

Chapter Title: Gangs and Their Environments

Book Title: Real Gangstas

Book Subtitle: Legitimacy, Reputation, and Violence in the Intergang Environment

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Published by: Rutgers University Press. (2012)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hjfvv.5>

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CHAPTER 1

Gangs and Their Environments

AT FIRST GLANCE, the busy intersection of Keystone Avenue and Thirty-eighth Street in northeast Indianapolis seems relatively mundane. Various fast-food restaurants, stores, and financial service businesses line the streets that lead to this junction. Vehicles passing through are notably varied, indicating that people of different economic classes use these roads to traverse the city. The mostly small, run-down houses that line these intersecting streets suggest that this area is poorer than others, but they do not signify to outsiders that it is a ghetto. Visitors may know from experience, reputation, or media reports that the surrounding area includes some of the most violence-prone communities in Indianapolis, but such information is not readily apparent when driving through. An astute observer may notice a heavy police presence or a group of youths loitering in front of a strip mall during evening hours, yet there are few overt signs of criminal activity. Even at night, these streets are not lined with signs of vice, as prostitutes and drug dealers rarely position themselves along the streets. For most travelers, there is little reason to leave the confines of their vehicles when passing through. When stops are warranted, many outsiders do not seem fearful, as customers at local filling stations or fast-food restaurants appear both racially and economically diverse.

People more intimately connected to the surrounding community view it with a degree of ambivalence unique to poor urban areas. Far from seeing it as a stereotypical ghetto wasteland, many residents hold favorable opinions of the area. Some residents perceive a strong sense of community, exemplified by vibrant religious institutions and numerous benevolent organizations. Other people have large networks of friends and family that provide support in good and bad times. Residents also recognize, however, that severe problems plague this area. Most notably,

people living in the communities near this intersection deal with a ubiquitous threat of violence. During 2008, sixteen homicides occurred within a one-mile radius of the Thirty-eighth Street and Keystone intersection.¹ These neighborhoods, though home to just under 2 percent of the city's population, witnessed 14 percent of the city's homicides in 2008. For the researcher, such statistics are a reminder of how violence is concentrated in relatively small geographical areas within cities (Braga 2005; Sherman, Gartin, and Bueger 1989). For residents of these neighborhoods, violence is devastatingly personal, too often forcing them to bury their children, grandchildren, or friends.

In community meetings, violence symposiums, or private discussion, concerned citizens often voice their frustrations and point to a myriad of problems that cause this violence. Drugs, guns, unacceptably high school dropout rates, apathetic parenting, and poverty are on the short list of factors used to explain the problem. Invested community members are especially exasperated with the large numbers of youths who become gang members. This frustration is, unfortunately, based in the realities of the street. Gangs are scattered about the neighborhoods surrounding this intersection, and while violence is a multifaceted problem in Indianapolis, street gangs are a major contributor.

There are reasons that street gangs are so common here. Even though gangs have spread into small towns and relatively rural communities, the heart of the gang problem still lies in the inner city. Adverse socioeconomic conditions in these areas provide a prime habitat for the formation and proliferation of street gangs, and the concerns about gangs expressed by northeast-side residents are not uncommon in other low-income urban communities.² Indianapolis appears prosperous when compared to other mid-west cities, but sections of the city still display high levels of poverty. Indeed, when contrasted to the relatively wealthy and peaceful neighborhoods just a few miles farther north, those neighborhoods near the Thirty-eighth and Keystone intersection are notably poorer and more violent. Within these communities, various street gangs share limited social space, so that each gang is immersed in a complex but powerful intergang environment. This study focuses on how interactions within this environment dramatically shape gang member behavior and contends that intergang relationships are driven by a continuous need to legitimize one's self or group to other gangs.

NORTHEAST INDIANAPOLIS: THE GANG'S
SOCIOECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

Indianapolis is located in the middle of America's rust belt, a section of the country that over the last fifty years has witnessed significant economic changes and the erosion of its once thriving industrial base (Bernard 1990). This type of change has had a transformative affect on the social organization of many northern cities. As industry in this region began to fade, the loss of high-paying blue-collar jobs caused many urban residents to migrate away from city centers for the comforts of suburban life. This outmigration in the latter half of the twentieth century led to dramatic population decreases in previously vibrant cities. Between 1970 and 2006, for example, the populations of Detroit, St. Louis, Cleveland, and Buffalo all decreased by over 40 percent. Minority populations that depended on industrial jobs within these cities for economic stability experienced the harshest consequences of deindustrialization (Wilson 1987 and 1996). Many residents who could leave did, and those who stayed faced increasingly grim job prospects. Most available jobs were in the low-paying service industries (Wilson 1987 and 1996). This transformation led to an increase in urban poverty and, perhaps more importantly, a growth in the concentration of that poverty (Wilson 1987 and 1996). In the United States between 1970 and 1990 the number of extreme poverty areas, or those areas that display poverty levels over 40 percent, doubled (Harding 2010; Jargowsky 1997), and a growing number of residents found themselves living in modern-day ghettos. Decades later, well into the twenty-first century, many northern cities exhibit concentrated areas of extreme poverty, and the physical environs in these areas are so neglected that they aptly fit the imagery of the rust belt.

