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CHAPTER 2

Joining a Gang

AS WAS OFTEN the case in the course of my research, I was ending a day by driving a few members of the DFW Boyz to their desired locations. Accompanying me were brothers Layboy and Shawn, and their cousin TJ. The boys defined certain settings as turf, but their movement through Indianapolis was not defined by geography. The original members of the gang knew each other from hanging out in a far-east-side neighborhood, but few resided there anymore. Layboy and Shawn, for example, had created so many problems in their far-east-side recent apartment complex that their mother was again forced to move. They had also been kicked out of multiple high schools in the city and were attending a school far from home. This movement allowed them to expand their social connections, so that they asked to be dropped off in many different locations.

Layboy and Shawn's neighborhood and school situations were rather fluid, and their living situation was even less specific. Their mother, grandmother, and aunt all lived in different locations along Thirty-eighth Street, and, at various times during the course of my research, each location seemed to be the boys' primary place of residence. For a while, they were even living with a community leader, until he kicked them out for their gang activities. In the past, their mother had ignored petty criminal behavior, but with her sons getting older she had become worrisome and hounded them about their activities. Her concerns were undoubtedly reasonable, as Shawn and Layboy's entire family seemed involved in gang activity. To the boys her fears were an unnecessary annoyance. They found more freedom at TJ's apartment, and their aunt, TJ's mother, seemed to function as their primary caregiver. On this day, however, sixteen-year-old Layboy told me that he would be living with another brother, Aaron, age twenty, who had recently rented an apartment on the city's far east side.

Heading east on Thirty-eighth Street, I relinquished control of the radio as Layboy turned up the local hip-hop station. Although music often monopolized the trips I made as the boys' driver, these drives proved to be invaluable for understanding the concerns of teenagers. When the car was full, the guys would openly converse about what was going on in the streets. They would also talk about topics ranging from girls, to parties, to specific boys who were rapping (talking negatively) about the gang. Sometimes the drives provided opportunities to ask questions. On rare occasions, the boys candidly talked about the more intimate and difficult aspects of their lives. Without displaying an awareness that comes with maturity, they, in passing, mentioned lifelong struggles with anger, poverty, or family members. On this day, however, music dominated as we traveled without much conversation.

Turning my vehicle into a far-east-side apartment complex, I was reminded that many of the low-rent apartments scattered about Thirty-eighth Street appeared relatively well maintained. Even the most notorious apartment complexes did not initially appear poorly kept, and one had to look closely to find evidence of physical disrepair. This particular apartment complex was quite ordinary. It resembled some of the complexes that my fellow graduate students were living in at that time in Bloomington, Indiana. There were no signs of vice in or around the apartments, and, with the exception of unmarked police cars that were routinely staked out in the complex, I rarely saw signs of vice all summer. The most prominent characteristic of the small one-bedroom apartment was its emptiness. The living room, dining room, and kitchen were completely bare. The only thing in the apartment was an air mattress that was being used as a bed. The apartment also did not seem to contain any food. In fact, throughout that summer, I would often arrive at the apartment to find a few hungry teenagers hoping that I would buy them food at a local fast-food restaurant. This was hardly an attractive place to live, especially when contrasted with the larger and better-furnished apartment that Layboy's aunt lived in.

Layboy's desire and ability to live with his brother in this empty one-bedroom apartment reflected his rather chaotic life. Despite multiple adults taking some role in raising Layboy, no one was willing or able to limit the time he spent in the apartment. Although he was only sixteen years old, Layboy was generally unsupervised, and he would run

the streets late into the night. At times during the summer when I would come by the apartment late in the morning, it would reek of marijuana, and a few girls would be lounging about. More frequently, Layboy would inform me about a fight, party, or robbery that he had participated in since we last talked. Even Shawn usually chose not to stay at the apartment because “too much stuff” was going on there. His aunt’s apartment provided Shawn unlimited access to the streets, but it also provided a respite if needed. Layboy, however, found the constant activity of Aaron’s apartment too enticing to leave behind.

The instability in Layboy’s life was not just a temporary state associated with his current living situation. It had been consistent throughout his entire life. There are many possible indices of instability, and Layboy and his brothers experienced poverty, a troubled family life, numerous moves, and exposure to drugs, gangs, and violence at an early age. They also had complete access to the streets during their preadolescent years. Although no singular pathway leads to gang membership (Thornberry et al. 2003), the individuals in this study often had a story similar to Layboy’s. For most gang members, gang life represented either a possible solution to an unresolved problem or an option embraced after repeated contacts with friends or family. For some members, a street gang provided an attractive substitute for a disagreeable home life, or it provided friendship and protection when needed most. Other members viewed gang life as a chance to increase illicit moneymaking opportunities made attractive by overt poverty. Or, they perceived gang life to be a quick avenue for gaining respect in the streets, and they were also attracted to a lifestyle of unrestrained hedonism. For all gang members, the gang provided a reliable network of peers who were invested in both a unified identity and the preservation of self and close associates. The relationships formed within the gang were often tight, and gang members viewed their close associates as being part of the family rather than just members of the same group. They became “my boys,” “my bros,” or “my niggas.” As such, in the midst of instability and chaotic life circumstances, the gang provided the illusion of stability.

BECOMING A GANG MEMBER

Most youths do not join gangs. National data indicate that about 5 percent of youths have been in a gang, and 2 percent are currently in

a gang (Klein and Maxson 2006). Even in at-risk communities, 70 to 80 percent of youths do not join gangs (ibid.). For those invested in gang life, membership is merely a significant turning point in the course of a complicated and often troubled life. Rarely are youths arbitrarily targeted by gangs and coerced to join. Rather, gang membership is the result of a series of life conditions that make gang life appear attractive or necessary. Although there is no single combination of circumstances and events that deterministically leads to gang membership (Thornberry et al. 2003), there are factors associated with gang membership. When compared to their non-gang peers, for example, gang members are more likely to experience negative life events, be unsupervised by adults, display nondelinquent problem behaviors, and associate with friends who participate in delinquent activities and/or exhibit pro-gang attitudes (Craig et al. 2002; Eitle, Gunkel, and Van Gundy 2004; Esbensen and Deschenes 1998; Esbensen and Weerman 2005; Gatti et al. 2005; Hill et al. 1999; Klein and Maxson 2006; Maxson, Whitlock, and Klein 1998; Thornberry et al. 2003). Moreover, the transition into gang membership is enhanced by other factors that motivate an individual to pursue gang membership. Scott Decker and Barrik Van Winkle (1996) report that some prospective gang members are pulled into gang life by attractive opportunities to make fast money or gain status in the streets. Other prospective gang members are pushed into gang life by family/peer influence, or because they need protection in a threatening environment.

When recounting the events and circumstances that eventually led to gang activity, individuals in this study often told stories fraught with generalized instability and chaos. They recalled how troubled households either forced them to find refuge in gang life or gave them the opportunity to run the streets at an early age. Confronted with the reality of street life, they found protection, status, opportunities to make money, and a sense of belonging in gang life. They often viewed joining a gang as a resolution to an array of difficult life circumstances.

