just 4 gangs (Block and Block 1995).

7. Alternatively, **crime may be necessary to the persistence of gangs.** If violence brings gangs into existence, gangs may cease to exist in the absence of criminality. We find a close association between the existence of gangs in a community and the level of criminal violence in that community because gangs disintegrate when criminal violence declines.

8. **Self-fulfilling prophecy.** Gang members become criminal because they are treated by police and peers on the presumption that they are criminal. Someone styled as a gang member is especially likely to be solicited by a would-be drug buyer, attacked in a preventive defensive strategy by someone anticipating being attacked, and focused upon and then arrested by the police. Thrown into jail because of police responsiveness to gang symbolism, youth come to need strong ties with peers in order to mount an intimidating, aggressive posture toward other peers.
In this scenario, gangs do increase criminal violence, but because of the general belief that they do, a belief that gang criminology helps sustain.

9. Regression to the mean. As another reason that gang criminologists may have falsely perceived gangs as causing violence, the risk of “regression to the mean” looms large in the design of gang research. Researchers seeking to justify their investigations as illuminating serious gang problems are well-advised to search for violent gangs. As youth violence peaks, political calls for solutions get louder, intervention programs emerge, and funding expands for a research focus on violent gangs. When gang researchers tag along and stay for a short while, their data collection is biased toward recording acts of violence in a relatively unrepresentative phase of the cycle of gang life. No-one, after all, has suggested that gang violence is produced with systematic temporal regularity. When, after research is completed, gang violence recedes as part of its natural cycle, the gang researchers will have filed their reports and published their studies. They are not around to record the lack of violence.

10. Gangs reduce violence in variety of ways. Gangs are so intimidating that where they exist, people may avoid starting conflicts for fear they will get out of hand. (See fn. 4). By exaggerating their members’ violent proclivities, gangs make it unnecessary for members to prove their aggressiveness individually. Gangs concentrate violent youth in places and under symbols that facilitate avoidance of violence by residents not committed to the gang world, and that guide police attentions, thus repressing an area’s crime rates over time. Gangs draw a variety of violent youth into relatively disciplined relations, facilitating control of the most violent over the less violent. And gangs intensify their members’ violence, destroying members’ lives more quickly than would otherwise be the case, thus repressing area crime rates over the long run.

Although each of these rival hypotheses is questionable, and although when presented together they are in many ways mutually inconsistent, their neglect indicates the ideological status of gang criminology. Various ways of combining these hypotheses could lead to a comprehensive modeling of the relationship of gangs and violence. In their interactions and cumulative effects, they point toward a research agenda far more demanding than the simplistic, unidirectional, gangs-to-violence, model. Several of these alternate views stress that the issue as a whole should be understood in a reflexive manner, that is, by taking into account not only the contingencies of violence but also the contingent effects of police and research attentions. That existing studies fail to take alternative views into account is indicated in their approaches to matters of definition, their treatment of causal directionality, and their neglect to argue the effect of gangs on crime rates.

Defining gang membership

There is a widespread reluctance to rely on police definitions of gang membership, in part because it is known that departments vary in how they define gang crimes (Maxson and Klein 1996) and in part because police actions are politically suspect (Hagedorn 1990). But despite this recognition, the research literature has failed to take seriously the problems of defining gang membership. Henry et al. (2001), for example, rely on police records in combination with self-reports. Youth who denied membership yet had an arrest report indicating a “gang-related” incident were coded as members.

Curry and Spergel (1992) developed a scale of “gang-involvement” based on behavior typical of gang members. Some of the items used to define gang membership included activities that themselves often incite violence, such as “flashing gang signs” and “attacking someone in a gang fight.” Such definitions bias the sample, selecting as gang members the most violent and dangerous youth (Morash 1983). As a result, the relationship between gang membership and criminality will likely be overstated.

