VOICES FROM THE BARRIO: CHICANO/A GANGS, FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITIES*

MARJORIE S. ZATZ
EDWARDO L. PORTILLOS
Arizona State University

Based on in-depth interviews with 33 youth gang members and 20 adult neighborhood leaders and youth service providers, we explore the complicated relationships among gang members, their families, and other residents of poor Chicano/a and Mexicano/a barrios in Phoenix. Listening to the multiple voices of community members allows for a multifaceted understanding of the complexities and contradictions of gang life, both for the youths and for the larger community. We draw on a community ecology approach to help explain the tensions that develop, especially when community members vary in their desires and abilities to control gang-related activities. In this exploratory study, we point to some of the ways in which gender, age, education, traditionalism, and level of acculturation may help explain variation in the type and strength of private, parochial, and public social control within a community.

Criminologists have long been fascinated with the problems posed by youth gangs. In recent years, community ecology approaches to gang-related crime and social control have become popular. One strand of research has focused on macrosocial patterns of crime and inequality among the urban underclass (e.g., Sampson and Laub, 1993; Sampson and Wilson, 1996; Wilson, 1987). A second strand has examined the "dual frustrations" facing inner-city parents who fear both gang- and drug-related crime and police harassment of young men of color (Meares, 1997:140; see also Anderson, 1990; Madriz, 1997). These concerns converge in research that examines the connections between and among the structural causes and community-level effects of economic deprivation, institutional and personal networks within a community, the capacity of local networks to garner human and economic resources from outside the

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community, and gang-related crime (Anderson, 1990; Bursik and Grasmick, 1993a,b; Hagedorn, 1998; Moore, 1991; Spergel, 1986; Sullivan, 1989). Bursik and Grasmick (1993a) take this approach the farthest theoretically, incorporating Hunter's (1985) three tiers of local community social control into a reformulation of Shaw and McKay's (1942) social disorganization framework. Their theory of community relations recognizes the relevance of long-term economic deprivation and institutional racism for community-based social control at the private, parochial, and public levels.

Bursik and Grasmick suggest that traditional social disorganization theory, sometimes in combination with subcultural theories, placed an emphasis on the private level of systemic control, as reflected in family and friendship dynamics. In underclass neighborhoods characterized by stable, high levels of delinquency, however, parochial (e.g., churches and schools) and public (e.g., police) forms of social control become more apparent. A few researchers, most notably Hagedorn (1998) and Decker and Van Winkle (1996), have applied Bursik and Grasmick's theory to inner-city gang research. Yet, these studies have been limited to midwestern cities. We also draw on this theory of community social control, but focus our research in a Chicano/a and Mexicano/a community in the southwest.¹ As we will demonstrate, our research site reflects a pocket of poverty in the midst of an almost unprecedented economic boom. Also, the community is close to the Mexican border, allowing perhaps for a greater range of traditionalism than might be found in midwestern cities.

Informed by the gang studies noted above and by other scholarship on the urban poor (e.g., Hernández, 1990; Moore and Pinderhughes, 1993; Wilson, 1996), we see gang members as integral parts of their communities, engaging in some actions that hurt the community and in some that help it. At the same time, we are particularly attentive to the ways in which gender, age, educational status, and degree of traditionalism differentiate the adults' perceptions of the gangs and choice of private, parochial, or public forms of social control.

**CONTEXTUALIZING THE PHOENIX GANG PROBLEMS: POCKETS OF POVERTY IN A BOOMING ECONOMY**

Our research is set in Phoenix, Arizona, a large, thriving, sunbelt city

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¹ For purposes of this paper, Chicano/a refers to men (Chicano) and women (Chicana) of Mexican descent living in the United States. Mexicano/a refers to men (Mexicano) and women (Mexicana) who were born in Mexico. While the Mexicano and Mexicana youths must be living in the United States to become part of our sample, they may or may not be U.S. citizens or permanent residents.
close to the Mexican border. As we will show, many of our findings parallel those reported by gang researchers in Chicago and Los Angeles, where most of the prominent theories about Chicano gangs were developed (e.g., Moore, 1978, 1985, 1991, 1998; Spergel, 1986; Vigil, 1988). Like those earlier researchers, we find that youths join neighborhood gangs for a variety of reasons, including friendship networks; access to alcohol, drugs, and parties; and wanting to feel included and protected by a group. Some of the youths come from multigenerational gang families, whereas others do not. The adult men we interviewed, as well as the youths, also talked about gangs and gang-barrio relations in terms similar to those reported by other scholars.

Unlike the other cities, however, Phoenix has experienced a spectacular economic boom in recent years. Phoenix is the sixth largest city in the United States and ranks number one nationally for its job growth. As we discuss later in this paper, the city and state have received high marks on a number of economic indicators, yet parts of the city remain severely depressed. Indeed, South Phoenix, where we conducted our research, was one of President Clinton’s stops during his four-day national tour of impoverished sites in July 1999, along with Appalachia, Watts, the Mississippi Delta, and the Oglala Sioux reservation in Pine Ridge, South Dakota. As the White House stated, it is “a classic example of a fast-growing region where some residents are being left behind” (Barker, 1999:A1).

This situation of poverty in the midst of plenty contextualizes our research. For example, the youths and adults we interviewed lamented that the schools in their communities are in terrible states of disrepair. Yet, the state legislature was unwilling to commit resources to poor school districts until the courts intervened, ordering development of a new system for school funding. Similarly, respondents spoke of the need for better public housing, basic city services such as more street lights and paved roads, and accessible public transportation. Just a mile away from their poverty-stricken neighborhoods, they can see the beautiful new housing developments being built on scenic South Mountain to the south, and the new ballpark to the north, constructed in part out of state and local funds. As a consequence, many residents of South Phoenix barrios feel isolated and alienated, excluded from the boom that surrounds their community. As we will demonstrate, some community members blame gangs for businesses not coming into the barrios. Other residents blame the city for not investing in the barrios, recognizing that economic, educational, and recreational resources might entice businesses and give young people something to do besides hang out in gangs. These sometimes divergent perspectives contribute further to tensions within the community. Yet, it is interesting to note that although gangs in other cities have become
entrepreneurial, selling drugs as a way for the gang to make money (e.g., Jankowski, 1991; Padilla, 1993), Chicano gangs in Phoenix have not organized around the drug industry. That is not to say that gang members do not use or sell drugs—many do, but the gangs themselves are not organized around drug sales.

A second key factor that distinguishes our study from earlier work on Chicano gangs in Chicago, Milwaukee, and other large cities aside from Los Angeles is Phoenix’s proximity to the Mexican border. This factor has a dual effect, contributing both to cultural replenishment and to tensions between Chicanos and Mexican immigrants and migrants. Many of the adults we interviewed commented that the Mexican culture flourishes in Phoenix, although it has been heavily commercialized. Yet, conflicts also develop because many Chicanos and Chicanas are embarrassed by the apparent provincialism of immigrants from rural Mexico and angered that their willingness to work for low wages depresses pay scales for all Latinos. Rivalry between Chicanos and Mexicanos also plays out among the youths, with Chicano/a and Mexicano/a gangs often fighting one another. Finally, as our interview data demonstrate, the degree of traditionalism and immigration status are also key elements in explaining men’s and women’s views about gangs and, perhaps more importantly, their abilities to tap parochial and public resources.

