



*ARC Centre of Excellence
in Policing and Security*

Towards a theory of gang evolution

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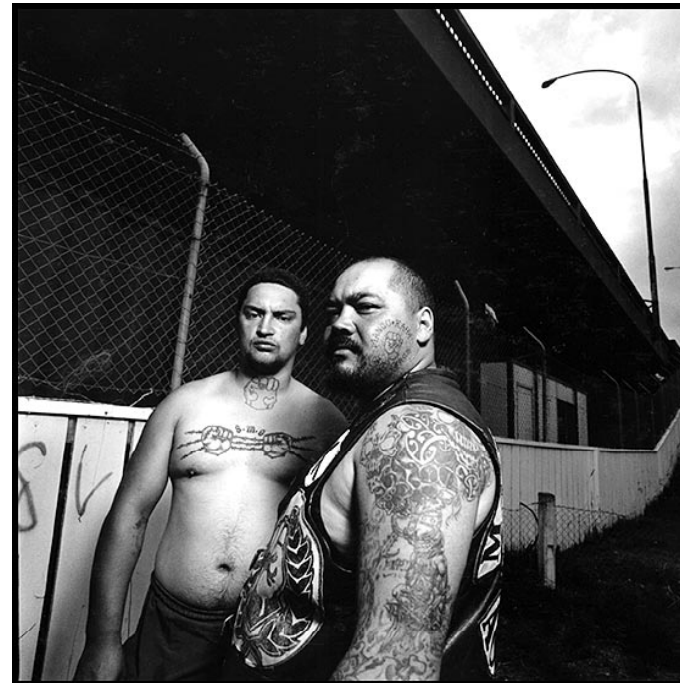
CEPS project 1.1 - Illicit Organisations (Peter Grabosky)

- Gangs
- Organised Crime
- Terrorist Groups

Natural histories

- Organisational level
- Individual level

Hypotheses; testing





Gang research

❖ **Mostly American**

- The Chicago school; California
- Eurogang project
- Australian research

❖ **Problem of defining “gang”**

- ‘street gangs’/‘youth gangs’, versus other types of gangs
- gangs versus other forms of collective behaviour
- gangs versus other types of criminal organisations




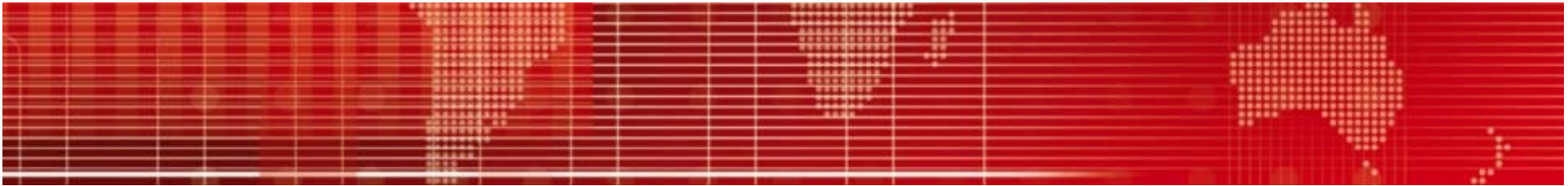


The Eurogang Consensus Nominal Definition of Street Gangs

A street gang (or troublesome youth group)* is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose own identity includes involvement in illegal activity.

*For those preferring not to use the word gang (bande, etc.), the phrase “troublesome youth group” can be substituted.





