A Systemic Analysis of the Dynamics and Organization of Urban Street Gangs

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Street gangs function as ongoing, open social systems in relation to their surrounding sociocultural context. Fundamentally, gangs are comparable to some family systems. In fact, most gangs do consider themselves to be “families.” The same concepts used to describe family systems may also be applied to street gangs. Street gangs usually exhibit a highly complex organization, structure, process, and functionality. All of these aspects intertwine within and around the gang to form a web of interconnectedness and continuity. To better understand street gangs and provide effective intervention plans, they must be viewed from this systematic and holistic perspective.

Street gangs have been documented in cities in the U.S. throughout most of the country’s history (Spergel, 1990). In some cities, gangs have been credited with an alarming share of violent crime, most notably homicide. Victims of the serious and often random violence that has come to be known as a common feature of street gangs have retreated within their communities and neighborhoods in fear—afraid to let their children walk to school, go to the corner store, or even play outside of their own homes (Conly, Kelly, Mahanna, & Warner, 1993). For years, social scientists, police officials, and popular media have all struggled to understand the essence of street gangs (Sanders, 1994). Perhaps street gangs can be best understood through the lens of a systemic approach by paying careful attention to their systemic dynamics, functions, and organizational structures.

Street gangs can be defined as groups of youths and young adults with varying degrees of cohesion and structure, who have regular contact with...
one another, ways of identifying their group, and rules of behavior within the system (Conly et al., 1993). Gangs serve numerous functions for their members, including providing a source of status, identity, cohesion, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging (Harris, 1994). Furthermore, gang members experience an intense emotional closeness born of children growing up together on the street and turn to each other for support and often for the mere function of survival (Lyon, Henggeler, & Hall, 1992).

There are at least three distinct types of gangs. The first is referred to as a social gang. This gang is a relatively permanent group that “hangs out” at a specific location (i.e., store, street corner, abandoned building). Social gangs are not likely to participate in serious delinquent activity and will engage in physical violence only if members are attacked and retaliation is unavoidable. The group stays together because of mutual attraction among its members, rather than through a need for protection or esteem. These gang members tend to have the closest association with the norms and values of society in general (Fagan, 1989). A second type of gang is the delinquent gang. This gang type is structurally cohesive and is often organized around the pursuit of monetary gain derived from illegal activity. Gang survival is dependent upon each member's precise execution of his/her assignment and the provision of back-up support when necessary. The accomplishment of these group enterprises may be viewed by gang members as their method of getting ahead in the world (Fagan, 1989). A third gang type is the violent gang. The primary purpose of this gang is to obtain the power and associated emotional gratification that violent activities can bring to youths (Hardy, 1996). Both leaders and followers tend to overestimate the importance, size, and power of their group. These gangs tend to have a highly structured hierarchy of leaders and followers. The violent gang is also characterized by intra-group violence. Gang members may be verbally violent with one another, but often hostility and aggression will take on a physical form (Lyon et al., 1992). Although in some gangs a particular type may be easily distinguished, there is often a blending of gang types within any given street gang. Moreover, researchers and others who study gangs tend to be more concerned with categorizing gang types, than are the gang members themselves.

No one has developed a satisfactory count of the number of gang members or gangs nationwide. Attempts to do so have been hampered by the variation of the way gangs have been defined from one site to another (Conly et al., 1993). However, it has been reported that Los Angeles County has documented the most gang members and gangs throughout the U.S. (Harris, 1994). Harris (1994) found that there are at least 600 gangs with an estimated 100,000 gang members operating in Los Angeles County. Homicides committed by gang members currently account for approximately 35% of the homicides in Los Angeles County annually (Rogers, 1993). Throughout the country, some of the most well-known gangs include the “Crips,” the “Bloods,” the “Vicelords,” and the “Latin Kings.” The majority of these particular gangs are located in large cities, such as Los Angeles, Chicago, New
DEMOGRAPHICS

Age
The ages of gang members range widely. However, most gangs studied report members falling between 10 and 30 years of age, with the majority being between 14 and 24 years old (Huff, 1989; Winfree, Backstrom, & Mays, 1994). Some gang members have been found to be as young as 8 years old. These younger members are often seen as expendable and are used as drug couriers (Borringer, 1995).