Family Life and Street Participation

A common theme in research is that gang membership represents an attractive alternative to a deficient and troublesome home life (Eitle, Gunkel, and Van Gundy 2004). Multiple researchers note the presence

of abuse, disruption, and hostility in the homes of gang members (Fleisher 1998; Miller 2001; Moore 1978 and 1991; Vigil 1991), causing some researchers to view gangs as surrogate families (Moore 1978 and 1991; Vigil 1991). Broader and more representative studies typically agree that gang members are more likely than non-gang peers to have dysfunctional home lives, but the exact reasons for such dysfunction remain somewhat unclear (Craig et al. 2002). Although research generally concludes that low levels of parental supervision are associated with gang membership, findings are less supportive for single-parent family structures and low parent/child attachment (for a good review see Klein and Maxson 2006). Furthermore, studies examining levels of family deviance and family hostility exhibit mixed findings (*ibid.*). The gang members in this study consistently identified family problems as being a reason for their gang activity, but such problems typically did not directly lead to gang membership. Instead, family life caused prospective gang members to enter the streets at an early age, and conditions in the streets eventually produced the motivation to join a street gang.

In the East Thirty-eighth Street area of Indianapolis, home life must be understood within the context of neighborhood environments. Each family is positioned in close proximity to the seductive lure of the streets. Organized around illicit markets and an underground economy, the streets are a ghetto institution regulated by extralegal and often violent activities. The streets socialize impressionable youths on the ways of adulthood by reinforcing the importance of toughness, street smarts, virility, and autonomy, while also teaching youths that violence is an appropriate response to disagreements or personal affronts (Anderson 1999; Oliver 1994 and 2006). For youths, there are strong attractions to street life. Teenagers uninterested in deferred gratification can find the promise of fast cash, material possessions, drugs, status, wanton sexual activity, and unfettered freedoms in the streets. Consequently, parenting in proximity to the streets is accompanied by unique challenges. And while the negative consequences of family instability, generalized dysfunction, and child maltreatment are universal, children in the inner city simply have different options than their rural and suburban counterparts.¹ They often turn to the streets.

Unrestrained participation in street activity during pre- and early adolescence typically precedes gang membership, and such access to the

streets is largely controlled by family environment. Most households within the Thirty-eighth Street community embrace cultural ideas that directly oppose alternative ideas found in the streets, and parents seek to limit their children's access to street life. Therefore, many youths experience intense conflict between home life and street life, which typically reduces their desire and/or ability to routinely participate in street life. Devon, a college student who grew up in the East Thirty-eighth Street area but did not become invested in the streets, remembered how his mother constantly monitored his activities:

Oh, she was very strict, and I think that that's one of the reasons why I stayed out of trouble. That's the biggest reason right there. When the lights came on, we had to be in the house. She didn't play about that. Like I said, she was in the church, so she would always make us go on Friday nights. It's funny how all the old people used to do it because on Friday and Saturday night we always going to church. We like, "Why we got to go to church on Friday and Saturday night?" But those were the nights where most people do their stuff. I'm realizing that they did that because they wanted us to keep us out of trouble. We always used to go to choir rehearsal. We always had to do Bible study. We had to do those kinds of things. At night she knew where we as at. She was so strict that by the time I got to high school she didn't have to give me a curfew because she conditioned me so much to be in the house. So I would come home straight from school, because we would literally get our butts beat if we didn't come straight home from school first and tell where we was at.

The existence of a conflict between home life and street life decreases one's probability of being exposed to the streets at an early age. Such conflict is often conceptualized as a contrast in cultural orientations; many families in the urban poor areas reject street life (see Anderson 1999; Hannerz 1969). Youths from non-street or "decent" households pursue conventional endeavors like stable employment and education, while those from street-oriented households focus more on street activities. Although such variation is important, households that reject street life must also successfully limit the opportunities children have to participate freely in street activities. Some households that reject

street life allow access to the streets by failing to adequately monitor relatively young children. Despite routine exposure to a conflicting cultural model, youths given the opportunity to participate freely in street activities are likely to do so.

In Indianapolis, I found that three non-mutually exclusive home types provided youths access to the streets at an early age. The first involved street-oriented families who were engaged in criminal activities, drugs, and gangs, while they also deemphasized conventional avenues for success, like school performance and steady employment (Anderson 1999; Hannerz 1969). Some of these families directly influenced gang membership by reinforcing pro-gang mentalities. For example, a large number of Layboy and Shawn's extended family were active in the streets. The boys had uncles and older brothers who were heavily invested in gangs, violence, and dealing drugs. Many of Shawn and Layboy's close contacts in the DFW Boyz were also younger brothers, stepbrothers, or cousins. Their sisters and female cousins were also part of the gang as DFW Girlz. Consequently, there was little conflict between family life and street life, and most family members transitioned into gang activities at a young age.

There was also an absence of conflict between family life and street life in families who lacked a strong gang tradition but had a history of engaging in illicit street activities. A parent's participation in illicit street activities often reduced one's desire and ability to monitor his or her child's activities, and it reinforced street life within the family. Gang members often recounted how their guardian's illicit activities both exposed them to street activities and gave them the motivation and opportunity to participate in street life. For example, some gang members noted how their parent's incarceration created uncertain living situations, frustration, insecurity, and allowed them to run the streets unsupervised. When asked about the events that led him to join a gang, Michael, a nineteen-year-old gang member, referenced his childhood living situation: "My family, man. My living situation. My momma's been to prison. My daddy's been to prison. We done live with like four or five different people. Since they been locked up, we had to move from house to house. There wasn't really nobody there you know. So we stayed out in the street." Ronnie, another teenage gang member, discussed how troubled familial

relationships and his father's incarceration caused instability in his home life:

At first I was living on the west side. I lived with my mom for a while, her and my dad got into it. She threw me out of the house, 'cause she wanted to be spiteful toward my dad. I lived with him for a minute. He stayed in trouble with the law, so I had to move back in with my mom. We didn't click well, so I moved in with my grandmother. Everything was cool for a minute, and I guess I moved back in with my mom. Stuff started to get bad. We moved into the projects, and I got introduced to fighting all the time, gang banging, this, that, and the other. That's when I met all my friends basically. Everybody I with now I met at that point in my life.

Youth from street-oriented families experienced little conflict between their street life and their home life. Street culture was often transmitted between generations, and youth in these households were also exposed to an unsettled pace of life. Incarceration, drug addiction, and/or routine late nights diminished parent's desire and ability to monitor their children's activities. With little direct supervision, these children had access to the streets at an early age, and they were more likely than their peers to become involved in street activity.

