

Gangs and Violence

To Do:

- *Read the summary below**
- *Read Barak p. 91**
- *Watch the documentary *Crips and Bloods* (available on Netflix)**
- *Read the PBS information on the documentary**
- *Go to the Discussion Forum and answer the questions**

Gangs and Violence

Key Themes: definition of a gang, types and levels of violence, relevance of structural violence

Definition

A gang is:

'A street organization...formed largely by youth and adults of a marginalized social class which aims to provide its members with a resistant identity, an opportunity to be individually and collectively empowered, a voice to speak back to and challenge the dominant culture, a refuge from the stresses and strains of barrio or ghetto life and a spiritual enclave within which its own sacred rituals can be generated and practiced'. (Brotherton and Barrios, 2004: 23)

How does violence feature?

‘Violence is...consistent among gangs. The extent and nature of the violence varies depending on the status of the gang. Most gangs will use some form of violence to protect their interests, honor or truff.. Many contemporary gangs in large urban areas have a high propensity for violence committed with sophisticated firearms ‘ (Valdez, 2003, p. 15)

Commentators have pointed out that gangs are involved in violence against other gang members, will use violence in criminal activities (eg robbery) and initiation ceremonies. But structural violence is also relevant in terms of understanding why people join gangs and violence might also be seen as a form of resistance against a social order that essentially condemns those who join gangs.

Being in a gang appears to significantly increase the risk of homicide. As Greg Barak notes, compared to the general population, a gang member’s risk of being killed is 60 times greater. In St Louis, it was found that the gang member homicide rate was 1,000 times higher than the US homicide rate.

Crips and Bloods: Made in America

Watch the documentary.

THE FILM

With a blend of on-camera interviews, historical footage, and scenes of current conditions, CRIPS & BLOODS: Made In America graphically portrays the ongoing street violence between rival African American gangs in South Los Angeles. In this 40-year feud, in which neighborhoods are staked out and rigid boundaries are drawn, crossing a street or taking a wrong turn can mean death. What is it that causes gang members to lock themselves into these tightly-defined zones and so fiercely protect their turf? That question is at the heart of this film.

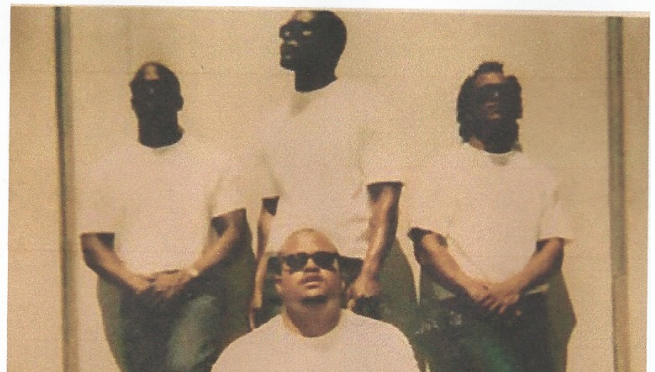
Three former gang members—Ron, Bird and Kumasi—recount their experiences growing up in South Los Angeles in the 1950s, when segregation ruled, both in organizations such as Boy Scouts and through neighborhood covenants that kept blacks and whites strictly separated. Young black males began forming their own groups—clubs where they could find a sense of belonging. Fighting between rival clubs became part of that culture, but the only weapons then were a strong pair of fists.

Despite the discrimination experienced by African Americans, the 1950s were a period of black prosperity and optimism in Los Angeles, fed by the abundance of industry-based jobs. By the late 1950s, however, those industries began to disappear, resulting in high rates of unemployment and displacement of unskilled black workers. Their downward economic spiral combined with years of prejudice, racial profiling and heavy-handed police methods to produce an explosive situation. In 1965, a routine traffic stop erupted into full-scale civil conflict on the streets of Watts.

Some rays of hope appeared during the late 1960s, with the rise of the Black Pride movement. As groups such as the Black Panthers and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee began providing services and involving young people in community organizing, gang activity hit an all-time low. The FBI, however, considered the Panthers a threat to the internal security of the country and began to target the leaders; many of them were killed or jailed. Without strong leadership to steer black youth in positive directions, gangs became active once more, and this time their weapons were guns.

In CRIPS & BLOODS: Made In America, current gang members describe gang life and the status, protection and other benefits that gang membership gives them. Their statements paint a bleak picture of the physical, social and personal devastation that is the hallmark of South Los Angeles. Even after a second eruption of riots in 1992, after the Rodney King police brutality trial, little has been done to rebuild the area and to provide the education and employment opportunities that could reduce violence and bring stability to those neighborhoods. With little help coming from the government, the vicious cycle of shootings and retaliation (which has produced an estimated 15,000 casualties in the past four decades) continues.

