# FORMATION OF GANGS AND INVOLVEMENT IN DRUG USE AMONG MARGINALIZED YOUTH: USES OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL VIEW

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## ABSTRACT

Youth gangs continue to present major social problems despite their frequent appearance in literature on social processes and deviance. Investigation of gangs with a focus on emergence, involvement in drug use, and trafficking can lead to useful areas of inquiry. Youthful members of practically all immigrant groups have formed gangs in their process of adaptation to life in the United States, and most of these gangs either converted into organizations of adults or died out as members moved into adult rules. Nevertheless, growing numbers of gangs have become perpetuated in their home communities, and their members include adults over 30 years old. These perpetuated gangs draw their memberships from populations that have histories of socioeconomic marginalization. Newly formed gangs in populations that have arrived in the United States recently are at risk of perpetuation if the populations from which they draw members become marginalized through lack of employment opportunities and viable adult roles. Both death and emergence of gangs in contemporary United States life merit further study with an eye toward preventing the most severe consequences of involvement in gangs, violence and drug use. Three cases in point – Cuban gangs in Miami, opportunistic gang formation in East Harlem, and Haitian youth on the verge of forming gangs provide examples of the process of forming and dissolving gangs. Data from a new study of Haitian youth suggest approaches to prevention of undesirable behavior among immigrant youth.

## INTRODUCTION

How the children of immigrants in the United States adapt to the behavioral demands of a "host" cultural context and an "origin" cultural background has attracted much scholarly attention, especially during the last century. Of the descriptive and analytic works on this subject, many have focused on deviant or delinquent behavior among males who form gangs, which first attracted attention in the mid-nineteenth century with the emergence of Irish gangs in New York (Goldstein 1991). Since then, hundreds of books, articles, screenplays, and news reports have described and analyzed the behavior of boys (and more rarely, girls) between the ages of twelve and 21 involved in fights with other gangs, vandalism, petty thievery, drug trade, gang rape, and more recently, drive-by shootings.

The process whereby a young person in ambivalent cultural circumstances becomes involved in gangs seems pregnant with possibilities for anthropological research, because the subject matter clearly demands that the investigator understand cultural process. Nevertheless, most of the extensive literature on gangs has been the province of sociologists and social workers (e.g. Arnold 1965; Cloward & Ohlin 1960; Cohen 1955; Fagan 1989; Furfey 1926; Hagedorn 1988; Huff 1990; Jankowski 1991), with the occasional social psychologist (Goldstein 1991).

This extensive literature lacks anthropological studies of gangs, despite the fact that social and behavioral scientists generally recognize that youth in the United States have tended to form gangs when in situations of culture change or intercultural conflict. Exceptions to this shortcoming include Vigil's *Barrio Gangs: Street Life and Identity in Southern California* (1988) also *A Rainbow of Gangs* (2002), and, somewhat obliquely, Bourgois' *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (1995).

The organization and behavior of gangs have received the bulk of the scrutiny in the literature to date. Two areas that have not received much attention, however, are the transitional phenomena: the birth and death of gangs.

As in most varieties of human organizations, the processes of formation and dissolution of groups vary according to specific circumstances. We can say with conviction that since the mid-19th century, most immigrant groups in the United States have had young males who formed youth gangs (Goldstein 1991). The ingredients of this process have received extensive analysis and theorization in the literature (Page 1997), primarily as variations of theories on deviance. They include the concept of social strain (Cloward & Ohlin 1960; Cohen 1955), in which youth find themselves under multiple pressures to adapt to difficult conditions of prejudice,

poverty, and alienation, the theory of differential association, or subcultural association (Johnson 1979; Miller 1958; Sutherland & Cressey 1974; Voss 1963) where youth seek out others of similar background and collectively adapt to a harsh urban environment, social control (Elliott, Agerton, & Canter 1979; Hirschi 1969; Nye 1958) in which response to external forces that govern behavior as well as to those within groups influences the formation and maintenance of gangs, labeling (Krohn, Massey, & Skinner 1987; Tannenbaum 1938) where forces of social control assign labels to categories of individuals who respond by confirming assertions about the categories, and radical theory (Abadinsky 1979; Meier 1976) which attributes formation of gangs to political and economic processes.