❖ Problems with data collection

- Police definitions and recording practices vary spatially and temporally
- Self-reporting by gang members unreliable; school surveys of questionable value
- Ethnographies have the usual problems

❖ High “walls”

❖ Some fundamental issues remain

- How socio-economic conditions get translated into the choices of (some) young people
- How gangs facilitate social behaviours
- The relationship between gang presence and crime rates/violence
- The role of sex and gender in gangs
- The role of ethnicity and culture in gangs
- What makes some gangs more resilient than others
- **How and why gangs change**



Towards a Theory of Gang Evolution

1. Signs of gang evolution
2. Previous work
3. Why consider an evolutionary framework?
4. Other evolutionary research
5. An evolutionary framework for gangs
6. Conclusions



Towards a Theory of Gang Evolution

1. Signs of gang evolution

- ❖ **Institutionalization**
 - ❖ **Formalization of organisational structures**
 - ❖ **Sophistication**
 - ❖ **Activities that cross borders**
 - ❖ Transnational presence
 - ❖ Links between gangs in different countries
- Potential for greater harm



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MS-13 gang members

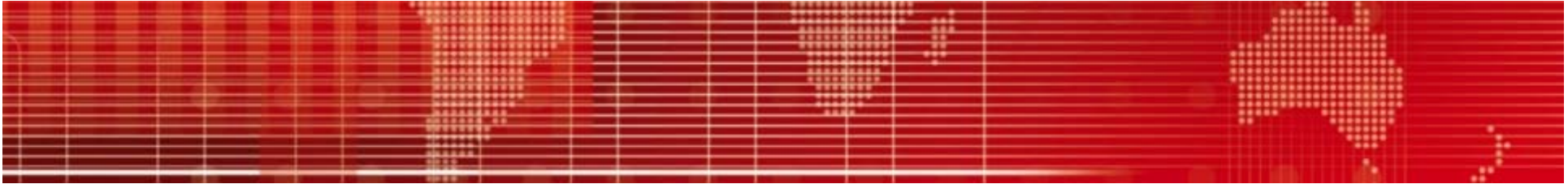


Towards a Theory of Gang Evolution

Signs of gang evolution

- ❖ Institutionalization
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Theories/research having relevance to gang evolution

Park and Burgess 1924

Thrasher 1927

Shaw and McKay 1931



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2. Previous work

Frederick Thrasher, *The Gang: A study of 1,313 gangs in Chicago*, 1927

- 'ganging' is a dynamic process producing organizations that constantly undergo change:

If conditions are favorable to its continued existence, the gang tends to undergo a sort of natural evolution from a diffuse and loosely organized group into the solidified unit which represents the matured gang and which may take one of several forms...(Thrasher 1927: 58)

.....

There is no hard and fast dividing line between predatory groups of boys and criminal groups of younger and older adults. They merge into one another by imperceptible gradations, and the latter have their real explanation, for the most part, in the former.... (Thrasher 1927 28)

- evolution in terms of structure and activities



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Sutherland 1934

Cohen 1955

Cloward and Ohlin 1960

Short and Strodtbeck 1965/1974

Spergel 1984

Bursick and Grasmick 1993

Maxson and Klein 1995

Sullivan 2001

Decker 2001

Weisel 2002

Hagedorn 2005; 2008



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3. Why consider an evolutionary framework for gangs?

- May assist in explaining differential evolution
 - ❖ why some gangs evolve, others do not; or why some gangs evolve quickly, others slowly
- May assist in designing interventions
 - ❖ help prevent greater harm over the long term



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4. Other evolutionary research

- Psychology, politics, linguistics, anthropology, computation, and organizational sociology
- Evolutionary economics
 - ❖ Explaining technological innovation and institutional change in socio-economic systems
 - ❖ Multiple equilibria or evolutionary endpoints
 - ❖ Focuses on evolutionary drivers and the processes of change
 - ❖ Complex adaptive systems that exhibit self-organising behaviour
 - ❖ Concepts of selection, variation and replication 'tuned' for the discipline



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Gangs, like other organisations, are complex systems

- ❖ **More than the sum of their parts**
- ❖ **Shared culture and gang processes**
- ❖ **Gangs self-organise and adapt**



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5. An evolutionary framework for gangs

Mechanisms of variation, selection, and replication at work as gangs adapt to *a changing environment*.