The prominence of the Chicano and Mexicano population in Phoenix is a related factor that distinguishes Phoenix from other major sites for gang research. Chicago and Los Angeles, for example, have large African-American and Asian/Asian-American populations. Moreover, in Chicago, the Latino population is divided between Puerto Ricans and Chicanos. In Phoenix, however, the Chicano and Mexicano population is the single largest racial/ethnic minority group, far larger than the African-American, Asian-American, or American Indian populations. This fact, we suggest, alters the urban dynamics considerably. For instance, in Arizona (and California, which has a larger number of immigrants), fierce political attacks on immigrants have occurred, aimed primarily at Latinos (e.g., English Only, Proposition 187). Yet, these attacks were ultimately foiled because the Latino population and supporters had sufficient political clout at the state level and in the courts. Nevertheless, this clout does not extend to poor Latino neighborhoods or individuals; on the contrary, barrio residents seem to have very little ability to challenge economic and political decisions unless a higher court intervenes on their behalf, as was seen in the school-funding situation. We suspect that the relative deprivation felt by individual Latinos is probably aggravated because only one major racial/ethnic minority exists, and thus the comparisons between their economic plight and that of wealthier whites becomes especially stark.
DATA AND METHODS: OUR YOUTH AND ADULT SAMPLES

If we are to understand the complexities of gang life, it is important that diverse voices and perspectives are heard. Accordingly, we interviewed teenagers involved in gangs and adults active in neighborhood associations or working with local teenagers. Snowball sampling was used to obtain both samples. For the youths, we began with a sample of teenagers on parole and who were participating in a partnership project between our university and the juvenile correctional system. For the adults, we began with a listing of youth services providers and neighborhood association leaders. At the conclusion of each interview, we asked the respondent for names of others whom we might interview to gain a full picture of gang life and of gang and community relations. Given the small samples and our dual focus on youths' and adults' perceptions of gangs and the larger community, this study must be considered exploratory.

Semistructured interviews lasted from 45 minutes to about 2 hours. The youths were interviewed in the summer and fall of 1995, and the adults in the summer of 1995. All of the interviews were taped and transcribed. Thematic content analysis was conducted to explore major themes in the data, as described in later sections (Lofland and Lofland, 1995).

Consistent with our theoretical interest in exploring multiple standpoints, we used an insider-outsider approach in our interviews. This strategy enhances validity and encourages reciprocity between researchers and the people asked to share their lives and thoughts (Baca Zinn, 1975; Frankenburg, 1993; Zavella, 1996). Although ideally both authors would have interviewed the youths and the adults, we recognized that the youths would be very reluctant to talk frankly with the first author, a white, middle-class, middle-aged female professor, seeing her as too removed from their lives. Based on prior experiences in the field, however, we expected that they would be very willing to talk with the second author, a Chicano graduate student in his mid-twenties. Similarly, we expected that the adults might not be willing to carve out much time from their schedules to talk with a graduate student, but would be willing to discuss their work with a university professor. Accordingly, we employed two strategies. First, we wanted to situate ourselves to minimize social distances along racial/ethnic, educational, and professional lines, which meant that the first author interviewed the adults and the second author interviewed the youths. Second, we were cognizant of and worked with our insider-outsider statuses, discussing our findings as we went along and offering one another insights and suggestions.

Interviews were conducted with 33 self-identified current or former gang members: 24 males and 9 females. They ranged between 14 and 18
years of age, although they were between 9 and 15 when they joined their gangs. Thus, our focus was on the youths, not the older veteranos. Five of the youths were born in Mexico; the other 28 are of Mexican or mixed descent but were born in the United States.\textsuperscript{2} Interviews took place in restaurants, their homes, the neighborhood, an alternative school for juvenile parolees, and locked institutions. The second author had already worked with some of the youths and their friends for more than a year in a related ethnographic project and was able to quickly establish rapport with them. Another factor facilitating both rapport and validity was his knowledge of Spanish and of calo (Chicano gang slang); otherwise, certain phrases might have been misinterpreted (Marin, 1991).

Very few of the youths had managed to avoid entanglement with the juvenile justice system, and most of them were under parole or probation supervision or incarcerated at the time of the interviews. Respondents were given a choice of receiving $10 or lunch at a restaurant of their choice. For the 12 incarcerated youths, $10 was placed in their account. Youths were asked to discuss their relationships with their families and friends, their own involvement with the gang, and their perceptions of gang life. Some bias could result from respondents' concerns that their comments might be relayed to their parole officers or caseworkers. They might exaggerate the extent to which they are easing out of gang activities and other changes in their lives that caseworkers would view positively. To reduce this risk, we made every effort to convince them that the interviews were confidential and that the transcripts would be anonymous.

Interviews were also conducted with 20 adults. They included youth service providers and social workers active in the Chicano/a and Mexicano/a communities, neighborhood association leaders and other neighborhood activists, city neighborhood services representatives from selected neighborhoods, a parish priest, a paid activist from Mothers Against Gangs, and a representative of the Phoenix Police Department. Seven of the adults self-identify as Chicano or Chicana, four as African American, two as Puerto Rican, four as White, one as Hispanic, and one as mixed Hispanic-African American. Our final respondent was born in Mexico. All but one of the adults spoke at least some Spanish. Two interviews were conducted solely in Spanish; in others, the conversations wove

\textsuperscript{2} Of the 33 youth, 11 self-identified as Mexican, 2 as "wetback," 1 as "wetback" and Indian, 7 as Chicano or Chicana, 2 as Chicano and American Indian, 1 as Chicano and white, and 7 as Hispanic. Two respondents, both of whom were born in the U.S., did not self-identify their ethnicity. It is worth noting that "wetback" has two meanings in this context. It is a derogatory term for an undocumented Mexican immigrant, yet it is also used with pride by members of the Wetback Power gang. Similarly, some of the youth who call themselves "Hispanic" are members of Hispanic Varrio Homeboys, and thus may have selected this term as both an ethnic and a gang identifier.
between languages. Most of the interviews were conducted in the respondents' offices, although one took place in a cemetery, next to the grave where the respondent's son was buried.

None of the adults saw the South Phoenix community as simply a site where they worked. Ten of the adults grew up in South Phoenix. Some still reside there; others have moved across town but continue to work with neighborhood youths and visit family and friends in the community. Most of those adults who have moved now live in more affluent areas, but a few made economically lateral moves to other, equally depressed, neighborhoods. For example, five of the adult respondents live on the Westside, a largely African-American area bordering South Phoenix. Eleven of the respondents lived in South Phoenix when we interviewed them.

All of the adult respondents living in South Phoenix or Westside see the very real possibility of death for their children, as well as for their nieces, nephews, and neighbors. This possibility had become a reality for three of the respondents, whose children had died in gang-related incidents in recent years. The three children are buried near one another, in the same section of a local cemetery. The adults had been active in neighborhood affairs before their children's deaths and continue this work, sometimes being paid for it and sometimes as volunteers. Thus, the issues of gangs and violence touched their lives in special ways.

In addition to offering their own impressions, the adults were asked for their expert opinions about how others in the community perceived gangs and efforts to control gang-related crime within the barrio. They were asked to consider variation within the community along lines of gender, age, number of generations the family had lived in the United States, and nationality. Thus, the adult respondents were also both insiders and outsiders, speaking in their own voices in some instances, and for other adults in the neighborhoods where they lived and worked at other times. These multiple standpoints allowed us to explore the intersection of race, class, and gender within the community, and then to take the analysis a step further to tease out the ways in which acculturation and traditionalism cross-cut nationality and age in gendered ways.

