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CHAPTER 7

The Violent Encounter

INTERGANG INTERACTIONS are imbued with meaning. In various social settings, gang members observe, interpret, and assess the behavior of their peers. They freely use dismissive labels such as “wannabe,” “weak,” “false flagger,” or “dick rider” to signify that a peer is not a part of the intergang field. The need to prove otherwise, to legitimize one’s self or gang to other participants in the intergang environment, is a focal concern for gang members. An act of violence legitimizes, but its effects are limited. A person or group must, therefore, build a reputation for violence that is broadly accepted in the intergang environment. Thus gang members routinely discuss their violent exploits, and each storyteller favorably recounts his or her role in various violent events. During the process, they mock other environmental participants and characterize peers as being weak or soft. Legitimacy is directly linked to violence, in that violence provides the means for gang members to establish their place within the intergang field. But legitimacy is also indirectly linked to violence, as negative labels and disparaging comments circulate through channels of gossip. The diffusion of inflammatory information across gang networks slowly builds animosities between various street gangs and increases the need for gang members to aggressively respond to the negative information circulating through gossip channels. By ignoring such talk, gang members risk irreparable harm to their reputations, so they often respond aggressively with violence or escalating threats of violence. This chapter examines the history and evolution of intergang conflict. Although intergang violence is often motivated by concerns about legitimacy, a violent act is merely the by-product of evolving hostilities that are fueled by gossip and reinforced by repeated antagonistic interactions.

GANGS, STREET BEEFS, AND
A HISTORY OF EVENTS

Gang violence is a complex problem that cannot be fully explained by a single theoretical concept, and scholars note that gang violence often stems from either instrumental or expressive motivations (Papachristos 2009). Instrumental violence occurs when gang members are involved in disputes over tangible material goods. For example, they may commit a violent act in response to a drug turf dispute or use violence to punish an individual who stole from the gang or from a single gang member (Levitt and Venkatesh 2000; Mieczkowski 1986). Expressive violence, by contrast, occurs when gang members respond violently to threats that offend or challenge their status. A common theme in gang lore is that colors automatically trigger a violent response from rivals, as a particular color represents a symbolic threat that merits reprisal. Expressive violence is, however, more commonly the end result of a pattern of interactions between one or more gang members, and it begins with an insult or an act of disrespect and escalates when neither of the involved parties submits to his or her counterpart. Concerns about legitimacy in the intergang environment simply add to a general cultural milieu where personal status is already closely guarded and expressive violence is all too common. The status of gang members is easily questioned, and so-called members face added pressure to protect their reputations by engaging in expressive violence.

Getting killed over turf or colors may be a reality in some communities, but these stereotypical motivations for violence are generally not a dominant element of the intergang environment in Indianapolis.¹ Instead, violence is often the byproduct of escalating confrontations that are largely motivated by considerations of legitimacy and reputation and are fueled by the diffusion of gossip through gang networks.² Although the intergang environment produces the motivation for conflict, violence is directly caused by contextual factors that influence two or more interacting and potentially hostile gang members.³ Scholars call this the foreground of criminal offending, or the immediate context in which the decision to commit a crime is activated (Jacobs and Wright 1999; Katz 1988). During these moments, considerations of legitimacy and building a reputation intersect with an adversary who is unwilling to be intimidated or submit to threats of violence. When this happens, the probability of violence substantially increases.

All intergang conflicts have a beginning. They start with mundane interactions as peers observe, interpret, and assess each other. Gang members form opinions of peers, which are then disseminated throughout the intergang environment. Negative assessments (“fake,” “soft,” “wannabe”) breed gossip and increase the possibility of a confrontation. A gang member may hear that a peer is “talking shit” about him or her, or may be openly mocked and challenged in public. A public challenge forces the individual to make a decision about a suitable response. Passivity brings forth serious negative social consequences, since other environmental participants are likely to assume that the individual is indeed weak, fake, or a wannabe. The establishment of such negative labels can lead to escalating insults while also generally undermining a key element of a person’s identity. Moreover, the negative labels reflect poorly on the individual’s gang, and the entire group can be labeled as a collection of wannabes. An aggressive response, however, is a display of strength and an administration of punishment (Jacobs and Wright 2006). It reinforces an individual’s position within the boundaries of the intergang field and establishes legitimacy in the streets. When an individual is a victim of humiliating criticism and chooses to respond with aggression, the intergang conflict or street beef becomes solidified.

There are no clear guidelines for the amount of aggression that should be used in response to public humiliation or a personal affront. Bruce Jacobs and Richard Wright (2006) suggest that at minimum an act of retaliation should be equal to the affront. This restores relational equilibrium and balances the negative image circulating throughout the intergang environment. Many participants in street beefs seem content with this balance; they often reciprocally posture or gossip without significantly escalating the conflict. Over time, however, responses can become more aggressive so that the probability of a physical confrontation increases. Another strategy for dealing with public humiliation involves an extreme response designed to clearly communicate one’s violent capabilities to the perpetrator and other environmental participants. In such situations, even a minor offense is perceived to be a serious threat to one’s reputation, and the victim responds with a force far greater than the initial offense. A person reacts to a perceived insult with an offer to fight, a threat of gunplay, or an actual act of violence. Each reaction substantially escalates the conflict and forces the new

victim to either respond with aggression or back down from the conflict. This response is also accompanied by an awareness of the potentially serious social consequences of appearing weak, which provides ample motivation for a gang member to further escalate the conflict.