Relative to neighboring cities, Indianapolis has been somewhat resistant to the social and economic consequences of deindustrialization.³ Comparing the overall economic status of Indianapolis to Columbus, Chicago, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Detroit reveals that the city's situation is better than all but Columbus's, which is similar. Detroit provides the most startling contrast. Whereas the median household income in Indianapolis is just over \$43,000 per year, households in Detroit earn less than \$30,000 per year.⁴ The poverty rate in Detroit is almost double the rate in Indianapolis. Poverty in Detroit is also more concentrated,

as 107 census tracts, or 22 percent of the city's tracts, display poverty rates above 40 percent, while only 13 census tracts in Indianapolis, or 6 percent of the city, exhibit extreme levels of poverty (poverty rate over 40 percent).⁵ Indianapolis also has only one census tract with a poverty rate over 60 percent, but that area is primarily home to university students. By contrast, Detroit has twenty-three census tracts that display poverty rates over 60 percent, and some show levels as high as 90 percent. Cincinnati and St. Louis also display poverty levels much higher than those of Indianapolis. Residents in both cities earn about \$10,000 less each year than Indianapolis residents, and they are more likely to live in a community marked by extreme poverty. Furthermore, Chicago has more severe levels of concentrated poverty, as twenty-nine census tracts reveal poverty rates over 60 percent, and, as in Detroit, some show levels over 90 percent. Although Columbus is economically similar to Indianapolis, it also contains a larger proportion of extreme poverty areas, suggesting that poverty is more concentrated in Columbus.

The concentration of poverty in urban areas is also not evenly distributed across racial groups, and blacks often disproportionately reside in extreme poverty areas. Some scholars, like William Julius Wilson (1996), persuasively argue that the loss of industry has affected urban black communities more than other communities. Simply stated, black industrial workers were less likely to find well-paying jobs when factories closed and were therefore more likely to remain in the city without viable incomes. Scholars also argue that years of racist housing policies have segregated large portions of the black population into sections of cities that were then decimated by the loss of good jobs (Massey and Denton 1993). The housing industry in Indianapolis for most of the twentieth century used formal and informal practices to segregate black residents into three areas of the city, and one of these areas was located just south of the Thirty-eighth Street and Keystone Avenue intersection (Pierce 2005). For example, in 1926, the city passed an ordinance that created sanctions against any black resident wishing to purchase a house in a white neighborhood unless he or she obtained written consent from the majority of his or her prospective white neighbors (*ibid.*). The ordinance was later deemed unconstitutional, but for at least fifty years real estate agents and moneylenders informally reinforced racial segregation in the city (*ibid.*). Consequently, sections of

Indianapolis remain predominantly black, and many of these areas remain relatively poor.

The degree to which black residents in Indianapolis live in extreme poverty areas is somewhat relative. In contrast to most neighboring cities, the black population in Indianapolis represents a smaller percentage of the total population, and, as such, accounts for a smaller percentage of residents living in concentrated poverty. However, black residents live in extreme poverty areas at a higher rate than their white counterparts. Although black residents account for 27 percent of the city's population, they represent 42 percent of all people living in extreme poverty areas, meaning that the black population resides in extreme poverty areas at a rate 56 percent higher than their overall representation in the city. Such disparity is not uncommon: Columbus, Cincinnati, and St. Louis all show a similar degree of disparity, though poverty areas in the latter two cities are filled with a greater percentage of black residents. By contrast, Chicago reveals the largest degree of disparity, as black residents account for 79 percent of the population living in extreme poverty areas, but they only represent 35 percent of Chicago's total population. The black population in Chicago, therefore, resides in extreme poverty areas at a rate that is 126 percent higher than its overall representation in the city. Interestingly, Detroit is the only other city in the region with comparable poverty levels: 78 percent of residents in the city are black and 80 percent of residents living in extreme poverty areas are black. Noting these two exceptions, Indianapolis's black residents are disproportionately represented in extreme poverty areas to a degree similar to that of other cities. Yet, because the total population of black residents in Indianapolis is lower than in other cities and because the economic status of the city is more stable, the level of concentrated poverty in the black community is lower in Indianapolis than in other cities.

The consequences of economic transformation and racial segregation are, however, still apparent in Indianapolis, and the city remains socially and economically disparate. The trend has not been as severe in Indianapolis as in neighboring cities, but Indianapolis has experienced the migration of central city residents to the periphery of the city (Barrows 1990). Therefore, some communities struggle with concentrated poverty while other communities remain quite affluent. The northeast side of Indianapolis, for example, is a diverse area marked by

TABLE 1.1
Economic and Racial Comparison of Neighboring Cities

	Indianapolis	Columbus	Chicago	Cincinnati	St. Louis	Detroit
<i>Population</i>						
2006 population	785,597	733,203	2,833,221	332,252	348,189	871,121
1970 population	744,624	539,677	3,369,359	452,524	622,236	1,514,063
Percentage change	5	26	-16	-27	-44	-42
<i>Economic composition</i>						
Median household income	43,351	43,569	48,761	33,855	34,227	29,447
Poverty percentage	17	20	21	25	24	33
Percentage of census tracts with poverty rates greater than 40%	6	13	15	13	19	22
Percentage of census tracts with poverty rates greater than 60%	.5	4	3	3	3.5	5
<i>Racial composition</i>						
Percentage white	68	68	43	55	48	16
Percentage black	27	27	35	43	50	78
Percentage of poverty-area residents who are black	42	44	79	67	79	80
<i>Crime rate</i>						
Average homicide rate (2000-2009)	13.8	11.8	18.5	19.9	36.7	41.5

SOURCES: United States Census Bureau 2010b; Federal Bureau of Investigation 2010.

both wealth and poverty, opportunity and disadvantage, peace and violence. Although neighborhoods marked by wealth, peace, and opportunity are typically insulated from neighborhoods more commonly associated with poverty, disadvantage, and violence, the poorest areas are not entirely isolated from the rest of the city. Residents in these communities are exposed to and must negotiate different cultural systems (see Harding 2010). Street gangs, which are common in these communities, are among these systems, and they are diverse in size, scope, and orientation. Residents, and, more specifically, gang members, struggle to define and understand the cultural significance of gangs in their communities.