Finally, we should note that the validity of qualitative research rests on the researchers' abilities to accurately and fully understand the phenomena under study. Although it is always possible that individuals have lied in telling their stories, we are confident that the 53 interviews we conducted, in combination with the ethnographic research and interviews with juvenile justice officials in the larger study of which this is a part, have afforded us a reasonably nuanced understanding of the relationship between gang youths and their communities. Respondents present a multitude of perspectives on this relationship. Some respondents reinforce popular images of gangs as terrible and support police efforts to rid the
neighborhoods of organized gang activity. Other respondents tell what Ewick and Silbey (1995) have called more "subversive" tales about police brutality, politicians ignoring poor parts of town, and lack of resources. Among and within these voices lies a complex set of experiences, fears, and hopes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO NEIGHBORHOOD AND GANG DYNAMICS

Most gang research in the United States has been grounded in social disorganization theory, subcultural theories, or, most recently, economic marginalization theories derived from Wilson's (1987) work on the underclass. Bursik and Grasmick (1993a) offer a theoretical framework that combines key elements of Shaw and McKay's (1942) social disorganization theory with recent work on gangs in underclass communities. The central problem with social disorganization theory for gang research, they suggest, is that it overemphasizes family dynamics, focusing on individualized resources and constraints to the exclusion of larger structural concerns. Accordingly, social disorganization approaches cannot adequately account for ongoing patterns of gang behavior in stable neighborhoods where families may live in the same houses or on the same block for many years, often spanning several generations. The gangs in these neighborhoods are often multigenerational, with several members of the extended family belonging to the gang in each generation.

Although initially subcultural theories became popular because of the inability of traditional social disorganization approaches to explain these multigenerational gangs, Moore (1978, 1985, 1991, 1998), Vigil (1988), Hagedorn (1991, 1998), and Sullivan (1989), among others, have offered an alternative explanation that refocuses attention at structural factors, including, especially, the economic marginalization of underclass communities. These scholars point to the crucial importance of whether, and to what extent, residents of poor but stable neighborhoods have access to public resources. Bursik and Grasmick (1993a) weave these concerns into a larger, more encompassing framework that examines access to private, public, and parochial resources. Drawing from Hunter's (1985) typology of local community social control, they suggest that these three dimensions operate simultaneously and that gang activity is most likely to emerge "in areas in which the networks of parochial and public control cannot effectively provide services to the neighborhood" (Bursik and Grasmick, 1993a:141).

Private social control refers to the influences and actions of family and close friends, which could be the nuclear family, the extended family, or
the interwoven networks of family and friends that characterize stable barrio communities. Through the family’s actions supporting or disdaining particular behaviors, social control is exerted. Parochial social control reflects “the effects of the broader local interpersonal network and the interlocking of local institutions, such as stores, schools, churches and voluntary organizations” (Bursik and Grasmick, 1993a:17). Control is exerted through residents supervising activities within the neighborhood and the integration of local institutions into many aspects of everyday life. Individuals and neighborhoods will vary in the extent to which they can harness parochial forms of social control. For example, monolingual Spanish-speaking parents may encounter difficulties and be easily intimidated when they try to communicate with their children’s teachers or school authorities. Public social control, in turn, focuses “on the ability of the community to secure public goods and services that are allocated by agencies located outside the neighborhood” (Bursik and Grasmick, 1993a:17). As Moore and Hagedorn have noted most pointedly, poor barrio communities often do not have access to or alliances with key urban institutions. For instance, although many barrio residents must interact regularly with health care, education, welfare, criminal justice, and immigration authorities, they do so from a position of little or no individual or institutional power. The absence of people who might serve as power brokers, interceding between community residents and institutional authorities, means that residents of economically marginal communities cannot effectively use public systemic control. One example that surfaced often in our interviews was access to police. Although many residents perceived the police to be omnipresent, the same residents complained that the police did not respond quickly when they called for help.

Combining these three forms of social control into a fully systemic model enables a more complete understanding of gang-community dynamics. Following Bursik and Grasmick (1993a), we apply this model to Chicano/a and Mexican/a gangs in Phoenix. We draw from interviews with gang youths and with adults active in the communities to explore how they perceive gang-neighborhood dynamics. One of the unique contributions of our research to this theoretical agenda is our recognition that access to parochial and public resources is very much gendered. Moreover, as we shall show, recent immigrants and parents with more traditional Mexican beliefs and values may be more intimidated by key societal institutions and by their children. Thus, we suggest that gender and traditionalism cross-cut age, educational level, and income to influence the extent to which individual parents and neighborhoods can draw on private, parochial, and public social control.
THE PHOENIX ECONOMY AND PUBLIC SOCIAL CONTROL IN LATINO/A COMMUNITIES

Most of the research on gangs that draws from political economic and community ecology perspectives has been conducted in cities that have experienced severe economic decline (e.g., Anderson, 1990; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Fagan, 1996; Hagedorn, 1998; Horowitz, 1987; Spergel, 1986; Sullivan, 1989). Chicago, St. Louis, and Milwaukee, for example, all faced structural dislocations with the movement of factories out of central cities. The political, social, and economic plight of poor blacks in these urban ghettos led to Wilson's (1987) depiction of them as the "underclass." We draw from this theoretical and empirical body of research to explore gang-community dynamics in a very different context, that of a pocket of poverty within spectacular economic growth. From 1993 to 1998, Arizona had the nation's second highest job growth rate, and the Phoenix area ranked first in the nation among the 22 largest metropolitan areas, with a 5.8% job growth rate in 1997-1998. The years 1993-1997 were the strongest five-year period of job growth in Arizona history, with more than 400,000 private sector jobs created during these years. Unemployment rates in Arizona are consistently among the lowest in the nation, and in the 1990s they were at their lowest levels since the early 1970s. By September, 1998, unemployment in metropolitan Phoenix had dropped to 2.9% (Arizona Economic Development Update, 1998; Arizona Department of Economic Security, 1998).

In the midst of this economic boom sits South Phoenix. The unemployment rate for 18 census tracts in the South Phoenix area in 1990 was 13.34, almost triple the unemployment rate of 5.3 for Arizona and 5.6 for the United States (U.S. Council of Economic Advisors, 1998), and quadruple that of the rest of metropolitan Phoenix. Elementary schools in the inner city are woefully underfunded. In 1998, the Arizona Supreme Court finally intervened, declaring Arizona's system of school funding to be unconstitutional. The high school serving South Phoenix had a 51.9% graduation rate in 1994 (White, 1995:Appendix A). Broken down by race/ethnicity, 66% of the white youths attending this high school graduated, compared with 48% of the Latino students (White, 1995:Appendix D).

Between 1980 and 1990, the percentage of the county's children living in poverty increased from 12.9% to 17.5%, rising to 19.1% in 1993 (Morrison Institute for Public Policy, 1994:69). In 1993, 20.7% of the families in the county received food stamps, up from 12.7% in 1990. Although only 26% of the county's juvenile population was Latino/a, 40% of the children in Aid to Families with Dependent Children in 1993 were Latino (Morrison Institute for Public Policy, 1994:69, 73), indicating that Latino youths participate in poverty programs at about double their population rate. Also,
although 24% of the children 19 years or younger in the state were enrolled in its indigent health care program (up from 19.1% in 1991), 43% of the children enrolled in the program were Latino (Morrison Institute for Public Policy, 1994:69, 73). Finally, Latinos composed 46% of the fire-arm-related deaths of youths aged 0–19 years, and 32% of juvenile arrests (aged 8–17 years). These statistics paint a bleak picture for Latinos and Latinas in the Phoenix metropolitan area, particularly in South Phoenix. The pockets of poverty appear especially stark, given the strong economic indicators for the state and for the city as a whole.