Although an intergang conflict can emerge from a reaction to a single insult, it often evolves slowly. As members of different gangs routinely interact and share social spaces, they develop negative characterizations of their counterparts and increasingly resent each other. This period of an intergang conflict resembles an incubation phase in which hostilities fester and gossip circulates. A conflict may take weeks or months to produce an act of violence. During this time, members gossip about each other to their peers through conversation or on social networking websites like MySpace. They might even engage in a series of potentially violent scenarios, in which threats are presented or guns are shown. Each of these encounters also involves a more nuanced series of interactions that can produce violence (see Athens 2005; Fagan and Wilkinson 1998; Felson 1982; Felson and Steadman 1983; Hepburn 1973; Hughes and Short 2005; Luckenbill 1977; Oliver 1994; Wilkinson and Fagan 2003). If neither participant backs down during a potentially violent encounter, violence is likely to erupt. More commonly, however, people on one side back down. They usually have a justification for their actions that allows them to save face, such as being outnumbered or outgunned.⁴ A nonviolent outcome to a single contentious interaction is not a final resolution to the street beef, however. The winner of the conflict will publicly recount the story, emphasizing how his or her gang is deep, while also telling peers that the other gang is weak. The loser reinterprets the story to diminish the exploits of the other group. Both messages are presented to the intergang environment.

In Indianapolis neighborhoods where the code of the streets tends to govern the actions and perceptions of some local youth, interpersonal conflict is not uncommon, and youths must periodically negotiate the microcontext of potentially violent situations (see Anderson 1999; Brezina et al. 2004; Kubrin 2005). Yet for gang members, these hostile interactions and enduring street beefs are more significant, as they provide an honest glimpse into one's capacity to "do gang." Conflict-ridden interactions are ideal forums for self-defined gang members to prove to peers that they are, indeed, legitimate members of the intergang field.

The social consequences of winning or losing such an encounter are greater for self-defined gang members than for most of their non-gang peers. The label of “gang member” generates expectations among peers. When a self-defined gang member also publicly constructs a self-characterization based on a willingness and ability to engage in violence, the pressures to perform increase further. Appearing soft in a potentially violent situation can undermine one’s reputation, and gang members, compared to their non-gang peers, are more motivated to prevent that from happening.

Although considerations of legitimacy provide additional motivation for gang members to engage in conflict, their skeptical assessments of peers can create a false sense of confidence during potentially violent encounters. Those involved in a conflict are often blinded by a naive confidence in their ability to dominate members of the other gang. They genuinely believe that they are strong and that the other group is soft. They also operate under the illusion that they can control the outcome of the conflict. With enough force, they can compel the other group to submit permanently, so they do not have to fear violent retaliation. This confidence is largely based on an assumption that most self-defined gang members are unwilling or unable to commit serious acts of violence. Previous experiences with gangs or gang members who were easily intimidated or were unwilling to retaliate reinforce this assumption. However, every street beef involves a risk that the other group will not be intimidated and is willing to escalate the conflict from mere threats to actual violence.

If both groups are heavily invested in gaining and maintaining legitimacy in the intergang environment, everyone involved in the street beef may be unwilling to back down from the conflict as hostility between the gangs escalates. Consequently, a simple street beef can escalate into a process of contagious violence, whereby assaults or shootings ricochet back and forth between the gangs (Decker 1996). The consequences of contagious violence can be devastating for both gang members and the broader community. For example, Andrew Papachristos persuasively argues that murders in Chicago are often embedded in “institutionalized networks of group conflicts” (2009, 76). Ongoing gang conflicts create relatively stable patterns of violence, and members on both sides are at risk of being either the victims or the perpetrators of murder.

THE BIRTH OF A STREET BEEF

During the course of my research, Layboy, Shawn, and their closest associates were involved in only one ongoing street beef. They periodically talked about other incidents that involved violence, but the victims in those circumstances quickly learned not to talk negatively about the group, so the conflict ended quickly. Members of the DFW Boyz generally acknowledged that their interactions with other gangs were uneventful because everyone knew who they were and accepted their status as serious gang members. However, the origins of a prolonged street beef between the DFW Boyz and the Naptown Boyz began in the spring of 2008 with some minor confrontations at school. It developed more fully a few months later during a routine interaction between Lonnie, a sixteen-year-old member of the DFW Boyz, and a few members of the Naptown Boyz. The conflict maintained momentum for the next few months and still was not resolved when I left the research field.

The day after the incident, Lonnie recounted his antagonistic encounter with some Naptown Boyz. "These motherfuckers talking shit. I wasn't going to worry about it, tell you the truth. I was trying to call these niggas [Shawn and Layboy] before the shit went down, but bro' wasn't answering the phone. So we walking in the parking lot, and he [one of the Naptown Boyz] started talking shit about me. I was cool with one of them, and they just started talking shit to me out of nowhere. He got into an argument with one of my niggas, and he was going to bring me in it by talking shit about me. So shit, I took off my shirt and was like, 'What's up?' Motherfuckers holding me back. He got on the phone and started calling his little niggas up. Niggas came out of the car, came out about twelve or thirteen deep. That little nigga a ho'. He didn't do shit. He had to get his cousin over. His cousin a ho', too, because he didn't do shit. He ran up and didn't do shit."

Lil' Crazy added, "And the niggas he got into it with was some of my hood niggas, like some of them niggas is from my hood. So I'm like, damn, both sides is my bro's, and they getting into it. I don't know. Want to squash that [mediate a peaceful resolution] between them, but, shit, he [the aggressor] done lame shit, so they going to have to bang it out."

Publicly challenged, and somewhat confused as to why he was targeted, Lonnie was confronted with a choice. He could have ignored the aggressor, or he could have responded with equal or greater force.