The Keystone Corridor: Cutting Through the City

A trip down Keystone Avenue provides an ideal description of the socioeconomic organization of Indianapolis. The communities located at the edge of the city are relatively wealthy, while those located near the downtown loop are quite poor. Keystone Avenue begins in a wealthy northern suburb, enters the northern edge of Indianapolis in a relatively wealthy community, and proceeds south through upper-middle-income, middle-income, and then low-income areas. Located approximately two miles east of the city's center, Keystone encounters the poorest regions on the near northeast side and remains in these communities as it proceeds south into the city's east side. A trip down Keystone Avenue offers a startling contrast between the affluent northern communities and their poor neighbors to the south.

Keystone Avenue intersects Eighty-sixth Street on the city's north end in a distinctly upper-middle-income and predominantly white community. Census data indicate that the median annual household income for the neighborhoods surrounding this intersection is slightly below \$73,000, and 96 percent of the population is white. Driving on the side streets allows one to discover large homes that are situated around small ponds, moderately sized but well maintained homes, and nicely kept condominiums. Perhaps best known for its shopping, the Eighty-sixth Street and Keystone Avenue intersection boasts a fashion mall filled with upscale stores, like Saks Fifth Avenue, Louis Vuitton, and Williams-Sonoma. There is little evidence of serious crime in this area, and in 2008 there were no murders within these surrounding communities.



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1. Map of Indianapolis

Continuing south along Keystone, houses become much smaller, but most are well maintained. With median incomes of just over \$50,000 per year, households in these communities make less money than their northern neighbors, but they are still financially viable. The area remains racially homogenous: about 95 percent of the residents are white. Violence is relatively rare here, but in 2008, two murders did occur in these communities, and there is a sense of uncomfortable closeness to the violence a few miles south. The intersection of Keystone and Sixty-second Street offers another shopping option. Even though a modest but nicely maintained mall was recently torn down, the area remains vibrant, with stores like Lowes, Staples, and Target as viable shopping options. A large secondhand store located across the street serves consumers throughout the area, but it is a favorite spot for some poorer residents. The area is within easy driving distance of the more southerly black communities, and patrons in the stores and restaurants are racially mixed. These businesses also have desirable jobs for local black youths and one commonly witnesses young black men and women at kiosks filling out applications. They are undoubtedly encouraged by the large number of black youths employed at these stores.

The area immediately south of Sixty-second Street begins a transition from middle-class to poor communities. Here, Keystone Avenue enters a primarily commercial area, as small retail stores, car dealers, and fast-food restaurants provide the scenery for a few miles. Businesses at the Forty-sixth Street intersection seem to denote a changing economic scene: the northwest corner boasts a newer and well-maintained CVS pharmacy, while the southwest corner of the intersection is abandoned. Indeed, Forty-sixth Street marks a clear transition between middle-class and poor neighborhoods. Accounting for the census tracts extending one mile west and two miles east of Keystone Avenue, households in the area six miles north of Forty-sixth Street boast a median income of \$55,863 per year, and only 8 percent live in poverty. Residents living in an area six miles south of Forty-sixth Street have a median income of \$27,099 per year, and 33 percent of the population lives in poverty. No community north of Forty-sixth Street is considered a poverty area, while twenty-three of the twenty-nine census tracts south of Forty-sixth Street are considered poverty areas.⁶ Moreover, ten of those census tracts are extreme poverty areas with rates exceeding 40 percent. The

communities south of Forty-sixth Street are also more racially diverse, as only 44 percent of the residents are white. However, 95 percent of the residents living within two miles of Forty-sixth Street are racial minorities, providing a clear reminder of the racial divide common to many cities.

By the Thirty-eighth Street intersection, Keystone has fully entered the poorer areas of the city. Businesses located along Thirty-eighth Street reflect the limited financial options of local residents. A popular and inexpensive fried chicken restaurant is located on one corner of the Thirty-eighth Street and Keystone Avenue intersection, while another fast-food restaurant serves sliders across the street. A nearby check advancement business symbolizes the financial desperation that some community residents face on a week-to-week basis. Physical structures in this area are visibly less cared for than their counterparts farther north. Franchised stores and restaurants have not been updated to meet the latest trends, and locally owned businesses, from gas stations to mechanics' garages, appear slightly rundown, as owners struggle to keep up with building maintenance.

The houses in these communities include tightly packed postwar ranch-style and older two-story homes. When driving through these communities, one appreciates the varied attention properties receive. Some houses are well maintained, with carefully landscaped yards boasting vibrant flower gardens. The insides of these houses, whose owners are often elderly, have older décor, but the homes remain quite functional and even comfortable. Other houses appear to be livable, but signs of physical dilapidation are apparent through unmaintained roofs, windows, siding, and landscaping. Inside, these houses need repair; some may only have cement floors, plumbing that is not entirely functional, and portions that are falling apart. Yet these houses remain inhabitable and lived in. Scattered about these communities are abandoned homes that are virtually unlivable. Some of these houses may be obvious from the street, as they display boarded-up windows, caved-in roofs, and grass four feet high. Other abandoned houses might only be viewed as hopeless upon entrance, as they reveal holes in the floor, crumbling walls, and kitchens or bathrooms in disrepair.