Like the neighborhoods Hagedorn (1998, 1991) studied in Milwaukee, South Phoenix is a "checkerboard" of stable working class families living next door to crack houses and abject poverty. Some houses are nicely maintained with fresh paint and flowers growing in the gardens, but others are shacks lacking such basic services as electricity and running water. Air conditioning is unusual, although temperatures in the summer regularly rise above 110 degrees Fahrenheit. The barrio receives few municipal resources. Public transportation is practically nonexistent, and roads are poorly maintained. Few streetlights illuminate the darkness at night, lending an eeriness to the neighborhood that exacerbates residents' fears of crime.

The war on drugs waged across the nation can be felt here as well. Grandparents and aunts are often left raising children when their parents are incarcerated for drug offenses, or too strung out to care for their children (see further Donziger, 1996; Lusane, 1991; Mann and Zatz, 1998; Miller, 1996). Drugs are commonplace, especially marijuana, glue, and paint, and drug houses appear to be doing a thriving business.

Yet, the blight cannot be blamed solely on drugs and the drug business. Few economic resources have been invested in the community. No factories or other large businesses are located in the area. Convenience stores and liquor stores abound, but residents must go elsewhere if they want to shop at major chain grocery stores or retail outlets. No shopping malls, movie theaters, or skating rinks are nearby, leaving the streets as the only viable place for teens to hang out.

Thus, in the midst of a remarkable economic boom caused by the surge in the computer microprocessor industry and tourism, residents of South Phoenix have been excluded, marginalized, and isolated. They have been excluded from participation in the mainstream labor market because they lack the necessary training and skills for the jobs that do exist and because public transportation is woefully inadequate; marginalized politically because they have little clout and fewer resources that might make politicians listen to them; and isolated socially because of cultural and linguistic barriers (see, similarly, Moore, 1998:7). As we have noted, poverty and unemployment are rampant in South Phoenix, schools are underfunded,
and graduation rates for Latino/a students are horrid. Residents have minimal access to political and economic power brokers, and little exists for young people to do except hang out on the streets. In this context, Bursik and Grasmick’s (1993a, b) attention to the possibilities and difficulties of parochial and public social control contributes substantially to our understanding of gang-community dynamics (see, similarly, Hagedorn, 1998; Spergel, 1986).

ADULT PERSPECTIVES ON Gangs AND THE COMMUNITY

The adults expressed a wide range of views, from seeing gangs as a normal part of adolescence to viewing them as social parasites that must be routed from the neighborhoods. This contrast is not surprising, given the heterogeneity of life experiences among barrio residents. Jankowski (1991), Moore (1991), Hagedorn (1998), Decker and Van Winkle (1996), Sullivan (1989), Padilla (1993), and Venkatesh (1996) also report contradictory or ambivalent stances toward gangs in the communities they studied. In the discussion that follows, we attempt to tease out these different perspectives and to account for some of the divergent opinions.

Gangs, the neighborhood, and the local economy

According to a neighborhood specialist for the city, the major problems that surfaced in a survey of South Phoenix residents were crime, homes and landscaping not being well maintained, graffiti, and a shortage of streetlights, followed by the lack of recreational opportunities for young people. Similarly, community leaders repeatedly voiced the fear that graffiti, combined with the threat of drugs and violence, contributes to urban decay by making the neighborhood less attractive to businesses. Yet, gang activity is only one factor affecting the local economy and can as easily be seen as an outcome of economic dislocation as its cause. The weak linkages to centers of economic and political power, in turn, reduce residents’ abilities to exercise public systemic control very effectively (Bursik and Grasmick, 1993a:146; Moore, 1985; Moore and Pinderhughes, 1993). It is in precisely such contexts that Bursik and Grasmick suggest gang activity is most likely to develop.

One of the most important and visible forms of public social control is the police. Although a substantial portion of the community is very willing

3. Neighborhood vehemence against gangs defacing the community was highlighted in October of 1995, while we were conducting our field work. More than 40 angry residents appeared at a juvenile court hearing, hoping to convince the judge that two 16-year-olds should be prosecuted in adult court. The youths had gone on a rampage, spray painting 32 houses and some cars (Whiting 1995).
to work with local police in at least some limited ways to eradicate gangs and crime, another portion sees the police, courts, and similar institutions as unable or unwilling to adequately protect them. Tensions between Latino community members and the police have historically been high, the result of years of institutionalized racism in police and court processing (Escobar, 1999; Mirandé, 1987; National Minority Advisory Council on Criminal Justice, 1980; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1970; Vigil, 1988). Allegations of police use of excessive force often lie at the heart of these strained relations. In Phoenix, community anger with the police has centered around the violent deaths of three young men: Rudy Buchanan, Jr., Edward Mallet, and Julio Valerio. Buchanan was African American and Latino. A member of the Crips gang who had reputedly threatened that he was going to kill a police officer, Buchanan was shot at 89 times in January of 1995, with 30 bullets entering his body. His family was awarded $570,000 in a settlement with the City of Phoenix in March 1998. Edward Mallet was a 25-year-old African-American double amputee who died in 1994 after being placed in a neck hold by police officers. In March 1998, a jury awarded Mallet's parents $45 million, finding that the police used excessive force that resulted in his death. The city later settled with Mallet's family, paying about $5 million. Finally, 16-year-old Julio Valerio's case is still pending. He was holding a butcher knife when he was pepper sprayed and then shot at 25 times in 1996 by police (Fiscus and Leonard, 1999).

Access to public social control goes beyond policing to encompass the range of agencies and actors who can provide public goods and services. The South Phoenix community did not perceive itself as well situated with regard to such access. Respondents criticized state and local politicians and other city officials for reducing the community's resource base and for placing it low on the priority list for revitalization, and businesses for taking money from the community but not investing in it. Finally, 19 of the 20 adults condemned sensationalist and biased reporting by the television and print media, particularly, exaggerated reports of gang violence that create the impression that violence is rampant in South Phoenix. Many of the adult respondents pointed out that much of the violence occurs north of the Salt River bed, in what is not formally South Phoenix. Nevertheless, South Phoenix continues to bear the stigma of a violent part of town, making it less attractive to businesses that might otherwise relocate there. This reputation, in turn, contributes further to the economic devastation of the community. A local resident and neighborhood activist whose son died in a gang-related shooting described the contradiction

It's a chicken and egg thing. What do we need first? Jobs and businesses that really care, or to clean up our community of drugs and
gangs? How do we do this without jobs and educational opportunities?

Some neighborhood residents work directly with the youths to curtail gang activities. Exercising both private and parochial social control, some residents tutor neighborhood teens with their studies and help them to find jobs; other residents work with voluntary organizations and local churches, organizing block watches to prevent violence, burglaries, graffiti, and drug sales in the neighborhood. One youth service provider criticized block watches, however, for excluding gang members. She argued that neighborhood organizations would be far more effective if they brought the youths in, saying, "What are you going to do?" rather than making them feel like outcasts with little stake in the community. In her words

The community refuses—will not—include them in organizing block watches [and] neighborhood associations for the betterment of the community. Instead, the strategy is to attack them, so gang kids become meaner, more defensive. They claim ownership of the community, and we need to make them a part of it, and instead they’re pushed off. Gangs are defined as the enemy, not as part of the community. We need to say to kids, ‘Hey, we need you to help with the block watch. What’s your part going to be?’ They could clean up graffiti, whatever.