If he chose to ignore the aggressor, his response would have been noted by observers and disseminated into the broader social environment. Many peers would have heard that Lonnie had backed down, which would have caused some peers to label him as soft. To prevent this, he needed to react aggressively to the affront. Despite being outnumbered, he tried to initiate a physical confrontation. Being held back only fueled his resentment and gave him a justifiable reason to label the other group as being ho's or as being soft.

Hostility between two parties does not automatically produce an ongoing conflict, and many street beefs are actually resolved through informal mediations by third parties. Social networks among street-oriented urban youths are so broad and loosely connected that one can be in an active conflict with someone without realizing that both individuals are tight with (close to) a third person. When this occurs, the third person has the power to either choose a side or mediate a peaceful end to the conflict.⁵ The third party often mediates a peaceful resolution to the conflict, and he or she will remain close to both conflicting parties. At times, however, the third party cannot intervene and he or she must choose sides. Lil' Crazy would have had the power to mediate a peaceful end to the conflict between Lonnie and members of the Naptown Boyz, but he was not present during the incident. Moreover, he viewed the member of the Naptown Boyz to be lame and deserving of punishment.

Shawn agreed, "If you ain't there, then there's nothing you can do."

"That's what I'm saying. If I ain't there, well, shit."

"So they came out there twelve or thirteen deep?" I asked.

Lonnie responded, "Yeah, get out of the car like, 'What's up' woo woo. Dude pointed me out. His cousin like, 'Who was rappin' [talking shit]?' He ran up, and I was squatting up. Then they start surrounding me like in their little car and shit. So I'm backing up, and, shit, my niggas didn't know what to do, so they walking away. Other niggas park somewhere else, and they still try to jump me and shit."

Aaron asked, "They didn't actually hit you or nothing like that?"

"No, my nigga called his little stepdaddy up and told him to come up there. He came up there and had his little 9 [9 mm pistol] and shit. He took us to my nigga's crib. They try to come and apologize to my bro'. Wasn't going down though, we still going to get at them, though."

I tried to further clarify the events that had unfolded, “Is that why they didn’t jump you, because he had a gun?”

“Yeah, when my nigga’s stepdaddy came, he had his little 9, and they chilled out for a minute. We all rolled out with him.”

During a single interaction, an insult turned into a physical challenge, and a physical challenge turned in a collective display of strength. The Naptown Boyz were trying to intimidate Lonnie by surrounding him with twelve or thirteen guys. If no one had intervened in the situation, the Naptown Boyz might have beaten up Lonnie. Such violence would have communicated to Lonnie and the DFW Boyz that the Naptown Boyz were willing and able to use violence and, therefore, should not be messed with. Possibly however, this display of strength was a collective demonstration designed to intimidate Lonnie, and none of Naptown Boyz actually had any intention of engaging in violence.

It is somewhat ironic that gang members were concerned with establishing a violent reputation but purposefully called in extra help when a fight seemed imminent. The irony in this situation was accentuated because Lonnie was not very big. He was a wiry sixteen-year-old who stood under six feet tall and probably weighted less than 150 pounds. He did not have a weapon, and he was not accompanied by intimidating peers. In his in-depth study of Kansas City gang members, Mark Fleisher (1998) noted that most of the gang members in his study were cowards who masqueraded as hardened criminals. Perhaps this was also an accurate description of many Indianapolis gang members; they might simply have been scared teenagers who tried to look tough in the midst of an intergang environment that emphasized violent behavior. They constantly sought to cultivate violent reputations by talking tough, telling stories, and intimidating peers in public settings. They produced a self-image that was more myth than reality. When actual confrontations did emerge, they called for backup and hoped for the best. The DFW Boyz certainly recognized the absurdity of the situation and characterized all of the Naptown Boyz as wannabe gang members. Still, the interaction between Lonnie and the Naptown Boyz had escalated quickly. A simple argument quickly became a gun-related incident. Fortunately, the gun was not used, but the street beef had become well established, and hostility between the two gangs was readily apparent.

“Is it going to continue?”

Lil' Crazy responded affirmatively to my question, "Yeah, it going to continue until we finally get at them. That's the thing. These niggas [Shawn, Layboy, and Lonnie] ain't from my hood, but I be knowing them for the longest. We lost touch when growing up and shit like that, yeah. They [the Naptown Boyz] from the hood and shit, but when it comes to bro' and me, I'm DFW Boyz for life. Shit it's on and poppin'. Knocking heads, breaking skulls."

After the incident, the DFW Boyz were angry and motivated to retaliate. However, efforts to retaliate were not always immediate; street beefs could linger for months without action. Following the event, the DFW Boyz readily talked about the incident and gossiped about members of the Naptown Boyz. Over the next few weeks, discussions about the Naptown Boyz subsided, and Layboy, Shawn, and the gang focused on other events and other people in their environment. I also stopped asking about the beef, in part because I did not want to unnecessarily stir any latent hostility. As weeks passed without another incident or further discussion about the Naptown Boyz, I gained the impression that, somehow, past transgressions had been forgotten. I was wrong.

THE POTENTIALLY VIOLENT ENCOUNTER

As I noted earlier, I spent a lot of time in my car with several members of the DFW Boyz. This time was invaluable, since it enabled me to closely observe the boys interacting naturally. However, the choice to spend so much time driving gang members around the city of Indianapolis was initially difficult and, in retrospect, probably unwise. As the owner of the car I was, after all, responsible for the people in the car, and there were no guarantees that I could avoid being involved in criminal activity. Perhaps the biggest risk involved in chauffeuring gang members around the city was the possibility that they were carrying drugs. I frequently worried about being pulled over by the police and having someone drop illegal drugs onto the floor of my car. Earlier in the research process, I had allowed drug addicts to ride in my car as I drove about the city. This decision made me very uncomfortable, but such risk was inherent to field research. When I began to hang out with the DFW Boyz, I asked them if they had any drugs on them before they got in my car. From the back seat, Shawn once responded by intentionally regurgitating the rhetoric of antidrug campaigns, "We just say no to drugs."