Perhaps there is no better reminder of the plight of the inner city than the threat of violence that permeates social interactions (Anderson

1999). Research suggests that criminal activity within cities is not evenly distributed across the geographical landscape. Instead, crime, and violence more specifically, often cluster in small geographical areas. Researchers consider these locations to be hotspots for crime and violence since such activities occur more frequently in these areas than in other parts of the city (Braga 2005; Braga et al. 1999; Sherman, Gartin, and Bueger 1989; Sherman and Rogan 1995; Wiesburd and Green 1995). By Forty-sixth Street, the relatively peaceful upper-middle-income neighborhoods are a distant memory, traded for neighborhoods too commonly riddled with violence. In 2008 the area north of Forty-sixth Street experienced four murders, while the area south of Forty-sixth Street witnessed forty murders, evidence of a continuum of violence that is common to many urban areas (see Anderson 1999). The farther one travels from the comforts of Indianapolis's northern edge, the closer one gets to those areas that experience the most concentrated violence. And with sixteen murders occurring within a one-mile radius of the Keystone Avenue and Thirty-eighth Street intersection, the area just south of Forty-sixth Street proves to be one of the deadliest in the city.

The East Thirty-eighth Street Area: A Gang's Natural Environment

The intersection of Keystone Avenue and Thirty-eighth Street serves as a geographical anchor for this study. Amid the single-family homes and low-income apartments that line the nearby side roads, local youths form social groups that they define as street gangs. During eighteen months of data collection, I followed gang members beyond those neighborhoods immediately adjacent to the intersection. Their disruptive home lives forced them to transition between multiple living situations. As a result, I spent time in different neighborhoods along East Thirty-eighth Street and talked to an array of people who were involved with gang life. The East Thirty-Eighth area begins about one-half mile west of the Thirty-eighth and Keystone intersection and extends eight miles east to the outer edges of the city. It also extends one mile north of Thirty-eighth Street to Forty-sixth Street and one mile south to Thirtieth Street. Like so many other urban communities where gangs are present, the East Thirty-eighth Street area is poor, has a large number of minority residents, and is home to high levels of violence.

The East Thirty-eighth Street area is, indeed, one of the most violent in the city of Indianapolis. In 2008, these sixteen square miles accounted for 30 of the city's 114 murders. The murder rate for this area was approximately 60 per 100,000 persons, which was significantly higher than the city's rate of 17 per 100,000 persons.⁷ Murders were also not evenly distributed. Three of the census tracts had homicide rates as high as 102, 127, and 216, per 100,000, while five census tracts had no murders. As previously noted, murders were concentrated near the Thirty-eighth and Keystone intersection but remained scattered throughout the eastern portion of the area. Some census tracts a few miles east of Thirty-eighth and Keystone had homicide rates of 78 and 97 per 100,000. Located near the eastern edge of the research site, Post Road has a well-deserved reputation for violence, and 2008 was no exception: five people were murdered along Post Road, most in and around apartments located near Forty-second Street.

Data from thirteen census tracts covering the area suggest that 82 percent of the residents living in these sixteen-square miles are racial minorities, and a relatively high number of them live in poverty. The median household income for this area is \$28,309, and overall, nearly 26 percent of families live in poverty. These numbers suggest that the area is generally poorer than most of Indianapolis, which has a median annual household income of \$43,351 and a 17 percent poverty rate. Nine of the fifteen census tracts in the research site are poverty areas, with at least 20 percent of households living in poverty. One census tract is an extreme poverty area, with more than 55 percent of households living in poverty. Of the remaining census tracts, only one area has less than 10 percent of families living in poverty.

One would be remiss to provide a monolithic depiction of local residents, although they are relatively poor. Pockets of relative affluence can be found near obvious signs of poverty. Although eight tracts have median family incomes below \$30,000 a year, the median income of three census tracts is above \$40,000 a year. The poorest tracts are located near the Keystone Avenue and Thirty-eighth Street intersection. Traveling east from that intersection, poverty areas are intermixed with more prosperous areas. Even within these specific tracts financial situations vary, as symbols of economic status can change considerably block by block. Sections of rundown or abandoned homes are sometimes

TABLE 1.2

Census Tract Description of Primary Research Area

Census tract	% minority	% below poverty	Poverty area	Population	Murders	Murder rate per 100,000
3226	86	27	Yes	3,026	2	66
3227	99	17	No	1,547	0	0
3308.01	86	39	Yes	7,181	4	56
3308.02	63	26	Yes	5,733	2	35
3309	90	30	Yes	5,222	2	38
3310	94	25	Yes	4,046	0	0
3505	96	26	Yes	1,966	2	102
3506	96	19	No	5,503	7	127
3507	85	8	No	1,897	0	0
3508	98	55	Yes/ extreme	2,774	6	216
3601.02	81	30	Yes	2,570	2	78
3602.01	47	23	Yes	3,103	3	97
3602.02	58	19	No	3,680	0	0

SOURCES: United State Census Bureau 2010b; *Indianapolis Star*, Marion County Homicide Map, 2008.

positioned next to a group of well-maintained houses. In some places, low-income apartment complexes are located within a few blocks of large middle-class homes. Even in the poorest neighborhoods, residents living in abject poverty are often living among people with enough income to maintain their homes and drive newer cars.

The East Thirty-eighth Street area is actually more economically secure than some communities found in neighboring cities. For example, significantly higher levels of poverty plague the Over the Rhine community on Cincinnati's near north side. Data from fifteen census tracts covering much of that community reveal approximately 51 percent of residents living in poverty. Some census tracts display poverty levels as high as 79 percent (see census tract 0017). The median family income for that area is slightly over 16,749 dollars annually, and some census tracts reveal shocking levels of poverty with median incomes under 8,000 dollars per year (see census tract 0009). The poverty levels in Cincinnati,

though exceedingly high, can also be found in other cities close to Indianapolis. A quick examination of Chicago and Detroit reveals census tracts that display poverty levels close to or above 90 percent.⁸ One also need not search extensively to find enclaves of concentrated poverty in St. Louis, where poverty rates exceed 40 percent more frequently than they do in Indianapolis. The contrast between poor neighborhoods in Indianapolis and those in neighboring cities is another reminder that the city has remained relatively resistant to the social consequences of recent economic changes. The poor are not as numerous or as concentrated in Indianapolis as they are in other cities.