Even this brief list of theories implies that the most useful theoretical perspective on gangs should combine them into a unified perspective. Therein lies the value of an anthropological view of gangs: principles of strain, differential association, social control, labeling, and radical theory effectively overlap and constitute component parts of the phenomena in question. A holistic view of gangs that encompasses all of these perspectives may prove especially valuable in explaining and predicting the behavior of children of immigrants when they form gangs. Vigil's work (2003) on the concept of "multiple marginality" integrates most of the theories of gang formation into a useful, holistic framework that features marginality as a key to understanding how young people become gang members. If we were to summarize Vigil's "multiple marginality" into a process-related phrase, that would be "adapting to marginal circumstances." The following analyses build on this perception of self-organization among youth as adaptation.

## GANGS AS ADAPTATION

In the voluminous literature on youth gangs, writers consistently begin their narratives with some description of the cultural distinctiveness of the group in question. Irish in the 19th century, Italians at the turn of the century, Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and Appalachian migrants to industrial cities in the early and middle 20th century found themselves in a culturally hostile environment, in which surrounding people discriminated against them and ridiculed their life-

ways. Their children's circumstances carried the added difficulties of having to go to school to learn another way of speaking ("American") and spend all day under the belittling commentary of their "American" peers, interchanges that could lead to physical violence during or after school. In many cases, these children had already rejected their parents' cultural heritage, yet they had a desperate need to belong to something. In this embattled environment, the formation of a gang seems a rational adaptation to intolerable circumstances. In fact, it would seem to help the youth to buy time for development of the skills necessary to operate in the world of the Euro-American. The gang member can keep the rest of the world off his/her back while learning the things needed to become effectively bicultural.

What if no amount of time is sufficient to gain skills necessary for advancement? In situations of ongoing marginalization through institutionalized racial prejudice and ghettoized neighborhoods, barriers to effective advancement into the educational and career tracks necessary to become part of advantaged society may present too great an obstacle to youth in these neighborhoods. Where this kind of chronic marginalization occurs, the possibilities for perpetuation of gangs become fertile.

## CASES IN POINT

Youth gangs form under two general conditions: 1) transition of one cultural tradition into an environment dominated by another cultural tradition, and 2) quixotic adaptation to conditions of stagnating or deteriorating economic development in a cultural context that contrasts with the surrounding cultural tradition. Historical examples of both abound in North America. Irish gangs in the 1800s defended themselves against the jeers and attacks of non-Irish children in New York City (Goldstein 1991). Italian gangs in South Boston defended themselves against the Irish (Whyte 1981). Cuban fraternities protected themselves against non-Hispanic youths as they tried to adapt to life in Miami (Page 1997). More recently, children of Chinese immigrants have fought with American-born Chinese youth in response to their taunts (Mark 1997). In all of these cases, youths coming from a culturally distinct environment felt the need to protect themselves against youths whose primary mode of aggression involves

asserting their superiority as participants in the majority's cultural traditions.

The second general condition of gang formation has at its base the same principle, a clash of cultural traditions, but the youths who form gangs are not children of recent immigrants. Rather, they live in communities of individuals who participate in a cultural tradition that contrasts with that of the surrounding population. They tend to live in ghettos where an alternative language dominates verbal activity (e.g. Ebonics, Creole, Spanish, Chinese) and where people's skin color contrasts with that of the surrounding population. Conditions of poverty dominate these communities. Those who have jobs work in low-paying service capacities, and the schools there suffer from lack of resources and support by either government or the parent base.

While examples of the first condition of gang formation include both historic and contemporary cases, examples of the second kind include examples of highly developed, institutionalized gangs that have histories of continuous operation over at least three decades (Hagedorn 1988). Characteristics of these gangs include well established colors and tags, members over 25 years of age, highly elaborate leadership structure, formal initiation of members, and presence in communities outside the community of origin, sometimes in other states. In all cases, these institutionalized gangs, or gang-institutions have formed among culturally distinct populations that have resided in the United States for more than 20 years.

Bourgois' (1997) brief sketch of a key informant's career as a stick-up man repeatedly asserts that the insurmountable barriers to achievement in the protagonist's environment have militated against this apparently gifted young man's "making it." At one juncture in his career, Tito formed an ad hoc gang to assist in his robbery trade. This account of a single career gives the impression that inexorable pressures of poverty and prejudice characterize an environment in which criminal behaviors and gangs can "pop out" (as if in response to the pressure) at any time. Furthermore, the environment is "flooded" with drugs, making involvement in drug use and trafficking almost inevitable for young men like Tito. Although this account has its merits in conveying the power and ubiquity of the barriers facing young men in minority communities, it may also overstate its case by asserting that young men who have ambition and intelligence only have one strategy available to them in this environment. In fact, bright, motivated people emerge from the same neighborhoods from similar life circumstances, achieving educational and career goals despite barriers. The career criminal and gang member is not a ghetto everyman, but given the obvious barriers, he is not an unexpected outcome.