Some studies use police reports to measure criminality and self-reports to impute gang membership. Huff (1996), for example, compared the ages of first arrest for gang and non-gang youth, finding a significantly younger median age for gang youth. There was no control for the likely possibility that gang youth, especially younger members, are more engaged in making their criminal inclinations visible. Consider the implications of the possibility that, for many if not all gang youth, what being in a gang means in an ongoing matter is primarily sustaining a stream of symbolic expression: a certain way to dress and use clothing, a style of movement on foot and in cars, ways and places to “hangout”, the display of a unique semiotics through gestures, car styling, and graffiti etc. While such
youth may have an audience of peers in mind, they unwittingly provide the grounds to be strategically targeted for arrest by police. Even if gang youth commit crime at rates no greater than non-gang youth, they should be expected to be over-represented in police statistics, and picked up by the police at an earlier age.

Studies that employ self-reports have been the most common (Thornberry et al. 1993; Dukes et al. 1997; Battin et al. 1998; Harper and Robinson 1999). Although this method avoids some of the sample biases described above, the process of applying the label “gang” is also at work when youth self-report membership. These studies lack evidence to rule out the possibility that youth involved in highly delinquent gangs will be more likely to report themselves as “gang members”. Less subtle biases show the extent to which the gang/crime causal nexus has not been seriously questioned. Esbensen and Huizinga (1993), for example, asked youth directly if they belonged to a gang or not. Of the 193 who claimed gang membership, 33 were coded as non-members because the respondents did not report that their gangs were involved in enough gang fights or other illegal activities.

Definitional issues have long plagued gang research and perhaps always will (c.f. Ball and Curry 1995), but research designs more open to null findings on the gang/crime nexus might develop evidence that would improve the discussion. Existing studies of police data usually compare gang and non-gang youth, not gang youth and youth in other groups. In self-report studies, respondents typically have no choice to describe their peer groups other than by saying they are in “gangs.”

As another strategy for improving the evidence, sampling for self-reports could be based on residential areas rather than on school populations. While gangs are universally presumed to be negative phenomena in criminology, it is not coincidental that Thrasher’s area-based study led to his statement

……that the gang is a protean manifestation: no two gangs are just alike; some are good; some are bad; and each has to be considered on its own merits. (1927: 5)

Notably, Suttles’ (1968) area-based study similarly resisted the assumption that gangs are malevolent in their impact on crime. Suttles found that the youth in the slum he studied were equally delinquent, regardless of gang membership. Horowitz (1987) found that non-gang local residents at times differentiate between good and bad gangs (compare Venkatesh 1997).

Which came first?

The neglect of temporality is a major weakness in the research on the gang/crime connection. Whether the analysis is correlational (Morash 1983; Huff 1996) or employs more advanced statistical techniques (Curry and Spergel 1992; Dukes et al. 1997; Harper et al. 1999), data often have been drawn at one point in time. Although they present results in causal form, these studies give no basis for understanding which came first, the violence or the gang.

Several studies have attempted to model the temporal sequence of gang membership and criminality with longitudinal data (Esbensen and Huizinga 1993; Thornberry et al. 1993; Battin et al. 1998; Henry et al. 2001). They test whether gangs “facilitate” crime based on whether members are more violent when in gangs than when they are not. Without discussion, the question of the impact of gangs on crime levels is transformed into a question about individual biographies. But even if gangs make their members more violent than they otherwise would be, there are any number of interactively related processes that could offset the effect of members’ activities on area crime rates: earlier termination of violent careers through death, injury and incarceration; discouragement of gang membership at the entry point and acceleration of exits from the gang; decline in violence by non-gang youth etc.

Thornberry et al. (1993) is currently the most frequently cited work in advance of the claim that gangs cause crime. Students in Rochester, New York were surveyed first in eighth- or ninth- grade classes, then the next year, then a year later. The final sample included 175 self-identified gang members; only 34 identified as gang members all three times, indicating the ephemeral nature of membership. The authors hypothesized that gang members would have significantly higher rates of delinquency and drug use when they are in a gang as compared to when they are not in a
gang. Their results show that, for most types of crime, youth are indeed more criminal while in gangs than they were
before they were gang members, and also that they are less criminal after leaving gangs (See also Thornberry 1998).

