

## **“DRINKING, KICKING BACK AND GANG BANGING”: ALCOHOL, VIOLENCE AND STREET GANGS**

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### **THE VIOLENCE QUESTION**

Criminologists and sociologists have had a longstanding interest in gang violence, dating back to Thrasher's (1927) ethnographic observations of Chicago's gangs in the 1920's. Debates have focused on a range of issues such as whether violence is a defining property of gangs. This question has led to analyses of the frequency, variability, severity, and organization of violence in gang life (Moore, Garcia, Garcia, Cerda, Valencia 1978; Sanchez-Jankowski 1991; Sanders 1994; Taylor 1989). The etiology of gang violence also has been of central concern with a variety of reasons being advanced. Yablonsky (1970) advocated a psycho-social framework in which gang violence was tied to the pathology of the group's leadership. Other attempts to construct a causal model were connected by an interest in class issues. Miller (1958) advocated a culture of poverty argument in which gang life including violence merely reflected the focal concerns of the lower classes. Cohen (1955) argued that gang members' hostility and aggression represents a reaction-formation to their inability to measure up to the middle class measuring rod. They reject their rejecters, and status is achieved through an alternative value system which emphasizes negativistic, malicious, and non-utilitarian behavior. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) took the notion of status deprivation further, suggesting that the variations in the legitimate and illegitimate opportunities in different lower class communities influences whether a gang is criminal, retreatist or violent.

As Moore notes (1990), however, such explanations obscure the great variability in gangs, gang related violence, and the communities they live in. Recent studies (Sanchez-Jankowski 1991; Sanders 1994) suggest that questions of causality also must distinguish between individual and collective forms of violence among gang members as the former predominates over the latter. This point is important in understanding the gang, drug and violence connection (Moore 1990). Studies have found variability in gang participation in drug dealing and related violence (Decker, Van Winkle 1994; Joe 1994; Waldorf 1993).

Skolnick, Correl, Navarro, & Rabb (1989) and Skolnick, Blumenthal & Correl (1990) argue that two types of gangs existed - a "cultural" gang, similar to the traditional neighborhood gang as described by Moore (1978) and an "instrumental" gang which was organized for the explicit purpose of generating income. Taylor (1989) outlines a similar typology with the scavenger and corporate gangs. Those who follow this framework further suggest that, not only has a new type of gang emerged, but also that "instrumental gang" have exacerbated violent behavior. For example, Goldstein (1985, 1989) refers to the systemic violence used to maintain strict organizational discipline and to ensure market regulation and control (Cooper 1987; Mieczkowski 1986). This concern with drug related violence not only re-affirms the strong association between delinquency and drug use (Elliot, Huizinga, Ageton 1985; Fagan, Weiss, Cheng 1990; White, Hansell, Brick 1993), but reinforces the tendency to overlook the role of alcohol within gang life.

Gang researchers have noted that drinking is a major component of the social life of gangs, and a common place activity (Campbell 1984; Fagan 1993; Hagedorn 1988; Moore 1991; Padilla 1992; Sanchez-Jankowski 1991; Stumphauzer, Veloz, Aiken 1981; Vigil, Long 1990). Few, however, have looked specifically at the role of alcohol within the social life of gangs, or even the relationship between drinking and gang violence. Existing research on the role of alcohol in youth gangs has been, to paraphrase Dwight Heath (1975), a "felicitous by-product" of other interests.

The connections between drinking and gang violence is an important area for investigation for several reasons. First, it allows us to determine whether gang members' alcohol use is important in "violence prone situations" and at the same time, reveals the sequence of events that lead from drinking to violent or aggressive behavior (Burns 1980). Second, it demonstrates the ways in which individuals are potentially both offender and victim (Sampson, Lauritsen 1994). Gang members are constantly involved both in defending