The second type of home was characterized by apathy, in that parents did not prioritize their children's development or monitor their children's activities. Although some of these families were invested in street life, others were not. For example, Bryan, a former gang member, recounted his childhood by lamenting that his parents' lack of involvement produced not only resentment but also the motivation and opportunity to run the streets:

From the time I left school, until maybe 10:00 at night I was out. Weekends and summers I was gone all day long. As I got a little older and was into females, I would be out gone even longer. I actually hated the environment that I was in. I would go to friends' houses, and it was completely different. Mom and Dad would play the role of family just like on TV. The house would be clean. I wouldn't see any bugs. So it gave me an outlook that when

I had company over to my house I was ashamed to have people over, especially girls. I never wanted to be home, and mom was always working. She was an LPN, she was always working, and when she got off of work she went to bingo. So she was rarely home to monitor any situation. Pops worked hard and when he came home he went bowling. So when they came home I was just getting in. They didn't really monitor what I was doing. I saw my mom struggle. I can look at it now and see that she mismanaged her money. Pops mismanaged his money. We'd wash our clothes once a month. What the hell am I going to wear to school tomorrow? There's a pair of socks, some old drawers, and some pants that I didn't wear this week. I got old car parts in there 'cause Pops is a car freak, but it's in my room. Sometimes I wouldn't eat so my mom could eat and she was trying to do the same thing. She wouldn't eat so I could eat. Food was scarce. A lot of bad decisions.

Some households that embraced a more conventional lifestyle might not have approved of children engaging in street activity, but they did little to prevent it. Parents might have been unaware that their sons or daughters sold drugs, carried a gun, or were heavily involved with gang activity. Thus youth with apathetic parents or guardians might have experienced some conflict between home life and street activities, but they were not prevented from running the streets.

The third type of home was characterized more by neglect and abuse than by apathy. Killa-Con, a member of the DFW Boyz, recalled how, at the age of thirteen, his mother kicked him out of the house and forced him to fend for himself on the streets:

Like me, I grew up by myself. I moved out here when I was thirteen. As soon as I moved out here my momma put me out. So all I knew was the streets. I grew up on the streets by myself, trying to find somewhere to live, somewhere to sleep, somewhere to try to get something to eat. Try to get some money or whatever. So me growing up like that, ain't nothing else to care about but the streets, that's all I know. I got in because I moved from the west side of Indianapolis and came out east. I started getting cool with everybody

out here. I'm already a Vice Lord or whatever. I came out here I met Layboy, one of the DFW Boyz. I met Layboy, they was like, "Shit, you be on the same shit we be on. You be down for whatever too. So why don't you get down with us?" So I got down.

Other prospective gang members sought refuge in the streets after suffering through years of mental and physical abuse.² Children who lived in an abusive household might or might not have experienced conflict between home life and street life. If conflict did exist, their desire to escape the home overpowered any attempts by guardians to limit their access to the street. For children who lived in abusive or negligent households, the world outside of their front door was more appealing, and it could offer more hope than the environment behind it.

Conflict, Protection, and Respect

Whether for one day or an extended period of time, leaving home to run the streets places an individual at risk for violent encounters. There is no shortage of reasons why someone might find himself or herself in a threatening situation. While in the process of learning to sell drugs, one may mistakenly conduct business on another person's turf, or mismanage his or her funds and short a drug supplier. Perhaps the individual unknowingly disrespects someone, or insults a peer in an attempt to build up his or her reputation. A sexual partner may make up stories to stir jealousies and induce anger from other interested parties. Or the individual is victimized by a group of local youth that enjoys harassing and beating up easy targets. Given that most gang members report being invested in the streets by the age of thirteen, their actions are initially guided more by naïveté and inexperience than genuine street smarts. The choice to join a gang must, therefore, be understood through the lens of someone in his or her early adolescent years attempting to negotiate a dangerous and violent environment. Lacking information and foresight, many youth view a street gang as a source of protection.

For some gang members in Indianapolis, this need for protection was the direct result of an ongoing conflict or problem that could be potentially resolved by acquiring allies within a street gang. Reggie, an inactive gang member, explained how routine confrontations with

gang members in a new neighborhood provided motivation to join a different gang:

My first involvement in gangs came 'cause the neighborhood I grew up in. Once we moved over there, I have two brothers and a sister, there were three new boys in the neighborhood, and we did not belong to a gang. So the boys in the neighborhood began to jump on us every day, bully us, pressure us, and beat us up. They wanted to fight us just because we were the new guys. Then they wanted to recruit us to be in their gang. But, of course, by us being attacked by them on a regular basis we had no desire to be with that gang. We actually wanted to get even with them. So at some point in time, with us fighting them on a regular basis, one of my cousins came over one weekend and we began to fight as usual. My cousin jumped in. Well, my cousin at that time, we didn't know it, was in another gang. The gang that was jumping us was considered BGD or Disciples. My cousin, at the time, happened to be a member of the Vice Lord gang. So after he got jumped the following week, he was like, "I'm going to get my boys and we'll be back and we'll deal with this. We'll help." He went to get his Vice Lord friends or gang members to help fight the gang that lived in the apartment complex, who were Black Gangster Disciples. They told us they would come over and help us whenever we needed help in exchange for us hanging with them and being apart of their gang. Being affiliated, because they weren't in it just to provide protection to anybody. So if we wanted to get help from other gangs we had to be in a gang. So what initially caused me or led me to join a gang was getting tired of getting jumped by these guys, and here are some guys that's willing to help me. And they happen to be a gang too. So that's about the time when my gang involvement starts.

Gang membership was accompanied by an expectation of mutual support during interpersonal conflicts. Unless a member was viewed as being completely unreasonable, problems with one member usually meant problems with the gang. For the adolescent tired of being beaten up, gang life offered safety in numbers.

This benefit also extended into the day-to-day activities of the street. In addition to providing support during conflicts, established

gangs were thought to garner immediate respect for their members. Four DFW Boyz talked about the practical benefits of membership by noting that outsiders understood the consequences of messing with one of their own:

YOUNG-G: They don't respect you when you're really nobody, but when you become somebody they know you get that respect.

KILLA-CON: When you by yourself they will whoop your ass. If you walking down the street at two or three in the morning with about thirty-five DFW Boyz, all got on black long sleeve shirts, black shoes, black jeans. Boy rolls by talking about, "Come here." Rest of your clique like, "Nigga what's up, what's happening?" See, they ain't going to let you walk up to this nigga's car by yourself, and you don't know what this nigga is on. They going to be right behind you like, "What's up, if you got something to say you got something to say to all of us."

SHAWN: You say it to one of us, you say it to all.

LAYBOY: Like the situation with him [Young-G], dude pulled up or whatever and tried to holler at him. I said, "Nah, it ain't going to be you holler at him. You holler at him you holler at all of us. You holler at him when all of us right there, you know what I'm saying." We had the gun. Dude just thought he was hard. He was rapping, I was like, "What you want? What's up?"

Ignoring the obvious consequence that mutual obligation actually placed the gang member in the middle of more conflicts, the power of such backing was somewhat intoxicating. For the previously outnumbered individual, this newly acquired reinforcement created a false sense of certainty in an otherwise chaotic environment.