In the past, our respondents noted, “Mexican gangs were tied closely to the community. This has changed.” Today, gangs “rob people of their sense of security. They barricade themselves in their homes because they feel so vulnerable.” Another adult respondent told us

If a gang is neighborhood based, they protect their neighborhoods and one another, and to the extent they can, their families and the families of other gang members. But that doesn’t always work.

These quotes reinforce one of the central contradictions inherent in neighborhood gangs. The youths see themselves as protectors of their communities and the police as abusive interlopers, regardless of whether this imagery appears exaggerated to outsiders. The protection gangs offer may be reduced today to simply making sure that competing gangs do not gain a foothold in the neighborhood, but the youths are adamant that protection of the community is still one of their primary responsibilities. In this sense, they are an integral component of parochial social control. Nevertheless, gangs also wreak havoc in their communities, both by their actions and by the lure they present to rival gangs. In particular, neighborhood residents are at greater risk of injury today than they were a generation ago because of the increase in drive-by shootings. A youth service provider expressed the views of many adults

A lot of innocent people get hurt in drive-bys. They’re just there in
the wrong place at the wrong time and get killed or shot when they
don’t have anything to do with the problem.

Similarly, a Chicano social worker commented

Neighbors feel they can’t go out at night, can’t sit on the porch.
There’s violence and crime. Many gang members may hang out in the
neighborhood and not be involved in violence, but they’re targets.
Somebody will drive by and verbally abuse them, throw things in their
yard, or shoot them.

Thus, two different, though interrelated, perspectives surface within the
community. Some residents blame the gangs, seeing “the stigma of having
gang problems” as contributing to businesses and middle-class families
leaving the neighborhood. Other residents focus on the city’s and the
media’s willingness to ignore economic problems in parts of town where
poor people of color live. When city officials and reporters do pay atten-
tion to the area, they focus only on the negative aspects of life there, with-
out doing much to improve the infrastructure. To better understand these
varied perspectives, we looked for structural patterns in the data. As we
will demonstrate, much of the variation can be explained by gender, age,
number of generations in the United States, educational level, traditional-
ism, and the extent to which the person’s family is gang identified.

THE MEN’S VOICES

We asked all of the adult respondents to tell us not only their own opin-
ions about the relationships among gang kids, their families, and the com-
unity, but also how they thought other adults in the community percieved these issues. We expected men and women to differ somewhat
in their views, consistent with the extant literature on fear of crime and
neighborhood-based crime control efforts (Bursik and Grasmick,
1993a:91; Madriz, 1997; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981). Considering first how
men in South Phoenix viewed gangs, the neighborhood activists and ser-
vice providers saw men’s opinions as determined primarily by whether
they are gang identified. For example, one woman observed

Fathers don’t have a big problem with gangs. They were involved in
one way or another when they were younger. They always had a
homie-type camaraderie.

Other respondents tied acceptance of gangs to prison life, and pointed to
the difficulty of private, familial social control of youths with incarcerated
parents. From this perspective

[some men] are accepting of [gangs] and are in prison gangs them-

[...some men] are accepting of [gangs] and are in prison gangs them-

...so the kids are in street gangs.
Regardless of whether they ever formally joined gangs themselves, adults whose families belong to multigenerational gangs appear to be more accepting of their children's involvement in them, may gain prestige from their children's acts, and see the gang as a barrio institution through which cultural norms of personal and family honor are played out. This finding is consistent with similar research in other cities (Harris, 1994; Horowitz, 1983; Horowitz and Schwartz, 1974; Moore, 1978, 1991; Padilla, 1993; Vigil, 1988). A neighborhood specialist for the city said:

It's multigenerational. The grandfather may have been in a gang. Grandfathers of 40 could still have ties with the gang. You could have a great-grandfather with ties to old gangs!

As they get older, the men ease out of gang life. Yet, as a Latina director of a youth service center commented:

The oldsters, old gangsters, sit back and watch what's happening. They are very aware. They are learning they have to pull away if they want to live, but those are strong friendships that last forever.

An African-American male police officer expressed a similar opinion:

In areas with multi-generational gangs, it is difficult for older males to understand why society comes down so hard on the young ones. The degree of criminal activity has not hit them upside the head until they lose a loved one to a shooting. . . . If the men get a reality slap, they see the differences over time. Or they'll say to the kids, 'Why don't you have a gang like we had? We had a good gang.'

Yet, some differences of opinion surface among the men. The neighborhood specialist quoted above continued:

Some men view the gangs with disdain, seeing them as a blight on the community and a threat to community life, and others feel it provides a sense of fraternity, an opportunity to become involved with others who think and act like they'd like to; it provides them with an outlet.

An African-American woman working closely with neighborhood residents drew similar distinctions:

Some of them are from multigenerational gang families. The parents are hardcore members supportive of the life, and they're raising their kids in it. Others are very hardcore in opposition to it, saying to make prisons tougher. They are harder, more judgmental, saying, 'if you do the crime, do the time.' . . . They say, 'I'm gonna stop it by buying a .45 and blowing away the first motherfucker who comes in my door.'

Thus, for some adult men in the community, gangs are perfectly normal, acceptable parts of life. They take pride in their children following in their footsteps. Other adult men abhor today's gangs. Key factors accounting for these differences of opinion include the extent to which the men hold
traditional Mexican values, the length of time they have spent in the United States, and educational achievements. A man born in South Phoenix, still living in the area, and working with local teens both as a volunteer and in his job as a probation officer sees these factors as intertwined.

The first generation, the traditionalists, see the second generation as lazy, as not pursuing the education and opportunities they are seeking for their children. . . . They try to prevent their children from getting involved. . . . The Chicanos who are traditional and have held ground (in the neighborhood) don’t see the gangs as so much of a threat. They have raised their children to be successful. They can see the other folks and say, ‘Hey, there’s a problem there and I wish they’d take care of it!’ . . . Of those in the second generation of gangs, the dads have limited educations. They take care of things physically, instead of rationally. They are starting to be supportive of changing the system, though, because they are seeing too much violence. For the second generation, bicultural men, and I count myself as one, success depends on how much education they have.

According to the adults we interviewed, men born in Mexico generally hold the most traditional values and tend to disapprove of the gang life. Yet, they are stymied by their inability to control their children or grandchildren, and if public resources exist that they might employ to better control the youths, these immigrant men do not know how to access them. They are also uncomfortable requesting help from parish priests, school teachers, or social workers. The women, as we shall see, are somewhat more willing to reach out for these parochial forms of social control.

A middle-aged woman directing a neighborhood association providing educational and employment-related services and training for youths noted, “Grandfathers disapprove, see them as lazy and shiftless.” A Puerto Rican social worker stated similarly

A grandfather will say, ‘I worked in the fields, why can’t you?’ Kids killing one another is not readily understood by the more traditional older generation.

Yet, another man working closely with boys in the neighborhood said

For the abuelos (grandfathers), they have a firm grasp of life, they’ve lived through many tragedies so they appreciate life and the foolish wasting of it in gangs.

Our data indicate that substantial changes have occurred over time in the perceived extent to which gangs protected the larger community, the dangers to gang members and others in the community posed by today’s more lethal weapons, and, generally, the respect with which gang members were and are held by others in the community. We were told

The general consensus is gangs are negative. This is especially from
grandparents who are used to gangs, from the Zoot Suits. They were respected, they were not a danger to the community. They say, 'I don’t understand these punks, why are they doing these things, not taking care of us, of the neighbors. They talk all the time about being part of the neighborhood but they don’t take care of us.'