Even though these data are longitudinal, in the sense that they describe the same person at different biographical
moments, they do not describe the temporal ordering of the key variables, i.e. whether the changes in propensity to
commit crime preceded or came after defining oneself as affiliated with or independent of the gang. The suggestion
is that adolescents become more likely to commit crime after they join, but many of the alternative readings,
discussed above, could apply. For example, the results may indicate that doing violence increases the likelihood that
young people will define themselves as in gangs. Or the relationship of violence and membership may be spurious:
before and as a motivation for gang membership, students may have become involved in the early stages of what will
flower as an intensive spate of violence; and conversely with regard to leaving the gang. Where present in a
community, gangs are attractive as a vehicle for an emerging phase of involvement in the dramatics of violence. But
the flowering of an especially violent phase of biography will occur regardless.

Note how the Thornberry reading, that gang membership precedes and causes crime, is more appealing if one forgets
that adolescents who do not commit crimes also spend much time with peers. What specifically about the gang
heightens criminality? Why should not the gang, which makes the criminality of each heighten the vulnerability of
all, control, limit, even suppress otherwise wild, egocentric criminality? The commonsense reading of positive
gang/crime correlations may be nothing more than an elaborate formulation of the universal parental wisdom,
individually sensible but collectively tautological, that each individual’s culpability is due to the bad kids he or she
hangs with. Nobody is at fault if a Durkheimian malevolent spirit rises spontaneously from the *frisson* of gang
interaction. (Compare the ‘contagion’ idea that the gang milieu raises pre-existing violence, as stated in Curry and

Since Shaw and McKay’s classic study (1931), criminologists have long held that juvenile delinquency is a group
phenomenon. But the pattern that young people do crime together rather than alone is not limited to “gang”
associations (Zimring 1981). Hence, if we want to show that gangs as distinct organizational types cause crime, we
should also want to know if they do so independent of the role of the delinquency of friendship groups.

The most influential study to take up the question (Battin et al. 1998) concludes strongly that gangs exert more
climbingogenic influence on youth than similarly delinquent peer groups. Battin et al. (1998), used structural equation
modeling (SEM) techniques to test for relationships between variables, as did many others (Curry and Spergel 1992;
Dukes et al. 1997; Harper et al. 1999; Henry et al. 2001). But SEMs do not rule out the alternative readings that we
have proposed.

Most statistical procedures, such as correlations or regression procedures, aim to bolster a theorized relationship by
negating competing views. SEMs do the reverse: they attempt to find models *that cannot be rejected by the data.*
They show that a given hypothesis cannot be ruled out, but they do not show that other hypotheses can be discarded.

Of the studies identified here, whether they use regressions or SEMs, all but one made no mention at all of the
possibility that gangs might result, in some way, from violence or crime. Using their evidence, we can, with equal
logic, simply reverse the conclusion that gangs are the cause and that violence is the effect. The exception is a study
Curry and Spergel (1992) that asked 439 Chicago students in the sixth through eighth grades whether they had
participated in a number of “gang-related” activities or held “gang-related” attitudes. These measures were modeled
against self-, school and police reports of delinquency. Although this study has been taken as positive evidence that
gangs cause delinquency, and not the reverse, we find reason to pause. Even putting aside limitations of the sample,
which barely reaches into adolescence, the findings are, in a simplified form, that kids who identify with gangs also
had been delinquent. Again, this can be plausibly read as a finding about popular discourse. As the dictionary tells
us, a prominent meaning of “gang” includes delinquency, but not vice versa. Put another way, it is necessary to be
delinquent before being in a gang, but it is not necessary to be in a gang to be delinquent. Read this way, the study
supports the hypothesis that delinquency precedes and contributes to gang membership.
The weakness of the evidence that gangs cause crime is essentially due to a neglect of process. Thrasher’s (1927) work provides a contrast. In a section titled “Does the gang cause crime?”, he suggests a number of potential mechanisms for understanding how gangs might cause crime (e.g. that they socialize youth to delinquent values, or that they increase the efficiency of delinquent activities by increasing numbers and opportunities). Recent studies do not consider even this simple framing of the process in which gangs increase crime. After 75 years, the criminologists’ gang has bullied the processual issue out of the discussion.