Most gangs in the United States have died out within ten to fifteen years of their formation, yet there is almost no literature on the demise of gangs. How do gangs disappear? In the cases of the Irish, Italian, and other Euro-American gangs of the last century and a half, gang members either became productive members of the working or middle classes, or they became career criminals in the context of an adult criminal subculture. This transitional process occurred among Cuban gangs, called fraternities by their members, leading to the disappearance of gangs such as the Vulcans and the Jutes by 1977, some fifteen years after their formation in the early 1960s (Page 1997). These fraternities had formed under the first condition for forming gangs: adjustment to migration into a circumstance where a contrasting cultural tradition dominates. Cuban boys became fraternity members to avoid being beaten up by "American" boys. They lived in conditions where their parents were struggling with poverty, disappointment, a new language, and resentment of their neighbors. These youths also perceived their parents as ineffectual in their struggles; they made no progress with their outmoded ways. Their need was acute to belong to a group that would protect them when needed and whose members understood their experience.

As the Cuban community took hold in Miami and prospered, establishing businesses of all sizes and transforming Miami into an international capital of commerce, to be Cuban and bilingual became highly desirable traits for winning jobs in trade sectors of the economy, with or without a high school education. Gang members and potential gang members were diverted from paths of youthful delinquency into a highly varied and active economy. The potential leaders of fraternities had highly attractive alternatives to a life of crime. Times changed and the fraternities died (Page 1997). Presently, the

main sources of Hispanic gang members are Central American immigrants' children and the children of post-Mariel Cubans.

The demise of the Cuban fraternities demonstrates, albeit at a temporal distance, how gangs might cease to exist: provision of viable adult roles for their members in some mainstream activity. The Cuban community's success in Dade County accomplished this co-optation naturally by providing so many options. As other immigrant populations prospered in the larger political economic system, they likewise were able to offer a wide variety of viable adult roles to their youth. One of the unique aspects of the Cuban experience is the fact that, rather than having to incorporate themselves into the larger dominant system, they built their own economic territory in the context of the larger system. Consequently, the jobs made available to young Cubans were offered by predominantly Cuban merchants and businessmen. Other immigrant groups' emergence into the larger system did not have this feature to the same degree as the Cuban emergence.

The case of Haitians in Miami illustrates a very different trajectory of adaptation to immigration. Haitians had been coming to Miami in significant numbers since the turn of the century, but by 1978, they had begun to arrive in larger numbers, so that by 1991, there were at least 100,000 in South Florida (Nachman 1993). Until the end of the 1970s, the Haitian population in Miami was invisible to the mainstream. Visibility of this population increased only slightly after 1980, and the image portrayed in some literature (e.g. Stepick & Stepick 1990; Stepick 1992) tended to be rose-colored (Laguerre 1998). People already established in South Florida, according to this view, perceived Haitians as willing workers, cheerful despite their poverty, and strongly motivated to achieve through hard work and education. With the mid 1980s and the full force of the panic over AIDS, the erroneous attribution of AIDS to Haitian nationality (Nachman & Dreyfus 1986; Farmer 1992) and the continuing arrival of more Haitians led to their increasing stigmatization. Prejudice against Haitians worsened as a consequence of their children's adoption of the street cultural characteristics in marginalized neighborhoods. Our anthropological observations of Miami/Dade's Haitian community over the last two decades have chronicled an alarming process that can only be termed marginalization. Despite difficulties in adapting to a new cultural setting and extreme poverty, the Haitian community had, during its first fifteen years of existence, no evidence of youth gangs.

When the present study was in its planning stages in 1997, the gang detail of the Metro-Dade police force estimated to us that no fewer than six Haitian gangs were active, with up to 600 total members. The Miami Herald (1994,1996,1997) reported on the marginalization of Haitian youth and their involvement in gangs and drugs. This emergent phenomenon seemed to reflect a combination of condition 2 and condition 1 for formation of gangs. According to our early investigations among Haitian youth, we found that self-protection from other African American youth was reported as a motivation for forming or joining a gang. At the same time, we learned of formerly African American gangs that Haitian youth have taken over.