their masculinity, their honor and their territory or attempting to gain status by asserting their masculinity. Therefore while on one occasion, gang members may be the perpetrators of violence, they may at other times, find themselves the victim (Sampson, Lauritsen 1990). Third, it illustrates the way in which new members are socialized by their peers into both acceptable drinking behavior and acceptable aggressive behavior. From the moment a new member joins the gang, the novice is expected to exhibit his/her ability to support the gang and fellow gang members in whatever ways are necessary, whether that be in the world of drinking or within the world of aggression. Taken together, the role of alcohol in the social life of youth gangs constitutes a natural and highly symbolic arena in which to fulfill the call for further research on the nexus of drinking and violence (Collins 1993; Pernanen 1991; Roizen 1993).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data for this analysis are drawn from two studies on ethnic youth gangs in Northern California in which we conducted field work and interviews with 659 gang members between 1990 and 1994 in the African American, Asian, and Hispanic communities. There are no exact figures on the number of youth gangs in the Northern California area. We initially sought police estimates for comparative purposes, but did not rely on law enforcement for any referrals. We relied on a snowball sampling strategy (Biernacki, Waldorf 1981), and were able to locate and interview members from 99 different gangs.

We conducted the interviews in two steps with an initial quantitative survey followed by an in-depth, tape recorded session in which members responded to open-ended questions about life in the gang. The use of traditional ethnographic and survey methods provided the means for looking at the group's history, organization and activities, personal demographics, drug and alcohol use, individual and group involvement in violent acts, and self reported contact with the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Interviews lasted, on average, two hours, and respondents were compensated with a monetary honorarium. The fieldworkers conducted interviews in a variety of settings including respondent's home, parks, coffee shops, cars, and office space in community agencies. Our two African American interviewers had known or had

connections to gang members in their communities and initiated several chains. The Latino fieldworkers initiated contact with gang members through a number of community youth agencies, and over time, the referral source became other gang members. The four Asian interviewers were recruited through contacts with gang members and social agencies. Validity and reliability concerns were addressed in a variety of ways including rephrasing and repeating of questions and cross checks on respondents' veracity through weekly staff discussions and field observations (Joe 1993).

Briefly, the gang members in our sample have the following socio-demographic characteristics. The ethnicity of our sample was 44 percent African American, 24 percent Latino, 24 percent Asian (including Southeast Asian), and 8 percent other. Respondents ranged in age from 13 to 40. The median age was 20, however, our Southeast Asian respondents tended to be slightly younger having a median age of 18. The educational level of the interviewed gang members was generally low. Younger members tended to still be in school; 31 percent of the interviewed gang members were still attending school. Among those who were no longer in school, the majority had dropped out. Within each ethnic group, the dropout rate was: 38 percent among African Americans; 27 percent among Asians; and 20 percent among Latinos. The majority of the gang members' came from working and lower class backgrounds as measured by father's and mother's occupation.

## YOUTH GANGS AND DRINKING Hanging Around

Gang members spend the majority of their day "hanging around" (Corrigan 1976) or "kickin' back," and typically describe this in the very mundane terms of "doing nothing." Although adults perceive these activities as a waste of time, the everyday practice of "doing nothing" is often an intense and busy period of time (Corrigan 1976). Activities that occur while members are "kickin' back" include talking, recounting details from previous events, joking, discussing business, defending one's honor, maintaining one's respect, fending off insults, keeping the police at bay, "cruising" around in a car, doing a few deals, defending turf, and getting high. Drinking is endemic to gang life, and as some gang members indicate, the consumption of alcohol occurs through the course of everyday social activities.

This Latino gang member's account of a usual day illustrates that the mundane activity of "hanging around" involves a hectic and long day:

I: Describe the activities of a usual day of a Home Boy? What time did you get up?

R: Mine began about 6:30 or 7:00. Because I take the people who are going to go to work, they want to stop off and get their morning fix to get on to go to work.

I: You take care of the morning crowd?

R: Right that involves getting my morning beer you know. I drink down the beer which calms my stomach you know. I fix and then I get out and hit Mission between 16th and actually maybe only 18th. For the two times I can make up to like \$800. You know what I mean, selling quarters at \$30 to \$45 a thing depending on how square they are or if they are a regular one you know how to trim that. Then after that I go take me a nap. I get up at 10:00. The other one comes on and I rest for a couple of hours. What I have to do is I take a shower and get dressed change clothes, so that the narc don't start to recognize me because I am wearing the same thing constantly ..... I will come out and maybe work an hour or two for the afternoon. It is a group of us though, we work the afternoon and drink a bunch of beer. Just get kind of buzzing. Then you kill time until the evening crowd.