Such variation influences the social and cultural dynamics in communities, and the degree and distribution of poverty in the East Thirty-eighth Street area likely produces a unique social setting. The distribution of poverty can influence interaction patterns between city residents. William Julius Wilson (1987 and 1996), for example, argues that African Americans living in areas of concentrated poverty are socially isolated from both conventional institutions and culture. As high-paying, low-skill industrial jobs leave urban areas and members of the middle class migrate away from city centers, become unemployed, or settle for low-paying jobs in service industries, fewer individuals living in these areas have meaningful ties with mainstream persons or institutions. This trend can have a transformative affect on community culture. Residents in these communities may decreasingly see the tangible rewards of mainstream values such as hard work and education, and they become therefore, less willing to pursue such endeavors. Moreover, the shared experience of living in concentrated poverty produces a number of cultural adaptations, which leads to what Wilson calls ghetto-related behavior. Street gangs represent one such adaptation, as youths spurn traditional avenues of success for an alternative pathway that helps them resolve both practical and momentary problems. Given that ghetto-related adaptations are directly related to concentrated poverty and social isolation, their prevalence and intensity should vary across cities. The pervasiveness and concentration of gangs in cities should also vary, leading to unique intergang environments.

In Indianapolis, the intergang environment does seem to reflect the broader social milieu of the city. For example, most residents living in the East Thirty-eighth Street community do not seem to be socially

isolated, perhaps because the area is not generally characterized by extreme poverty. They live among and interact with people of varying economic levels who embrace divergent cultural models. It is not uncommon to encounter a college-educated person in the same social setting as someone who dropped out of high school. Streetwise ex-cons interact with local business people, active gang members socialize with college students, and honest pastors with advanced degrees mingle with street criminals. The area displays a remarkable level of what David Harding calls cultural heterogeneity, or “the presence of a diverse array of competing and conflicting cultural models” (2010, 143). Street gangs merely represent one cultural model that has a strong, but not ubiquitous, presence in the East Thirty-eighth Street area. Given this dynamic, gang members are also not socially isolated or confined to small geographic locations. They often interact with youths from different neighborhoods, freely move about the city, and contribute to a diverse intergang environment.

Defined here as “any durable, street oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (Klein 2005, 136), the gangs of this community, and Indianapolis in general, are varied. Fluid and overlapping labels, different types of affiliations, and dissimilarities in commitment to gang life characterize the intergang environment. Some gang members pledge affiliations to national gangs based in Chicago, like the Black Gangster Disciples or the Conservative Vice Lords, and many older members remain invested in the more formal aspects of these gangs (see Knox and Papachristos 2002; Knox 2006). The degree to which these affiliates are actually connected to their organized counterparts in Chicago is somewhat ambiguous. I encountered a few older gang members who claimed to be directly connected to Chicago gangs through their position within a national leadership structure. For example, one older gang member said that he attended an annual meeting of gang leaders and had a distinct oversight role in the city of Indianapolis. Moreover, he indicated that the gang was organized and extensively involved in dealing drugs. Other gang members supported his claims, and he did display an ability to move through different neighborhoods counseling younger gang members, but such statements were generally difficult to validate.⁹ Many others in this study also claimed to be high-ranking, four-star generals in national gangs. Such

labels seemed to be used freely in the city and, at times, arbitrarily by anyone trying to sound important. Teenage gang members also claimed affiliation with these well-known gangs, but their connection to an organized national gang structure was, again, questionable. When speaking about their gang, some mentioned rules, internal discipline, a hierarchy, gang literature, and other elements common to more organized gangs, but such accounts were inconsistent and confused.

Although many of the younger generation of gang members claim affiliation to Chicago-based gangs, they are more likely to orient their gang activity around hoods and smaller clique structures. Even when they do claim affiliation to a national gang, their commitment to a clique or a hood is often more salient in their daily lives. Hoods can represent broader communities such as Haughville on the city's west side, more specific neighborhoods like Post Road on the far east side, or specific apartment complexes like "the Balt" located near Keystone and Thirtieth Street. Gang members representing these geographical areas may or may not be affiliated with smaller cliques, which are typically made up of twenty to seventy-five friends and family members who give themselves a name and adopt a gang identity. The East Thirty-eighth Street area is host to a number of cliques, hoods, and groups that use the names of national gangs. For example, many youths use the city's east-west roads as an indication of clique or hood affiliations. Although a number of hood gangs, such as Twenty-first Street or Tenth Street, can be found in the poor east-side neighborhoods located just south of the Thirty-eighth Street corridor, few claim territory north of Forty-sixth Street. Within the Thirty-eighth Street corridor, however, nearly every major east-west road (Thirtieth Street, Thirty-fourth Street, and Forty-second Street) is affiliated with a hood gang.

These hood gangs and cliques generally resemble the unorganized gangs located in other emergent gang cities, or those cities with a limited history of gang activity (see Klein 1995; Miller 2001; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Decker, Bynum, and Weisel 1998). They lack stable leadership, established rules, and a system of internal discipline. Members' endeavors are not particularly focused, and groups do not specialize in a specific criminal activity. Gang members commonly deal drugs, but they typically operate autonomously. They are responsible for gaining access to drugs, and they keep all of the profits. Some gang members, in fact,

vehemently reject the wisdom and utility of being a part of a more organized system that fronts them drugs and forces them to pay dues. They do not want to share their profits or lose their autonomy by acquiring debt. More generally, the criminal activities of these gangs are sporadic, as members opportunistically but inconsistently engage in different criminal endeavors. As will be noted throughout this book, gang members fight, rob people, and break into houses, yet most of their time is spent just hanging out. During these uneventful times gang members are very similar to non-gang-member youths in the community.