- ❖ **Far reaching socio-economic changes during 20th century**
 - Two world wars and a number of smaller conflicts
 - Waves of immigration
 - Rise of manufacturing sector
 - Deindustrialization; decentralization
 - Technological advances
 - Decreasing demand for unskilled labour
 - Low incomes, high unemployment



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- Chronic marginalisation and social exclusion - the rise of gangs
- Difficulty of 'maturing out' of the gang – persistence of gangs
- New opportunities for illicit gain – institutionalization and evolution of gangs
 - **New markets: income**
 - **Weak states: power**
 - New technologies: coordination and geographic reach



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Rocinha favela, Rio



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Variation

- ❖ Almost infinite variety: structures, demography, geography, criminal activities, purposes, internal workings
- ❖ Variations may be due to
 - Environment
 - Choice
 - Externalities



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Selection – internal features of gangs

- ❖ Selection works on features of the particular variation to preserve advantageous ‘mutations’
- ❖ In biology, mutations occur by chance but with gangs, human agency cannot be discounted
- ❖ Some common selectable variations:
 1. Kinship ties
 2. Leadership and other central positions
 3. Organisational structure



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Selection - external forces

- ❖ **Competition: operating “without the state”**
- ❖ **Institutional opposition: “against the state”**
 - Gang suppression tactics (e.g. street sweeps, hot spot patrols, injunctions, curfews, increased penalties for ‘gang-related’ crime)
 - May work on the least resilient gangs
 - May have unintended consequences such as increased cohesiveness (Klein1995)
 - Displacement caused by suppression may spread gangs and also increase cohesiveness
- ❖ **Institutional support**
 - Similarly may increase cohesiveness



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Retention and Replication

Occurs through modelling (Braithwaite and Drahos 2000 - “observational learning with a symbolic content”)

Modelling takes place

- ❖ Through the media
- ❖ Through instrumental links with other criminal organisations
- ❖ Through social interactions with other criminals
- ❖ Through contemporaneous incarceration

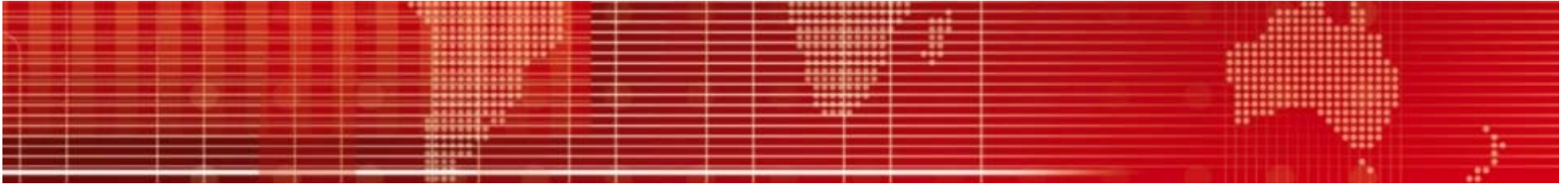


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6. Conclusions

- Generalizations about gangs difficult to make and not particularly helpful
- Need for high quality and detailed intelligence in order to craft effective strategies
- Need for state agencies to understand how suppression or support can have counterproductive effects
- It may be less harmful to do nothing
- Broad scope for further research





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Programs of Research



Generate Insights

Illicit Organisations
Vulnerable Communities
Risky People
Vulnerable Infrastructures
Transnational Actors
Fragile States
Extending Frontiers
Historical Threats
Social Wellbeing

Assess & Evaluate

Investigative Practices
Integrity Systems
Government Coordination
Intelligence Methods
International Responses
Frontline Policing
Legal Frameworks
Performance Models

Innovate & Test

Reduce Crime
Minimise Threats
Harness Technologies
Enhance Wellbeing

Integrate & Implement

Fresh Ideas
Knowledge Integration
Ignorance & Uncertainty
Decision Support