.... What is good about the Home Boys man is one will go out and spend \$25 on food ..... bring a bunch of tacos and burritos back and say it is time to eat. Because you got to keep as much powder as you do you, make sure you put some nutriment in that body. And after that, after lunch time some of us kick back smoke a little herb and drink some more beer and kind of let the newer people get out there. And catch the stray people here and there.....

This is getting to be about 4:00. Then we bring the young guys from the inside with the girls and give them a break. Feed them and then those guys go attract the evening crowd. Because the evening after work everyone gets off of work and they want to boom do it again.

Take care of that business you know. Now this is getting to be about 6:00 or 6:30. Through out this continually thing there is drinking you know you are always having your cervaco, man. And okay so like about 6.30 it slows down a little bit. There is still a lot of freak action going on constantly. So we would either change the clothes because we know at 3:30 or 4:00 the chotas (police) change shifts too. Sowe change

clothes. We shift people around a little bit around so that they can, no one is really getting identified so to speak right there.

This vivid account demonstrates the intensity and order in "hanging out": meeting up with others; earning a day's pay; arranging and eating meals together; getting energy to last through the day; and avoiding police attention. Importantly, it also underscores the extent to which drinking is an integral part of those activities. His drinking begins with an early morning beer, in the afternoon a "bunch of beer" is consumed, supplemented with a "little herb", and at this point the "buzzing" begins. Once the evening commences, drinking becomes continuous. His case is not an isolated one, as can be seen from another Latino gang member's description of a normal day:

I called my friends up and told them let's meet somewhere. We got some money and go buy beers. Got some beers and kicked back. We played some basketball and talked to some girls. After we finished talking, we got some more beer, and kicked back and go meet another friend and go for a ride...after we cruise around we rest until 5.0 we meet everybody and drink up some more.... Then when night comes we should be drunk by then. I guess we are all pretty drunk because I was drinking all day long.

This prevalence of drinking is not confined solely to Latino gang members, but also occurred among other ethnic gangs. This African-American gang member recounts his typical day:

I: Describe the activities of a usual day. Like yourself, you wake up at what time?

R: Wake up, go to the store, get some drink, hold it for later on 'til when we come outside.

I: About what time do you get up? And get out?

R: Well, I get out and go job hunt for a minute, come back, go get the drink, take it to the house. About 11:30 am come back outside. Somebody might be out there. We just get the party started.

I: Oh, okay, and hang out how long?

R: 'Til everything is gone.

I: What you mean, "everything is gone?"

R: 'Til the drink, the dope, everything.

In comparing the experiences of

different ethnic gangs, we found that although Latinos commenced regular drinking (defined as drinking any type of alcohol more than once a month) earlier than other ethnic groups, African Americans reported much higher alcohol use for all three categories of alcohol - beer, wine and hard liquor. In terms of units of alcohol, the mean number of all units reported by African-Americans was three times that of Latinos and five times that of Asian-Americans.

Still Asian American gang members similarly report that "hanging out" involves drinking usually in public settings like bars, parks, and housing projects, and, occasionally private parties.

Most of the day, the biggest problem with being in a gang is boredom. Most of the gang guys, everyone is looking for fast money, hardly any one works, so you got a lot of free time on your hands. You wake up late, you hang out, planning ways to make money. Most of the time you are bored... Most of the time is spent hanging out either at the bar or the coffee shop.

Even when gang members have legitimate employment, the role of alcohol in "kicking back" remains central in their everyday social activities. This Chinese gang member, who works part time, describes the organization of a typical day:

I went to work in the morning, stayed home and then ate dinner. Made some calls, hooked up with everyone in the project, and we went out to a bar in the Richmond, had a lot of drinks, met back in Chinatown to have a related dinner, two or three in the morning... Sometimes we just get buzzed at the project and just stay there.

"Partying" is another regular activity, where drinking is an integral component (Moore 1991; Moore et al 1978; Vigil 1988; Vigil, Yun 1990). As one gang member remarked when asked about the most frequent activities he did with his homeboys, replied:

The most activities I do with my homeboys is we party a lot. We party and we go cruising. We go to dances... we go to street parties ... and we party and drink beer and gettin' high.

