'We Can't Get No Nine-to-Five': New York City Gang Membership as a Response to the Structural Violence of Everyday Life

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Abstract

This article draws on 287 in-depth interviews with young New York City gang members to understand the roles gangs serve in their lives, the impact of labeling the gang as criminal, and what a more critical perspective on gangs reveals about violence. Findings show that these youth find themselves in double-binds. While their gang membership is largely a reaction to the inequities and marginality they face from the police, unemployment, and poverty, efforts they undertake to survive—joining gangs, selling drugs, carrying weapons—only deepen their vulnerability to discrimination, involvement in the criminal legal system, and interpersonal violence. Violence prevention programs that eschew structural violence as a root cause of crime and community violence cannot succeed in achieving long-term safety for such communities. Prevention efforts must address the realities of what gangs provide for their members, building safe space and supportive community to bridge participants to the supports they need.

Introduction

Recent media coverage of gangs in New York City has almost exclusively focused on violence and crime: the increase in shootings attributed to gangs (e.g., Balsamini 2021; Gartland et al. 2021; Sandoval 2019; Tracy 2021; Watkins 2019); and the arrest, detention, or prosecution of gang members (e.g., Annese 2021; Celona 2021; Fenton et al. 2021; Fondren 2022; Marino et al. 2021). With few exceptions (e.g., Southall 2021), most of the news stories omit the voices of the gang members themselves and any nuanced discussion of the milieus in which much of the violence is generated.

This construction—gang members solely as sources of violence—is not limited to the media, however. Though some of the earliest research on gangs had a more open-ended definition of the gang (e.g., Thrasher 1927), over time, academics began defining gangs by their criminal behavior (Augustyn et al. 2019; Klein 1971). In the 1980s, when many policies were being developed to address urban gangs, the subcultural perspectives (Cohen

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1955) became peripheral in gang discourse, which instead focused on individual thinking and psychological explanations for gang violence (Yablonsky 1997) rather than looking at the social contexts in which it occurs. This in turn motivated decades of anti-gang policy and inspired social control responses of the state (Brotherton 2008). Some academics and policymakers have put forth strategies to "manage the violence" through focused deterrence programs (Braga et al. 2001; Kennedy 2011) and explicitly stated "gang prevention" and "gang suppression" models such as the US Department of Justice's Comprehensive Gang Model and Project Safe Neighborhoods. In New York City, after upticks in gun violence during the Covid-19 global pandemic, Mayor De Blasio unveiled his "Safe Summer NYC" plan to combat shootings.[1] The mayor's strategies included partnering with the New York Police Department to create "gang-free zones" and increasing police presence for "targeting gangs and crews" (New York City Office of the Mayor 2021).

This law enforcement response, i.e., a commitment to gang eradication and repression, has repeatedly failed in its goals and often leads to its opposite (see Greene and Pranis 2007). Taking a more critical criminological approach to the gang and its relationship to violence to interpret recent research findings, I propose the following questions: (i) Why do so many of these gangs exist in the first place? (ii) What roles do gangs serve in the lives of their young members? (iii) What might the impact be of labeling the gang as criminal and in need of being "taken down"? and (iv) What would a more critical perspective on gangs reveal about the problem of violence?

Study Methods

This article is based on research conducted between 2018 and 2019 with young people ages 16–24 in New York City who had carried a gun in the last 2 years or were at risk of doing so (i.e., had carried other weapons or had been shot or shot at). That mixed-method study used respondent-driven sampling (Heckathorn 1997, 2002, 2007) to access a sample of 330 young people involved in the street in three neighborhoods (across three boroughs) with high rates of gun violence to understand why they were carrying guns, what their social networks were like, and how guns were a part of those networks. Initial "seed" interviews were recruited from local Cure Violence programs, outdoor areas in public housing developments, and trap houses. Each interview lasted about an hour and included a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions related to demographics, neighborhood safety and social cohesion, violent victimization, attitudes toward guns, gun carrying practices, gun access, gun use, gangs and peer networks, alternative economy involvement, experiences with the police and the criminal legal system, and substance use. Participants were paid $30 for their time. The study was approved by the Center for Court Innovation's Institutional Review Board. For that study, descriptive statistics were run on all quantitative data; for qualitative data, interview transcripts were iteratively coded thematically by the full research team. (See Swaner et al. 2020 for a more detailed description of the methodology.)