Gender
Gang behavior, especially gang-related crime, tends to be largely a male phenomenon (Winfree et al., 1994). Although street gangs are predominately male, recent research reveals that the number of all female gangs is rising rapidly (Clark, 1992; Harris, 1994). There may be a number of females associated with a particular gang, but they usually serve as auxiliaries or branches of male gangs. They are often expected to support the male gang completely, but they are rarely able to become official members (Moore, 1991). Females associated with male gangs are typically used to carry weapons, provide alibis, act as spies and lures, and provide sex for male members (Winfree et al., 1994).

Ethnic and Racial Composition
The ethnic and racial composition of gangs seem to be overrepresented by minority group members. Most gangs tend to be racially exclusive (Clark, 1992). Gangs are often divided into four main racial groups: African-American origin, Asiatic origin (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, Samoan, and American Indian), European origin (English, Italian, Irish, Slavic, Russian, and German), and Hispanic origin (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Panamanian, and others from Spanish-speaking countries) (Miller, 1975). Overall, African-American and Hispanic gangs are the most dominant gangs represented in the gang population (Conly et al., 1993).

Location
Contrary to popular belief, the location of gang activity varies widely. There are three main areas that gangs usually exist. The primary location for gang activity is in the inner cities, especially areas in decay. Gangs tend to form in the shifting, changing, or transitional neighborhoods of the larger cities, such as York, Miami, and Milwaukee (Clark, 1992; Hagedorn & Macon, 1988; Sanders, 1994).
as the “projects.” These areas tend to be characterized by social disorganization and rapid population shifts (Conly et al., 1993). Another area conducive to the formation of gangs are stable slums. Stable slums, for example, South Central Los Angeles, are characterized by areas where population shifts are slow, permitting patterns of behavior and traditions to develop over a number of years (Siegel & Senna, 1985). A third place gangs originate is suburban and rural areas (Conly et al., 1993). Slums and ghettos have shifted from the inner city or ring city, to suburban areas—that is, to formerly middle-class areas that are now in decay. In the past 10 years, many gangs have claimed this turf as their own and have begun to take over some suburban housing projects. The fact that there is less intensive police patrol in these areas has contributed to the shift of gangs out of the cities and slums to the outer edges of certain districts (Siegel & Senna, 1985).

GANGS AS SYSTEMS

From a systems perspective, street gangs can be viewed as ongoing, open, social systems. As is true of street gangs, social systems function as a whole in relation to their sociocultural context (Broderick, 1990). Each member of the gang affects and is affected by other members and by the context of which they operate. In line with systems’ thinking, street gangs are fundamentally comparative to family systems. The same concepts that are used to describe family systems, such as hierarchies, subsystems and suprasystems, entropy and negentropy, boundaries, communication, and homeostasis (Broderick, 1990; Minuchin, 1974; Walsh, 1982), can also be applied to the street gang. Because most gangs do consider themselves to be a kind of family, it is both critical and prudent that they be viewed and studied from the family systems perspective (Vigil, 1988.) For many gang members, their gang family is the only family that they have. The street gang functions as a “surrogate family,” providing its members with affection, understanding, recognition, loyalty, and emotional and physical protection (Morales, 1992). This sense of companionship and belonging fills a void that has been left empty by the gang member’s previous family relationships (Hardy, 1996). For some gang members, they join because they do not have another family; for others, they join to escape a dysfunctional situation in their families of origin (Vigil, 1988). Once a youth has gained membership with a gang, he/she is fully accepted as a family member. Many gang members report that they are willing to die or kill for their gang, expressing their ultimate love and loyalty to their gang family (Belitz & Valdez, 1994).