Primarily located within the East Thirty-eighth Street area, the Down for Whatever Boyz (DFW Boyz) exemplify such a group. The DFW Boyz was formed a few years before I began my research by a group of teenagers who lived in the same apartment complex. Shawn and Layboy, who were central figures in this study, were vital to this process. The boys had been in the streets since they were small children, and they often fondly recounted the days when their activities included stealing bikes and dogs. Their street-oriented activities escalated during their teenage years. Positioned in the middle of a large extended family, Shawn and Layboy had both older relatives invested in the streets and younger siblings who mimicked their way of life. Connections to older and more influential street figures provided them insight into gangs and street life. Shawn and Layboy were strong, attractive, intelligent, articulate teenagers who naturally drew a following of peers. When these attributes were combined with their position in a large local family, they had access to a pool of impressionable kids who were loyal and willing to learn. Together they formed the DFW Boyz.

Affiliation with the DFW Boyz was not mutually exclusive with other hood or national gang affiliations. For example, Layboy and Shawn lived in the East Thirty-eighth Street area and identified themselves as DFW Boyz, but, because they had lived on the west side of Indianapolis as children, they also claimed affiliation with the west-side hood of Haughville. Moreover, Layboy claimed to be a member of the Insane Vice Lords, while Shawn pledged allegiance to the Gangster Disciples. Their fellow DFW Boyz also had affiliations with other gangs or hoods. Some DFW Boyz claimed Forty-second Street, while others claimed Thirty-fourth Street. Some DFW Boyz claimed the far east side hood of Post Road, while others claimed the Balt. Within the group, Gangster

Disciples intermixed with Vice Lords, Bloods, and individuals who claimed no affiliation to national gangs. A year prior to the start of this research, the group even “cliqued up,” or joined forces with a few other groups to form an informal conglomerate under a new name. The DFW Boyz collectively distanced themselves from this new name only after the conglomeration was publically associated with a string of burglaries in the city. Despite various hood and national gang affiliations, members of the clique were united around the idea of being part of the DFW Boyz, which was their primary loyalty.

Since its inception, the gang had maintained durability for a few years, but more recent movement had dispersed its members. The group’s activities were originally concentrated in and around an apartment complex on the city’s far east side, but intense police pressure and member movement caused the group to become fragmented. At the time of my research, Layboy and Shawn lived about five miles from the location that birthed the DFW Boyz. The gang therefore lacked cohesion but still thrived, as members relied on informal subgroups that were positioned throughout the city. Shawn and Layboy were connected to multiple groups in different areas of the city, but they mostly operated in a few East Thirty-eighth Street neighborhoods. They were, therefore, able to travel throughout most the city without negative consequences. Their travels extended well beyond a single neighborhood or even the Thirty-eighth Street community. I accompanied them to locations on the south, west, near north, and far east sides of the city. They also interacted with people who were variably involved in gang life. Still, Shawn and Layboy’s daily interactions were typically confined to a select group of peers. Although they infrequently interacted with most DFW Boyz, Layboy and Shawn were very close to members who either lived close to them or were family members. These individuals were also central figures in this study.

In addition to being durable, the group displayed the other defining elements of a street gang. The group’s activities were oriented toward the streets, as members routinely met at parties or while hanging out in parks, malls, and street corners. Nearly every member of the DFW Boyz was younger than twenty, and the group’s identity focused on criminal activity. The moniker Down for Whatever represented their understanding of the group’s defining trait. Members had to be down for

whatever or they misrepresented the group. Members understood that the DFW Boyz opportunistically, and somewhat haphazardly, pursued criminal activities that provided them with meager sums of money. Some gang members sold drugs, but this was not a defining element of the gang's identity. More often they robbed people, broke into houses, or stole merchandise. A more prominent part of the gang's identity involved a willingness and ability to fight whenever needed.

The informal nature of the DFW Boyz is a microcosm of gang life in Indianapolis. Mixed, overlapping, and, at times, fluid affiliations create a complex and confusing intergang environment. The general heterogeneity in the community, marked by mixed interactions, creates widespread exposure to gang life so that the boundaries of gang affiliation become blurred. Youth come into the area, either to live or to visit, and interact with gang members. Gang affiliations are then variably embraced and sporadically employed by youths who may or may not have actual connections to gangs. Moreover, in the continuous cycle of movement and maturation, new groups form and seek to stake their claim in the streets. Amid such an environment, self-defined gang members struggle to establish a clear and widely embraced understanding of what it actually means to be in a gang. The intergang environment in Indianapolis is, therefore, characterized by uncertainty, a dynamic that dramatically influences intergang interactions.

A FIELD OF GANGS: BOUNDING A GANG'S SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Gangs are not isolated in the streets of Indianapolis; their social environment is characterized by mutual interaction. These interactions are a focal concern to gang members, who, in a manner consistent with their adolescence, spend an inordinate amount of energy assessing the characteristics and actions of others. Individuals who are active and invested in the streets typically operate with impressively in-depth understandings of the gangs in both their surrounding community and the city in general. In Indianapolis, gang members living and operating on the city's far east side are familiar with the various cliques and gangs in other parts of the city. Their working knowledge includes elaborate impressions of different gangs and gang members. Conversations between friends or fellow gang members often represent a collective effort to label other groups.

In time, one comes to understand that a specific gang operating near Thirtieth Street and Central Avenue “don’t play around” and should not be messed with. Or, the gang located in the apartments along East Twenty-first Street is weak and talks too much. Although some of this focus is the inevitable byproduct of the dangers that stem from intergang conflict, much of it reflects large numbers of teenagers and young adults belonging to an extended network of similar groups. Being in a gang is meaningful, and the characteristics and actions of other so-called gangs provide a frame of reference that can either be admired or mocked.