Although the boys partied and smoked marijuana occasionally, drugs did not seem to be a central element of their lives. I saw little evidence of drug sales, so I stopped worrying about the potential problem.

There was also a risk that their newfound mobility could induce random violence. Over time, however, my concern diminished as I became more comfortable with the day-to-day events surrounding the DFW Boyz. The repetitious pattern of the boys' lives dulled my fears and produced a (retrospectively) foolishly relaxed approach to driving them around the city. They talked about violence, but I had not seen much evidence of such activity, so I simply drove them to their desired locations without asking many questions. As I became more familiar with the neighborhoods I was able to navigate between the gang's favorite locations without directions. If gang members told me to go to one of those locations, I agreed to drive them with little thought for any potential negative consequences.

One afternoon, about a month after the incident with Lonnie and the Naptown Boyz, I was in the car with Lonnie, Layboy, and Shawn. Lonnie received a phone call, talked to Shawn, and told me drive to a strip mall near one of the gang's major hangouts. The conversation between Shawn and Lonnie was inaudible over the blare of loud hip-hop music in the car, and I assumed we were going to meet some other DFW Boyz. They directed me into a familiar parking lot and told me to wait while they checked something out. The strip mall was nondescript. A row of small shops anchored the large parking area, and a gas station was situated across the lot near a busy intersection. We were within short walking distance of Lonnie's apartment, which was another favorite hangout for Layboy and Shawn. The boys were gone for an usually long time, so I walked over to the gas station for a snack and then returned to my car to listen to the radio. The boys emerged from the strip mall after fifteen or twenty minutes and walked toward the gas station instead of my car. Shawn and Layboy's older brother, whom I had not yet noticed, was filling his black sedan at the gas station. After a few minutes of discussion, they got into their brother's car and drove back to the other side of the strip mall. The presence of Shawn and Layboy's older brother was not a good sign. They did not speak much about him, and although he was friendly to me, he had no interest in being involved in my research. Shawn and Layboy occasionally mentioned that their brother

had “handled a situation for them.” I never asked what that meant. The boys reemerged from the mall after a few minutes and came back to my car. At the same time, two police cars entered the parking lot, drove past Layboy, Shawn, and Lonnie, and went to the back of the strip mall.

As they got back into my car and we left the parking lot, Shawn, Layboy, and Lonnie began excitedly to discuss what had transpired in the strip mall. Their narration of the incident was hurried and not focused on recounting the events logically. Rather, they raucously tried to retell the story, with each person focusing on his part in the incident. Unable to keep up with their conversation, I drove to a nearby house where we could rehash whatever had happened. The conflict between the DFW Boyz and the Naptown Boyz was ongoing, and it seemed to me that Layboy, Shawn, and Lonnie had just used me to drive them to a potentially serious gang confrontation.

“I’ll tell you what happened,” said Lonnie. “I got a phone call from my bro’. There are those Naptown Boyz niggas that I’m into it with and DFW Boyz into it with.”

Lonnie impersonated his brother’s phone message, “Shit, these Naptown Boyz niggas up here.” He had encountered the Naptown Boyz as they were sitting in a barbershop.

Quickly shifting back to his response, Lonnie continued, “‘We going to be up here in a minute, nigga.’ Got in the car and went up there. There’s two of them niggas. Shit, went in there with my niggas, because they going to be banging [fighting] with us too.”

Upon entering the barbershop, Layboy, Shawn, and Lonnie initiated an interaction that largely determined if violence would be used to end this street beef. These moments were the foreground of criminal offending, the micro-context of potentially violent interactions when threats of violence could turn into acts of violence (Jacobs and Wright 1999). In this situation, the gang’s goal was not to use violence. Rather, the boys desired to publicly humiliate the Naptown Boyz and force them into submission by using threats of violence. For Shawn, Layboy, and Lonnie, winning the interaction without violence was preferable, but they were probably willing to use violence. What ensued from this agenda was a series of threatening behaviors that were designed to intimidate. These threats were observed, interpreted, and then countered by the Naptown Boyz. If both groups were motivated, these interactions

could have quickly escalated to a point where serious violence was inevitable. Both parties had to weigh the costs and benefits of violence with the costs and benefits of submission.⁶ Thus each group was making nearly instantaneous calculations about its ability to physically handle the conflict, in addition to the reputational consequences of backing down. Each group knew that its counterparts would have labeled them as soft if they had backed down. Each group was heavily motivated to avoid being viewed as inferior. Verbal threats could have escalated as each group tried to convince their counterpart that the consequences of a conflict were too great. Posturing could have turned into physical challenge, which could have turned into a discussion of guns, which could have turned into a display of firepower. If no one had been willing to back down, both groups would have been left with guns drawn, thinking that the last one to shoot would be the victim.

Lonnie continued, "They said, 'Alright nigga, shit, meet us outside.' So shit, I went outside, I don't know what they [Shawn and Layboy] was doing. They probably was talking shit to them."

"I was in there muggin' them niggas," replied Shawn, letting us know he was holding his own. "Muggin'" simply referred to carrying oneself in a manner that communicates to others that they are in a dangerous position. He was posturing in a threatening manner and letting the Naptown Boyz know that he was down for whatever.

"I was talking shit," chimed Layboy, who had admitted to me earlier that he was much louder than his brother during such confrontations. Shawn liked to stand back and observe, while Layboy jumped into such situations emotionally and verbally harassed potential combatants.