Hierarchies

From a systems perspective, gangs, like families, have an organized structure within which their members assume roles and carry out certain responsibili-
ties. Both are organized based on hierarchies (Haley, 1976). In families, parents are in the executive position of leadership in the family, and children assume the subordinate position. In the leadership role, parents have the responsibility of making decisions that will affect the safety and security of all family members (Minuchin, 1974). Most street gangs are organized in much the same way. Joe (1994, p. 396) states, "Gangs are interconnected and hierarchically organized according to age and experience." Most researchers and practitioners agree that gangs usually consist of a set of leaders, peripheral members, and recruits (Conly et al., 1993). The hierarchy and structure of most street gangs can be described by beginning with the hardcore gang member or the "OG," which stands for "original gangster." This type of gang member is heavily involved in the gang, making it central to his or her life. The "OG" is often a violent criminal and he or she is very committed to gang activities. The original gangster has usually been part of the street gang for a long period of time. Because of his/her experience, the "OG" is often looked up to by other, less experienced gang members. Novice gang members may look to the "OG" for guidance, support, and protection as they navigate their way through the first stages of their gang membership. The "associate" gang member usually knows people in the gang, but does not participate in all gang activities. He or she participates in some gang activities, but is less likely to get involved with the more serious, sometimes deadly or illegal activities of the gang. The "wannabe" is often infatuated with gang behavior. Wannabes are usually associated, but not committed, to the gang. This type of gang affiliate is often in middle school or just slightly older (Jackson, as cited in Conly et al., 1993).

Street gangs may have one leader or multiple leaders and multiple cliques, each with a slightly different interest and responsibility in the gang (Conly et al., 1993). Leadership in the gang has been described as (a) multiple, where there is more than a single leader at any one time; (b) informal, where the choice of a leader is not structured; (c) situational, where the leadership role may only be in certain situations; and (d) functional, where situational leadership is based on a particular function (Sanders, 1994). Whatever the leadership structure may be, it is certain that proven leaders have specific, known qualities. One member of the "Latin Kings" stated, "Leaders must be daring, dangerous, and not afraid" (Hagedorn & Macon, 1988, p. 93).

Subsystems

Any given system consists of smaller systems called subsystems. Family subsystems have their own interdependence and mutual influence among their members (Nichols & Everett, 1986). There are three main subsystems in the average family: the spousal or couple, the parental, and the sibling subsystem (Minuchin, 1974). The spousal/couple subsystem refers to the bond between partners. The parental subsystem (often called the executive subsystem) refers to the responsibilities and duties involved in parenting. The
sibling subsystem refers to the relationship and interactions among siblings (Minuchin, 1974). Subsystems are most visible in the street gang in the form of cliques. Most cliques seem to be age-graded, although some cliques have mixed-age membership (Hagedorn & Macon, 1988). Clique members may form within the hierarchical structure of the gang-producing subsystems among leaders, associates, and wannabes. A parental clique may form among the leaders of the group. The parental clique may act as the “parents” of the gang. The leaders of the gang act as a parental subsystem by “watching over” gang members and activities, and providing guidance, direction, and protection for the new and/or less experienced gang members. Spousal or couple subsystems may be seen in gangs (especially male gangs) within the relationships that form between gang members and the female auxiliaries that “hang” with the gang. Often these females are expected to support their male companions as “spouses,” but are rarely allowed to become official members of the gang. Sibling subsystems often form among the cliques that consist mainly of associate and wannabe members. These less experienced members often join together as “siblings” to provide one another the support needed as they begin to gain experience in the gang. One study found that in Los Angeles, gangs that contain about 100 to 125 members produce cliques with an average of 30 to 40 members each. These cliques have fluid membership and some sort of connection to the other cliques in the gang (Hagedorn & Macon, 1988).