It is important to note that this study employed participatory methods, with much of the team comprised of street-involved men. This allowed the research team to access and leverage knowledge that may not have been possible in a more traditional research approach.

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[1] In 2020, gun violence had increased across the country. In New York City, despite a historic low in overall index crimes, there was a 97% increase in shooting incidents and a 45% increase in murders compared to 2019 (New York Police Department 2021). The numbers for 2021 increased slightly from 2020.

Table 1 Demographics

N	287 (%)
% male	83
Mean age	21.2 years
Race/ethnicity	
Black	73
Latinx	12
Multi-racial (e.g., Black and Latinx)	10
Other or Not Specified	5
Public housing resident	79
Raised by single parent	65
Has children	37

It also improved the interview instrument by including questions by researchers who had faced similar challenges and experiences of the youth in the study while allowing for access to a population that would not have been possible otherwise (Swaner et al. 2020).[2] Thus, the participatory approach tries to correct for the power imbalances in knowledge creation and information flows that emerge from more traditional research.

This article pulls data from that larger study, where 87% of the youth interviewed were involved in gangs or street organizations. The data presented here are based on this sub-sample of 287 current or former gang members from that original study. Quantitative data are reported for the full 287 and qualitative data from 81 interview transcripts. Drawing from a mix of both types of data, this article seeks to paint a portrait of young gang members in New York and understand how they make sense of their gang involvement and experiences of safety, while documenting the larger milieu in which their gangs exist and must navigate daily.

Table 1 presents the demographic makeup of this sample of young gang members. Most were young Black men living in public housing, and over a third were parents.

Findings

Findings revealed that participants had experienced extensive violence victimization, felt extremely unsafe in their neighborhoods, and believed that police not only failed to protect them, but were a threat to their safety. They discussed what they saw as problematic police behavior that included: not responding to serious crime in the community; over-policing minor crimes; and regularly harassing, discriminating against, and dehumanizing young gang members. Participants' prior criminal justice involvement and discrimination restricted access to legal forms of employment. Hence, guns, gangs, and the street economy emerged as strategies for ensuring safety and survival in the face of weak social and economic supports and state violence.

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[2] Participatory methods do not mean a sacrifice in rigor. The researchers were trained to do things that academics do, and they were supported by people who have more formal training.

Table 2 Neighborhood safety

N	287 (%)
In my neighborhood…	
There is a lot of crime	80
I feel safe:	
During the day	69
At night	50
Hear gunshots in my neighborhood	
Weekly	46
Monthly	25
Every few months	18
Every 6 months to a year/Never or rarely	11
Hear of someone threatened with a gun	
Weekly	36
Monthly	19
Every few months	16
Every 6 months to a year/Never or rarely	29
Possibility of violence limits my activity	51
Most police in my neighborhood are:	
Trying to protect the public from violent crime	34
Are interested in understanding the needs of the community	19
Have good reason when they arrest people	14
Would like to move out of neighborhood	86

Neighborhood Context

Social disorganization theorists suggest that location matters, and crime is a response to poor neighborhood conditions (Bursik and Grasmick 1993; Sampson et al. 2002; Shaw and McKay 1942). Neighborhood violence is often related to community-level risk factors such as poverty, poor housing conditions, limited access to services, and high unemployment (Office of the Surgeon General et al. 2001; Resnick et al. 2004).

Extant research has demonstrated the negative effects of perceived lack of neighborhood safety on mental health outcomes (Goldman-Mellor et al. 2016; Meltzer et al. 2007), and children exposed to community violence can experience post-traumatic stress disorder (Lynch 2006). What was the neighborhood crime and violence context for the gang members in this study?

