Gangs in New York City

Successive and pronounced cycles of gang violence have been documented in New York City, reaching back well over a century. Social historian Eric Schneider has chronicled the trajectory of the serious and widespread gang problem that plagued the city from the mid-1940s through the mid-1960s, during the transformation of the city's economy from war production and manufacturing to financial and legal services, insurance, real estate development, and civil service jobs (Schneider 1999).

African American and Puerto Rican families migrating into the city faced a highly racialized labor market that systematically excluded them from well-paying job categories and racial segregation that shunted them into older housing stock located in the poorest neighborhoods. Adolescent peer groups formed within crowded city schools competed outside of school with hostile ethnic groups for recreational space along neighborhood borderlines.

As neighborhood rivalries spread, the schools themselves became contested territory between competing groups of cynical youngsters of color who were well aware of the class, racial, and ethnic barriers that stood between them and opportunities for good jobs in the future. Dropping out of school only stiffened the barriers they faced, trapping them within the city's secondary labor market, where discrimination and exploitation rendered employment an episodic experience at best.

War veterans returning to the city introduced emerging street-corner-fighting groups of disaffected youths to more violent tactics and more sophisticated weaponry. The rate of youths killing youths increased markedly as a result. In 1947 the recognition that gang violence was a serious problem led to establishment of the New York City Youth Board.

Youth Board funding became available to support gang intervention projects operated by private social welfare agencies. The Youth Board placed street-level gang workers (termed "detached workers" because they worked entirely outside of traditional social service program offices) in central Harlem, in the Tompkins Park area in Brooklyn, and in the South Bronx neighborhood of Morrisania to intervene whenever violence flared between neighborhood youth gangs.

Schneider recounts how street workers sought to establish relationships with youths they perceived to be gang leaders and tried to deflect gang members from fighting. They organized athletic programs at neighborhood recreation centers, offering advice supplemented with field trips to amusement parks, beaches, and camp sites. They provided resources for organizing neighborhood social events, block parties, and "hall dances." Their most highly valued service by far was intended to draw individual gang members away from gang activities by locating job opportunities for them.

By 1955 the Youth Board was deploying 40 street gang workers in troubled neighborhoods across the city. Ten years later the number had swelled to 150. While gang members were initially suspicious of street workers, they were also status-conscious—well aware that an officially assigned street worker enhanced a gang's prestige by underscoring its reputation as a dangerous group. Mediation sessions engineered by street workers between hostile gangs dampened violent confrontations, but they also provided a level of recognition approaching celebrity for certain gang leaders.

Even the modest resources street workers provided in their efforts to channel gang members' energies toward more positive social activities could bolster gang cohesion. Yet the city's dedicated commitment to street work as the primary strategy to combat violence among street gang members fostered a far more constructive, less counterproductive response to gang violence than the harsh law enforcement tactics employed by police to suppress gangs in other cities.

Soon after the establishment of the Youth Board, criticism from police and politicians forced it to require that street workers inform the police of impending

gang fights, and about caches of weapons. Street workers were thereby compelled toward a limited degree of cooperation with the police. Street workers complained that the policy of cooperation compromised their credibility on the street, while police officers remained suspicious about the role of the street workers. Yet, once channels of communication about potential gang violence were established, they facilitated development of more strategic, better-targeted police patrol tactics designed to quell violence before it started. Schneider credits the citywide decline in large-scale gang "rumbles" during this period to cooperation between the Youth Board and the New York City Police Department (NYPD).

Cooperation between these two diverse city agencies failed to dispel the obvious tension between proponents of harsh police tactics and those committed to innovative social work approaches to address the gang problem. Pandering politicians continued to call for "nightstick justice" against gangs. Use of mediation between warring gangs was frequently condemned—despite its obvious effectiveness in achieving truces, at least in the short term—by those whose crime-control tastes preferred the spicy flavor of police crackdowns.

Yet establishment of a city-funded system of street work and gang intervention programs, solidly grounded in principles of effective social work practice and institutionalized entirely outside of the law enforcement domain, helped to constrain New York's policy makers and police officials from embracing most of the counterproductive gang suppression tactics adopted elsewhere. Kim McGill, founder of the South Bronx–based Youth Force Project who now directs the California Youth Justice Coalition, believes that Youth Board policies and practices in the 1950s established norms that continue to influence and modulate New York City's approach to the problem of street gangs today.