[What about the fathers?]

When I was a kid we had gangs, but we never used guns. We used chains. When we had a problem and fought, it was one-on-one, or a gang on a gang, but never three, five, six to one. That sounds cowardly to them [the fathers]. This generation gap is a problem. The kids say, 'Your way wasn’t better, it didn’t work. I have more money than you, so how can you tell me it’s not right, that your way is better?' This is a big issue. They make money! And they [fathers] can’t make money in society.

Another local social worker also reminisced about the “old days” when he was involved in gangs

In the past, we weren’t out to kill each other. Maybe there’d be fist fights or knives, but we weren’t out to kill each other. Guns and drugs are the problem, and they’re easily bought on the streets.

Thus, educational level, age, and the recency of their family’s immigration to the United States structure barrio men’s views about gangs and the range of resources they see as available to them. Grandfathers and fathers who immigrated to the United States may be leery of public forms of social control, such as the police and the juvenile justice system, and more hesitant than their wives to call on the Catholic Church for aid. They rely most heavily on the extended family to control youths, often unsuccessfully. In contrast, men raised in the gang life and still tied to it are more accepting of their children’s involvement. Finally, the men raised in the barrio but now successful in local businesses and social services (e.g., probation, clinical psychology) have greater access to political and economic brokers in the metropolitan area and, perhaps for this reason, are more willing to rely on public as well as parochial and private forms of social control. Our data suggest that less variation exists within women’s perspectives, with the key distinguishing factor being whether they were raised in a traditional Mexican family, either in the United States or in Mexico.

THE WOMEN’S VOICES

The consensus among our adult respondents was that most women disapprove of gangs. A Puerto Rican male working with families of gang members had the impression that “nine out of ten mothers despise gangs.”
Some of the women were members themselves when they were younger and may remain at least peripherally involved, but as they become mothers many grow increasingly fearful that their children could die in a gang-related shooting.

Gendered cultural expectations of child-rearing responsibilities appear to have contributed to mothers becoming more active than fathers in opposing gang activities. Also, many of the barrio's adult men are incarcerated, or for other reasons do not interact much with their children. Neighborhood leaders, both male and female, commented that it is primarily the women who come forward to work with them. One neighborhood activist said

[The women] are pretty fed up with it. . . 60% of those who come to community meetings are female. They are very vocal, fed up, afraid to lose their children. Some have already lost their children, or their nephews and nieces, at the hands of guns. They want to bring the neighborhood back under control.

Some of these mothers take a very strong line and "won't let daughters date boys who look like chulos." Neighborhood women are also well represented at funerals. A parish priest with the dubious honor of burying the neighborhood's children told us, "At wakes you will see 400 kids, 50 mothers, and maybe 10 fathers." Mothers Against Gangs, a grassroots organization begun by a mother after her 16-year-old son died in a gang shooting, is a prime example of women organizing to reduce gang violence. Again, we see a link between private and parochial forms of social control. When parents and grandparents are not able to control the youths, they often turn to community organizations, such as Mothers Against Gangs (see, similarly, Fremon, 1995). Moreover, we see that these examples of private and parochial social control are very much gendered.

Mothers and grandmothers raised with traditional values were less likely to be out on the streets and so did not themselves live the gang life. These traditional women often do not know what to do about their children's involvement with gangs. As an activist knowledgeable about gangs said of the mothers who moved here from Mexico

[They] feel helpless. It's something new for them. Many of them have problems with language. The kids speak English better than they [the mothers] do and better than they speak Spanish, so the parents can't communicate with the kids. It's not like in Mexico, where the abuelos can say and do things. Here, it depends on the parents.

Similarly, a Chicano social worker stated that for mothers

The general feeling is powerlessness. They have to care for them and love them and wish they weren't involved. They may feel guilty. It
must be their fault, what did they do wrong. . . . It is very painful if the girls are in the gangs.

The sense of individual, rather than societal, responsibility for gang violence was stressed by many of our respondents. Specifically, they suggested that young mothers often have inadequate parenting skills. A probation officer raised in the barrio commented

These kids intimidated their parents way before this. The hardline mothers and grandmothers who really push their kids to stay out [of gangs] are winning the battle. Those who are afraid, and they're mostly the 18–20 year olds, are afraid because they didn't put their foot down enough. It comes down to parenting skills, taking a hard line.

Social workers and neighborhood activists suggest that some mothers are unwilling to believe that their children are involved in gangs, even when signs are all around them. We were told that traditional women, in particular

[See gangs as] a danger to the family unit. They don't want their kids involved in it, are very protective. But they also may have blinders when it comes to their own kids, saying, 'My kid isn't into that' when he is.

A South Phoenix parish priest related a story about a mother who wanted her son to be buried in a red shirt and the pallbearers to wear red, claiming it was always her son's favorite color. Another mother insisted that her son was not involved with gangs, until the priest turned to the young man and asked him to explain the significance of his red shoelaces to his mother.

In conclusion, then, our data suggest that whether and when adults rely on private, parochial, or public forms of social control depends on their access to economic and political resources and their position within the family and neighborhood power structures. One of our contributions to this literature is to show that this access may also be gendered, with women evidencing more indicators of powerlessness, such as not speaking English, and less experience dealing with businesses, courts, and the like. These women are most likely to advocate for a mix of parochial and public social control. They fear for their children's lives, but they tend to be among the most intimidated by their sons and daughters. Many of these women have organized within their communities and work with the police to at least a limited extent, hoping that these efforts will help to keep their children alive. This combination of private, parochial, and public social control is the premise of groups such as Mothers Against Gangs. In contrast, women who were in gangs as teenagers and who maintained that identity are generally the most accepting, and perhaps the least fearful, of
gang violence and the least willing to let the police into their communities. Even these women, however, express fears of losing their children to gang violence and may draw on parochial forms of social control within the community.

The perceptions held by adult service providers and residents may be plagued by faulty, perhaps romanticized, recollections of what gangs were like in earlier generations. Also, many of the adults we interviewed had vested interests in the gang problem. Reliance solely on their perceptions ignores how young people see their own lives and the relationship between their gangs and other community members. Consistent with our emphasis on multiple standpoints, we turn now to the thoughts and concerns of the youths.

**YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON GANGS AND THE COMMUNITY**

Historically, gangs have been important neighborhood institutions offering disenchanted, disadvantaged youths a means of coping with the isolation, alienation, and poverty they experience every day (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1991, 1998; Horowitz, 1983; Jackson, 1991; Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995; Moore, 1978, 1985, 1991; Padilla, 1993; Sullivan, 1989; Vigil, 1988). Yet, gangs are dynamic, responding to transformations in the larger social order. Sometimes, changes in the social and economic structures also cause cracks in what we call the gang-family-barrio equality. It is not so unusual today to find families living in two different neighborhoods and, thus, often participating in two or more gangs. When this situation occurs, fissures appear in the cement bonding the community's social structure together.

**GANGS AS NEIGHBORHOOD INSTITUTIONS**

Regardless of what other neighborhood residents may think of them, the youths identify strongly with their neighborhoods, consider themselves to be integral parts of their barrios, and view their gangs as neighborhood institutions. They see themselves as protectors of their neighborhoods, at least against intrusion by rival gangs. A few youths take pride in their care of elderly residents. However, most youths acknowledge that they do not contribute much to their neighborhoods, excluding community service stipulated as part of their probation or parole agreements. For example, one youth stated

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4. Members of the gangs we studied sell drugs, steal cars, and commit other crimes as both individual and gang-related activities. Unlike the gangs discussed by Padilla (1993) and Jankowski (1991), however, these gangs are not organized as criminal enterprises.
We spray paint the walls and stuff like that, stealing cars, shooting people when we do drive-bys and stuff like that. Moreover, some youths recognize that innocent bystanders are occasionally shot in drive-bys or other revenge killings.