Table 2 presents data on their feelings of neighborhood safety. Eighty percent said that there was a lot of crime in their neighborhood. Half of the participants reported feeling safe at night, half said that their activities were limited by the possibility of violence, and nearly three quarters (71%) said they hear gunshots in their neighborhood at least monthly. One 24-year-old from Brooklyn stated, "Just the fact that I live in the midst of a lot of shit, man. A lot of beef. A lot of guns going on, shots going off in the middle of the night. I don't feel safe like that, I can never feel safe like that."

Some of their feelings of unsafety stemmed from their own experiences witnessing and being a victim of violence. As Table 3 shows, violence victimization was near universal

Table 3 Violence victimization

N	287
Direct victim	
Shot or shot at	83%
Attacked with weapon other than a gun	68%
Witness	
Saw someone shot	73%
Saw someone attacked with weapon other than a gun	91%
Had someone close to them get shot	89%

among the participants. A large majority (83%) had been shot or shot at, nearly three-quarters (73%) had seen someone get shot, and nearly nine in ten (89%) had someone close to them get shot, most often a close friend, cousin, or sibling. They feared they could be victimized at any time—by random acts of violence or by opposition gang members.

Participants had very little trust in the local police's ability or desire to protect them from violent crime—"[at night the neighborhood is] more of a town where the police don't really want to work, they just out in the afternoon just to be seen." They also identified the police as a threat to their safety. One 16-year-old Bronx resident made an explicit connection between being worried about being shot by the police and the decision to carry a gun: "Cops always have a gun on them, and they're trigger happy, […] they're gonna shoot if they wanna shoot. […] So, everybody carries."

Criminal Legal System Involvement

The participants spoke from their lived experiences when talking about the police. They had widespread law enforcement contact, with nine-in-ten having ever been arrested, and 93% having been stopped by the police in the last 2 years—reflecting recent reports showing that young Black and Latino males continue to be targets of an enormously disproportionate number of stops in New York City (New York Civil Liberties Union 2019). Most had been stopped multiple times, and for many, the number could not really be accurately quantified because it happened so often. Some participants said that frequent stops had become normal because of their race, where police were associating Blackness with criminality (Muhammad 2010): "I guess 'cause I'm Black. […] In 2 years for nothing, literally

Table 4 Criminal legal system experiences

N	287 (%)
Stopped by the police in last 2 years	93
Ever arrested (any charge) (*n*=281)	90
Ever arrested (gun charge) (*n*=275)	36
Ever incarcerated	66
Juvenile Detention Center Only	15
Jail Only	25
Prison Only	4
More than one type of facility	22
Person raised by spent time in jail or prison (*n*=279)	38

just for nothing, [the cops] will just roll up on me. I could say I'm up at least in the 90s going into the 100s."

Not all stops resulted in arrest, but when they did, common arrest charges included low-level offenses such as marijuana possession, drug sales, fighting, robbery, and subway fare evasion. Two-thirds of participants had also been incarcerated (Table 4).

Experiences with the Police

Participants had frequent interactions with the police—nearly all of them negative. They reported being over-policed for minor infractions, discriminated against because of their race and gang affiliation, and regularly harassed.

Over-policing Minor Offenses

Generally, participants reported feeling that the police were not working to keep their community safe. As revealed in previous research with similar populations (e.g., Brunson 2007; Carr et al. 2007; Payne et al. 2017), those interviewed reported that officers were not to be trusted and were too focused on arresting them for minor transgressions such as not having an ID. Responses such as the following were typical: "They locked me up for two days just because I didn't have a piece of plastic"; smoking marijuana—"We're just over here smoking and drinking, why you there bothering us? We're not supposed to be doing that but it's not violence"; and bicycle violations—"They lock a nigga up for riding a bike on the sidewalk." One 19-year-old male from Manhattan discussed how he felt this focus was wasted effort:

> I hop a turnstile $2.75, $3, y'all niggas want to arrest me. Shit ain't even important. You go to the judge, "Oh, misdemeanor, get him out of here." You don't even get a ticket, you just get a [release on your own recognizance], like, what is the sense of sitting 24 hours, 48 hours in the bunkers to get the fuck out, anyways? It's nothing, ROR, come back and turn that shit into a violation. Waste of time.