Street work was augmented by more conventional forms of social work and gang intervention programs provided by neighborhood service organizations, churches, settlement houses, and recreation centers. The effectiveness of agency-based programs was limited by issues of control, as competing gangs contested for ownership of the "turf" represented by a particular recreation center, or resisted direction from professional social service staff.

More successful interventions drew from a social work model pioneered decades earlier by Clifford Shaw, a sociologist who established the Chicago Area Project

(CAP) in the 1930s. CAP used local residents as family counselors and organizers in their own neighborhoods to engage the energies of youth and adults in projects designed to improve and strengthen social control in the community.

Clashes during the mid-1950s between Mayrose (a street gang made up of white youths of varied ethnicity), Dragons (a Puerto Rican gang), and Sportsmen (African American adolescents living in housing projects) escalated into a violent and deadly gang war in lower Manhattan. An assortment of settlement houses, civic groups, and churches became linked together in a CAP-style gang intervention network under sponsorship of the Lower Eastside Neighborhood Association (LENA).

Gang truces were negotiated by LENA, while Youth Board street workers plied their services to defuse street violence, and social workers at the Henry Street Settlement House set up prevention programs targeting "predelinquent" children to divert them from joining gangs. Gang conflict did not disappear, but Schneider says that cycles of violent attacks and retaliation were somewhat disrupted.

Tasting a modest degree of success, LENA sought funding from the Ford Foundation to build on these efforts. An ambitious planning project begun in 1967 with visionary guidance from faculty members Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin at the Columbia University School of Social Work was expanded after the 1960 election when a newly established President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency joined forces with Ford staff. LENA's mission was broadened into a comprehensive agenda of youth development and community organizing.

Mobilization for Youth (MFY) was launched in 1962 with a rich mix of federal and city funding that enlarged the substantial stream of Ford grant dollars. Five settlement houses located in the target area coordinated an expanded cadre of street workers who mounted intervention efforts with more than a dozen neighborhood street gangs. A raft of job training, job placement, subsidized employment, and social service programs were established to prevent gangs from forming by providing new channels of opportunity for neighborhood residents. A team of activist lawyers was assembled to protect and expand residents' legal rights, advocating for social benefits and economic entitlements.

Drawing on the CAP model, MFY launched an ambitious organizing drive designed to mobilize neigh-

borhood residents for action against entrenched community problems: substandard housing, poorly performing schools, deficient public services. Embrace of confrontational tactics that characterized the 1960s—noisy picketing and "sit-ins" at the offices of government bureaucracies and the homes of bureaucrats, militant rent strikes and school boycotts, forceful agitation against police brutality—rapidly thrust the MFY community organizing tactics beyond CAP's relatively sedate political style toward radical activism.

Predictably, given the agency's generous public funding base, MFY's managers soon found themselves engulfed in a media-fueled political firestorm, almost completely alienated from the government agencies that provided that funding. MFY's political opponents charged loudly that agency staff included communists, that MFY organizers were responsible for the 1964 uprising in Harlem, and that vast sums of public money were being misspent (Moynihan 1969).

By the time investigators determined that these allegations had no basis in reality, MFY's director had resigned and the agency had retrenched, retooling itself to concentrate primarily on delivery of direct services to neighborhood residents. Community organizing was restricted to campaigns that were less likely to disrupt provision of government antipoverty grants. The reorganization served to boost the agency as a prototype model for the community action programs set up across the nation under President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty.

By 1966 the problem of serious gang violence had largely been abated in New York City. The NYPD youth division reported that the number of street gangs had declined. MFY replaced street-work programs with "adolescent service centers" set up to dispense conventional job and educational counseling services. In Schneider's assessment, New York City's gang intervention strategy had proved to be an overall success, with LENA and MFY mounting the most effective tools for keeping gang violence to a minimum and diverting youths away from gang membership.