Lonnie continued to tell the story, "We was up there at least seven or eight deep. Shit, it was us three, and then some of my niggas was there. They was going to bang with us, too."

"Some more niggas pulled up," affirmed Shawn.

If necessary, the DFW Boyz could quickly draw a crowd. In the twenty minutes between getting the phone call and the beginning stages of the conflict, they had doubled the number of members involved in the fight. In such conflicts, being deep, or being able to amass a large number of allies, strengthened the group's position. It was momentarily advantageous to appear deep during a conflict, as it could have motivated the other group to back down. If violence did erupt, being deep also

increased the group's ability to handle it. In these moments, notions of honor and fair fighting that were well developed in street lore were irrelevant. Pragmatism defeated idealism during intergang conflicts, so the DFW Boyz called for backup.

Backed by these numbers, and a violent reputation, Layboy continued to challenge the Naptown Boyz. "I was like, 'Which one you got a problem with, my brother Lonnie? What's up nigga?' There's one of them talking about how he from Haughville, I mean, shit."

At this point, Shawn took over the role of primary narrator. "They got beef [a problem] with us. They scared. They kept walking away. So his uncle came out there and some more dudes came out there at the barbershop.

"He's like, 'I'll bang with him one on one.'

"We like, 'There ain't one on one when it comes to fam.'"

Ironically, members of the DFW Boyz had previously described scenarios in which they had been outnumbered in a situation and had disdainfully characterized peers who would only try to fight or intimidate them with skewed numbers as cowards. The Naptown Boyz had tried to intimidate Lonnie with skewed numbers during their previous encounter. Of course, the actions of the Naptown Boyz were viewed as cowardly, while the actions of the DFW Boyz during this conflict were somehow justified. Indeed, discussions of norm-violating behavior, bravery, and honor often became irrelevant when the numbers were in favor of the DFW Boyz. If they had not had the upper hand in this situation, they would have perceived a one-on-one fight to be the only fair option. Using the excuse of being family seemed to be an ad hoc rule created to fit the immediate context.⁷

"Some dude says something. He got some things," Shawn continued, implying that gunplay had emerged as possible resolution to this conflict.

"So you got some things? Ok, we'll be right back.' Called my big bro'."

The DFW Boyz had access to guns, but they typically did not carry them. During the day, especially while riding with me, they never carried guns. If they needed guns, the boys would call their older brother.

Shawn continued, "He got scared. 'No, I'm talking about my hands, talking about my hands.'

"Some dude called the police while we was right there.

"Dude's uncle said, 'Bang one-on-one, bang one on one.'

"So we said, 'Ain't no one-on-one nigga.'

"So he point out little bro' like, 'Shit, bang with him, then.'

"I was like, 'Nigga nah, ain't no-one-on one.' Layboy walked up on one dude and jumped at him. He damn near fell because he was scared."

"Pussy," agreed Layboy, quite proud of his ability to intimidate.

Shawn continued, "His uncle was like, 'We family, so I'm family too.' Showed his tattoo got family name on there. 'We bang one on one, though. I was in the penitentiary, whoopto woo woo.'

He left, backed up. Someone told us he got choppers [tech-9's] or whatever. My big bro', we met him at the gas station. We rode over there with the pump [shotgun]. Everybody sitting over there quiet against the wall, didn't want to bang."

Layboy bragged, "They walking around paranoid like this." He showed me a defeated walk that signified submission.

"Paranoid, they all walking around the barbershop," agreed Shawn.

"Ain't doing shit," added the temporarily vindicated Lonnie.

"They calling the police," said Shawn. "So we came up around here with you. That was the end of that, but we probably get them later on tonight."

Fortunately, the Naptown Boyz had submitted, thereby mitigating the need for violence. Yet the conflict had not been resolved. Perhaps the Naptown Boyz understood that the DFW Boyz were willing to use extreme measures to win this street beef and would accept their fate as the weaker gang. From the perspective of the DFW Boyz, submission was not an option, and they seemed ready to continue the conflict if needed. The incident at the barbershop was another intense moment in an evolving intergang conflict. Each group was heavily motivated to build or maintain its reputation within the intergang environment. Backing down and being perceived as weak was not an option. Although I could not verify their reaction, the Naptown Boyz were probably incensed over this humiliating experience, and it presumably increased their hostility toward the DFW Boyz. For the DFW Boyz, the incident merely reaffirmed their characterizations of the Naptown Boyz. They were weak. They were wannabe gang members who played the role of gang members but were not willing or able to use extreme forms of violence.

To both the gang and specific gang members, overt affronts deserved punishment, and although Shawn, Layboy, and Lonnie were satisfied with the outcome of this incident, they were not ready to feel vindicated.

"Later on tonight it's going down. You might see some fellas' on the news," said Layboy. I could not tell if he was serious, but I hoped he was exaggerating. I knew what he meant, as I had developed a daily routine of checking the news to see if any of the boys had been murdered.⁸

Shawn continued, "Go to those pumps [shotguns] so we letting all them ride."

"Something going to go down," agreed Lonnie.

"So is this exciting for you, or do you get tired of this?"

At once, they all said, "Exciting."

I was not surprised. Their energy in the last thirty minutes had increased to a level I had not previously seen, and they retold the story at a feverish pace. There was something undeniably alluring about the drama in this situation that would attract a teenager, I thought. The excitement of the moment was also fueled by a general understanding that the Naptown Boyz were going to get what they deserved. Justice, it seemed, was based on a distorted understanding of retribution, with violence the appropriate response not only to the latest threat but also to a series of events that had led to this moment.