Academics and other experts appear throughout the film, including California state senator Tom Hayden and author Gerald Horne. They offer perspectives on gang behavior and the disintegration of civil rule, and who suggest ways of solving the underlying problems, rather than just attacking gang-related street violence. The most promising solutions, however, may come from the people of South Los Angeles themselves, where former gang members and other concerned individuals have taken on the task of working with young people and providing a positive alternative to gang membership. Examples of their work, and the new groups they have created, give the film an upbeat ending.



INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN CRIPS & BLOODS: MADE IN AMERICA

Bird
Kumasi
Ron

All three of these men are former gang members who are currently activists, educators and community leaders.

Authors and academics

Dr. Todd Boyd, University of Southern California
Dr. Josh Sides, California State University, Northridge
Leon Bing – *Do or Die*
Dr. Gerald Horne – *Fire This Time*
James Gilligan, M.D. – *Violence*
Senator Tom Hayden – *Street Wars*

Gang intervention leaders

Bo Taylor – former Crip, founder of Unity One
Rock Johnson – former Crip, National Chief of Staff, Amer-I-Can
Vickey D. Lindsey – founder, Cry No More
Minister Tony Muhammad – representative, Nation of Islam, founder of Peace Makers
T. Rodgers – founder, Sidewalk University
Aquil Basheer – Maximum Force Enterprise
Aqeela Sherrills – Reverence Project
Jim Brown – pro-football hall-of-fame member, founder of Amer-I-Can

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Attraction of Gangs

Society's contribution

Certain factors create pre-conditions that can make gang membership an attractive and desirable option for young people. Societal factors include:

- **Racism:** Denied access to opportunities and resources, young people may form or seek to join an anti-establishment group.
- **Poverty:** Being unable to partake in the economic life of a community, or even to obtain basic goods and services, can result in a sense of hopelessness and a lack of self-worth. One way to earn cash is to join a gang involved in the drug trade or other illicit, but lucrative, activities.
- **Lack of a support network:** When basic needs for love and protection are not met because of family dysfunction, and if youth programs are not available in the community to provide additional support, young people may turn to gangs to meet those needs.

Who's at risk?

On a personal level, the list of risk factors includes:

- Family poverty and dysfunction
- Absence of a father figure
- Low school achievement, possibly due to learning disabilities
- Having friends who are delinquent
- No positive activities or interests outside of school
- Lack of positive role models
- Behavioral problems at an early age

Add to these personal factors the feelings of boredom that can come from living in an environment without acceptable outlets for young people, along with the peer pressure that is a fact of life among the young, and gang membership can become an irresistible attraction.

Who joins and why?

Gang characteristics

In general, gangs tend to be urban, male and young. Within those parameters, there are numerous variations in gang membership, with The Crips and Bloods representing one type of gang, the *'turf' gang*. As its name suggests, this type of gang is based on geography, albeit a limited one—the geography of perhaps a few dozen city blocks. Ethnic gangs are defined by the nationality or race of the gang members, e.g., Latino or Asian; others, such as neo-Nazi gangs are defined by their opposition to certain ethnic or religious groups. A third type of gang is the prison gang, which is made up of street gang members who continue their gang activity in prison. Gangs may also start in prison and keep going once members are released.

Estimates from the U.S. Department of Justice provide a rough profile of gang composition:

- In 2000, 94 percent of gang members were male and 6 percent were female.
- 39 percent of gangs active in 2000 had at least one female member; 2 percent of gangs were identified as being composed of predominantly female members.
- In 1996, 50 percent of gang members were under the age of 18, but in 1999 only 37 percent of gang members were under the age of 18.
- In 1999, 47 percent of gang members were Hispanic, 31 were African American, 13 percent were white, and 7 percent were Asian. These percentages have remained fairly steady over the years.

In addition, in 2001, 100 percent of cities with a population of 250,000 or more reported gang activity, and 85 percent of cities with a population between 100,000 and 229,999 reported gang activity.

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National Youth Gang Survey Trends from 1996 to 2000, by Arlen Egley, Jr.

For young people experiencing the risk factors described previously, a gang can provide:

- acceptance, structure, and discipline
- a sense of self-worth, status and respect
- recognition and power
- a sense of belonging, a 'family'
- companionship, training, excitement, and activities
- physical safety and protection
- the continuation of a family 'tradition', i.e., following in an older relative's footsteps

Source: Crips and Bloods: Independent Television Service

Read the following sources from PBS (you may need to cut and paste the links into your browser).

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/cripsandbloods/film.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/cripsandbloods/map.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/cripsandbloods/timeline.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/cripsandbloods/gang.html>

Further References:

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/cripsandbloods/more.html>

Additional Reading:

If you are interested in this topic area the attached paper by John Hagedorn discusses the importance of studying gangs and offers a global perspective.

Discussion Forum

Now go to the discussion forum and answer the following questions by 11/18

- 1. Commenting on the street violence in South Los Angeles, Senator Tom Hayden says, “It’s been defined as a crime problem and a gang problem but it’s really an issue of no work and dysfunctional schools.” Do you agree? Why or why not? How does this relate to our discussion on structural violence?**
- 2. What will it take to stop the gang warfare? Where should efforts begin?**