Money and the Gang Lifestyle

Although a threatening environment often compelled an individual to join a gang, others were attracted to gang life by perceived monetary benefits associated with some gangs. In East Thirty-eighth Street neighborhoods, youth were immersed in an environment that pressured them to find illicit means to get money. For some, the source of this pressure came from the immediate consequences of overt poverty. Some children lived in homes that either could not or did not provide basic needs, such

as consistent food and adequate clothing. Other children permanently left home at a relatively young age and were forced to survive without parental support. For these youth, who were typically not old enough to enter the legal job market, the opportunity to make quick money through illicit activities was tempting. As Kenny, a sixteen-year-old gang member, recounted:

I mean you grow up with roaches and rats and all that. Do you know what I mean? Some people working two or three jobs just to take care of their kids. When they still come home, they come home to a shack. I mean clothes and stuff everywhere, holes in the roof, roaches all over the wall. It's crazy—mice running around. They've been living like this forever, man. That's why people sell drugs. People think that we sell drugs because it's cute or something. You got to do what you got to do in order to come up. You don't want to be broke your whole life, you feel me? . . . To be honest I had to sell drugs at a young age, at ten years old, 'cause my little sister and my little brother was starving, you know what I mean? We had nothing to eat, you feel me? My momma tried to work but you can't do fast food restaurants your whole life.

When given the opportunity to run the streets, children living in poverty easily justified illegal activities as being necessary to acquire basic needs. Putting in some work selling drugs could yield enough money to buy food or clothing. Such activities may have also provided preadolescent youth access to meager luxuries, such as junk food, cool clothing, additional cell phone minutes, or the latest CD/music download. These desires were modest, but in the context of overt poverty, motivation was strong.

Although the desire to make money originated from the immediate consequences of overt poverty, youths were quickly immersed in a culture that emphasized conspicuous living (Wright and Decker 1997). In the streets, many youths were attracted to, and experienced, albeit very briefly, a lifestyle of self-indulgence characterized by desperate partying and superficial displays of independence (Jacobs and Wright 1999; Shover and Honaker 1992; Wright, Brookman, and Bennett 2006; Wright and Decker 1997). For example, Nikki, an eighteen-year-old

inactive gang member, remembered the days when she was dating a temporarily successful drug-dealing gang member:

The money. The flashiness. The lifestyle. I was sixteen, going to the club and drinking expensive stuff. And it was like, "Shit, my momma don't even drink this expensive champagne." I'm getting money from my boyfriend, and he's got his Chevy on 24's [tire or rim size]. It's the lifestyle that attracts the females to them. But they got to know in the long run they going to leave them. But you don't think that way when you in it. When you in the situation, you riding in the Chevy, he bought you an outfit, hell he might even bought you a car. But you don't think about it until, shit, he go to jail, you get pregnant, and he leaves you. That's what I think attracts a lot of people. That's what I think attracted me, the lifestyle. I enjoyed being around and kicking it, just hanging out.

Such extravagance is the exception and not the rule, but displays of financial solvency often provide the impression that the streets are lucrative. The reality of street life is much more modest; most people invested in illicit moneymaking endeavors earn just enough to support their party and/or drug habits (Bourgois 1999; Fleisher 1998; Jacobs 1999; Jacobs and Wright, 1999; Levitt and Venkatesh 2000; Wright and Decker 1997). The allure of fast cash is always present in the streets, however, and despite being positioned in the poorest urban communities, there are ample opportunities to make money. The underground economy is nearly synonymous with street life, and there are wide-ranging hustles that allow people to make money and access the rewards of street life (Venkatesh 2006). Youths are exposed to an array of options, from drug dealing to prostitution to armed robbery, that can potentially lead to fast cash.

One does not need to join a gang to fully participate in such moneymaking endeavors, but some prospective members perceive gang life as being lucrative. This perception is somewhat rational: the gang can, for some, potentially increase a member's ability to negotiate a competitive market that is common to the underground drug economy (Fleisher 1998; Sanchez-Jankowski 1991). It provides social contacts, learning opportunities, and a pool of loyal friends to resolve the chaotic and often dangerous situations that inevitably occur when money changes hands in

the streets (see Venkatesh 2006). In contrast to conventional wisdom, most gang members do not just rely on organized drug dealing as a source of fast money. More accurately, they participate in what Malcolm Klein (1995) calls cafeteria-style crime, picking and choosing their criminal activities as opportunities arise. Gang members sell drugs, participate in robberies, break into houses, and engage in other illegal money-generating activities. Such activities are made easier by the social support found within gangs. In a sense, the strength in numbers provided by gang membership allows individuals to take better advantage of illicit moneymaking opportunities.

Even though the DFW Boyz were generally not, as a collective body, entrepreneurially involved in street activities, there were informal monetary benefits to joining the gang. Some members of the DFW Boyz explained that they joined the gang to make money:

YOUNG-G: Why? Shit, like I said, I ain't been out long [due to being incarcerated] so I needed some money. I needed something. I was hurting bad. He [Killa-Con] was just talking. I didn't even know they was going to put me in. They like, "You want to be in?"

"Yeah, got to get this money."

"Go get the money."

I'm down for the money. I'm down for whatever.

As I continued to ask questions about why membership in the DFW Boyz was a financially attractive option, he and other members explained:

TL: So how does being in the clique help you guys get money?

KILLA-CON: Say it like this, if I get an ounce of weed, and if I'm like the only one out of all the people in the group, I'm going to wait until I get my money up. Then I'll be able to put this person up. Then when he do that, he do the same thing, and we can go around. By next summer we all be riding on something good. If we get to the point where we can't get money and we needed it at that point.

Although establishing a network of peers to aid in dealing drugs was one possible benefit of being in the DFW Boyz, this response seemed more like wishful thinking than an actual plan. Some DFW Boyz did sell marijuana, but it wasn't a prevalent activity in the group. As we continued

to talk, the boys began to discuss a more common approach to making money that was greatly enhanced by membership in the gang:

YOUNG-G: We'll rob a motherfucker.

KILLA-CON: If we really need it, we'll go out there and catch somebody slipping. Go get it—the whole definition of being down for whatever.

They continued to describe a recent night in which some DFW Boyz collectively ran the streets actively looking for an opportunity to break into houses or rob vulnerable individuals:

KILLA-CON: This one night we didn't have no money, and you know me, trying to get some money and shit. We was walking on Thirty-eighth Street coming from the gas station and shit. I'm behind, I'm lingering. I'm high, fucked up and shit. Then Layboy like, "This nigga got a chain." I see the chain and I want it. So I'm following the nigga all the way back to Forty-second Street. He gets in front of me.

They like, "Go get him, go get him."

I said, "Go get him?"

They like "Yeah." I said, "Hey nigga I want your chain." Ran up on him, like, "Don't run nigga." He took off. I'm like, I'm not about to run. Bop, bop, start shooting at him [Killa-Con is laughing].

They like, "Nigga you shot at him."

I'm like, "Bro," think he dead" [he is still laughing]. I was like, "Fuck it."

LAYBOY: That same night ran into some girls. We was on the same thing they was on. We was in black, there was a couple of girls. They had bats.

We was like, "What's up?"

They said, "We about to whoop this nigga's ass. My baby daddy ain't take care of my baby."

KILLA-CON: Hold on, before I saw they had bats I was about to rob their ass.

LAYBOY: They took us to his house or whatever, dude got flat screens, PlayStation.

KILLA-CON: PlayStation, no money, no guns, he got dope.

YOUNG-G: I'm high so I'm like, "It's whatever." I knock on the door three times, I heard him come to the door the first time. So I said

fuck it, kicked that bitch open. He was like “Ok, ok, the police on their way.” We didn’t even run off, we walked off and I shot in the air “DFW Boyz.” So we go cross the street.