For the average gang member, other gangs become known through direct contact or street gossip. Contact between members of different gangs occurs fairly regularly, as they attend the same schools, go to the same parties or clubs, share jail time with each other, and at times even live in the same apartment complexes. Some members of the DFW Boyz, for example, had been kicked out of so many schools that they established contacts with gangs on each side of Indianapolis. Frequent, and often hostile, banter on networking Web sites signifies another avenue for interactions between members of different gangs. Even if an individual does not have direct contact with another gang, he or she is likely to hear about it. Conversations routinely focus on which cliques or hoods were represented at the latest party or the current status of an ongoing street beef (conflict). Although no single gang is fully knowledgeable about the happenings of the street, each gang actively observes and evaluates other similar groups.

Thus each gang is embedded in a complex environment characterized by mutual awareness and interaction. Conceptualizing such an environment requires a theoretical construct that can adequately account for large numbers of similar groups. Organizational theorists have created and utilized various theoretical concepts to represent aggregations of similar collectivities (Benson 1975; DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Fligstein 2001; Kenis and Knoke 2002; Scott and Meyer 1991; Warren 1967). An organizational field, for example, is a social construct that represents “those organizations that, in aggregate, constitute a recognized area of social life” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991, 64). By grouping similar organizations, researchers have been able to study the formation and maturation of a field, its relationship with other social arenas, interorganizational influences within that field, and those in-field pressures placed

on a focal organization or members of that organization (for examples see Brint and Karabel 1991; DiMaggio 1991; Fligstein 1991; Lune and Martinez 1999). By applying the notion of a field to the intergang environment, researchers can better frame an array of important empirical and theoretical issues. This study, for example, is concerned with how pressures within the intergang environment, particularly in relation to the construction of field boundaries, influences gang member behavior.

Although most gangs cannot be accurately described as organizations (Klein 1995; Klein and Maxson 2006), street gangs when combined do represent a distinct area of social life. Scholars have largely neglected to develop theoretical ideas about the collection of gangs in a given area. More importantly, studies have undertheorized the content of intergang interactions. Studies that do examine such interactions focus only on the existence and consequences of conflict between gangs (Decker 1996; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Klein 1971; Short and Strodtbeck 1974). The complexity of intergang interactions encompasses more than conflict, as gang members continually observe, interpret, and evaluate the actions of individuals representing other gangs. However, before this process can be examined, three basic characteristics of the intergang field must be clarified.

Establishing Field Boundaries

Given that a field represents a collection of similar groups, individuals invested in the concept must decide which groups do and do not belong in the field. Often researchers attempt to objectively establish such a boundary through a systematic selection process. For example, to ensure cross-study consistency, gang researchers have openly debated the definition of a gang (Ball and Curry 1995; Bjerregaard 2002; Esbensen et al. 2001; Klein 1995; Klein 2005; Winfree et al. 1992). When attempting to define the boundary of an intergang field, a researcher can use a widely accepted definition of “gang” to appropriately identify which groups belong in the intergang field. Meticulous application of this generally agreed-upon definition reduces the possibility of false labeling. For the sake of research, the parameters of that field are further limited to a geographical area (all gangs in Indianapolis) or empirically derived through network analysis. Thus when one uses a widely accepted method to distinguish gang members from non-gang

members, the boundaries of the intergang field are clearly defined, and one can be certain that all groups are appropriately labeled.

Fields can be defined externally, but they are not just artificial constructs created for research. They are meaningful to participants, and researchers must examine how groups come to define their social environment (DiMaggio 1991; Fligstein 2001). Detached from academic discussions of gang definitions or concerns about cross-research consistency, gang members are fixated on what a gang is and what it means to be a gang member. Each member forms an individualized understanding of the requirements needed not only for inclusion into his or her focal gang but also for the greater gang environment. Some groups are labeled as real gangs, while other groups do not meet the established standards. In many fields that are unrelated to street gangs, such individualized understanding about the location of a field boundary does not lead to widespread disagreement. Through mutual interaction, participants in a field often establish agreed-upon standards to determine the outer limits of the field boundary. Those groups that belong to and are accepted as viable members of a field share similar goals, functions, output, and appearance/structures, or meet a formalized standard that may come from practices like accreditation (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Scott and Meyer 1991). Agreement produces environmental certainty, as it assures a focal group that inclusion into the field will be met with unanimous acceptance.

If objective standards create general agreement about field boundaries, the opposite can also be true. In the absence of objective standards, a field will be characterized by widespread disagreement and general uncertainty about which groups do and do not belong. This dynamic is more representative of the intergang environment in Indianapolis. Without agreed-upon standards, individualized understandings of gangs are fairly inconsistent between gangs and gang members. Each member subjectively forms his or her understanding of “gang” through personal experience, so there are as many definitions of the term “street gang” as there are definers. This profoundly impacts the field, as each invested gang or gang member has a different understanding of who is and who is not a part of the general gang environment. The resulting uncertainty impacts the everyday actions and concerns of gang members.

Intergroup Interactions

Another essential characteristic of the intergang field involves the multifaceted social connections between different street gangs. Researchers have understandably focused on the role of threat or conflict in the context of these interactions. Conflict between gangs or gang members is associated with the formation of gangs, group cohesion, and contagious violence (Decker 1996; Klein 1971; Papachristos 2009; Thrasher 1967). Driven by systematic efforts to thwart gang violence, scholars have also begun to trace the existence or absence of conflict between known gangs in a given city (Kennedy, Braga, and Piehl 2001; McGloin 2005; Tita, Riley, and Greenwood 2001). Yet focusing only on the presence or absence of intergang conflict oversimplifies the content of such ties. It also does not provide much insight into the interactive process that leads to intergang conflict. Rarely do members of different gangs engage each other violently without a history predicated on patterned interactions. Expanding theoretical conceptions of intergang ties beyond conflict or threat can actually lead to new insights that may help explain intergang conflict.