Coupled with their claims of being over-policed for petty crimes, interviewees (participants) concluded that the police were not protecting them from violent ones. As another 20-year-old Bronx male said, "They're never on time when crime do happen or when somebody is shot and bleeding to death."

In their routine interactions with police in their neighborhood, 81% of the gang members interviewed did not feel that police were interested in understanding the community. One 23-year Latino connected this lack of knowing the residents to severe consequences for him and his peers:

> Most cops don't come from […] your neighborhood. […] They don't come from, like, our struggles or what we go through, so what we see as a normal day or just regular thing, it might be a little confrontation, but we know it may be over with it because we're from here. We know it's not about nothing. They see it and they see angry mobs. They just see a mob and they just see danger and they take it as an excuse to lock you up.

Participants felt police antagonized them for no reason: "You're not bothering them or you're not even doing nothing and they find a way to harass you." Often, this harassment was merely for being outside, made clear in this response: "They see us walking, they just

be bothering us. We don't be having nothing, they just jump on us all the time." As Geller et al. (2014) and Sewell et al. (2016) have found, these types of aggressive neighborhood policing patterns—multiple stops, intrusive encounters, constant surveillance—lead to increased trauma, anxiety, and feelings of worthlessness.

Discrimination

Some participants identified a clear relationship between their race and being targeted by the police, as in the following: "Cops see Black men, if you standing on the corner, just you and your boys and say that there's four of you, undercover cop going to see you as a threat even if you're not doing anything. Just based off your skin complexion."

It should come as no surprise that participants felt that officers treated them poorly specifically because they were gang members, and the negative assumptions that having a street affiliation brings up for officers. As with the near exclusive negative representation of gang members in the media, participants said they regularly heard officers refer to them as "criminals," "animals," "demons," "scum," "monsters," and "terrorists." This constant pathologizing of them and their peers is reminiscent of the "super-predator" (DiIulio 1995) and "wilding" (Acland 1994) language used to describe urban youth in the 1990s and shows the "linguistic violence" (Conquergood 2015) inflicted upon gangs for decades. When participants were asked how they thought police viewed gang members, they responded: "They think you don't give a fuck about life," and "They think that we stupid. We don't understand. […] We don't know our rights as humans." One participant expressed a sentiment—shared by many—that police officers assumed they were violent:

> They think we out here shooting people for fun or fighting people every day for fun. […] we just want to live our lives, trying to not get shot up going to the store, trying to get education, […] Trying to get out the hood. Trying to make music. Smoking weed just because, like, you feel me? Just to enjoy my day. […] You see me with weed but now you searching me for weapons.

A 24-year-old Bronx man discussed how he saw these assumptions being codified into policy:

> The police, they don't like gangs at all. They've got their own separate gang unit and all that, they're trying to take down all the brothers. Even when you get arrested, they ask you "are you in a gang," and then whatever the case may be, now you're in the system with a bunch of other of your bros and if something happens, you get picked up, if something happens with that gang, they're going to check out all these dudes on the computer that's all gangs.

Finally, the intersection of race and gang member status made participants feel further targeted by the police. As one young gang member reported, "Gang plus Black equal death by police."

Poverty

As in most gang studies, this research found that most of the participants came from extreme marginality and relative deprivation—all forms of structural violence (Galtung 1969). Over three-quarters of the participants lived in New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments, and most struggled with having enough money to support

themselves and/or their families. One Bronx Latina who lived in public housing pointed to the poor conditions where she resided and connected it to health problems she was having: "I just developed asthma out of nowhere, and the paint that is peeling off my wall for years, I know it's asbestos. I'm telling you it's not safe, I already know I'm dying. All my life and I get asthma at 22, where that come from?" The deteriorating conditions of NYCHA buildings have been well-documented (e.g., Moses 2020; New York State Department of Health 2018; Powell 2016), as has the relationship between poor housing conditions and negative health outcomes (e.g., Bonnefoy 2007; Gates 2020; Krieger and Higgins 2002; Pevalin et al. 2017).