KILLA-CON: We had to kick this gate in to get to the other side of the city and shit. We catch this dude in his truck, so we like, let’s go get him, he about to go in the house. So I run up to his truck and put my gun in his face and say, “Give me your money.” He’s like, “I ain’t got no money.”

YOUNG-G: He said, “I ain’t got no money.”

LAYBOY: It was an old dude. He had false teeth that fell out and everything.

KILLA-CON: I’m patting him down like, “Where your money at?” He looked back at the house and told whoever was back at the house to get the pistol.

LAYBOY: He said, “Go get the gun.” He started beeping the horn.

KILLA-CON: He slammed the door on my fucking leg.

LAYBOY: We just start running. He’s beeping the horn. He’s on the horn for like five minutes.

On this night the boys’ criminal efforts were unsuccessful, but being affiliated with a group of peers who were also willing to pursue money through violent means had its advantages. Having the group’s backing increased their willingness and opportunity to commit such acts, and the probability of success increased with the number of attempts. On this night they were just unlucky. If the first victim had not run or the second victim had not called the police or the third victim had been carrying cash, the boys would have profited from their crime spree.

Social Relationships

A street gang represents a collection of individuals bound not only by group affiliation but also by meaningful routine interactions. For most gang members, the relational ties found within the group provide an underlying motivation for joining the gang. The attraction of such relationships builds over time, as most youths join gangs after establishing a pattern of hanging out with a group of gang members. These relationships, however, contain different meanings for different people. Some members view the gang as a surrogate family that takes care of their

needs during difficult times. Other members view the gang as an accepting peer group that helps them build self-confidence and negotiate street life. For some members, the gang is simply a collection of peers that shares mutual interests. Regardless of the exact role these relationships play in the lives of members, gang youth perceive these social ties as being positive elements in their lives.

Perhaps the strongest attraction to gang life is the sense of belonging that an individual gains from joining a gang. This sense of belonging, however, is positioned inside an exchange system whereby the gang conditionally accepts all members. Most gang members understand that their peers accept them because they are useful to the gang. Yet this utility is bidirectional, and gang members get a sense of purpose and satisfaction from their ability to contribute to the gang. Such contributions do not typically come from scripted, formal roles in the gang; rather, they arise over time as youths demonstrate their place within the group.

Most DFW Boyz, for example, enjoyed talking about their role in the group. One member described himself as the crazy one, and another member embraced the label of a hot boy, or someone willing to shoot a gun during a conflict. Both individuals proved to be quite useful to the gang, and both took pride in those roles. Having noticed this, I had developed a habit of asking new study participants about their individual identity within the group. For example, during one conversation, a few DFW Boyz introduced me to Big-D and then described his role in the gang:

TL: Who are you in the clique?

SHAWN: We call him the bodyguard. He the big man.

BIG-D: I am like the bodyguard, but I do as much as they do.

SHAWN: He put in work just like we do. He like, the biggest one.

BIG-D: If someone is trying to fight someone, I'll probably be the first one to run up and help.

SHAWN: He the biggest one most of the time. They send somebody big anyways. They going to get intimidated. So we throw Big-D at them.

LAYBOY: He can take hits too. Ah, yeah. He can take a punch, still be funny at the same time.

BIG-D: I be sitting back and laughing at the niggas' trying to hit me.

Most of the DFW Boyz were not very big. Although Layboy and Shawn liked to show off their well-sculpted bodies, both were under six feet tall and did not lift weights frequently enough to expand their muscle mass. Many of the younger gang members were skinny boys and could not have weighed more than 150 pounds. Big-D, however, stood at or just over six feet tall and had a thick body that was neither obese nor muscular. He must have weighed 230 to 240 pounds. Almost by default, he embraced the bodyguard role, but, despite his size, Big-D was not naturally aggressive. According to Shawn, Big-D had been an unconfident and weak child before becoming affiliated with the DFW Boyz. His ascension to being the group's intimidator was the result of a process in which members of the DFW Boyz noticed his size and then taught him to be tough. The methods used for such a goal were simple:

SHAWN: We used to make him stand there while we punched him up. He'd stand against the wall and we'd beat him up. He take the punches.

BIG-D: They showed up at a bad time for me.

SHAWN: We like family. We all fight, ain't no one-on-one fight. That's how that works. Keep everybody on their feet, that's what's up.

Although the DFW Boyz interest in Big-D was largely self-serving, their efforts, according to Big-D, were very helpful. The gang gained another person with a big body who gradually became accustomed to fighting, and Big-D gained the acceptance of peers who seemed invested in his so-called personal development. He gained a sense of purpose as he developed an appreciation for his role in the group. He was no longer an unconfident social outcast. The exchange, it seemed, went both ways. The gang supposedly helped members stay on their feet, while the members made important contributions to gang.

Relationships guided individuals into gang membership and often continued to reinforce the value of being in the gang. When facing a dangerous street environment, or when struggling to make money on the streets, relationships found within the gang provided immediate relief. Relationships were also a source of esteem, as early adolescent youth gained a sense of identity and purpose from their role in the group. For those members capable of benefiting the group, gang life

offered a network of peers committed to helping them in various situations. The gang, for some members, became like a family.

THREE LIFE STORIES

Although the factors that lead to gang membership provide valuable insight, they lose descriptive power when removed from the context of everyday life. Each story told here uniquely interweaves the aforementioned factors into personal life histories to explain gang participation. With the exception of some subtle editing to help make the stories more readable, they are presented directly from the individuals themselves. The first comes from nineteen-year-old Tyrese, who at the time of the interviews did not consider himself actively involved in gangs. This inactivity was largely due to recent armed robbery convictions. His friends and coconspirators went to prison, while Tyrese did not. The second story focuses on Jon, a thirty-five-year-old inactive gang member who had spent the majority of his adult life in prison. He had recently been released from prison after serving a lengthy sentence for murdering someone during a botched drug deal. By all accounts, he had been a very influential member of an organized gang. The final story focuses on Shauna, a twenty-five-year-old inactive gang member who spent a large portion of her teenage years in juvenile facilities. Thanks to a caring family friend and some help from a community organization, she departed from gang life, and at the time of the interviews was attending a local university. The chaos in the lives of these three individuals is unmistakable, and although each uniquely describes his or her attraction to the gang, they all present a common theme: the gang provided some semblance of certainty amid unstable life circumstances.

Tyrese's Story

I grew up on East Thirty-fourth Street until I was about seven or eight, and then lived on Thirtieth Street for a while. I now stay out farther east. I had a rough childhood, but I don't complain, because I feel like everything I have been through has made me stronger. My mother's white, my daddy's black, and we lived pretty rough because they were both drug addicts. I don't know how we lived or what money we lived off of, but they eventually chose drugs over their kids. I have two sisters and a brother. I have never met one of my sisters, but I am close with my

brother and my other sister. We lived from motel to motel, from shelter to shelter. We stayed with my grandma off and on. My father finally left and my mother finally gave us up to Child Protective Services. We lived in a guardian home for about two years; I was finally adopted when I was nine.