According to Moore (1991), "partying", for Latino gangs was synonymous with drinking or getting high. We found this to be the case

among the different ethnic gangs with "partying" occurring in public places like dance halls, bars, and parks, or private parties held in someone's apartment or garage. Private parties were sometimes formally arranged, and were organized either as occasions for celebrations as well as occasions for grieving. More frequently, partying was informal and spontaneous as this gang member described the weekend:

Well we just kick back, so you know on Saturday night, somebody always comes by, hey how much you got, I got five bucks, well I got three, lets go see if we can get some 12 packs or something, or some other one got some more money, everybody comes in, lets party, its like everybody goes to party everyday.

### Symbolic Significance

Drinking is a commonplace and integral part of everyday life among gang members, and in all these activities, alcohol can be said to act, as with many other social groups, as a social "lubricant", or social "glue" working to maintain cohesion within the group (Moore et al 1978; Vigil 1988; Vigil, Yun 1990). Moreover, in male dominated gangs, where intoxicated behavior is more acceptable, it also works to affirm masculinity and male solidarity (Dunning, Murphy, Williams 1988; Messerschmidt 1993; Peace 1992). Comparisons across the different ethnic gangs, however, suggests that drinking affirms masculinity in culturally defined ways. Existing research on Latino gangs suggests that drinking plays a key role in the creation of a "macho" identity.

Yeah, we just cruised around [yesterday]. We stopped by and picked up some beers and drink up. And then we went to his house and just mess around, use weights, pumped up.

"Machismo" includes demonstrations of strength and "toughness" as well as "locura" (crazy or wild) (Feldman, Mandel, Fields 1985; Moore 1991; Padilla 1992; Vigil, Long 1990). As Vigil and Long (1990) have noted, alcohol can work as a "facilitator" in the observance of ritually wild or crazy behavior, especially in violent conflicts with outsiders.

Studies of African-American gang life suggest the construction of a different cultural identity. One where "the overall street style and the desired approach to projecting an individual's personal image can be summed

up in the word 'cool'" (Feldman 1985; Hagedorn 1988; Taylor 1989). In this sub-culture, occasional drinking is the norm (MacLeod 1987) in public and private settings.

After everybody's pockets were financially secured we went to one of our partner's houses and drank until about nine or ten at night and then retired.

Although the African-American gang members in our sample reported relatively higher alcohol use than the other ethnic groups, the style of drinking and the behavior associated with stresses that intoxicated drinking undermines the "cool" image, and is likely to be interpreted as a sign of "being out of control." In the case of Asian-Americans, the available research suggests different attitudes to drinking. On the one hand, Chin (1990) suggests that intoxication is frowned upon by Chinese gangs. On the other hand, our own work on both Asian-American and Southeast Asian gangs (Toy 1992; Waldorf, Hunt, Joe 1994) suggests that although drinking is not heavy among these groups, it is nevertheless widespread and intoxication in public and private places appears acceptable. In addition to its role as a cohesive mechanism, particular drinking styles within gangs may operate, as with other social groups (Cohen 1985; Hunt, Satterlee 1986), as a mechanism to maintain group boundaries thereby demarcating one gang from another. In this way, particular drinking styles can be seen as similar to other symbolic insignia including tattoos, dress colors and codes. Alcohol was also ritualistically used to remember absent gang members who had either been killed or who were currently in prison or jail. For example, Campbell (1991) describes an incident where each gang member, during a drinking session, ritually poured alcohol on to the floor prior to drinking from a bottle of rum which was being passed around, "...he pours a little of the rum on the ground in memory of those who are dead or who are in jail".

### **AGGRESSION AND VIOLENCE**

In the same way that drinking appears endemic to gang life so also does aggressive and violent behavior. According to Sanchez-Jankowski (1991), violence is the "currency of life" within gangs. Furthermore, just as drinking can be seen to fulfill certain symbolic roles or functions within a social group, so also does

violence. It can work symbolically as a way of demonstrating to one's peers that one is a dependable member of the gang (Messerschmidt 1993; Padilla 1992; Vigil 1988). In addition, it reinforces solidarity among the group (Sanders 1994). Violence also operates as a way of gaining "recognition" and status. Just as heavy drinking can operate to allow gang members to exhibit special traits of masculinity and toughness, so also can violence. As Messerschmidt (1993) has noted, young minority males who are denied access to legitimate resources often create a context for public and private forms of aggressive masculinity, within which violence and drinking are key components.