The concept of an intergang field provides a basic framework for examining another powerful dynamic common to intergang interactions. Since the notion of “gang” is meaningful to gang members, and they are invested in establishing a field boundary, intergang interactions are often characterized by an interpretive process whereby all involved assess others’ right to belong. Inconsistent understandings about the meaning of “street gang” and “gang member” lead to a general lack of agreement about the boundary of the field. So while gang members perceive themselves to be a viable part of the intergang field, others may disagree. Such external assessments are indeed prevalent in the intergang environment and are vital to understanding gang interactions. Intergang interactions can, at times, be dominated by overt dismissals in which one’s gang affiliation is openly mocked. More often, gang members are aware that peers evaluate them, and they are therefore motivated to demonstrate their place within the field boundary. Both aspects of intergang interactions precede, and can induce, conflict.

Legitimacy

The gang and gang member must be studied as elements within an intergang field. Lacking agreed-upon standards that clearly establish a

boundary, the intergang field in and around Indianapolis is characterized by widespread disagreement and uncertainty. This uncertainty fundamentally shapes intergang interactions, as gang members use individualized understandings about the meaning of “gang” and “gang membership” to accept or reject peers who claim to be a part of the intergang field. This process becomes most problematic when an outsider claims that a self-defined gang or gang member is being inauthentic. When disagreements arise about the authenticity of a gang or gang member, all invested parties are confronted with a problem of legitimacy. According to Mark Suchman, “Legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (1995, 574). Interactions within the intergang environment are the avenues through which assessments of legitimacy are made. They are also the medium that creates the norms, values, beliefs, and definitions used to make such evaluations. Establishing legitimacy is simple when everyone involved in a given social milieu reaches a general understanding about the requirements needed for acceptance; an individual or group simply needs to meet those standards. When agreement does not exist, however, and involved parties are still making evaluations about legitimacy, the process of establishing legitimacy becomes problematic. This is the case in the intergang environment.

The gang members in this study are caught in a constant struggle for legitimacy, which is gained not from conventional society but from the assessments of other gangs or the intergang environment. Self-defined gang members strongly believe that their group is a gang and that they are gang members. Yet the intergang environment is skeptical of those claims, as too many youths falsely assert gang affiliation or embrace a weakened version of a gang. Accordingly, these individuals are not considered to be real gang members. They are perceived to be positioned outside the intergang field and are treated accordingly. Thus each gang member struggles to validate his or her claim of gang membership to the broader gang environment. Without fieldwide agreement about the norms, values, beliefs, and definitions needed to establish legitimacy, each claimant is left without a clear method to attain legitimacy. This is the paradox of legitimacy. A dubious intergang environment forces gang

members to seek out legitimacy, but it does not provide any objective criteria for establishing legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

The intergang environment is not a concept specific to the city of Indianapolis. Street gangs reside in most, if not all, cities, and gang members interact frequently enough to establish mutual awareness. Moreover, the construction of the intergang field, through the establishment of environmental boundaries, is also a general process that can, and should, be examined in other cities. This process is, however, influenced by variations in social networks that guide social interaction. To the degree that a community or group of people is socially isolated, their social interactions will be limited to a relatively small number of people and will produce similar cultural ideas. In an isolated community where mutual interaction is high, the establishment of a field boundary should be clear and disagreements should be minimal. When social isolation is not evident, interactions are mixed and divergent ideas emerge. In impoverished urban communities that do not exemplify high levels of social isolation, street gangs still emerge and are an option for many youth. Yet diversity in interactions creates numerous ideas about the boundaries of the intergang environment. Not everyone in Indianapolis agrees about the meaning of “gang,” and this produces both high levels of uncertainty in the intergang environment and a constant struggle for legitimacy. Such a dynamic may not be perfectly reflected in other cities. Fluctuations in concentrated poverty may influence the degree of social isolation in cities, and this may influence the level of uncertainty within intergang environments. With the possible exception of prisons, however, communities are rarely fully isolated, and within these communities different ideas about the parameters of the intergang environment coexist. The struggle for legitimacy in the intergang environment probably exists in most cities, though the nature of the struggle varies.

This pursuit of legitimacy reflects a continuous and enduring cultural process whereby gang members create and negotiate various cultural artifacts that provide meaning to daily life. The idea of being a real gang member is one such artifact that is meaningful, yet subject to the subtleties of social interactions. Gang members, often through routine conversation, discuss what “gang” means. Moreover, they contrast real

gang members with supposedly fake gang members, which allows them to develop a set of behavioral expectations for real gang members. These culturally proscribed expectations then shape their interpretations of situations and cause them to “do gang,” or act in a manner that real gang members are supposed to act, so that they are not labeled fake. They also embrace and contribute to broader cultural narratives that both contribute to the uncertainty in Indianapolis’s intergang environment and reinforce the need to gain and maintain legitimacy in that environment.

Considerations of field boundaries and legitimacy arise only after one joins a gang and embraces a gang identity. Understanding the precursors of membership provides insight into the reasons why some gang members remain heavily invested in the idea of being a gang member. Moreover, examining the origins of gang membership reveals a fundamental contradiction that is common to gang life. For many youth, the street gang serves as a stabilizing force in the midst of relative chaos. But gang membership is also accompanied by entrance into the intergang environment, and subsequent intergang interactions are fraught with uncertainty, angst, and even violence.