The woman who adopted me was a churchgoing woman, and she taught me a lot of Christian principles about morals and stuff. But I still had the mentality that I saw all my life. All my cousins were gangbangers, and they taught me the wrong stuff. At that time it did not seem like the wrong stuff, because it was just what they knew. It was what their friends and parents taught them. I was real young at the time so I really didn't understand it, but their motto was "money over bitches." If you don't have money you can't do anything. So that was the number one thing they taught. They were going to get money any way they could. So they did that.

When I got adopted I still kept in contact with my real family. I wasn't supposed to, but I did anyway. We all got into a lot of trouble with social services for doing that, but we didn't really care. I just wanted to please my cousins so bad. I wanted them to accept me. I felt like they only accepted me because I was their family. I was quiet, not wild like they were. I didn't like to make a scene like they did. I liked to be undercover and keep to myself. I wasn't really like them. But when it came to money, I felt like our mentalities were on the same level. They were all in the drug game, and I was introduced to that early at age thirteen.

Two of my cousins were Vice Lords. They taught me a lot of the stuff, but I never wanted to be in their gang. I did everything with them. I did the same stuff they did, but I wasn't officially a part of the gang. I never got jumped in or anything, because that just wasn't for me. They were too wild. They were reckless and would do things without thinking. It could be a Monday morning, and they could just wake up, get drunk, decide to go outside, and start shooting their guns in the air. They would pick people out who were walking down the street and beat them up just because they felt like it. They would commit robberies for no reason at all. That was too reckless. They drew too much attention. But even if they were wrong, I was always in their corner. When they had problems with other people, I was always there for them.

We used to rob dope houses when I was about thirteen years old, and I thought that was the tightest [coolest] thing in the world. That was my little fun. One night we were robbing dope houses, and we hit one right there right off of Thirty-second Street. But we ran up in there on a dice game. They were having a dice game, so it could have been a good lick [score] that night, but so many people had guns. We were not expecting that many people. There were only two of us. We ran in there and went through the whole procedure. Everyone was down for a while, and then I started hearing shots. Next thing I know he was murdered. He was gone. He was out the game. I didn't know him real well. My cousin put me in contact with him to do this, and he brought the guns. He got shot up. I didn't because I was gone. I was a track star. I was outa' there. I will never hesitate to run. I don't care. Call me a punk or call me whatever. I will run because you can't stop a bullet. So yeah, that turned out real bad. That was too much for me. I wasn't a violent person. I just had the love of money, same as they did.

But then I got introduced to the Gangster Disciples. They weren't Gangster Disciples at first. They called themselves something else. But basically their color was blue, their side was right, and I joined their gang. They were more discreet and sensible than my cousins. They just didn't get hot when somebody violated or came on their set. We were not really about the sets, neighborhoods, and streets. We were just about the family unity. I got initiated, and that's why I got the tattoo loyalty on my hand, because that's the most important thing. You have to be loyal because it is a family. They looked out for each other. It wasn't like we were out shooting people or robbing and doing crazy stuff. We were looking out for each other. When I was younger, they made sure that I would get my homework done. They made sure I stayed on top of my schoolwork. I would go there if I didn't have any food, and they would feed us. They would clothe me. They kept money in my pockets. They protected me. I stayed in their cribs. That's why I felt obligated to do whatever they asked. They wanted loyalty. If something go down and we get caught, just keep my mouth shut. That's all they were asking.

My best friend was actually in the opposite gang. His colors were red. Mine were blue. We became best friends because we had the same type of mind. We both wanted money so that's what we pursued. We made a lot of mistakes, and we did a lot of stuff that we never got caught

for. We started doing the robberies, and everyone wanted to make it gang affiliated, but it really wasn't. We were just in desperate need of money. I didn't want to sell drugs, because it carried too much time. All my family had been to prison, so I knew what could happen if I sold drugs. It was hard, but it was fun. I took heat for a lot of people, and I got beat up for a lot of people. But when you know you had all your boys looking out for you, you feel invincible. If you feel you haven't ever been touched, then you feel like you can't be touched.

Jon's Story

I didn't know my real father, because my mother said I wasn't his and told him to leave us alone. My stepfather treated my little brother and me differently. He was mentally abusive and sometimes physically abusive. So there was not a lot of love at home. I spent a lot of time with my godmother and grandmother until eighth grade. In sixth grade my grandmother died. In eighth grade my godmother died. I was by myself from that point on. My parents made good money, but people couldn't tell when they looked at me. I looked like I came from the mission. I used to have to explain to people why my brother was dressed real nice, and I was dressed real bad. Everybody around me treated us that way. When outsiders saw me, just like reading the cover of a book, they would treat me like I looked. They would cater to my baby brother because they knew he was my father's favorite, and then they would mistreat me if they thought it would please my father.

My mother and stepfather were churchgoing people so I was raised in church. Apartments surrounded my neighborhood, so I had to learn how to live in the streets. I grew up in the church, but when I went outside I knew I had to live another way. It was hard to be raised not to fight and be peaceful, and then have someone hitting me upside the head when I went out to buy candy. I had a baby brother who was always with me so I had to protect him. I started running the streets when I was twelve. One day my mother came home, and I was sitting in the house watching TV. She was like, "You spend too much time in the house, get out." I said, "Where I'm going to go?" She said, "I don't care, just get out." So I got out and started hanging with a good friend of mine.

I began to get certain freedoms, and I got peace from being away from home. I was just tortured at home. My home life was horrible for

me. As the years went by, I did whatever it took to stay away from the house. When I was young I didn't know how to fight. But I learned that if I could beat someone up, I could get a name for myself. I just didn't know how to fight, so I would lose. My baby brother had a loud mouth, so when somebody messed with him he'd say, "I'll get my brother and he'll whoop you." So to win I would come up with a plan. If there was a person that jumped on me every day, I would set traps. If he jumped me in a certain spot I could run five feet where I had a brick hidden. Most people just want to fight, and I learned that if I go to the next step it would bring a positive outcome for me. I was willing to grab a brick and run up between someone and their grandma, aunt, or mom and dad, and bust their head wide open. Most people were not willing to do that. But if I do that, people would know that I would do anything. The thing is, if you didn't bother me, you never had that coming. So that's how I kept people off of me.

I liked getting high and drinking. I liked smoking a nice joint and getting alcohol in me so any pain I had went away. When I got sober it came back, so I would get some more. I chased girls, got high, and stayed okay in school. I was a party guy. I always made sure I was the one who brought the drugs and alcohol. I always made sure I was the guy who knew where to find it. I hung with a gang three years before I joined. When we was just hanging out it was like, "You cool, you down but you ain't part of us." I wasn't really obligated, but I also didn't have any of the perks that came along with being in it. I just figured I had been with them so long, and I was going to keep hanging out with them that it might as well be official. When I joined I was family. I had all the perks and all the privileges that came along with it. I was trustworthy because I had things governing over my life that made me trustworthy.

What really made me be in the gang was they were like family to me. They would die for me. If I was hungry they would feed me. If I needed clothes they would clothe me. They made me feel like they wanted me to be around. That's my family. They gave me a new name. I needed a coat one year because it was cold. When I got out of the joint, they gave me a black leather jacket. It was nice. I was so high I didn't really want to go home, and I didn't want to hear from my parents. They hid me out in their mother's house. We had an ultimate goal. We were trying to get somewhere. We wanted to buy property. We wanted to get

businesses going. I ran my high school. If we went to high school and I said to you, "Man your best bet is to never step foot in here again," and you did, you was going to the hospital. Might die, might not. That's a lot of power. That's power I eventually gained.