The symbolic elements of violence have unfortunately tended to be neglected by many researchers, who in accepting common sense definitions of violence, have failed to examine either the ritualized qualities or the rules of behavior that underlie their operation. In attempting to uncover some of these symbolic meanings or hidden rules, Marsh and his associates (1978) distinguish between aggression and violence. Confrontations between male gangs, in this case football hooligans in England, often possess ritualized aggressive behavior which are largely symbolic and instead of leading inevitably to violent behavior operate as a break on the aggression developing into severe violence. Marsh identifies a number of features, used by group members to signify symbolic aggression including dress styles, known as "the gear", as well as particular postures.

These features are clearly similar to those described in several gang studies in the U.S. For example, Conquergood (n.d.) discusses in great detail not just different styles but also intricate body representations, for example tattoos, which signify a wide range of symbolic gestures. Many of these gestures, such as hand signals both affirm one's own gang and negate the other. Other examples of symbolic negation include erasing another gang's graffiti or drawing the characteristic symbols of another gang upside down or reversed. "This represents a symbolically complex way of killing the Other through the desecration of his or her name" (Conquergood n.d.). Such gestures illustrate that aggressive behavior may not always be through physical or violent confrontation, but instead can be produced through forms of cultural and symbolic practice.

Marsh and his colleagues (1978) also examine the existence of "...a distinct and orderly system of roles, rules and shared meanings" which operate to determine conflict resolution. Marsh shows the way in which "taken-for-granted" rules dictate when it is appropriate for one group to attack another, how the fight should proceed and how the fight should be closed. A similar system of rule-governed behavior also operates in gang cultures. For example, Moore (1991) discusses the importance among Latino gang members of the notion of control, which refers to both individual and group control. This belief in a sense of control "never starting fights but being willing to fight if necessary" was so strong that members who violated the norm, often referred to as the extreme "locos", were frowned upon and, if they persisted in stirring up trouble, could be expelled from the gang.

These symbolic gestures and rules of conduct are not unique to gang culture, but are similar to other forms of fighting and warfare, in our own society as well as in other cultures. As many anthropologists have shown, fighting and warfare include ceremonial activities with specific sequential structures, elaborate preparatory stages, and stylized social means for the issuing and acceptance of challenges. These activities suggest a mode of fighting that seems guaranteed to inflict the least possible amount of death or injury (Marsh et al 1978; Riches 1986).

One central task then is to examine and compare those circumstances whereby ritualized aggressive behaviors dominate and those that lead to more overtly violent behavior. Moreover, this would also include an examination of the role of alcohol in these settings. We now turn to explore some of the social settings and conditions under which gang members drink and engage in aggressive and violence.

## VIOLENT ACTIVITIES AND DRINKING

### Internal Violence

Parkin (1986), in examining the role of violence and death among the Giriama of Kenya, distinguishes between violence whose cause is seen as being within the group or community and violence emanating from outside forces. This distinction can be used to distinguish violent gang activities. Violent activities directed internally include, for example, induction ceremonies where members are put through different forms of physical trials - referred to as "jumpin-in" - "...which test

member's toughness and desire for membership" (Vigil, Yun 1990). Such ceremonies are common for both male and female gang members (Campbell 1990, 1991). The ritualized physical testing of potential group members is a common occurrence in many societies and has been described and analyzed by many anthropologists. As Heald (1986) has noted, group initiation are similar to examples of "battleproofing" in military training, where the new recruit experiences a situation of stress that allows them "...to develop confidence in their ability to face danger". Similar to Padilla's findings (1992), we also found these gang initiations or "rites de passage" ceremonies are sometimes accompanied by drinking both for the participants and for the spectators. Other examples of internal gang violent activities associated with drinking include fighting between members because of notions of honor, respect, rivalries or tensions. Tensions may arise when two gang members or cliques compete for power or status within the gang, or when two members compete over the affection of another. After bouts of drinking, these simmering rivalries may erupt and fighting often occurs. As one Latino noted, when asked if there was intra-gang fighting:

Sure, if it gets hectic and we are kind of drunk. We don't know what we are doing sometimes. That's alcohol, especially that Old English. You fight and smile today but laugh about it tomorrow.