Mayor John Lindsay applied lessons learned from the community action experience in his citywide effort to avoid the urban conflagrations erupting in other cities across the nation during this period. The Lindsay administration set up the Urban Action Task Force, empowered to step up delivery of city services and channel resources to community leaders in African American and Puerto Rican neighborhoods, connecting them directly to city hall.

The Youth Board recruited neighborhood troublemakers to serve as youth leaders, organizing summer recreation and employment programs in these communities. Neighborhood youth councils hired the "worst kids" to staff these programs, while city hall bent civil service rules in order to offer them the possibility of upward mobility into permanent jobs in the city bureaucracy. Schneider describes how former gang members helped to quell a 1967 uprising in East Harlem, after which the local youth council was used to channel welfare assistance and jobs to community residents, cementing the direct political ties between the mayor's office and East Harlem's youth leaders.

By no means, however, does Schneider credit the Lindsay administration's political embrace of community action or the gang intervention programs with solving the structural problems that had given rise to the city's serious postwar gang problem, or with providing effective crime control in the long term:

> Gang intervention in all its forms attempted to disrupt the operations of the gang, especially gang fighting, and press youths into making conventional adjustments to working-class life. Because these programs define gangs as the problem, rather than as a symptom of other problems, they were unprepared to confront the fundamental issues that had led adolescents to form gangs in the first place. These were the limits of liberal social reform. The result was that gang intervention, where it successfully disrupted gangs, inadvertently substituted individual deviance in the form of drug use for the collective resistance of the gang. By the mid-1960s, authorities decided that gangs were no longer the problem. They had been displaced by the rapid spread of heroin among New York's adolescents.

Of course, heroin did not *actually* displace gangs in New York City, any more than gang intervention programs erased their existence. But bolstered by other contributing factors—radical movements and community politics that siphoned off the most talented gang leaders, the Vietnam War and a wartime economic boom—the city's sustained investment in street work and gang intervention programs had worked to reduce the level of gang violence below a threshold level, or "tipping point," where cycles of gang attacks and retribution become acute and con-

tinuous. And the spread of heroin that followed the decline in gang violence supplanted the ethos of gang warfare with an emerging drug culture:

> The relationship between drug use and the decline of the gangs was synergistic: the collapse of the gangs furthered drug use and the rising tide of drug use eroded the remaining gangs' abilities to preserve their members and themselves…. Public policy and gang interventions pushed the number of gangs below the threshold level in the early 60s, but it was heroin that kept them there, as one epidemic gave way to another.

Schneider points out that the phenomenon of youth gangs never entirely died out in the city. Cycles of gang activity have continued to the present time, with periodic episodes of gang violence flashing above the tipping point in one distinct area of the city after another.

The 1970s saw a revival of gang activity in the South Bronx, where the ravages of intractable poverty, heroin addiction, and an epidemic of arson had cut wide swathes of devastation in the bleak urban landscape. Youth gangs carried on the customary battles over turf, of course, but they also organized against the drug trade, mounting aggressive campaigns to drive heroin dealers and junkies out of their neighborhoods.

Periodic gang revivals also sparked renewed ethnic violence, as Euro-American gangs, particularly those in Italian American enclaves in the North Bronx and in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Howard Beach and Bensonhurst, were primed to terrorize any African Americans and Latinos with the temerity to venture into their neighborhoods. Conflict between Chinatown youth gangs mirrored long-standing ethnic, political, and commercial rivalries that had been exacerbated by an influx of immigrants from different regions of China.

Since the waning of the sustained gang violence that plagued the city for two decades after World War II, episodic revivals of gang activity have never rivaled the extent or intensity of the postwar gang crisis. Those who expected that the problem of youth violence would subside as street gangs lost their widespread appeal, however, were sorely disappointed when deadly gun violence reached epidemic proportions among New York City youths in the later half of the 1980s.

The sharp upsurge in the rate of gun homicides was not, for the most part, perceived to be gang-related.

Jeffrey Fagan has described how the escalation of gun violence across the city was fueled by development of a pervasive "ecology of danger" within which the widespread availability of guns helped to spark contagious behavioral norms and "scripts" that reinforced their use, with extraordinarily lethal consequences (Fagan and Wilkinson 1998).