When my parents found out what I was they couldn't believe it. My momma's jaw hit the ground. She couldn't believe it. The principal at my school knew my family personally. When she found out I was running the gang in her high school, she called my parents and asked them, "Do you know your son is in a gang?"

My mom said, "Yeah we knew."

"You mean that you knew he was in a gang and didn't do nothing?"

"Well, we didn't think he had what it takes to be in a gang. We figured eventually they would beat him up and put him out."

So she was like, "Tell your mother what you is around here."

I said, "I'm chief violator."

She was like, "Tell your mother what you is."

So I was like, "I'm a five-star general."

My mom said, "What that mean?"

I said, "I run everything around here, don't nothing happen unless I know about it."

Your kids are more than what you think they are. And if you don't do anything for them, the streets will. Whatever you don't teach and show them, the streets will be more than happy to. The outcome might not be what you expect. I'm thirty-five years old, and for all my adult years I have been incarcerated in some form or another. I have never been able to run as a free man. The way a free man should. The best way to keep a child out of the gang is to stay involved in the child's life. Be your child's gang leader. A lot of people don't have enough time to invest in their children. They always have something else to do. I wanted my dad to kick my behind and take me to my gang leaders and say, "This is not your gang member, this is my son." He never did that. So I figured, if they don't care, why should I?

Shauna's Story

Around the age of twelve I became very rebellious, because I experienced a lot of domestic violence at home. My dad was an abusive alcoholic, and my parents always fought. As a young child I saw so much

violence at home. It never really stopped. The summer when I was eighteen, I lived at home for a while, and my parents still fought to the point where my father and I would get really physical. Guns would occasionally get pulled out. He would pull a gun out on me, and I would try to find a gun to pull on him. It got real bad. People don't understand that domestic violence gets worse over time. The only way it gets better is if the parents separate. But my mom was raising five kids, and some parts of the situation were good. We had our own rooms, our own stuff. You know, we had our own crib.

When we were big enough, we would physically pull him off of her. My oldest brother is thirty-one and he's doing 116 years in prison. My other brother is twenty-seven. My sister's twenty-nine, I'm twenty-five, and my little brother is twenty-three. At some point the oldest one's stepped up to confront my father so the rest of us would step up with them. So as I was older, he had to deal with his kids. When he had four or five kids jumping on him, he got the mentality of, "I brought you in and I'll take you out." He decided not to let his kids get the best of him. As teenagers, we were protecting our momma. We had a mentality that we would kill him to protect her. And we kept that mentality. My father kicked all of us out when we turned eighteen years old. The police escorted me out of the house. My baby brother was arrested on a trespass warrant for coming on my daddy's property. My sister got pregnant in order to get out of the house and away from my father.

My home life gave me an excuse to behave the same way in other situations. At the age of twelve, I saw my mom and dad fight all the time, so it was easy to go to school and want to fight my teachers. My real authority figures were not holding themselves accountable and being good role models. So what do you expect? When I got to sixth grade I went nuts. I fought all the time. I've always been the leader of anything that I do. So, if I said that I wanted to start a fight, I would have ten people willing to go with me. But I was the one who did all of the damage. I was the class clown, and nobody could tell me what to do—no teacher, no security, and no principal. I had so much anger built up inside of me that I refused to obey. Time and time again teachers used to say, "Oh, you know she's just such a bright student. She's very smart." But I refused to let the good come out, because everything going on at home was so bad. My feelings about my parents defeated any of the

good. What's the purpose of making straight As when your mom and dad is fighting like cats and dogs? In sixth grade I also joined a gang. I considered myself to be a Gangster Disciple. It was a way for me to express myself.

I was also in the streets at a young age. I would follow around my older brother and try to do what he was doing. I was a tomboy and didn't do anything girly. When the boys fought or wrestled I would be in the back wrestling with them, and they would slam me around. Eventually, I started running the streets with them. When they started smoking weed so did I. There used to be ten or twelve dudes, and I was always following. My brother would tell me to go home, but his buddies would say, "Come on, you cool, you can hang." I got into the mix because a few of my brother's friends took me up under their wing. So when my brother didn't want me around, those guys would smoke weed with me and tell me everything I needed to know. If they were on their way to a certain neighborhood, I'd walk with them. If they didn't like certain dudes in the neighborhood, neither did I. That's kind of how it rotated with me.

I got street cred' immediately because of who my brothers were. So, when I started behaving like them, it wasn't a front. It was sincere. Imagine a skinny little twelve-year-old girl who has ten dudes treating her like a sister. I eventually had the same attitude they had, and I had the same amount love they had for me. So when there were five guys on the east side that they didn't like, I was riding with them. If the most I could do was hold their hoodies while they take their shirts off to fight, then that's what I did. I was a part of the gang. If the most I could do is say, "Here come the police," that's what I did. Because this is my clique, and these are my buddies. If one of them is getting ready to go to jail or they had a warrant, I would spend the quality time with him. He couldn't hang in the streets, so we would hang out in the crack house and just kick it. I have to stress that sex was never a thing. I was a tomboy and sex was not what we thought about. To run with all those boys, they know you're not easy. They know you don't want to sleep with them.

By the time I was twelve, I was in the streets one hundred percent. I was in the back of the clubs owned by guys who are now in the federal penitentiary. I was in their cars, which were bought with drug money, rolling up blunts. Some of these guys were twenty-nine years old, and

I was eleven or twelve. I ain't old enough to get in the club, but I could sit in the car behind it and smoke weed. So I felt that the big dogs blessed me in. They were the first ones that gave me my nickname. I knew that I was a part of the clique, because they gave me that nickname. They were like, "This little bitty skinny thing hangs with us and rolls blunts really good." I did roll them really good. I knew all the lyrics to the music they listened to, and I could keep up with their conversations. They would ask, "What you know about gangsters? What make you gangster?" I could sit for a whole hour and have a conversation, cuss, and tell them what I knew. That's part of my initiation right there. When I could sit and have a conversation with someone who's facing thirty years to life, somebody who already killed someone, somebody who's dealing kilos of coke, and they tell me, "You got some fire, you hip. We are going to give you a nickname." What more did I need?

In middle school, I hooked up with some friends who lived on Thirty-fourth Street where there was a lot of heroin being sold and a lot of crack houses. My buddy was already a Vice Lord, and she wanted to set me up with her baby daddy's twin brother. I was into boys at that time so one day I didn't go home after school so I could meet him. We were into getting the best possible drug dealers, and I knew he had money. She took me home, and as soon as I walked in his mother was like, "Yeah, she's real pretty." I remember her saying, "That's going to be my daughter-in-law." She used to sell drugs back in the day, and she was like a queen pin. She got her sons involved in dealing drugs. He came out of the bathroom, and I knew he was grown because he had all this chest hair. I was just a skinny little girl, and I knew he was older than me. I was fourteen or fifteen years old, and he was nineteen or twenty years old. I always lied about my age. I never told my real age until I was eighteen. He came out, saw me, and we hugged. After that I didn't go home any more. I didn't go home because I liked him. From that night on, I was riding with them.