Although this incident was produced by interactions between members of both gangs and by the decision of the Naptown Boyz to submit, the conflict itself was grounded in a history of events and motivated by concerns of legitimacy. Hostilities had emerged months prior to this event and were reinforced when the Naptown Boyz targeted Lonnie. Since that incident, each group had developed a characterization of its counterpart and disseminated it to others in the intergang environment. This last incident would circulate through peer networks, as the DFW Boyz were more than willing to tell peers about their exploits. A pattern of escalating, conflict-laden interactions led to this incident, and intergang hostilities probably would have been difficult to stop.

"I been on one of them. He be rapping [talking shit] on MySpace," Shawn added in an attempt to explain what had been fueling the conflict. "He be rapping on MySpace. I tell him I will get him when I see him. He was scared. He didn't even want to fight. He backed up. He was by the door."

"He didn't even say nothing," scoffed Lonnie. "The big dude, he was the one rapping, talking shit. He soft."

"He got put in a body cast," added Shawn.

"Yeah. That nigga got put in the hospital. One of my niggas whooped his ass and put him in the hospital," affirmed Lonnie, referencing an incident that had happened months earlier.

Negotiating reputation invariably causes one to diminish peers in a public forum (Horowitz 1983). Social networking Web sites created a false sense of security for gang members who sought to build or maintain violent reputations, and the DFW Boyz often dealt with other youths talking negatively about them online. These Web sites were, however, public staging areas, and the gang did not tolerate inflammatory online banter. There had to be consequences for the child who sat at a computer and publicly challenged the DFW Boyz. The boy's operating premise was, after all, that most self-defined gang members were frauds. They delighted in incidents that suggested this belief to be true, and they took great satisfaction in the perceived weakness of the Naptown Boyz.

Trying to clarify the emergence of guns in this episode, and the decision to call their big brother, I asked, "Why did you call your brother for this one?"

"'Cause they said they got some things. And then . . ." replied Lonnie before Shawn interrupted him.

"One dude showed his pistol, 'See I got mine here.'"

"No thing, we can call them if you want them."

These last statements were indicative of the mindset held by members of the DFW Boyz. Many teenagers carried guns in the streets of Indianapolis, and when they felt threatened or afraid, they revealed their weapon to others by simply lifting their shirts or by pulling the gun out, pointing it at the sky, and shooting it. Often, this caused everyone else to disperse. However, Shawn and Layboy had been taught that, if they were going to show a gun, they had better be ready to use it. If someone else showed them a gun, they were free to respond accordingly. If they had a gun in the moment, they should use it. If not, they should go get one and return. By bringing up the idea of gunplay, the Naptown Boyz had pushed the ongoing conflict to a new level. No longer was this conflict a simple street beef that built up or tore down reputations. The idea of guns invoked issues of life or death, and the

DFW Boyz were seemingly prepared to come out on the right side of that option.

Conflicts are not uncommon in the streets, and most of the time they do not lead to extreme violence. Indeed, the most common responses to disputes or conflicts in poor urban communities are nonviolent, as people demonstrate a remarkable ability to live with and manage prolonged conflicts (Felstiner 1974; Merry 1979). Yet gang members are not just average residents in these communities. When compared to those of other community members, their responses to public disputes are more often guided by the need to defend their identity and combat environmental skepticism. Still, violence is not deterministically bound to petty conflicts, and many gang members walk away from fights (see Garot 2007a, 2009, and 2010). Cooler heads prevail, as someone involved may realize the cost of a street beef is not worth the benefit. Others may step in and mediate a peaceful resolution, especially when two of their acquaintances are engaged in a conflict. The outcome of any conflict or street beef is unpredictable, however, and gang members can only reference their counterpart's reputation to estimate the probability of a violent outcome.

Given that he was related to a member of the Naptown Boyz, perhaps Lil' Crazy would intervene. I asked hopefully, "Is there any way this is going to get squashed [end peacefully]?"

Each replied, "Ah, hell no."

"No."

"Hell no."

Shawn added, "Even if it's squashed, we going to beat their ass every time we see them."

"They're probably going to beef with us," agreed Lonnie. "Every time I see one of these niggas, I'm muggin', talking shit to them or something."

"How's it going to end?" I asked, still searching for the hope that someone would back down.

Shawn answered, "Us beating their ass. One of them getting popped [shot]."

Lonnie countered, "Tell you the truth, I don't think we have to take it that far. That's how soft they is, man. We don't have to take it that far. Them niggas don't really want it."

This was an odd, and rather troubling, gamble that could only be based on reputation, teenage gossip, and brief interactions. All these forms of information, I thought, were tenuous at best, and it was certainly not a game that should be played by teenagers.

FRIGHTENING CONSEQUENCES

The gang members in this study viewed intergang violence with a naive sense of invincibility coupled with an equally naive assumption that they could control the outcome of any conflict.⁹ Each gang member assumed that a threat of violence would not be reciprocated with an actual act of violence. In their experience, the threat of violence was often enough to get another group to back down. If not, an act of nonlethal violence was sufficient. Of course the outcome of each potentially violent encounter was unknown to participating gang members in advance. They often downplayed, but remained aware of, the slight possibility that another gang or gang member was willing to respond to their threats or violent actions with lethal force. This was always a possibility, but the boys often gambled that their reputation for violence would deter anyone from using such extreme measures. Such violence could also be delayed, as their counterpart waited for a more advantageous moment to exact revenge (see Jacobs and Wright 2006). This led to a general awareness of lurking violence, but few gang members believed they would be the victims of that violence.