New York's leading urban anthropologist, Mercer Sullivan, closely examined the nature of youth violence in New York during the last decade of the 20th century, when "supergangs" from Los Angeles and Chicago were reported to be proliferating across the nation (2005). He conducted a systematic search for stories published in city newspapers between 1990 and 2000 that included the term "youth gang," pinpointing 1997 as the year when "nationally famous gangs finally came to New York City, at least in name." Newspaper references to Bloods, Crips, Latin Kings, and Ñetas surged that year, raising fears about an impending gang-related crime wave. Yet police reports from the same period indicate that serious violent crime was on the decline in the city well before, and long after, media reports of the emergence of a new generation of violent gangs. *Something* was going on, but clearly it did not produce a crime wave.

Sullivan had amassed a wealth of interview and observational data during ethnographic field research he conducted in three city neighborhoods between 1995 and 1999 to examine the social ecology of youth violence and document changing patterns in violent behavior over the period. The research was specifically designed to trace perceptions of local youth gang activity among parents, teachers, police officers, and youths themselves. The patterns of violence he documented help to explain why the apparent proliferation of notorious national youth gangs was not associated with an increase in serious youth crime.

Sullivan's data contained signs of the gang emergence phenomenon, but he also found evidence that media reports of sensational gang conflict were primarily a relabeling of existing local rivalries. Group violence, when it erupted, stemmed primarily from conflict ("beefs") between informal cliques of youths who lived on particular city blocks and shared a strong sense of identification and loyalty. Sullivan reports that youths in such local groups were familiar with the phenomenon of youth gangs, but they tended to distinguish these from their block-group loyalties:

> In the early period of fieldwork, 1995–1996, beefs between these groups were described in terms of these place-based identifications,

as, for example, "between Redwood and the Desert." By the end of the fieldwork, following the spike in newspaper gang reports of 1997…these conflicts had been redefined. We heard at one point that Redwood and Castle had joined together to fight the Bloods from the Desert who were trying to "take over the neighborhood."

But the "beef" between the Bloods and the block groups was an ephemeral event that was quickly disrupted with targeted police action—and it took place during a period of general decline in violence in this area.

Some indications of localized violence in one particular area of the city coincided with the 1997 spike in media coverage about gangs, yet the scale of the problem fell far short of the gang-related mayhem expected by those who were reading the media accounts:

> Our data suggest mutually reinforcing effects of media panic and street rumor, on one hand, and some real changes in the amount and organization of youth violence on the other.

> At the beginning of the fieldwork period, we documented high levels of fighting among students from the middle school we were studying. Many of these fights involved multiple participants, but they were not organized as named gangs. Some groups involved in fights could be associated with a particular block or housing project, but other fights involved essentially ad hoc groupings, time-limited action-sets rather than cliques, much less named gangs.

> Beginning in 1996 and rapidly increasing in 1997, named gang affiliations swept through the area. Local youth began choosing to identify as either Bloods or Crips, mostly Bloods.

> These identifications, however, were ambiguous and highly contested. There was no single group leader or structure within either category, and there were many subsets of these categories. Rumors ran rife and mutated constantly. A favorite topic of conversation was the difference between "real Bloods" and "fake Bloods." Most individuals carrying the insignia of Blood membership were said to be "fake Bloods."

> Many stories were told of the rituals supposedly associated with Blood membership. To be inducted into the Bloods, various accounts claimed that a person had to do something such as randomly slash the face of a total stranger with a razor. In other versions, the slashing victim had to be a family member, or one's own mother. The crescendo of this hysteria peaked on Halloween 1997. As the day approached, rumors circulated throughout New York City that Halloween would be a day of mass Blood initiation. The chancellor of the New York City schools issued a public statement that schools would remain open despite widespread calls from parents and others that they be closed. The Soulville middle school we were studying remained open, but only a handful of students showed up.

> The mass slashings never occurred. …Some entity or loosely related group of entities called Bloods did appear in New York, but the panic came and went as violent crime citywide continued to decline.

Sullivan wonders whether law enforcement estimates of increasing gang prevalence reported in the National Youth Gang Survey conducted during the period may have largely resulted from a wave of moral panic over gangs.