Gangs and crime rates
As noted, the studies of the gang/violence connection to date have been on the individual level. Joining a gang, it is argued, is bad because it increases the individual’s criminality. But the field of gang criminology as a whole is also, perhaps more fundamentally, based on the idea that gangs increase criminal violence in society. Do crime rates fluctuate in relation to increases and decreases in the number of gangs and the size of their membership?

Police departments and popular culture can change perceptions of gangs for political, organizational and emotional reasons, but counts of dead bodies and other signs of victimization are less subject to political pressures and public mood. In 1995, Malcolm Klein, describing extensive, nuanced interviews he conducted with police and lay gang experts around the country, wrote of the dramatic “proliferation” of gangs that had been in progress since at least the mid 1980s. “This much is clear: The gang problem is exploding....” (1995: 370. Another study published at about the same time found 16,000 gangs in 300 cities with half a million members (Curry et al. 1996). This seemed to make sense of the well-publicized rise in youth crime rates in the 1980s and early 1990s. But, late in 1995, evidence appeared to indicate that:

….what sociologists call a ‘moral panic’ had set in.... youth violence rates had peaked in 1993; the 1994 police data showing a decline from the peak, a decline that has continued every year since, did not become available until late in 1994. Thus youth violence had been in decline for nearly two years when concern about it reached its height. (Tonry and Moore 1998: vii)

For the public in general, an assumption that expanding gang membership will lead to an explosion of youth violence may be a matter of panic. For gang criminologists, presumably some other explanation must be sought.

4. Conclusion

The greatest challenge facing gang research is the narrative power of the topic. Criminologists and street kids share a fascination with the gang as a symbolically protean mythology. Gang members seem to have an infinite appetite for gathering around and re-telling stories of the wounds they have received (Horowitz 1983). Particular episodes of conflict resonate so profoundly that narrator and audience can remain transfixed upon repeated re-livings even though no new information is imparted. Similarly, gang criminologists cannot resist going far beyond the limits of their data and speaking to the great issues of the day.

The narrative seductions of the gang genre are evident if one compares writings on gangs to the research literatures on youth violence, on guns and violence, on drug criminality, on career criminals, or the relationship between age and crime. In other areas of criminology, writers hone much closer to variations in their data. While criminology lives on journal articles, gang researchers more readily produce book monographs. In writings on gangs, there is a much stronger temptation to locate causes in background factors that figure prominently in culture wars and political debates but that do not vary in relationship to gang life, as least not so far as one can tell from the data presented. As an intellectual enterprise, gang writing risks being a reverse kind of myth making. In classic form, myths explain constants (e.g., why we see a mountain over there) by reference to events beyond the reach of human observation. In gang writing, varying patterns of gang life which escape direct research observation are explained by reference to constants (e.g. the social inequality we see over there).

Thus virtually the entire Mexican-American population could fit some part of Diego Vigil’s characterization of the “multiple marginalities” that account for Mexican-American gang life. Are we then to see all Mexican-American
youths as gang members? If so, the link between gangs and violence must be weak. If not, what is missing from the explanation?