One of my last recorded conversations with members of the DFW Boyz included Layboy, Shawn, EZ Man, and Shon-Shon. The latter members were not heavily involved with this study, but they happened to be around during the conversation and were willing to participate. By this time in the research, I had established enough rapport with Shawn and Layboy that they told me about their criminal activities and street beefs, but we had never openly discussed the use of potentially fatal violence. With only a few more weeks left to collect data, I tried to resolve some lingering questions.

"How do you know that when you get into a fight with someone, they're not going to pull a gun out and shoot?"

EZ Man replied, "If you beat them up, you know they going to come back. They going to come back to fight you again, or they'll come back with a weapon because they know they can't beat you up."

"They going to come back," agreed Shawn.

Shon-Shon added, "You get them before they get you."

EZ Man agreed, "After you beat them up you get to that point, you get it in your mind where, he's going to come back, so I'm going to take care of him before he take care of me."

The certainty of retaliation in these statements starkly contrasted with the tone of prior conversations. Generally, the DFW Boyz assumed that other groups were too intimidated to continue a prolonged, violent street beef. The boys were confident that their capacity for violence caused other groups to avoid additional confrontations. They often told stories about beating someone up, and the individual never messed with them again. Their apparent admission of inevitable retaliation did not fit with what I had witnessed or heard for the last few months.

Before I could ask them to explain this disparity, Shawn clarified, "If we beat them, and we see them come back, we know they strapped. They not going to come back to fight you hands-up again if you beat they ass. You see them coming at you running, 'Ah ok, hey bro' bring up the things.' We sit there and let them keep coming until the pumps start spraying. Then they start going the opposite way."

EZ Man added, "Especially with us, when we beat somebody up, we really beat them up."

Shawn agreed, "Ain't none of this beating them up and, 'Ah nigga you can walk away.' Don't pick up the phone and act like you going to call somebody. I'm going to get you again. That's what I did to that one dude. He got on the phone. I was like, 'Nigga, you calling somebody?'

"'Nah, I'm calling my boss to tell him I'm going to be late for work.'

"'Yeah, ok. Don't be on the phone. I'm going to beat your head so you have to go to the hospital. I don't play that shit. I'm not going to let you get me.'"

Although the boys assumed that their peers were not willing or able to retaliate, they remained aware of the possibility. Members of the DFW Boyz believed that they could mitigate the inherent risks of such violence, regardless of the threat involved. They could offset the consequences of delayed retaliation by recognizing an attempt and responding with extreme aggression. They could also proactively diminish the probability of retaliation by reducing their victim's will or his opportunity to respond violently. When possible, the DFW Boyz beat up someone to a

point where he could not immediately retaliate.¹⁰ Given that youths often called their associates to come and handle a street beef, the boys recognized that an opportunity to make a phone call could mean impending retaliation. Extreme violence prevented this simply because the victim would be incapable of organizing a response. Such aggression was also intended to make the victim rethink instigating additional confrontations with the group. It also reinforced the group's reputation, which acted as a deterrent in future conflicts. To the boys, retaliation was controllable, and they were confident in their ability to handle the risks involved with intergang conflicts.

Shawn continued, "Yeah, everybody shoots with choppers."

"What's choppers?"

Shon-Shon answered, "A motherfucking automatic."

While acting like he was shooting an automatic, Shawn said, "That shoot, that spray."

To verify my understanding of another gun-related slang term, I asked, "Pump is a shotgun?"

"Yeah," verified Shawn. "That's a shotty. We got a lot of pumps." With that statement, they all talked excitedly about the sound and feeling of shooting a shotgun. Everyone was laughing, and during the chaotic conversation someone said, "It sounds good."

Shawn added, "Those pumps ain't no joke, especially when you learn to shoot the motherfucker."

Layboy agreed, "And the motherfucker's spreading."

"Have you ever shot at people?" This was a question I had not yet felt comfortable asking.

"Last time . . .," said Shawn, thoughtfully, but he was not able to fully respond.

EZ Man quickly added, "I have with my older cousins and them . . ."

"I don't know if I be hitting people," interrupted Shawn. "Somebody could get hit, but you can't tell until afterward. I spray the motherfucker. I let loose. I don't give a fuck. Especially at night, I wait till night anyways. Hit that boy and duck out. Get the throwaways, and put them in the sewer somewhere."

Even after spending months hanging out with Shawn, Layboy, and their DFW Boyz associates, this was a startling admission. The boys had previously admitted that some gang members were labeled as hot boys

because they liked to shoot at people. The capacity to shoot, however, seemed to be an individualized trait not universally embraced by all legitimate gang members. I often wondered what distinguished the so-called killer from the average violent gang member.¹¹ I hoped that Shawn's admission was merely tough talk, but everyone in this conversation knew him very well, and nobody challenged his statement.

Shon-Shon added, "I'm to the point where I don't give a fuck. If a nigga talking about that gunplay, I ain't going to give him no chance."

EZ Man interjected with a harsh reality of street life, "I been shot at a lot."

"I been shot at too many times," agreed Shawn. At least for the moment, he abandoned the illusion of control and admitted the inherent danger of gang life and street beefs.

Layboy added, "I done seen the bottom of the barrel. That motherfucker's bigger than a bitch. I was scared as a motherfucker. Start praying, nigga."

"What was this?"

Shawn replied to my question, "That was on Fortieth. That dude went past with his car. He came up too fast."

Layboy recounted, "I was knocking on everybody's door. 'Hey, call the police. This nigga's got a gun.'"

"Did he shoot?"

"He didn't shoot," responded Shawn. "He wanted to."

"He didn't shoot," verified Layboy. "I was wearing a big ass red coat. I was like 'I'm hit. Fuck, I'm hit.'"

Shawn added, "Pops and them took care of that one, though. I was like, 'Damn, that a wrap.'"