I also left home because of the physical confrontations with my dad. He was an abusive alcoholic, so it was always physical. We also didn't have friends. We were not allowed to bring kids in the house. I really couldn't talk on the phone with my friends, so how could I have fun with them? Maybe puberty was also getting in the way. I was going through phases of trying to learn who I was. What were my likes and

dislikes? Am I beautiful or am I not beautiful? So when I got attention from older boys, it made me want to experiment a little more with relationships. Not sexually, but just to have a boy liking me. Before this, I used to run away for shorter periods of time. I wouldn't come home from school because once I was home I could not get out of the house. So I would not get on the school bus. Instead, I would go over to my friend's house when I knew her mom and dad were not going to send me home. Of course, they didn't know my situation, because I didn't want anyone else to know.

After I left home, I used to hang in the crack house with my boyfriend's gang and sell drugs. They taught me the ins and outs of it, and that's what I used to do. Since I was a runaway, I sold crack to get new clothes and shoes. To be honest, I was really good at it, which made me do it even more. I was young and a runaway, making seventy to eighty dollars in one day. It's against the law, but I was making money. Actually, the ring I have on was given to me in exchange for crack. I remember the guy didn't have any money, so he gave me this ring for some crack. I also used to fight all the time. If any girls came through and they didn't represent Vice Lords or GD, they were going to get beat up. And because I am so skinny I felt like I had something to prove. So I used to fight big girls. I also used to go to school and clip people for their rings. I used to pick on the white kids, or the kids that I knew were good kids. I would be like, "Let me see that ring." Then I would put it on my finger and cut out because I knew they weren't going to fight me back. That's how bad of a bully I was.

I almost got raped twice while I was staying there, and I was assaulted many times. I was so young and spent most nights in a crack house. Twice when the guy I dated was passed out on drugs, his uncles tried to rape me in my sleep. I was quietly in a room fighting off these overgrown men. There were two or three men over top of me trying to snatch my clothes off. I was so young and dumb that I was worried about my boyfriend's reaction, so all I could think of is fight them quietly. I didn't want him to think that I was like the other girls that come over all the time to have sex. I was fighting these three men, trying to get them off of me. If I am only 105 pounds now, I couldn't have been much more than 90 pounds back then. But there was so much anger in me that I fought three grown men, and they had to get off of me. But who could

I tell the next day? I could not go home and tell momma. So it just makes me even angrier. It made me want to sell more dope, beat up somebody else, and if I ever got the opportunity to shoot or stab one of them I would have done it.

My dad knew I was over there, because he rode the bus, and he would see me at the crack house. He used to come over and try to get me. But I would hide in the house, and all the guys in there ain't going to let my daddy come in. They'd cuss my father out and tell him I wasn't there. He'd threaten to call the police. The police came for me many times, but I would be gone. It was a crack house. We'd be in and out. We would go on the next street and wait until it cleared up. I never went home, because I knew my father was going to beat me down. Once I was runaway, I was scared to go home. I felt like it didn't matter if I had been gone for three hours or two days, I going to get the same treatment. I knew I was going to a guardian home, and I did not want to go to a guardian home. So I was gone for as long as I could be gone. I knew if I went home, my momma and daddy wouldn't trust me anymore. I knew it was just over for us, so I stayed gone as long as I could. The only reason I left is because a friend's mother and my former boyfriend came looking for me. They caught me sleeping in the house at nine in the morning. That's the only reason I got out. I probably still would be out there. I probably wouldn't be where I am now. Just the fear of going back home was enough to keep me there. But my friend's mother took me in and let me live with her. She accepted who I was and what I had done. She didn't try to beat me down and be like, "You ain't no good, you ain't no good, you ain't no good." My mommy and daddy weren't ready to be that easy on me.

If all these people keep jumping on me [treating me poorly], I am definitely going to run to the streets. The streets don't treat you like that. The streets know you messed up. The streets know you come from a messed up home. The streets know you got issues. The streets know you want to fit in. And they are going to embrace you. Instead of saying, "You ugly, you dumb, don't no boys like you," they going to hook you up with your first boyfriend. Instead of saying you don't know how to drink or smoke, they're going to introduce you to your first blunt, your first drink. Instead of saying you're a punk or you're a fag, they going to show you how to fight. Instead of saying you broke, you ugly, you ain't

got no shoes, you ain't got no food, they going to show you how to steal a bag of chips. They are going to teach you how to steal your first pair of tennis shoes. And you feel like I finally got some friends. My brothers and sisters are always picking on me. My sister won't do my hair. My mom won't pay for me to get some decent shoes. My family, my gang, is going to give me their hand-me-downs, they going to let me wear the expensive tennis shoes. A girl that's in the gang will do your hair. She'll do your hair in an expensive hairstyle instead of you having to beg your mom and dad for it. She'll give you your first lipstick, whatever the case may be. That's what it was for me. It wasn't about continually being bad. It was about being embraced by people who I felt loved me and cared about me.

CONCLUSION

For youth exposed to street life at a young age, gang membership can be an attractive solution to problems. Gang membership can give some youth a sense of protection in a threatening environment, or it can them access new illicit opportunities to make money. The gang can offer refuge from a disagreeable home life and give impressionable adolescents a sense of purpose and belonging that they do not get anywhere else. Yet the benefits of gang membership experienced by many gang members are easily outnumbered by the direct negative consequences of gang membership. The rest of this book examines one such problem that dramatically influences gang members' lives.

The process of joining a gang, as described in this chapter, also indicated that most gang members were not innately different from their peers. They did not seem, as some researchers have argued, more likely to suffer from low self-control or a psychological illness (see Fleisher 1995; Yablonsky 1959 and 1967). Their pathway into the gang was not, as some researchers have suggested, fostered by a proclivity for violence and an inability to socialize with peers (see Hirschi 2006; Yablonsky 1959 and 1967). Some gang members participated in criminal activity before they joined a gang. Shawn and Layboy, for example, committed petty theft before they became gang members. Joe admitted to fighting in the streets and using drugs before he joined a gang. Shauna was experienced with marijuana before she became a gang member. Killa-Con gravitated to the DFW Boyz because his behavior was already consistent

with the gang's collective behavior. Yet for most gang members, serious delinquent behavior increased dramatically after they became gang members. Something about gang life enhanced or facilitated criminal activity among members.

This observation is consistent with the current state of gang research. Scholars in multiple locations have provided convincing evidence that gang members are more likely than their peers to engage in serious delinquent behavior. Moreover, there is strong evidence that this behavior substantially increases after membership begins (Gatti et al. 2005, Gordon et al. 2004; Lacourse et al. 2003; Thornberry et al. 1993 and 2003). Researchers are left with the challenge of explaining why gang membership has such a significant impact on the lives of youth. The following chapters provide new insights into the question. Most notably, intergang interactions and the struggle for legitimacy in the intergang environment produce strong pressures for gang members to cultivate violent reputations, and this can induce violent behavior and intergang conflict.