Even gang researchers who spend decades making carefully guarded statements that are drawn close around variations in their data find it irresistible, in the writings of their years of wisdom, to tell a story about the origins of gang life that, if heeded, would reshape national policy on the grandest scale. Thus Malcolm Klein, in the crowning book of his career, leaps to explain gang life with the theories of William Julius Wilson and John Hagedorn on “deindustrialization,” the decline of social programs in the 1980s, and the success of the civil rights movement in taking positive role models and other social supports out of the inner city; even though his own research was in booming southern California, not the midwestern rust belt; even though his work covered Mexican-origin populations for which new immigrants have been much more relevant in shaping social structure than affirmative action paths toward mobility; and even though his distinguishing contribution, based on immersion in field research in the 1960s and 1970s, argued the causal power not of socio-economic conditions but of situationally contingent social processes, in this case, the positive effects of gang intervention programs on group cohesion. And Hagedorn, who became prominent in gang research with his study of Milwaukee gang formation as a response to “deindustrialization”, was soon adding a smorgasbord of social problems to the list of contributing causes: guns, drug markets, prison, the mass media’s celebration of materialism, and - what the hell! - brutish masculinities and values indifferent to community service. One benefit of the smorgasbord is that it lures attentions from the unattractive feature of any one offering, in this case, the failure to specify deindustrialization in historical time and to relate it, or even unemployment levels, to rising gang formation, and rising and then falling gang violence.

Why can’t gang writers stick to their data? Why is it not obvious that it is gratuitous to refer to background conditions that do not vary in relationship with variations in the data about gang life? Why have gangs become such a clear window, in criminology and in popular culture such as in movies, newspaper journalism and folk wisdom, for telling stories about what has gone wrong in American society and what should be done about American social policy?

We suggest that the mystification of the field begins with evading causal questions. Gangs make it unusually easy to finesse causal issues. As compared to guns, age, or even peer networks, gangs are mythical matters from the start. They exist, if they exist in a manner worth distinctive study at all, as transcending symbols, as collective phenomena that overarch, inspire and give honor to their members. It is hard for researchers to know whether gangs exist and who is in them because of their ontology: they exist as matters whose existence is put repeatedly on the line, in ceremonies of claiming membership, in challenges that test loyalty, in everyday routines in which hanging out might, with a turn of a phrase, become the beginning of a collectively organized assault. To the extent that gangs do not have such transcendent status, then the criminality of the individuals involved may be studied in standard ways, with individual level measures alone.

We recommend a two step process for reorienting the field. First, state clearly the various causal issues necessarily implicated in gang research. We see three: the production of gangs, or gang formation; the effects of gang membership on individual criminality and other biographical matters; and the impact of gangs on crime rates. Second, specify alternative hypotheses and distinguish the forms of data that will aid research on each of these issues.

With regard to the impact of gangs on crime rates, we need comparisons among communities. Within any one community, we need to follow the social histories of gangs and crime rates over time; and we need to consider how gangs interact with other parts of the youth population. With regard to the impact on individual biography, we need longer perspectives on individual lives, and we need measures that open up the ambiguities of gang “membership” and that can distinguish the temporal ordering of gang involvement, criminal activity, and other personal changes. We need more situationally specific data that include descriptions of how violence emerges in different social situations, and how, if at all, gang membership is used in the violence process.

The field is most promising with regard to the question of gang formation, essentially because in studying gang formation, one need not make presumptive codings of gang/non-gang youth; one can specify the emergence of gangs
as meaningful groups in members’ own distinguishing practices. There is a growing, lively debate on whether gang formation now is fundamentally different than it was in mid-century and whether, in turn, the early industrializing city gave rise to gangs in a still different manner. With refreshing echoes of the “natural history” emphasis in Thrasher’s original work, several gang researchers have suggested that it might be possible to build a stage-theory to explain gang formation.

The ideas on gang formation currently floating around might be organized as follows. Youth play groups are shaped as part of the social organization of childhood but also as “structural” patterns, and “macro” changes shape everyday proximity. Residential patterns structure childhood social relations around kinship; government policies build and destroy public housing, implement school busing, occasion immigration and residential movements within the region and the US. These “macro” developments shape the demographics of youth and patterns of peer affinity.

At the same time, themes arise and go out of fashion in mass popular culture. Play groups or informal youth associations embrace and innovatively transform culture movements. Their innovations may emerge in the style of ethnic culture, in “crack” consumption, as a culture of marginality, within a youth fad like breakdancing or surfing or the “gangsta” fashion that is used to characterize a lifestyle lived through music, clothes, gestures etc.