Given high levels of poverty—"we wasn't born with a silver spoon in our mouth like a lot of other people"—a third (33%) of participants reported turning to illegal activities to sustain themselves and their families economically. For some, this meant turning to the informal economy and drug dealing. One gang member described: "I was moving from Harlem and […] my mom ain't have a job so I had to go out into the streets and do what I gotta do to survive and keep my mom happy. Like sell drugs." Similarly, another explained that past criminal records and the experience of being "marked" (Pager 2007) contributed to his inability to get a job in the legal economy, forcing him to turn to alternative strategies for survival: "We got to sell drugs […] we can't get no nine-to-five, we done been in jail, got felonies, man. We can't operate the same way other people operate. But we still got to get money. Everybody got a kid. We got shit to do." For others, this meant robbing: "[You] do violent things or robberies when you got no other way out. That's all it is now."

At the same time, some participants expressed a desire to work but faced economic exclusion.

> I bet at least ten people [in the public housing courtyard] probably got their [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] card, right. I bet if we went across the street, at this new site, probably couldn't get us a job. Try building something in our neighborhood. Why can't we do it? We got OSHA and shit. Why can't we work? Building something in our neighborhood you don't want us to go to that shit. We be spending money going there. But we can't get a job.

One 23-year-old gang member from Brooklyn summed it up thusly:

> It's like we're already in the trap, with the system and with the law. Everybody's going to jail, there's no jobs, minimum amount of services provided for us, health-wise. People tend to do things, they get caught up. We call them illegal things, and they get caught up in the system. So, you can't go nowhere, you're just around.

Guns

The young gang members in this study came from high poverty neighborhoods, and recent research has shown that high poverty concentration is associated with increased risk of youth dying from firearms (Barrett et al. 2021). Given the levels of violence, the perceived lack of protection from the police in these communities, and a scarcity of economic opportunity, the vast majority (86%) of participants said they would like to move out of their neighborhood. But, with the realities of their present and the feeling that they "can't go nowhere," nearly all reported turning to weapons and gangs to ensure their safety and well-being. One participant stated that he did not carry a gun "just to carry it just to say, 'I'm cool, I've got this on me.' It's not about that," and that he would carry it "if I feel like my

Table 5 Guns and weapons

N	287 (%)
Owned or carried a gun	89
Feel safe when carrying gun ($n=246$)	78
Feel safe when not carrying gun ($n=246$)	63
Carry a different weapon	75

life was being threatened or something or my life was at stake or something like that." This sentiment was shared by many.

As Table 5 shows, 89% of participants owned or carried a gun, and they reported feeling safer when carrying a gun than when not. Three-quarters also carried a different weapon like a knife or blade.

Participants also talked about exercising caution with their weapons, affirming that its use was for extreme circumstances—"I feel more safer 'cause I know I'm not gonna use it for no reason. […] I'm not gonna just pull it out, tryna shoot you for no reason. […] I'm not gonna take an innocent life for no reason."

Reasons for Joining Gangs

With their physical safety threatened and their inability to access the mainstream economy for basic needs, many also turned to gangs to survive—physically (protection), economically (money), and emotionally (love and brotherhood). All these conditions stemmed in part from the "multiple marginality" (Vigil 2002) that they, their families, and their geographic and racial/ethnic communities had experienced, often across generations.

Though some cited the inevitability of membership given older family involvement, many participant narratives centered on gangs as sources of protection and support. They felt that a gang could provide the "strength in numbers" and protection necessary to keep them safe because of the precarious environments they lived in, where rivals or the police might come with the intent to harm. Given the poverty they faced, they also felt that gangs could provide them with ways to make money through "illegitimate opportunity structures" (Cloward and Ohlin 1960).