In such cases, as other researchers have noted, alcohol works to create a ritualized context for fighting, and violent confrontations, whether physical or verbal (MacAndrew, Edgerton 1969; Szwed 1966), in which in-built tensions can be released or disputes settled within a contained arena. Once resolved through alcohol-related violence, the group can maintain its cohesion and unity. In fact, on some occasions once the conflict has ceased, the antagonists seal their unity by sharing a beer. As another Latino respondent remarked:

Yeah, we fight amongst each other, over a little argument but it never goes no further than a fist fight. And then we just shake hands and go have a beer and that is that.

However, in spite of the endemic nature of drinking within gangs, different views may operate, especially between men and women,

on definitions of acceptable and unacceptable behavior while drinking or being high. For instance, a number of our female respondents complained about sexually violent male behavior. In the following example, the Latina respondent, although expressing anxiety for reporting her homeboy to the police, felt that she was justified because the homeboy had violated a sense of trust between her and her homeboys. This trust extended even to situations when she was high.

I: Do any of the homeboys hit on or bother the homegirls sexually?

R: Well, yeah, it did happen to me once with one of the guys from 18th..... When this happened to me, I told one of my homeboys, but he's in jail..... I pressed charges on him because he raped me ..... I felt real bad. I didn't go to the park. I wouldn't show my face. I wouldn't hang out with them no more because, you know, I felt so bad because he was from 18th. I had been there for three, four years now and none of them had ever did stuff like that to us..... But I pressed charges on him, you know, and I told my other friends that day - one of 'em, when I told them, he was crying 'cause he's known me since I was twelve and he's always taken care of me. And, you know, he told me that if he would have been out, this wouldn't have happened to me..... One of 'em that was real close to him. He's the friend, right? And he was talking shit to me, telling me oh, I wasn't supposed to go back and tell him 'cause I was high when this happened, right? And he was trying to tell me, "Oh, you got drunk with him. It was your fault. You got high with him. That was not right." And I told him, you know, that I could get high with the other guys and none of this would happen to me, you know? And I could get drunk or whatever with anybody.

### **Violent Activities and Drinking: External to the Group**

External violent activities encompass many different types of activities including: violence targeting a member or members of a rival gang; violence against residents of the gang's own neighborhood; and violence against gangs or residents of another neighborhood (Sanchez-Jankowski 1991). The reasons for such conflict are varied and include such issues as: gang members testing others, gang members' perceptions that they or their territories have been "disrespected", gang members' fears that their turfs are under threat, and gang members' attempts to expand their turf,

and fighting over the affections of another. In many of these types of external violent activities, drinking prior to the event is common.

The gang members in our sample report drinking immediately prior to most of the violent inter-gang incidences that they were involved in. Aggressive and violent encounters with others was usually unplanned, and took place in the context of socializing and drinking with their fellow gang members. This gang member captures the frequently described happenstance nature of inter-gang fighting:

Well we got into different fights with different group... Like the one with SS... We were just all at a baroneday and I don't even remember what started it. It started outside. One of them got into a fight with someone that hangs with us... I forgot [how the fight started] but you know, one thing led to another. Somebody threw a punch and then everybody went at it in the street.

This African-American gang member recounts when a "keg party" deteriorated into a fight.

We went to a party it was about 6 months ago. We went down there to a party. Someone said come down because we are going to have a kegger. We are going to party. A couple of my Home Girls are going to be there. Come down. So four of us went down there..... We were partying and all of a sudden some Home Boys from Diablo Park had come up there. They came in talking shit. He came up to one of my Home Boys saying "this is D.C. (Daly City) east side D.C." my Home Boy was like we don't want no problems we just came to party. The Home Boy was like I don't give a fuck, we are going to get it on. Some Home Boy went and another Home Boy came in with a fucking golf club and started going wild. So one of my Home Boys went out to the car and he got the gauge (gun) and came in, he was blasting. I was like so lets get out of here. Lets just go because D.C.P.D. (the police) is going to be here..... I don't know who got hit or whatever, we were just at a party.

The occasion for drinking, as described above, is tied not only to celebrations but also to grieving. Another gang member describes a shooting that took place at a funeral party.

A funeral I went to .. my friend started getting drunk and got into with this dude. The dude was going to fight with him. My Home Boy whipped

his ass and the dude got mad.... went to the car...came out with a 22 and shot him.