The transition from hedonistic creativity with a cultural style to gang organization requires opposition. Male adolescence is a fertile ground for paranoia, which may be variously stimulated by family cultures of conflict, points of transition from neighborhood elementary schools to middle schools covering wider areas, and any number of chance events, such as encounters with suspicious police, provocative and defiant peers, and anxious school authorities. Objective trends, such as the imprisonment of an increasing number of inner city youth and the street marketing of a hot-selling drug, institutionalize budding gang affiliation, giving the seductions to gangs new self-protective and economic meanings. In all of these respects, cultural, social organizational, and repressive action, the gang’s existence depends not solely on the interests, values and actions of gang members, but also on what others, in wide-ranging areas of society, do. These include the sympathetic responses of many local area residents, whose pride in identifying with defiant youth is underwritten by the contribution that “slum” reputations make in keeping local rents down. The gang’s formation and persistence is understood to be a collaborative act.

Note how studying gang formation settles the hoary issue of defining what a gang is. The meaning or meanings of gangs are empirically settled by finding the social processes that historically lead to different types. For this inquiry, we should not expect to have “a” definition of the gang. How to define a gang is discovered by discovering members’ meanings, which does not mean asking them to provide a definition but documenting how their social lives developed and the means to which they put their relationships. Just as we discover multiple forms of violent criminality when we ground definitions of crime in subjects’ meanings and actions, all of which may fit in the same legal category and receive the same label from the criminal justice system, so we should expect to come up with numerous types of groups. Each will have a different natural history, each will be used differently by members. We will come to set aside the dummy variable employed by police: gang/non-gang youth.

If gang research to date has only in sketchy ways appreciated the contributions of others to gang formation and maintenance, the essential contribution of gang members themselves to gang formation has been completely missed. Given the massive immigrations and internal migrations in the last twenty years of U.S. history, it is striking that the gang literature persists in using local economic conditions as explanatory factors. Literally millions of extremely poor, grade-school-educated immigrants have incurred large costs and run enormous personal risks to cross borders in search of improved economic opportunities. Many such migrants from Latin America have come as adolescents. At some point in the history of social thought, the neglect of this mobility evidence will become an embarrassment for the field. What sense does it make to invoke locally unattractive economic conditions like “deindustrialization,” “unemployment” and “social inequality” to explain gang formation, without explaining why native-born residents facing limited local opportunity do not move toward greater opportunity, especially when they do not face the legal barriers to movement that impede border-crossing migrants, and especially when poorly educated migrants who have uprooted themselves are flooding into the very cities said to be stuck in a deindustrializing cul de sac. The issue is being addressed, albeit gingerly, in migration and labor studies, but in the gang literature, there is no recognition
that, if limited local economic conditions are to have causal effect, as they may well have, there must be another part of the explanation that is missing, something that is necessary to give local conditions determining power.

It is just here that the sociological genius of gangs has been missed. Gangs make local attachments glorious. They transform what might be seen as the shameful maintenance of childhood ways into a matter of pride. An outsider might hear “homeboy” as perilously close to “momma’s boy,” but “homeboy” now is not an insult; in the gang world it is a badge of respect. If gangs do not raise the level of violence beyond what otherwise would obtain, they may still play a powerful role by emotionally and symbolically sustaining barriers to mobility. And, if recent gang research has it right, gangs appear to be increasingly able to make the maintenance of a childhood social world locally respectable well into adult life.

Thirty years ago, long before the phrases “deindustrialization” and “underclass” became common currency, David Matza (1966) wrote of the “demoralized poor”. He was referring to those ethnics who remained in such areas as Hell’s Kitchen and the Lower East Side of New York after huge portions of their ethnic peers had moved up and out. Such populations should be expected in all historical periods, especially when the economy is working well and there is rapid upward mobility. No process of mobility will work in one historical moment for an entire population, not unless a government institutes something like the migrations that Bismarck directed in order to push Germany into the industrial age. Those who remain behind have to make sense of still living in inner-city conditions. Gangs make local area attachments morally respectable. Violence and the fear it inspires makes for heroic commitments and a blinding narrowness of vision. And in material terms, gangs serve local community populations by creating “ghetto” reputations that keep gentrifying forces out.