Economic Needs

Thus, some participants indicated that they joined their gang to get their material needs met. As one man stated, "I joined 'cause I was struggling. I'm in foster care. I'm not getting the actual support I need from my parents, so I went out and did what I had to do." These young people found that gangs could help them meet their basic survival needs around money, housing, and food, and that gang leaders would provide them with that essential security—"If I get kicked out of my mom's crib right now, I can call my homie and I'll be able to sleep on the couch or sleep on the floor. […] If I'm hungry […] they might give me \$5 to get something to eat."

Love and Emotional Support

Many also talked about joining to get their emotional needs met. As one participant stated, gangs are "for the people that's, like, actually in the struggle. They don't have nothing at home, and they just want to be a part of something. They want to feel loved." This sentiment of needing love was cited by many of the young gang members interviewed. "Every time I go into the streets, they showing me love. So I'mma be where the love is at, and if I can't get the love from home I'm definitely going to join a gang."

For some, not getting love at home was related to feeling alienated from their family members—"It was mostly 'cause I didn't feel the love from my family. I felt like they never really liked me, soon as my mom and everybody found out that I was gonna be gay." For others, it was about not having other family members even present, particularly male role models lost to incarceration or public health crises: "The whole family structure be messed up. Like niggas don't got no pops or, you know, pops be locked up or the uncle will be a fiend. […] And gangs, the big homies, they pull you in, show you love, teach you about being a man."

One Brooklyn gang member summed it up as follows: "[Joining gangs] was never about violence, […] it was about family structure and then positiveness and you know. And self-production and elevating and evolving. That's what it was about. And protecting one's own, our community."

Participants pointed to the emotional support the gang provided when encouraging words took the form of reminders to "stay in school" or pursue what they love, as was the case for this 18-year-old: "They know I dance, so if they see opportunities that I don't see, they will let me know. […] They want me to go chase the opportunity. They'll push me on to go chase my dreams, […] push me to my highest, to my fullest, to go finish doing what I like to do." Sometimes, these encouraging words from older gang members helped pull them out of depressed states.

> They'll see something up with me. I won't say it or anything, but it was like how I act, or how I talk, or I distance myself, and they would just always tell me like, "Son, keep your head up. You know you a smart guy, this and the third. A bright future's going to come for you," and things. Positive talk, basically, […] but a older person gave it to me so, it would brighten my day.

Fellow gang members were seen as people trusted to lend an ear—"When you don't got nobody […] that you can talk to, you can come to them"—and act in solidarity to "let you know you're not in the problem alone. We will take on the problem with you." At times they offered a reminder on how to keep safe in the streets: "If I'm outside bugging, they're gonna be like, 'Yo, boy, you gotta chill. Cops, they come by, you a Black young man, they gonna get you.' That's words that they're telling me."

Gangs as Prosocial Actors

Contrary to oft-presented media representations of gangs as exclusively negative forces and sources of violence, for the study participants, gangs provided a well of support, positivity, and protection for their members and the larger community. The youth in the study were aware that even the word "gang" conjures up negative ideas for many people, but they wanted to push back on that narrative, tell their own experience, and break the stigma (see Brotherton & Gude 2021 for another example of this). As one participant stated:

Table 6 Gang activities

N	287 (%)
My Gang…	
Provides me with support	93
Does things together that are fun but not illegal	93
Provides protection for its members	91
Gets in fights with other gangs	89
Has or uses guns	83
Helps neighborhood kids	81
Does things that are illegal	74
Is involved in community activities	73
Provides help to neighborhood residents	70
Requires me to have a gun	20

I love the brotherhood of being in a gang. The word gang, you just loosely throw it around, it's already looked at badly, once you say gang. I'm just going to keep using brotherhood throughout the rest of it. I love being a part of my brotherhood, because […] we actually look out for each other, we actually try to find support systems for each other outside of just the violence. We're actually there for each other.

Mutual Aid

Economic need had led some participants to join a gang and, indeed, many reported that they continually received material support from other members and paid it forward when they could, reflecting the nonmarket process of "reciprocity" (Sullivan 1989) documented by some previous research (e.g., Venkatesh 1997). One participant reported that the gang sent him commissary when he was in jail, while another cited a time the gang gave him money to buy a new outfit for a job interview. Others shared instances of gang members opening their homes to other members in need: "There's times I don't got nowhere to stay. I'm going to my brother house. Got nothing to eat, go to my sister house. She gonna make me something to eat. Give me some money."