Suprasystems

All systems are embedded within larger systems called suprasystems (Nichols & Everett, 1986). Families are surrounded by suprasystems in the form of friends, extended family, neighborhoods, communities, schools, the workplace, and an overall social and ethnic environmental element (Broderick, 1990). The suprasystems that are most likely to affect and be affected by the street gang are the community or neighborhood of which the gang is a part and the law enforcement agencies that patrol the location where the gang frequently operates. Researchers who work with Los Angeles Chicano gang members state, “The word for gang and for neighborhood is identical. ‘Mi barrio’ refers equally to ‘my gang’ and ‘my neighborhood’” (Hagedorn & Macon, 1988, p. 134).

The social balance between a gang and its community seems to be a delicate one. In some communities, gangs are afforded a certain amount of community tolerance. This community tolerance generally exists for three reasons:

1. gang members may be family members and neighbors of community residents;
2. community residents identify with the economic and social challenges that gang youths face;
3. a gang may help to establish some degree of order in its community, for example, by protecting local businesses from attacks from rival gangs (Jankowski, 1991).

Law enforcement agencies (such as police officers) interface with gangs on a regular basis. Sanders (1994, p. 178) states that police officers “stand as society’s institutional interface in the social construction of gang activities.” However, interviews reveal that gang members often have an intense dislike for police officers who use unnecessary “strong-arm” tactics when arresting or questioning them. Gang members may feel vengeful when police officers behave unprofessionally, and it is likely that they will seize the first opportunity to “get even.” When police officers demonstrate personal concern for gang members (i.e., asking how they’re doing when they see them on the streets), in some cases, a mutual respect will develop between the officers and some gang members. Veteran police officers and gang members may know each other on a first-name or nickname basis, and may demonstrate a great deal of respect for one another (Huff, 1989).

Entropy

A system that is either too open or too closed will probably be dysfunctional. At either extreme, the system can be described as being in a state of entropy. Entropic systems are often moving toward maximum disorder and disintegration. In these disorganized systems, the members may use their energy thoughtlessly or in a random manner. When energy is used in such a way, the system is in chaos and out of balance. By allowing in either too much information or not enough information, the identity and survival of the system may be threatened. In families, for example, tasks may be pursued in a conflictual or haphazard manner causing nothing to ever get done. When this happens, a sense of coherence or order seems to be lacking. The absence of organization may be undermining the ability of the family members to successfully complete their tasks. The movement of the system at this point is toward entropy (Becvar & Becvar, 1982).

Gangs depend on organization for the survival of the system. Some gangs are highly organized, while others have very little organization (Sanders, 1994). A gang that has little organization may naively use all of its energy and then begin to decay. Entropy is likely to occur in newly formed gangs, who do not yet understand the structure and functions that keep the gang system alive. Gangs that operate in a disorganized state may allow too much or not enough information to enter the system. For example, if the gang does not have clear external boundaries and allows unknown outsiders to enter the gang, they may open themselves up to a vulnerable state. In this state, some of the core rules and boundaries that hold the gang together may be threatened and the system may begin to disintegrate.

A gang that is moving toward entropy will soon be dissembled unless
new information is introduced into the homeostatic system. A gang that is in a state of decay requires negentropy to build it back up. Negentropy is a movement away from disorder. Negentropy can be described as the introduction of new energy into the static system. The system is allowing information to come in and is permitting change that is appropriate, while it is screening out information and avoiding changes that would threaten the survival of the system (Becvar & Becvar, 1982). New energy may enter the gang system when new members are initiated into the gang or when the gang experiences a change in leadership. Gang violence also seems to add an enormous amount of energy into the gang. For example, drive-by shootings and gangbangs are a continuing source of power for the gang (Sanders, 1994). When gang members participate in violent activities, the gang system is strengthened by the bond that forms among the members. The more members collaborate to pull off violent activities for the “good” of the gang, the stronger this bond becomes. This new energy, whether it be positive or negative behavior, may allow the gang to reconstruct its system and resist the breakdown enforced by entropy.