The extended social networks of gang members make street beefs complicated. Shawn and Layboy had connections throughout the city, and their position within a large extended family full of gang members gave them options when dealing with a problem. Just as their brother had intervened in the situation at the barbershop, their father, and his associates dealt with the prospective shooter. If conflicts with the DFW Boyz escalated to the point where shootings became an option, the boys had access to a pool of older family members who were capable of overwhelming the opposition with force. These connections only emboldened Layboy and Shawn and reinforced their illusion of control.

EZ Man added, “You basically don’t have to worry, though, because if someone shoots one of us, there’s somebody above us that’s going . . .”

With that, everyone else chimed in, “Yeah.”

Layboy elaborated, “We know people. I’m telling you we know people. If people come at us, we got big bros. They got big bros.”

Shawn agreed, “All of us got big bros. Everybody got big brothers, and big brothers got niggas.”

Shawn, Layboy, and other members of the DFW Boyz thought that they were safe. After all, they believed that most other self-defined gang members were not real and did not have the ability or willingness to use violence. The gang’s reputation alone would convince most other gang members not to question the gang’s status. Yet when someone did “talk shit” about the gang, the DFW Boyz responded aggressively and used the opportunity to reinforce or expand their reputation. Although most offenders learned from their mistake and did not continue to dismiss the DFW Boyz, a person or group occasionally continued to insult members of the gang, thereby creating an ongoing street beef. As these conflicts escalated, members of the DFW Boyz remained confident that they were more willing and able to use violence than their counterparts. They believed that their efforts to intimidate other gangs would demonstrate their strength and reveal their counterparts’ weaknesses. Their connections to older relatives who had no qualms about the use of violence seemingly insulated them from extreme forms of violent victimization. I was not as confident about the safety of the DFW Boyz, but their attitude was somewhat contagious. I hoped their perceptions were accurate.

CONCLUSION

On the streets of Indianapolis, much was gained or lost during the micro-context of social interaction. For gang members, reputations were built, maintained, or lost during social interactions and the resulting flow of gossip, which efficiently disseminated information. One’s performance during a public confrontation was intimately linked to status concerns, as each gang member was aware that he or she might be labeled as soft or, perhaps, as a wannabe gang member. Gang members experienced strong pressures to avoid these labels, as the assessments made by observers would undoubtedly transcend the moment and become part of

the general street knowledge base. Appearing soft or weak during these interactions did not just cause a gang member to lose social standing among observing peers. He or she also risked losing status throughout the intergang environment, as a growing number of peers would begin to think that he or she was not a real gang member. The need to prove that one genuinely belonged within the boundaries of the intergang field produced consistent motivation to engage in interpersonal violence. Legitimacy in the intergang environment was, therefore, a status concern that was intimately related to expressive, rather than instrumental, violence. Indeed, the DFW Boyz and other research participants were not motivated by monetary concerns and settling street debts. They were concerned with perceived slights and building or maintaining their reputation in the intergang environment.

Gang members' concerns about their public image are not entirely different from the concerns of their street-oriented, non-gang peers, but the intensity of their commitment to status is greater than that of their peers. Legitimacy is intimately related to respect, a concept that has long been noted as playing a role in interpersonal street violence (Anderson 1999; Jacobs and Wright 2006; Oliver 1994; Wilkinson 2001). For gang members, respect and legitimacy are interdependent concepts. Gang members have to establish legitimacy in the intergang environment to gain respect, but they gain legitimacy by becoming respected in the streets. And for gang members, interpersonal interactions offer a forum where concerns of legitimacy and respect intersect. Personal slights are not only viewed as incidents of disrespect, they also might be perceived as symbolic challenges to one's status as a real gang member. In addition, any overt challenge to or question about one's status as a real gang member is automatically viewed as being disrespectful. Concerns about legitimacy are not as salient among non-gang members. Thus gang members in this study were likely to be more sensitive to personal affronts, and they were likely more willing to respond with violence.

For gang members, respect is connected to an explicit identity that is embraced by an individual, or a collection of individuals, presented to a peer environment, and then questioned by that environment. When compared to the notion of "gang member," few other identities in the street are so easily embraced and performed yet so frequently questioned. Whereas non-gang street identities are often broad, gendered, and

connected to vague notions like toughness, virility, or street smarts (Anderson 1999; Oliver 1994; Wilkinson 2001), gang identities are often linked to the unambiguous notion of violence. Gang members must “do gang,” or publicly perform in a manner that is consistent with environmental expectations about the meaning of “gang,” which invariably means that gang members must engage in or appear to engage in violence. Given their immersion into an environment that is generally skeptical about gang membership claims, gang members are more likely than their peers to have to defend their street identities. And, as some scholars note (see Anderson 1999), violence is a common response to an identity attack.

Concerns about status and social identity were salient among the gang members in this study, and they influenced both gang members’ behavior and their understanding of social life. Members of the DFW Boyz, for example, believed that if they consistently demonstrated a willingness and ability to engage in violence, questions of legitimacy would become irrelevant. They believed that if everyone recognized them as tough or deep, the need to engage in violence would diminish. Borrowing from William Muir’s classic dictum on the paradox of face, “the nastier one’s reputation, the less nasty one has to be” (1977, 101), the boys seemed to assume that building a reputation for violence was a good solution to an array of short- and long-term social challenges. It solidified their sense of belonging, established their place within the intergang environment, and was supposed to reduce the probability that other gangs would dare to threaten them. But in the unending social struggle found within the intergang environment, the increased visibility that accompanied a growing reputation also increased the frequency and intensity of potential intergang conflict. The boys’ pursuit of legitimacy in the intergang environment placed them at greater risk for violent victimization.