Community Involvement

During interviews, the gang members shared that the mutual aid was not limited to those affiliated with their gang, but rather was extended to people in their geographic community as well. As shown in Table 6, in addition to providing members with support and protection, the majority of participants reported that their gang helps local kids (81%), is involved in community activities (73%), and provides help to neighborhood residents (70%).

One participant in the Bronx reported that as a gang member, "You help out everybody in the hood […], making sure that everybody in this project eats, […] that's my main priority." When asked if his gang provides help to the neighborhood, another stated that, "It's a law, like they have to. Like within gang, it's law." Examples of events that gangs organized for community members included cookouts, basketball tournaments, food drives, and clothing and school supply distribution. One female in Manhattan described that the gang was

constantly giving out food. They're constantly looking out for, no matter what, if they're out here on the corner, doing what they do, they're still going to look out for the community. At the end of the day, they're going to help your uncle out, your sister out, whatever it is you need. You need money? Here. You need food for your house? Here. You need milk, eggs, and cheese? Yeah, here.

Community involvement was seen as an essential component of the gang. As one participant put it:

You're supposed to police our own community. [...] You're supposed to hold down your community. That's why a lot a stuff got started in the first place. The police was comin' around killing young Black men and raping females and wasn't nothing happening. [...] So yeah, that's some of the stuff you supposed to do, mandatory. If people walk around claiming that they're in a gang, and they don't do that kind of shit, they not real.

This is not to say that the participants did not recognize that gangs also engage in fights with other gangs or illegal activities. They frequently described common "beefs" with "ops" over territory and stolen drugs or money and pointed to these conflicts as reasons for gun use.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the complex environment in which gang-involved youth are making decisions about their survival. These young people have widespread individual trauma, having been a direct victim of and frequent witness to interpersonal violence in their neighborhoods. They provided testimonies of the fear they lived with as a norm of everyday life—fear of themselves or their loved ones being harmed from random acts of violence, targeted attacks, or the police—and this fear factored into nearly every decision they made.

The gang members also had extensive "community trauma" (Falkenburger et al. 2018), having been subjected to historic harms and structural violence—often related to their race—at the hands of the police and the criminal legal system. They felt under constant harassment from the police, who treated them inhumanely and who made negative assumptions about them because of their race, age, and gang affiliation—and the intersection of all three. They reported that policing strategies for serious offenses were nonexistent, but for minor ones they were militaristic. In their view, racialized policing led to the majority spending time in jail, prison, or juvenile detention; and contributed to the breakup of family units as their siblings, parents, and extended family were lost to incarceration.

Participants also felt complete institutional abandonment, describing how they were denied any pathways to survival—economic, physical, and emotional. Discrimination and criminal records meant that many of these young people had no access to the mainstream economy. They were already experiencing poverty—and its criminalization (Wacquant 2009)—and, consequently, in their words they "gotta make our money happen." As a result, they turned to alternative survival strategies (such as drug dealing and robbery). This is where we see structured, conjugated oppression (Bourgois 1988) and both the setting and context for gang membership. This historic disinvestment in their communities (e.g., Eisenberg 2017; Lee et al. 2019; Vitale 2008) has created institutions that fail to provide the resources and support structures necessary to pursue the lives promised them in

such foundational commitments to social progress as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the USA co-drafted and signed more than 70 years ago (United Nations 1948). Hence, it should not perplex us that they resort to such agency to meet their needs.

The participants were constantly caught in double-binds: their gang membership was largely a reaction to the inequities and humiliations they face on a daily basis from the police, unemployment, and poverty. But the efforts they make to exercise their forms of situated agency (see Brotherton 2015)—joining gangs, selling drugs, carrying weapons— to survive in the face of these daily injustices and threats to their existence only compound their vulnerability to being discriminated against, getting caught up in the criminal legal system, and experiencing interpersonal violence.