Boundaries

The systems concept of boundaries is very important to the structure and function of the street gang. In families, boundaries are characterized by the physical and emotional barriers that distinguish individuals and families and regulate the amount of contact occurring among them (Minuchin, 1974). Boundaries delineate where one system stops and another system begins (Nichols & Everett, 1986). Boundaries regulate membership in the gang (i.e., who is in and who is out), and information in the gang (i.e., what is or is not done or talked about within the gang or outside of the gang). Street gangs tend to have rigid boundaries, which denotes that boundaries are relatively impermeable. Gangs typically do not approve of active members having friends, especially close friends, outside of the gang (Winfree et al., 1994). Members tend to establish group boundaries and consider those outside the group as “pousers.” Those who have not been formerly initiated into the gang are considered outsiders and are not able to cross the boundaries that surround the gang. Gang members are very careful not to discuss gang activities and plans with outsiders for fear that they may be enemies and/or spies for a rival gang, and thus a threat to the gang system (Kennedy & Baron, 1993).

Street gangs base much of their structure on the fact that their boundaries are impermeable. Gangs take pride in having selective membership practices and codes of secrecy. Members are selected into a gang only after they demonstrate the necessary skills required, and the ability to be loyal and committed to the gang. Most gangs have highly rigorous initiation processes which involve perspective members demonstrating their ability to understand the unwritten rules of the gang. The initiation process usually
entails a physical beating by several other gang members. The beating must be endured without complaint and without fighting back. The slightest whimper or other expressed signs of pain could result in rejection of membership. The initiation process can be considered a prerequisite to weed out the weak and uncommitted (Vigil, 1988).

Within the gang, unwritten rules inform members of appropriate norms and behaviors expected among the gang and of the traditional attitudes felt about other gangs in the area. Unwritten rules center on covert behaviors and beliefs such as:

(a) appropriate gang colors and attire;
(b) roles and duties delineated to members;
(c) ownership of turf and how that turf is to be protected;
(d) which gangs are rival gangs and why those gangs have become enemies.

The gang member who fails to live up to the gang's requirements (i.e., the member who does not defend his honor) incurs immediate loss of status, removal from the gang, physical harm, or even the risk of being killed (Kennedy & Baron, 1993).

Communication

All behavior is regarded as communication, transmitting interpersonal messages (Walsh, 1982). Within a family system, communication occurs continuously through both verbal and nonverbal interactions (Minuchin, 1974). Street gangs communicate both between and across systems with the use of their own unique language, which is mostly nonverbal and symbolic. There is a distinct emphasis on symbols and colors (Vigil, 1988). For example, in Los Angeles, the street gang known as the Crips wear blue, usually in the form of bandannas, as their identifying color. Conversely, the gang known as the Bloods, use the color red to signify their gang affiliation (Clark, 1992). In large gangs, hand signals are used to identify themselves to one another and to other gang members. For instance, holding up three fingers on the right hand signifies membership with the Latin Kings. The three fingers represent the tips of a king’s crown (Hagedorn & Macon, 1988). Tagging (more commonly known as graffiti) is one of the most widely used types of gang communication. Gang names, the street names of their members, and various self-laudatory and rival-deprecatory comments make up typical tagging messages. Some messages are simple and crude, while others are elaborate and artistic. The terms “gangster,” “gang,” “gangbanger,” and “mob” are used frequently in gang graffiti, revealing something about the tagger's self-identity. Crip and Blood graffiti often include the characters C/K or B/K, which stand for Crip-killer or Blood-killer. When a gang wants to challenge a rival gang, they will paint an X over their rival’s tagging message, and place their
own name on the wall (Sanders, 1994). The number “187,” which is the Los Angeles Police Department’s code for murder, is also used extensively by gang taggers. By placing the number “187” next to another gangster’s name on a building or wall, the message is clearly a foreshadowing for a gang hit. Some graffiti messages are quite complex. For example, the message, “Cyco 33 OG 8-ball” has a variety of messages within it. “Cyco” is the nickname of the tagger. The number “33” refers to the tagger being a member of a 33rd Street gang. “OG” stands for original gangster. To use the letters “OG,” the gangster is probably someone who has killed for the gang. Last, “8-ball” is a code meaning someone who deals cocaine (Borringer, 1995). All of the types of communication used by gangs help to maintain the boundaries within and around the gang. The communication style of colors and symbols are especially important in maintaining the rigid membership boundaries that surround the gang.