Gang criminologists appear to have fallen for the same seductive fantasies that sustain gangs, the idea that local conditions by themselves could explain the careers of local youth. Members secretly collaborate across gangs, sustaining the affiliations of each by imagining enemies in mirror-image peers. Essentially identical young people face off against each other in the name of one or another local area, and the myth works even for gang members who do not live in the areas they “claim.” Violence then transforms what might be seen as the childishly imaginary into undeniably real, serious, adult business. Likewise, gang members celebrate the fantasy of creating a high life through crime by imagining that drug profits will make them rich, and the gang research community joins in by depicting gangs as entrepreneurial tools. It may be that it is the very absence of determining forces in local background conditions that explains the seductive magic of the gang. Put in other terms, gang affiliation offers an inspiring alternative to what might otherwise be a demoralizing view of one’s historical situation. But it is not the gang members themselves whose employment prospects count. Their fascination with the gang starts so young as to indicate that they appreciate the defiant posture of the gang as a proud alternative to what they perceive lurking in the humbled shadows of their parents’ generation.

Attempts to link background features to gang formation share a common problem. The background features exist beyond the awareness of the youths themselves. It speaks worlds about gang criminology, and sociological explanations of poverty more generally, that the problems of the parents are imputed to the children without explaining the linkage. It may be that high unemployment keeps young men affiliated with gangs in their twenties, but they typically do not first join at that age. At the age of entry, which in some studies is treated as young as 11-13 years of age, what would a strong job market mean? Gang writers struggle to suggest that the lack of summer jobs is a significant incentive to gang involvement. Without really addressing the matter, they imply that government should take over the structuring of early adolescence, creating occupational commitments through providing attractive jobs in order to create a more moral population. No-one seems to perceive the echoes of Booker T. Washington.

As soon as one begins to think seriously about the linkage between adult realities and the worlds of childhood, the issues become extremely complex. If it is not actually the child’s immediate economic opportunities that count but those of the adults in their families or neighborhoods, then in which phase of adult life should we measure the economic opportunities that shaped mobility outlooks? It is not obvious that the immediate present is the relevant phase.
And then, how do adult outlooks become translated into sensed backgrounds of childhood? This linkage is the key missing piece in explanations of gang life that refer to socio-economic conditions. The image of the demoralized poor portrays adults as realizing their own failure as they have witnessed the successes of peers. If they respond by developing a routine paranoia about disrespect, then this culture may remain in a community’s atmosphere even as generation after generation passes through and sees many get up and out. And that becomes a resonant background for the everyday paranoia of gang life.

Perhaps the distinctiveness of the American gang problem is due to the lack of barriers to labor and social mobility. Perhaps the aggravating problem is not the removal of positive role models (“old heads”) but the vividly present awareness that ethnicity and original social condition do not determine one’s fate. Perhaps deindustrialization is a blessing, not only for low-skilled, poor immigrants but also for the native born who, compared to immigrants, have advantages (“cultural capital”) for moving into managing positions in the service economy.

But we risk committing the error we seek to warn against: over-theorizing. Our goal is to show that once the causal issues have been explicated and separated analytically, gang theory will have to be reformulated. It will then not be so easy for gang researchers to see through the gang in order to tell stories about relatively invariant background conditions. They will at least have to stop and clarify some of the links along the way.

A further implication is that the study of gang formation should develop as part of a larger sociology of youth, marrying with social movement and collective behavior studies, and creating collections of historically documented cases as a new research methodology. To get around the sampling problems that haunt the field, researchers can use analytic induction (Katz 2001), comparative qualitative analysis (Cress and Snow 2000), or the constant comparative method (Glaser 1965) for theory testing and development. Launched on these roads, the gang research literature may be able to break its addiction to shaping the prevailing imagery about the gang and leave the story telling to the gang kids and the popular media, at least until the research literature is equipped to describe the natural histories of gang formation, the situational contingencies through which criminal attacks emerge, and the processes linking socio-economic background to the foreground of gang life.