Nonetheless, these young people also seek better lives, lives without guns, lives where they can get jobs that allow them to support their families, and lives where they reside in safe communities. Meanwhile, the media representation and the pathological language universally employed to describe gangs has only served to increase the "moral panic" (Cohen 1972) around their members. In response, state actions and reactions—particularly from the police and the criminal legal system—continue to make a hostile, punitive, and criminalizing world for them. Gang databases label them as criminal when they may have not participated in criminal activity, leading to arrests for minor offenses (see Chauhan et al. 2014) that often lead to pre-trial detention or jail sentences. These strategies only push them further into the octopus-like system of punitive sanctions and stigma (Goffman 1963), adding to their existing vulnerabilities.

These findings mesh with other studies. For example, incarcerating people for low-level crime does not deter future criminal involvement (Petrich et al. 2020), while the process of arrest, incarceration, and reentry is intentionally clustered in certain geographic areas and affects the well-being of these communities (Chung and McFadden 2010). Other research focusing on the consequences of incarceration show reduced employment prospects, lower income, high likelihood of re-arrest and re-conviction, damaged family relationships and poor mental health outcomes (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999; Kirk and Wakefield 2018; Turanovic et al. 2012; Turney 2017). In general, mass incarceration depletes the economic base of communities, reduces employment opportunities for parents, and fosters a crimino-genic environment (Clear 2009; Graham and Harris 2013; Lynch 2003; Olson et al. 2019). In short, this research supports a conclusion that the erosion of social welfare policies and decades of mass incarceration policies have weakened the communities where these young gang members live, making gangs an important player in helping connect their members with methods of survival (Brotherton 2008; Hagedorn 2005).

Finally, I must conclude that current policies and practices aimed at responding to gangs and gun violence that reject a critical criminological approach of addressing the root causes of crime and adopt instead the perspective of individual pathology are not long-term strate-gies for community safety. Contrary to "broken-windows" policing strategy (Wilson and Kelling 1982), harassing gang members for low-level criminal activity will ultimately only increase their likelihood of being susceptible to violence. Such approaches are not a means to the end of achieving community cohesion and well-being. Rather, as the young peo-ple in this study have declared, it is a dangerous end in and of itself—one that is distract-ing police officers from protecting the communities. Programs such as the Group Violence Intervention that focus on targeting individual gang members deemed to be responsible for much of the violent crime while simultaneously implementing "enforcement actions" that "seek to apply legal sanctions, informal sanctions, or uncomfortable attention to as many of [those people's] group associates as possible" (National Network for Safe Com-munities 2016) only fuel racialized and coercive social control responses while increasing

state surveillance and police victimization of the most oppressed and vulnerable communities. Such failure to recognize that the structural violence witnessed and experienced by the gang members in this study is at the root of much of the interpersonal violence in their communities points not to the pathology and the internal deficits of such subjects but to the Hobbesian imagination behind so much punitivism in policy and the social science that legitimates it.

The findings of this study speak to the need for very specific approaches to working with gang members to reduce gun violence. Prevention efforts should directly address the realities of what gangs provide for their young members—protection, economic opportunity, emotional support, and mentoring—and their neighborhoods. Programs should build safe space and supportive community to bridge young people and the supports they need to achieve self-knowledge, self-determination, and lasting personal and community safety and wellness. Necessary activities would include distribution of items and resources to meet basic needs of food and shelter; employment training that increases social capital and provide concrete connections to jobs that pay a living wage; individual and group healing services that can address the past and ongoing interpersonal and community trauma the youth have experienced; group sessions that help young gang members explore the links between their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors; and community conversations that weave together political education about historical and contemporary systems of oppression, resilience and resistance, and methods of building and nurturing community within and beyond the street. To increase likelihood of recruitment, retention, and success, these programs should be staffed with gang leaders who have pre-existing relationships of trust with their members, who can vouch for the program, and whose presence will communicate physical safety to these young people.

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