We began our three-year study of Haitian youth in 1999 with the plan of recruiting 300 at-risk youth from street environments, administering a structured interview schedule to these recruits, and then focusing in-depth and clinical assessment studies on subsets of this group. As our field recruitment of study participants progressed and our ethnographic team had opportunities to conduct participant observation and in-depth interviews, we were able to probe the forms that adaptation took for young Haitian Americans. The powerful cultural influences that surrounded them had major impact on their behavior and their relations with their parents. They imitated, as much as possible given the limitations of their finances, the dress of the hip-hop subcultural complex, jarring the parents' sensibilities regarding clothing, hair care, and footwear by wearing oversized pants that did not quite cover their boxer shorts, getting haircuts that left designs shaved among the stubble, and demanding sneakers that cost more than $100. They composed and recorded songs in the style of the gangsta rap artists. They smoked tobacco and marijuana and became aware of the opportunities to traffic in the various forms of cocaine.

Although all of the cultural influences mentioned above had a noticeable influence on the behavior of the young people who participated in our study, they did not abandon their identities as Haitian Americans. Most (175 of 292) had been born in the United States,

and 25 had been born in the Bahamas, but practically all of them self-identified as Haitian or Haitian-American. Furthermore, those who had become involved in unsupervised peer groups often named these groups "zo (*other noun*)," a name that connoted a strong sense of being Haitian. The word "zo" in Creole means "bone," and it implies that when only my bones are left, I am still Haitian.

Our original study hypothesized that extensive traumatic experience of young Haitians was related to involvement in violent acts, criminality, and gang behavior. In order to pursue that hypothesis, each respondent answered a series of questions about traumatic experience, and eventually, a subset of those who self-reported traumatic experience received a clinical assessment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This hypothesis was emphatically rejected when we analyzed our data (cf. Douyon, Marcelin, Jean-Gilles, & Page n.d.). Subsequent analyses indicated that young Haitians who had lived or had grown up in households with just one parent present were more likely to have engaged in undesirable behavior than youths who had lived or were living in two-parent households, even when one parent was a step-parent (Page & Marcelin 2003). In this interpretation, the street, with its myriad opportunities for meeting the materialistic and social needs of Haitian youths, awaited those children with either the freedom or the temerity to emerge into the street scene. Parents who could effectively maintain authority in the household were empowered to prevent the emergence of their children into the arena where drug use, fighting, and criminality can be learned.

The ways in which Haitian youth participated in the "street option" varied widely. Some merely "hung out" with their peers on street corners or at the homes of friends, listening to music and perhaps smoking tobacco and/or marijuana, and possibly drinking malt liquor. If a consistent hang-out group convened regularly for these kinds of activities, they called themselves a "group." The next level in terms of social organization found by our field team was the "clique," which did everything that the group did, with the addition of somewhat greater cohesiveness, some focus on a dress code, and the possibility of small-scale drug traffic and minor skirmishes with non-clique members. The gloss "gang," as used among our

study participants had strong organizational features, including exclusive membership, hierarchic leadership, and structured involvement in criminal behavior. Differentiation among the groupings called gangs by the study participants involved degree rather than presence or absence. All gang members or former gang members reported a wide variety of activities in which their gangs engaged, including auto theft, burglary, armed robbery, fights involving firearms, and drug trafficking. Different gangs focused on different activities, but all were capable of criminality and violence.

The most organized and powerful of the gangs observed by our field team engaged in "regulating" a large territory in which that particular gang assumed hegemony over all illegal activities. Because the whole phenomenon of youth gangs among Haitian youth was relatively young (at most six years old at the time of the study) these highly organized gangs still did not have the "long" traditions of gangs found elsewhere (cf. Hagedorn 1988; Vigil 1988, 2003). This lack of established traditions, hierarchies and power relations may help to explain the high level of violence attributed to Haitian gangs in 1996 (*Miami Herald* 1996).

## MIGRATION HISTORY AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

Immigration issues have shaped and fed the gang phenomenon among Haitian youths in various ways. For example, as the juvenile justice system implemented tougher laws in order to contain juvenile related violence, drug use and gang activity, the US Immigration and Naturalization Services came into play in a more radical way. On one hand, jails and prisons in the US are overcrowded and very costly to maintain. On the other hand, the industry of delinquency and violent offenders does not stop; it produces some delinquents who are citizens, but most of the time, it produces delinquents who are not. In Florida, when the justice system caught a Haitian youth for drug or gang related crimes, the INS promptly implemented their deportation to Haiti.