Within a gang system, members may communicate with one another by using similar symbolic messages. For example, hand signals are often used to send brief messages to one another, especially in a life-threatening situation when verbal communication is too timely and dangerous. Gang members may also use a number of code words and slang language to communicate with one another. This type of language helps to maintain the boundaries around the system, and protect the gang’s secrets from pousers in gangs that have a large membership (Borringer, 1995).

Homeostasis/ Morphogenesis

The concept of homeostasis assumes that systems attempt to maintain stability in the midst of frequent internal and external changes to the system. Homeostatic systems are able to accept change, but only within certain limits (Minuchin, 1974). More appropriately, gangs like family systems, are morphogenic in nature, meaning that they tend to change in response to their environment in order to maintain continuity within their system. In families, members may contribute to this homeostatic balance through a mutually reinforcing feedback loop. Family members seek to regulate tension and to restore the family equilibrium or homeostasis (Walsh, 1982).

Street gangs may be either homeostatic or morphogenetic in their structure and activities. Homeostatic gangs may adapt to change, but they are not hypersensitive to environmental stimuli. These gangs tend to be more rigid in their structure, and thus they are more resistant to change. Homeostatic gangs are not likely to endure over time. They tend to come onto the gang scene with lots of strength, but eventually they surrender to the impact of entropy. Gangs that are in an extensive homeostatic state are often too rigid to allow negentropy to enter their system, and as a result, they begin to decay and ultimately fizzle out.

Some gangs tend to be morphogenic instead of homeostatic in their
systemic nature. The morphogenic gang is more receptive to change. These gangs are very sensitive to environmental stimuli, and they may readily allow new information to enter the system to resist the breakdown enforced by entropy. The morphogenic gang tends to gain strength over time. Examples of morphogenic gangs include the Crips and the Bloods of Los Angeles. These gangs have withstood the test of time by having both flexible and rigid boundaries when appropriate. Morphogenic gangs learn from their experiences, adjust to new information, and may eventually reach a morphogenic state characterized by ultra stability.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

Utility of Systems Concepts

Applying systemic concepts to street gangs allows for an acknowledgment that gangs, as all systems, have multiple and complex levels. All levels of street gangs must be reviewed before prevention and intervention strategies will be effective. Viewing gangs from this holistic and systemic perspective provides a number of benefits for both researchers and practitioners:

1. Family systems thinking explains not only why, but also how gangs function as a whole. This allows for some of the negative and blameful language to be shifted away from gang life, and for more empathetic ideas to be introduced into the study of street gangs. For example, if clinicians and researchers understood the systemic functioning of street gangs, interventions could be organized to address all aspects and dimensions of the life of a gang member.

2. Understanding gangs as systems helps to explain the function that they serve for their members based on a holistic perspective. The functionality of gangs may be viewed in terms of a breakdown in the home, neighborhood, and/or community. Therefore, programs and interventions aimed toward gang members should encompass a multilevel approach, inclusive of individual, family, community, and cultural influences.

3. Systems thinking enables outsiders to understand the structure and hierarchy of gang organization. Understanding power balances and cliques within the gang can be helpful when implementing intervention plans. For example, because gang leaders and original gangsters have such a high level of influence over other gang members, an intervention plan that targets the upper level of the hierarchy may have a ripple effect for the rest of the gang.