People are getting smoked everyday and you don’t even hear about it on the news, only if it is crazy and shit.

Chicano/a gangs often take the name of their barrio as their gang name. With few exceptions, the youths must live in the neighborhood and be of Mexican origin to become a member of the neighborhood gang. These membership requirements hold whether the youth is “born into” the gang or “jumped” in. Some, particularly the young women, are simply “born” into the gang because they live in the neighborhood. They do not need any more formal initiation rites: It is their neighborhood, so it is their gang. If they want to be taken seriously as a gang member, though, being “born” in is not enough. The youths—male and female—must endure a serious beating by a group of their homeboys or homegirls (Portillos, 1999).

Beyond feeling ties to the physical boundaries of the barrio, the youths feel strong emotional ties because neighbors are often family members. If we contextualize the term “family” more broadly to include the nuclear family, the extended family, and the fictive family (cornpadres and cornadres), gang-family ties become even stronger. All of the youths in our sample claimed that at least one other family member was involved in gangs. For example, a youth informed us:

I got two aunts that were in a gang, my dad was in a gang, my grandpa was in a gang, and I got a lot of cousins in gangs. Most of them are in my barrio but some of them aren’t.

Siblings, cousins, and family friends so close as to be considered cousins are frequently members of the same gang, resulting in what often appears to be a gang-family-barrio equality. Although these overlapping social relationships have characterized Chicano/a gangs in the past (Moore, 1991; Vigil, 1988; Zatz, 1987), and in large part continue to define them today, we find that geographic dispersion has altered the tight bonds among the gang, the family, and the barrio.

COMMUNITIES IN TURMOIL: FAMILY FIGHTING FAMILY

Family mobility was another issue that came up frequently in our interviews and provides insights into some of the ways in which public social

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5. The major exception is a predominantly Mexicano gang that accepts some white youths as members.
control and, to a lesser extent, parochial control shape and constrain private forms of social control. Sometimes, families moved because of divorce or job opportunities elsewhere in the valley. Other times, they moved because the parents were so fearful of gang activity in the neighborhood. Children also went to live with grandparents or aunts when their parents were incarcerated. Finally, teenagers unable to get along with their parents sometimes moved in with relatives. An unfortunate and ironic side effect of this mobility is that it may lead to gang rivalries cross-cutting families. That is, if gang warfare erupts between these different neighborhoods, families may literally be caught in the cross-fire. This phenomenon of family fighting family is anathema to more traditional Chicanos/as and Mexicanos/as, challenging existing notions of private, familial social control.⁶ A 15-year-old female commented that more than 50 members of her extended family are or were in gangs

We can’t have family reunions or anything because they are always fighting, like my tíos (uncles) fight. At the funerals they fight, or at the park, or at a picnic when we get together, they just fight. So sometimes the family don’t get together, only for funerals, that’s the only time.

Similarly, a 16-year-old male reported that his dad was mad because

I am from westside; they are from eastside. See, I was supposed to be from eastside, but I didn’t want to be from there. He don’t want me to be his son because I’m not from eastside.

For the family that is split across two feuding gangs, cycles of revenge killings are particularly devastating. A 17-year-old male described the conflicts within his family

And it’s crazy because we are like from different gangs, only me and my cousin are from the same gang. Like my brother, I always disrespect him because he’s from Camelback and shit, they did a drive-by on my house and shit, and then he called me. I was like, ‘Fuck you, motherfucker, fuck your barrio and shit,’ and he was like, ‘Don’t disrespect,’ and I was like, ‘Fuck you’. That’s the only thing bad about it if you decide to join the wrong gang.⁷

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⁶. The theme of inter-gang conflicts within families arose during the course of our interviews with the youths. Because interviews with adults were taking place at the same time, we were not able to systematically ask the adults for their perceptions of how extensive this problem had become. We did, however, ask samples of probation officers and juvenile court judges whom we later interviewed for a related project to discuss this issue, and we incorporate their views here.

⁷. With the exception of the gangs named in note two, pseudonyms are used in place of individual and gang names throughout this analysis. Street names have also been changed so as not to identify particular neighborhoods.
Similarly, a young Mexicano-Indian clarified his relationship with his uncles:

They are from different gangs, though... but I don’t care about them because they be trying to shoot at us all the time. My own uncle shot at me, one of them tried to kill me already, but that’s alright.

He explained further that although most members of his family, including brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, his dad, his mom, his grandfather, and numerous cousins were in the same gang, a few claimed different neighborhoods. He noted rather matter-of-factly:

I got about two uncles in a gang. I had four of them, but one is dead. My uncles killed him for some reason, I don’t know, different barrio maybe.

As this youth noted, it is sometimes difficult to assess the basis for fighting within and across gang families. He was not certain why his uncle was killed, whether it was over gang issues or identities or for some other reason unrelated to gang membership. Yet, his assumption, perhaps because of the centrality of gangs in his own life, was that the intrafamilial homicide was gang related. When family feuds become entwined with gang rivalries, it is clear that the private system of social control has broken down. Family and friendship dynamics are no longer able to keep peace within a community. Under these conditions, parochial and public forms of social control typically come into play. Because one of the major public institutions of social control is the juvenile court, in a related study, we asked a sample of juvenile court judges and probation officers whether they perceived gang-related violence within families to be a significant problem. Most of the court officials responded that intrafamily gang conflicts were not a problem in their courts, although a few had seen such conflicts within extended families. Where intrafamily conflicts developed, the judicial officials attributed them either to the gang becoming a stronger psychological force than the family for particular youths or to youths moving into neighborhoods with strong gangs. As one judicial officer stated:

I think it would depend on the neighborhood that you live in and who was in control of that neighborhood.... A lot of these kids join gangs for their own protection. And if this is the gang that is going to afford me the most protection, I don’t care what gang José on Oak St. belongs to just because he’s my cousin. I don’t live over there. I live over here, and I have to do what’s best for me.

NOT TO DIE FOR

Gang members are supposed to be willing to do anything for their
homeboys and homegirls, even to die for them. The importance of demonstrating one’s “heart,” or willingness to be “down” for the gang, is the major reason for jumping in new members and the basis for extolling acts of bravery and craziness (*locura*) by gang members (Portillos et al., 1996). To assess the relative importance of gangs and families as predominant institutions in the youths’ lives, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) explicitly asked gang members to choose between their family or the gang. The overwhelming majority, 89%, of the youths chose their families. As Decker and Van Winkle explain their finding, “For most gang members, the gang was a place to find protection, companionship and understanding. Their family, however, represented something deeper, a commitment that most saw as transcending life in the gang” (1996:251). As we have shown, often gang members are family members.

Given the assumed importance of gangs and historically close ties among the gang, the family, and the barrio, one of our most interesting findings was that more than half of the youths would not willingly die for all of their homeboys and homegirls. About a third were willing to die for specific individuals who were in their gang, but not for everyone. Another third straightforwardly stated that they would not willingly die for their gangs. The reason, they said, was “because I know they wouldn’t die for me, they ain’t that stupid.”