According to an estimation by the New York based National Coalition for Haitian Rights, from January to July 2000, the United States has deported more than 1900 individuals of whom 70 percent were under 25 years old and had a criminal record related to gang

activities. All of those individuals did not come from Florida, but the consequences for the gang and the drug industries were tremendous. Estimates by local researchers and individual agencies working with the weak juvenile system in Haiti, sustain that more than half of the deportees ended up in gangs or gang related activities. We have documented gang members in Miami who have been deported to Haiti, had been recruited in a heavily armed and criminally involved gang in a neighborhood called "Cité Soleil," eventually to find their way back to the United States! Although we do not have yet a reliable estimate as to how many of "deportees/returnees" have been circulating from Miami to Haiti to Miami – and in some case, from New York to Haiti to Miami – the fact remains that their networks are powerful enough to get them out jail in the US, to find them new passports, in some case new visas in Haiti, and get back to work in the United States.

One of the families with whom we are working called us to "provide guidance and support" to its 16 year old kid who have been referred to opportunity school. After obtaining the consent of his family we recruited him as a study participant. He is part of what he called a "clique" that occasionally steals or sells cocaine "rock" in the streets. We found out later that at age 13, he was sent to Haiti as a punishment for his repeated misbehaviors. Most Haitian parents try to deal with the challenge of juvenile delinquency or to gain control over their children by sending them to Haiti. By doing so, they hope, their kids will learn good manners and high values. In this particular case, our young respondent told us in an interview, that it was in Haiti (actually in rural Haiti), not in the streets of Miami, that he first tried cocaine and learned about gangs!

In the process of comparing preliminary data on gang proliferation collected in Haiti with the data collected by Dr. Inácio Cano, a colleague who studies gang activities and violence in Brazil, Salvador and Nicaragua, in order to find commonalties and differences. Salvador and Haiti provide compelling cases in point. Two elements appear to be critical in Salvador and Haiti: First, the post Cold War crisis that results in the dismantling of their traditionally repressive regimes has precipitated the conversion of "death squads" into criminal gangs that can be manipulated by local groups and politicians.

In the case of Haiti, traditional institutions could no longer contain the generalized crisis of a ruined rural economy, the destructuring of the family, the massive migration of peasants to the cities, the explosion of filthy and unhealthy shantytowns, and the disarticulation of the State apparatus. The crisis affected every corner of Haitian society (until today), and it has resulted in the dismantlement of the repressive Army and its para-militaries (*tontons macoutes* and *attachés*). In today's Haiti, most of the individuals who command the gang networks used to serve in repressive and para-military institutions and have been widely identified by local Haitian police, human rights institutions, and independent researchers. Most of them have reconstituted networks that include very high levels in Haitian society. In a country where the state can no longer contain its traditional "professionals of repression," specific groups can only maintain and consolidate their local power through the drug market.

The second commonality between Salvador and Haiti involves the radical destabilization of the local economy by the advance of global capitalism which had reconfigured the national market economy within the new rules of globalization. In both countries the drug market is perceived as the principal means through which acquisition of wealth can be possible during an individual lifetime. This phenomenon has become widespread, mostly in Haiti's urban areas. The young deportees we describe here become the eager recruits of this complex of drug related activity in Haiti.

## CONCLUSION

Haitian youth in our study were predominantly "American-born," but their problems were directly related to the cultural transitions that they and their families were experiencing. As policy makers decide what to do about the problems found among Haitian youth in Miami, consideration of the following points would contribute to avoidance of violence and other criminality among Haitian youth:

1. The socioeconomic context in which Haitian youth most often live needs basic improvement, especially in terms of jobs that pay living wages. Parents who are competent wage earners tend to have more effective power over their house-

holds.

2. Although many Haitian youth are born in the United States, we can expect them to retain their Haitian identity. Their non-Haitian peers need to learn to respect that choice and appreciate the cultural diversity that it offers.

3. Immigration brings about dependency of the parents on the children in many areas of life. Immigrant parents need training in how to continue to "be the adult" in their respective households.

4. Widespread subtle racism is still a factor in the adaptation of Haitians to conditions in South Florida.

5. All transitions are difficult. The Haitian population in Miami/Dade County has achieved a critical mass only recently, and the problems that we see now can be alleviated with time. Nevertheless, it is possible to intervene in the processes of adjustment to life in the U.S. to make adaptation less painful.

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