4. Knowledge of street gangs from a systems’ perspective provides information on how members can replace dysfunctional systems with
more appropriate, working systems. Appropriate systems may be developed by providing alternative resources and activities in place of repetitive gang activities. For example, intervention programs that teach gang members job skills and provide job placement will redirect gang members into more positive activities, instead of just lecturing to members that they should not participate in negative gang activities.

5. Understanding the systemic cohesion involved in gang membership provides knowledge about how gangs operate as “family systems.” Sensitivity toward gang loyalty and codes of secrecy allows for a conducive environment for intervention plans. Thus, gangs should be viewed as family systems who care for, protect, and support one another. Although violent activity may accompany certain aspects of gang life, there are other parts of gang membership that are not often discussed. The cohesion, connectedness, loyalty, and protective nature of gang organization often receive little or no attention. It is important that these concepts be recognized, since violence is often a forced product of these underlying assumptions that hold street gangs together.

FAMILY THERAPY INTERVENTIONS

Since family dysfunction has often been identified as a correlate to gang involvement, intervention and treatment plans must focus on the underlying family issues that may have led the gang member to search for another family system. Much of the therapy process may need to center around the family’s history of violence, neglect, and/or abuse. Families must acknowledge the impact that abuse and/or neglect has had on the family system and on the individual child who has suffered and/or witnessed the family violence. Understanding the gang member’s emotional responses to family traumas allows for a better understanding of the context and meaning of his/her gang participation (Belitz & Valdez, 1994). Family therapy should also address the family’s dynamics, roles, rules, and means for resolving family conflict (Clark, 1992). Understanding these concepts within the family system provides a window into the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that may have been learned from the youth’s family of origin and then later modeled through gang membership and activities.

A primary goal for family therapy is to assist the family in verbally expressing and listening to one another without becoming aggressive or punitive. Family therapy allows the gang member to express the anger, hurt, resentment, and sense of rejection at those in the family who may have abused, neglected, or failed to protect the youth (Belitz & Valdez, 1994). This time for expression forces parents and other family members to actively listen to the emotional expression of the youth with the support and guidance of a therapist. For many family members, this may be the first time they
have heard the emotional context surrounding the youth’s gang membership. For the youth, this may be the only time he or she feels safe enough to express those deeply buried feelings and emotions. Concurrently, families need to be taught healthy and effective communication patterns as the main mechanism for resolving family conflict in a way that is both respectful to individuals and to the family system. During these therapy sessions, when the lines of communication are finally open for the family, the issue of forgiveness must be addressed. If parents and family members want forgiveness for events that have taken place in the past, they must ask for it. Because some of the youth’s scars are so deeply embedded, it may take months or even years for forgiveness to take place. If parents and other family members do not feel a need to ask for forgiveness, the gang member must be prepared to let go of his or her anger and initiate the healing process without the support of parents and/or family members.

It is very important during family sessions that the youth’s role in the family be explored and redefined. For example, gang-related activities and behaviors that are violent may be reframed as learned behavior from the youth’s family of origin (Belitz & Valdez, 1994). New and more appropriate beliefs and behaviors must be introduced to the youth and his or her family during therapy sessions. Furthermore, a discussion on gender roles and societal stereotypes of men and women is also highly relevant. For many gang members, the only male and female role models they have had are of a dominant and violent father and a dependent and submissive mother. These concepts and beliefs should be explored by the therapist, followed by a psycho-educational approach to challenge the learned gender roles adopted by the youth and his or her family.

Family sessions should also explore the sociocultural stressors that are influencing the youth and the family system. Discussions of the cultural context surrounding the family offers insight and understanding into a number of family dynamics and the cultural meaning of gang participation. Therapy sessions should focus on identifying cultural strengths and integrating those strengths into more positive individual and family identities (Belitz & Valdez, 1994).