In response to the direct query, “For whom would you willingly die?” all of the youths claimed that they would die for their families. When probed, they named their mothers, their children, their siblings, maybe an aunt or grandmother, and specific friends and relatives. Some of these family members belonged to the gang, but others did not. The distinction between someone who is simply a member of one’s gang and someone who is family (including fictive kin) was clarified for us by a 16-year-old male who, a few days previously, had been struck by a bullet that, had he not gotten in the way, would have hit a friend’s grandmother. He said, “I will die for my true homeboy; he would die for me.”

We suggest that affirming one’s willingness to die for a friend takes on new meaning when easy access to guns makes death a real possibility. When asked about the bad parts of gang life, “death” was typically the first factor named by both the gang members and adults. Probing indicated that the youths have a very real sense that they could die if they remain in *la vida loca*. In earlier generations of gangs, when death was not so common a feature, it may have been far easier to claim, with plenty of bravado, that one would die for one’s gang.

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8. According to one of our respondents, a machine gun cost about $35 in 1996, when we were collecting our data. While guns may have been used in the past, in recent years they have become exceedingly cheap and easy for teenagers to obtain.
The responses to our question reinforce the gendered nature of gang life. Even though female gang members prided themselves on their fighting skills, none of the young women declared a willingness to die for her gang. A few confessed that they might have done so when they were younger, but their tone suggested that this was a phase they had outgrown. These gendered responses are consistent with the general findings in the literature of lower rates of violence and lesser acceptance of violence among females than males (Chesney-Lind and Sheldon, 1998; Curry, 1998; Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995), but they may also reflect the greater relevance of the family and private social control for young women than for young men.

It is difficult to determine at this point whether we are simply seeing an aging or maturation effect, in which as youths become older and perhaps leave the gang life behind, they see the gang in less romantic terms. They may be maturing into a more adult way of taking care of the barrio, which as we have maintained is their extended family, or we may be seeing evidence of a crack in the gang-family-barrio equality.

Of particular interest to our thesis, we suggest that the apparent contradiction between intrafamily fighting and a willingness to die only for one’s family may be explained by a more careful analysis of variation in the forms that private social control may take. That is, family fighting family suggests a reduction in the amount of private social control, but when youths report that they would die for their families, but not for their gangs (excepting gang members who are family or close family friends), this indicates that the family remains a potent force in their lives. Thus, we do not see a complete breakdown in private social control, but rather what appear to be some changes in the form that private social control takes as we move from more traditional families to more acculturated families. When we add economic stresses and political disenfranchisement, we also see few opportunities for courting public social control on the community’s terms. In the section that follows, we return to our earlier theme of economic and political dislocations and what these imply for local youths.

**GANGS, MULTIPLE MARGINALITIES, AND URBAN DISLOCATIONS**

The final theme that emerged from interviews with the youths brings us back to Vigil’s concept of multiple marginalities and urban dislocations. The immediate world within which these youths live is marked by poverty, racial discrimination, cultural misunderstandings, and gendered expectations. As one young man stated, “We are a bunch of project kids, always on the move.”

All of the youths in our sample were either kicked out or dropped out
of school, and many had not completed ninth grade. This lack of education makes it exceedingly difficult to leave their marginal positions in the inner city and the gang life in their neighborhoods behind (see, similarly, Anderson, 1990; Padilla, 1993; Spergel, 1986). They spoke at length about problems they faced in school. For example

I use to go to Lincoln Middle School. The teachers, fuckin' white teachers. The gym teacher, you know just because I was messin' around, threw me up against the locker and I reported him. And nobody said shit about it. I told them, 'fuck that, I ain't coming to this school no more' and they didn't even call the damn police. When they did call the police, they said they were going to take me to jail. So I just took off, I was like what the fuck, the motherfucker, he was the one pushing me.

It is interesting to note that the only times when the youths spoke about what we might call parochial and public forms of social control, it was to complain about them. As the above quote indicates, teachers were not viewed as a resource by most of these youths, but rather as authority figures who reinforced their daily experiences of racism, marginality, and alienation. Moreover, their sense was that the police regularly sided with the teachers, rather than protecting the youths against what they perceived to be assaults and other forms of aggression on the part of the teachers.

The teens we interviewed are cognizant of the barriers confronting them. They recognize that their criminal and academic records make it almost impossible for them to move up the socioeconomic ladder. Yet, they still hold very mainstream aspirations. They see themselves as settling down to life with a steady partner or spouse and children, and they hope to be able to find a decent job. They want to become jet pilots, police officers, and firefighters, and they aim someday to purchase their own homes. For example, a young man expressed high hopes for his future but recognized the sad reality of life in the barrio

I want to become an Air Force pilot, that wouldn't be a bad thing to be. The only fucked up thing is that I can't become a pilot because I have already been convicted of a felony in adult court.

Thus, although these youths may aspire to very mainstream futures, they recognize that poor schooling, inadequate job training, felony records, and racial/ethnic discrimination limit their potential for success.

CONCLUSIONS

In closing, we must stress that ours is an exploratory study, and our conclusions are based on only 53 interviews. Also, we did not set out to test Bursik and Grasmick's thesis; thus, our study does not constitute a full
test of their model. We found, however, that attention to private, parochial, and public social control helped us to better understand the complexities of the relationship between gang members and other community residents.

We urge further research examining the perspectives of adults living and working with the youths. They know a lot about the youths’ lives. Some adults are very sad and jaded, having watched their own children die in gang-related incidents. Other adults remain hopeful of making small changes in their worlds, with or without the help of police, business leaders, or politicians. Many adults are themselves former gang members and can shed light on historical shifts in the relationship between the gang, the family, and the neighborhood. Their insights, we suggest, should be incorporated into future studies of neighborhood-based gangs.

In conclusion, our study contributes to the growing body of research on gangs as situated socially and politically within poor urban communities of color. Like many other gang researchers (e.g., Curry and Decker, 1998; Curry and Spergel, 1988; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1991, 1998; Horowitz, 1983, 1987; Jankowski, 1991; Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995; Klein, 1995; Moore, 1978, 1985, 1991; Padilla, 1993; Vigil, 1988), we assert that the social, economic, and political contexts within which gang life is set help to explain the complex and often contentious relations among gang members, their families, and the larger communities of which they form a part.

The gang was, and is, composed of brothers, sisters, cousins, and neighbors. The gang gives them a sense of community, a place where they belong. Kicked out of school, assumed to be troublemakers, looking tough and feeling scared, these young people are well aware that their options in life are very much constrained by poverty, racial discrimination, cultural stereotyping, and inadequate education.

Within this context, we suggest that Bursik and Grasmick’s (1993a) theory of neighborhood dynamics helps explain the complex and often contradictory relations among the gang, the family, and the barrio. Their attention to private, parochial, and public levels of community-based social control are evident in the barrio we studied, and they point further to the difficulties facing community residents when they try to garner political and economic resources from outside their communities. It is, perhaps, to these political and economic linkages and disconnections that gang researchers and others concerned with crime in poor urban communities should look next.
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Marjorie S. Zatz is Professor of Justice Studies at Arizona State University. Her
research addresses racial, ethnic, and gender biases in court processing and sanctioning,
the racialized and gendered nature of recent crime control policies, and social and legal
change in Cuba. Address correspondence to Marjorie S. Zatz, School of Justice Stud-
ies, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-0403.

Edwardo L. Portillos is a doctoral student in the interdisciplinary Justice Studies pro-
gram at Arizona State University. His recent publications have focused on Chicana/o
gangs and the racialized social construction of gender and crime. His research interests
include issues of gender, ethnicity/race, policing, and crime in Latina/o neighborhoods.