But violence and drinking are not only associated in a spontaneous way, but coincide more deliberately. As both Vigil (1990) and Moore (1991) have noted, gang members may drink deliberately prior to an inter-gang confrontation to assist them to develop a sense of "locura" or wildness. Moreover, gang members may deliberately consume alcohol prior to doing a job, which in turn may develop into a potential violent conflict. For example, several Southeast Asian gang members talk about drinking prior to a "home invasion" to embolden themselves before doing the job. In these cases, alcohol works, not as the literature would suggest as an excuse or deviance disavowal mechanism (Heath 1978; MacAndrew, Edgerton 1969), but instead as an enabling mechanism. While drinking can act as an enabling mechanism, it can also result in "letting one's guard down." This can, sometimes, lead to gang members' victimization. In everyday gang life, the gang member is potentially both offender and victim.

In one case a Latino respondent amusingly recounts a situation where, because he was so drunk, he unwittingly found himself in a party hosted by a rival gang.

Well, I was like a gold mine to them, I was in a party, they threw a party, which I didn't know that they were throwing a party, and I was with my sister and all to pick up her brother, mean not her brother, her boyfriend. So I'm over there, I'm already drunk, so I went inside the party, and I seen them taking pictures of girls, so I tried to get into it, and without knowing who was throwing the party, those 30th boys, so they all looked at me, like what I am doing here, and I ain't even sure ..... and one of them came up to me and.... asked me what I'm doing here? Since I knew him from the past, in ways that came up to me when we talked to me, nothing, I'm drunk, so I just hit him, and then, realizing I'm with each different faces I'm beginning to, remembering all of them, I said oh no, I'm in a party full of these guys, and that was it.

One Chinese gang member recalls an evening at a club which resulted in a shooting and the death of another gang member. The gang rivalry had taken advantage of the setting.

I: What happened?

R: I don't know, we just drinking beer in X [dance club], and then me and my wife were there. I don't know, he tells me something. I tell him to have one last drink. He wanted to go home already but I tell him to stay back until 2:00 and he say all right. We sit there and a lot of us, about 15 of us. We kind of old homeboys and we drinking a lot and we got out at two something. Me and my wife go another way to get my car. His girlfriend parked in the other lot. And all I hear is boom boom boom and I try to run over and he already lay down.

I: Who shot him?

R: I don't really know...[he had a] stocking on his face.

Clearly the relationship between drinking and violence is a complex one. Importantly, although gang violence is typically portrayed as an event involving planning and drug dealing (or drug using), our respondents' experiences suggest that drinking is frequently a precursor to internal and external forms of aggressive, often violent behavior. In addition, the context of fighting, whether it is internally among members or externally with rivals or "outsiders," is normally episodic. Members reported aggressiveness with other members while drinking, and this served as a release, mechanism. In some instances, however, it would lead to deviance disavowal as reported by the Latina who had been sexually assaulted. External violence also was typically spontaneous, as gang members, while drinking, let their guard down. Ironically, drinking among gang members acts in two directions in internal and external situations of violence, as a disavowal and as an enabling mechanism. In this connection then, the role of alcohol in gang violence may operate similarly to other social groups like football hooligans or working class males in pubs.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined an area which has heretofore received very limited attention. Few researchers have examined the inter-connections between two endemic features of gang life: violence and drinking. To date, most gang researchers have focused on violence and its relationship to illicit drugs. This focus has led to a neglect of the importance of alcohol in gang life both as a cohesive and divisive factor. As a corrective to this oversight, we have tried to show, not only the



extent to which drinking is a pervasive feature of gang life, but also the way in which drinking connects with different types and settings of violent behavior. In tracing the possible relationship between these two activities, we have sought to emphasize their symbolic and ritualized content, as opposed to their purely instrumental nature. Gang life is a rich symbolic arena, in which dress codes, graffiti, hand signs and initiation rites express an agreed upon and shared group language. When viewed as symbolic behavior within a socio-cultural context, drinking and violence may begin to display an order, and a structure. The existence of such an underlying structure, often overlooked in societal notions of gang life, may also lead to a realization that gang life, far from epitomizing the extremes of "violence-prone" behavior, may instead merely reflect behaviors common to our own culture and society. Future research should compare the symbolism and context of drinking and violence between gang members and other groups, and in the process, close the distance between "us" and the "other."

#### NOTES

The term "kickin-back" refers to gang members hanging around and the term "gang banging" refers to inter-gang confrontations.

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