Notes

1. Actually he did not. He found hundreds of gangs, but, according to Solomon Kobrin, whose career overlapped with Thraser’s, the 1313 figure used in the book’s famous subtitle apparently came from a joking reference by research assistants to the street address of a brothel, the joke perhaps also being a mocking of the pedantic effort to come up with a precise number (Geis and Dodge 2000).

2. The gang label is powerful not only for youth on the streets, but, increasingly in the US, for anyone with a serious complaint about organizational conspiracies that facilitate crimes. The flexibility of the term is itself a powerful social fact. The federal RICO (anti-’racketeering’ statute, first applied to organized crime of the ‘Mafia’ variety, recently has been invoked to charge the Catholic church with criminal conspiracy for
covering up sexual abuse by priests. Faced with such stretched use, gang research needs a strategy to hold onto a distinctive field of social behavior. An initial step would be to reserve the term for collaborative activities that seduce members to criminal violence, quite apart from material gain. That is, while we should study drug gangs, organized crime directed by adults in Mafia and Chinatown contexts, the criminal activities of CREEP (the committee to re-elect president Nixon) etc., we can focus the study of what are often called ‘street gangs’ by focusing on collectivities whose transcendent qualities are built upon commitments to violence. It may be that drug gangs are utilitarian and that its members are indifferent to the charms of being members of an awe-inspiring group. Or it may be that many drug gangs grew out of street gangs, then became cold organizational tools, and then took on awe-inspiring identities which became collectively charismatic for their members. This is not a matter that will be settled by theory, definitional conventions, or by studies that never leave the discourse of the university long enough to show us the symbolic environment as constructed by the people allegedly studied.

3. This is the implication of the Harvard Kennedy school, Boston-based, anti-violence effort which claims great success in reducing criminal violence by swarming gang leaders with zero-tolerance law enforcement (Kennedy 1997). The argument goes that while shotgun police repression efforts may backfire by increasing gang cohesion, a sharp decline in a jurisdiction’s rate of homicide can be achieved quickly if local and federal enforcement powers are pinpointed on the most egregious core offenders.

4. Here several mechanisms may be at work, both within the gang and without. Gangs may concentrate the violent careers of their members biographically, and gangs may discourage non-members from violence. The latter possibility is indicated by current research being conducted by Curtis Jackson-Jacobs on
white youths in a southwestern city who regularly go out looking for fights in bars and in party scenes. The informality of the commitment to violence appears to be central to its persistence. When on occasion these young men encounter minority and prison gang members in provocative settings, many reflect on the meaning that violence would have in a gang context and quickly bow out. Gangs appear to shape the volume and the social location of youth violence in ways much more complex than have been considered. A relatively low rate of white youth violence seems at least partially produced by a high rate of minority youth violence, especially as expressed in dramatic gang forms.

5. Other studies that take up the question, Morash (1983) and Henry et al. (2001), find significant effects, but of small magnitude and in only specific types of delinquency. A more useful predictor of delinquency, they found, was whether the respondent had delinquent friends.

6. The anti-yuppie or anti-gentrification sentiment in many gang areas expresses a classic hostility toward the bourgeoisie, but not from progressive or bohemian sentiments. It may seem odd to understand gangs as socially conservative agents, but the characterization is worth contemplating. The symbolism and culture of gangs is a celebration of elitism, of the natural superiority of color (whether black and white or red and blue) or native territorial origins, not a pride in the common humanity of downtrodden masses. Urban American gangs are much too quickly isolated in analysis from rural and European racist and fascist movements that attract youth to the call of resisting the uprooting effects of macro level social changes through symbolisms that would honor threatened local attachments. American criminologists should consider whether their efforts to make the city street gang into an agent of progressive social change is based on precisely the
wrong understanding of the gang’s attractions to its members (Katz 1988: 153-63).


References