If gang youth are still living at home, parents need to be empowered as the decision-making adults in the family. Family rules need to be established along with the consequences for breaking those rules (Belitz & Valdez, 1994). Structural family therapy can be used to help redefine the parents as the executive subsystem. Youth need to understand their place in the family hierarchy and learn the new roles and behaviors that are involved in being part of the child subsystem. Exercises in the therapy room, such as role plays and family sculptures, can help to reinforce the new hierarchial structure.

Some families may bring multigenerational gang involvement into family therapy. This may complicate family intervention because family members support one another in their gang activity. For this reason, it is important that multigenerational gang participation be dealt with directly, keeping in mind the family’s systemic dynamics (Clark, 1992).
Supplementary Interventions

Although family therapy should be the main focus of intervention for gang youth, other treatment plans, such as individual and group work, also can be effective and valuable components of the therapy process. Individual work, in conjunction with family therapy, allows youth to explore their own identities both within their family system and as independent and autonomous individuals outside of the system. Individual treatment with gang members should focus on identifying how basic needs are being met by gang participation. Identifying these needs includes exploring the gang member's yearning for a family to provide basic dependency needs and the quest for the gang to provide psychological and cultural identity. It should be noted that asking a gang member to drop out of the gang so that productive therapy can continue is a highly unrealistic request. Gang members should be encouraged to develop more adaptive ways of meeting needs and functioning in the larger world so that gang involvement can progressively become less important. Gang members should also be encouraged to maintain the positive elements that may be associated with gang membership, such as being strong, loyal, willing to take risks, and being a survivor. Furthermore, individual treatment may allow for gang members to philosophically examine the meaning of life and death, their own underlying meaning of gang involvement, the importance of morality, and the human capacity for positive and negative thoughts and behaviors (Belitz & Valdez, 1994).

Group therapy can be a powerful agent of change for many gang members. Group work is most effective after some family and individual work has already been done. Once the youth has committed to making a change in his or her life, the group process can be used as a strong reinforcement agent to achieve these goals. Participating in a group often allows gang members to receive validation for their feelings and experiences. This helps participants to break down the artificial barriers that separate them from rival gang members and reduces the alienation they may feel when they are outside their gang territory. A major focus of group work with gang members is exploring identity issues and how participating in a gang relates to those issues. The group also facilitates the learning of new social skills, such as providing and receiving feedback among peers, being assertive in a nonaggressive manner, and providing and receiving emotional support from peers, family members, and role models. Furthermore, the group process should include an education series about mentoring and tutoring services, job skills development, and employment assistance. The effectiveness of the group process is further strengthened if former gang members either help lead the group or come to the group on a regular basis to offer their own experiences related to gang membership. Current gang members are often empowered and motivated by former gang members who have now succeeded in more positive endeavors.

In order to conduct a successful group of diverse gang members, some
specific rules must be enforced. Some rules may include maintaining the property where the group is held as neutral territory, no tagging or graffiti on the property, showing respect for others by not verbally or physically threatening one another, allowing everyone an opportunity to participate, and attending on a voluntary basis (Belitz & Valdez, 1994).

CONCLUSION

For years, it has been popular belief that street gangs are just a collection of hoodlums who only cause trouble and make neighborhoods look bad. Little research has been conducted on how gangs operate as systems and what systemic function the gang serves for the members who are part of that system. As stated earlier, the gang serves as a family for most gang members. Many individuals who join gangs are looking for the closeness, cohesion, and acceptability that they have been deprived of elsewhere. A gang may provide members with esteem, stability, and a connection with the world that they have never experienced. Granted, gangs may also provide danger and violence for their members, but to truly understand street gangs, those aspects cannot be studied as separate entities. Gangs, as all systems, function based on an interrelatedness that connects every aspect of gang life together within a complex web of interactions. Successful research endeavors and prevention and intervention programs must aim to approach street gangs from a holistic and systematic perspective, taking into account the highly complex structure, process, functionality, and culture that are located within the core of every street gang.

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